

THE CRYOPOD TO HELL

The Cryopod to Hell (Refresh)

by Klokinator

Volume 2 of 3 — Parts 293-609

2026-09-18

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Part 293: Retaking the Core

Due to the events of Stormbringer, humanity suffers a devastating loss. After well over two of the three million people on Tarus II perish, only half a million remain, with eighty percent of them being human, and the rest a mixture of monsters, along with a handful of allied demons.

Three days after Stormbringer's conclusion, outside the Fortress of Retribution's walls, every single member of humanity's survivors gather. With all of the injured and wounded healed by the Hero's seemingly limitless mana capacity, none appear injured on their bodies. However, their minds and souls are a different story. A downcast atmosphere lingers in the minds of every person present, with few exceptions.

Jason and Phoebe Hiro stand solemnly atop a fifty-foot-tall platform, allowing them to overlook the throng of humanity's last free individuals. Despite the possibility demonkind might attack again, nobody appears worried, having observed the Wordsmith's current level of power. With Camael's Cube at his beck and call, any invading force will surely perish instantly. None of the First Hell's survivors would be so stupid as to attack a world where their mightiest Emperor and Dukes fell.

A nearly invisible force-field hums in the skies above. It encompasses the entire planet, preventing Warpers from stepping foot on Tarus II's soil. Numerous magical embattlements dot the land. Their tremendous firepower and automated aim will allow them to repel any intruder who dares step foot on humanity's bulwark world without permission.

The Wordsmith and his wife, standing above their friends and comrades, heave sighs of regret.

"Everyone," The Wordsmith begins. "Thank you for coming. I owe you all an apology... from the bottom of my heart. I am sorry. I have failed you."

He pauses for a beat, allowing his words to sink into the ears of the half-million-strong audience.

"We've all lost people precious to us during the despicable Stormbringer Attack. Ose planned to capture Hope and I in order to enslave humanity. She failed, in the end... but our victory has proven hollow. The cost we paid was too high. Far, far too high."

"We have made gains," He continues. "I have acquired a device which will catapult humanity to the stars and beyond. However, this device cannot bring back those we've lost. Were you to place it in the hands of the old me, the one who had lost nothing and was too afraid to take any actions that might prod our enemies into action, I would have wasted its potential."

"Yes, the truth is, I could have prevented all of this, even with my previous abilities. I could have constructed a field that would keep Warpners away. I could have made the demons fear me to the extent of ever provoking my wrath. I could have claimed so many demon lives that they would never risk my ire falling upon them. But I didn't. Instead, I spent my days merrily keeping to myself and playing nice."

"That is why, starting today, I make a solemn promise to everyone here that I will no longer allow another one of our children to suffer because of my inaction. I will not allow my soldiers to suffer and die for a bleak future of merely existing. We have the right to live freely. We have the right to survive, and even to thrive!"

Jason's words project throughout the sky, allowing anyone on the planet to hear him, let alone the throng positioned directly before him.

Phoebe gazes at the side of her husband's face. For a brief moment, a sense of loss appears in her eyes.

The man she fell in love with has changed irreversibly. No longer do those same optimistic eyes look out at the world, hoping for a compromise. Instead, the rip his heart has endured has shaken him and torn away the sheet covering his vision, making him truly see reality for its stained, ugly truths.

The Wordsmith's wife bows her head.

It's better this way. She thinks. I always tried to tell Jason he was too naïve. I just... I didn't want him to change this quickly... this abruptly. Not under these circumstances. The price we've paid was one I wish we hadn't.

Belial stands behind Phoebe, watching as the stone-faced mother stands silently beside her husband. She aches to comfort Phoebe, but with so many eyes focused on humanity's leaders, she doesn't feel right putting herself front and center. Especially with her identity as a Demon Emperor. In many ways, she feels even guiltier about the Stormbringer war than anyone else.

I'm the Second Emperor. I should have helped defend the Core at the start. Beelzebub? Mephisto? Bael? I could have fought alongside Kar and easily beaten all of them back. Ose was the only demon capable of beating me, but with Kar and Blinker there... we could have overwhelmed her!

Belial glances slightly to the right, where the Monster Queen sits on her shoulder, also watching the proceedings.

Belial touches Blinker's hair with her finger, offering what little emotional support she can. However, the Monster Queen appears unmoved. Blinker's gaze fixates on Jason's back, but her thoughts dwell elsewhere, imagining the children she could have raised with her husband.

"And that is why I will make the first strike today!" Jason proclaims, grabbing everyone's attention. "I will not allow these demons to so much as *sneer* in our general direction. Today... without anyone else's help. I will steal back the Core. It is mine to take. It is OURS to take!"

The Wordsmith turns to his left, facing away from Phoebe on the platform.

"Portal!"

The space before him rips apart, momentarily revealing the stunned faces of several demons as they turn to look at the intruder.

Without any fanfare, Jason activates his T-REX, enveloping himself in a sea of nanites. Then he steps through and closes the portal.

The audience, including Phoebe and Belial, appear momentarily stunned.

"What?" Belial whispers. "I didn't know Jason was going to do that!"

Phoebe blinks her eyes. "I-I... I didn't, either."

A single human steps inside the Labyrinth Core. Despite his face being exposed for the briefest of moments, none of the low-level grunts standing closest recognize him. By the time he enters the room, they can only gaze at the stupid fleshbag barging into their space before bursting into laughter.

"Oy, mates! Who's this bugger? What stupid fleshie thinks he can take us all on alone, eh?" Asks a Demon Lord nearby, an unpleasant-looking fellow with two tusk-like teeth

jutting out of his lower jaw.

Almost fifty thousand demons walk and crawl around the Core's interior. After several days of cleanup, they've already pulled most of the debris outside and otherwise made the Core somewhat presentable. The louder the ruckus at the Wordsmith's location, the more heads that turn to face him.

The Demon Lord summons two bone spikes into his palms and laughs greedily. "Gut the bastard!"

He fires the spikes at Jason, even while a thousand other demons leap at the human in unison, all looking to bite off a piece of the Terran's armor and claim the easy kill for themselves.

An instant later, a silent explosion detonates inside the room. A flash of light spreads outward from the Wordsmith's body faster than the eye can follow. Any demon the expanding shockwave of holy energy touches disappears at the atomic level, vanishing from reality.

One second later, the room becomes eerily silent. A few confused orcs, minotaurs, goblins, and other assorted monsters stand, frozen in a mixture of surprise and shock as the fifty thousand demons around them seemingly vanish into thin air.

"H-huh?" One minotaur grunts, as he flicks his head from side to side. "Where... did the others... go?"

The Wordsmith raises his finger. He summons a pebble of condensed dark energy, which suddenly races away from him toward the nearest monster, a goblin. Before the goblin can react, its head explodes, and its body gets sucked into the small black orb, which grows minutely bigger.

Chaos erupts in the Core as the monsters realize the human that has appeared is the one who killed all of the demons and is now aiming for them! The bravest monsters charge Jason, but the rest flee toward the Core's exit. Some even rush toward an open portal targeted at another world somewhere in the Milky Way.

However, their speeds pale in comparison to the seemingly sentient orb of darkness. Like a miniature black hole hellbent on devouring all the Wordsmith's enemies, it zips around at the speed of sound, ripping apart anyone in its path and killing them before they can voice a grunt of pain.

One minute later, every enemy inside the Core disappears, leaving Jason alone.

The Wordsmith lowers his helmet and gazes around, a mildly dissatisfied expression on his face.

"...That was easier than I expected."

"Hell has lost all of its Emperors and Dukes," Mind-Phoebe says. "Barons appear to be in short supply. That just leaves Lords and a bunch of bottom-feeders."

Jason nods. "Mmm. Mephisto's still alive. But, I guess one Duke won't be much of a threat... not compared to the Hidden Hells. Belial said we'd have to start worrying about them, since I've effectively wiped out the entire power structure of the First Hell. Hard to believe these life-threatening enemies we've been facing all this time weren't even the tip of the iceberg."

His mind-wife nods. "I talked to Belial a bunch, and my real-self, too. They told me all sorts of info about the Hidden Emperors. Honestly... I don't see why they have stayed off in their corners all this time when they had the power to overthrow the First Hell all along."

Jason slowly shakes his head. "Have you forgotten? Standing above all the Seven Hells is the First Emperor. The one demon publicly ranked above Belial. Nobody knows who he is or what he looks like. They only know that those who go to face him return with all memories of his face and features erased from their minds. I can't even restore Belial's memories with my Wordsmithing, that's how deep his magic cuts."

The Wordsmith chews his lower lip as he glances around the empty Core.

"What sort of demon is the First Emperor? Is he strong enough for even me to be worried?"

Gabriel stands beside Phoebe in Jason's Mind Realm. He remains silent, clearly knowing nothing about the so-called First Emperor's identity.

After Jason muses for a few more minutes, he turns and strides out of the Core, finding himself standing before the substantially larger ball of sludge-like energy. Having devoured a few hundred fleeing monsters, it has already grown to twice Jason's size. For a brief moment, he even thinks to himself that it might be equal to Kar's stature.

"Halve. Reform. Disguise. Sentry."

With four words of power, he changes the shapeless, black hole-like blob into a pair of human-shaped figures identical to himself. They assume his appearance and stand at attention, awaiting his orders. With bodies far sturdier and denser than demonstone, they become a pair of nigh-unkillable sentries capable of defending the Core.

"Sentience. You two will stay out here. If demons come, kill them. If hostiles come, kill them. Anyone else? Tell me. I'll meet them myself."

The eerily human-shaped blobs nod their assent, then turn and stand at attention on either side of the former Great Doors to the Core, now both torn from their hinges and lost when the Core collapsed.

"There." Jason mutters. "I've taken back the Core. Soon, the rest of humanity's worlds will follow. The demons may have stolen them from us... but they cannot stop our inexorable march. Humanity's rise begins today."

"You sound awfully ominous." Phoebe mutters. "I'm glad you taking more proactive measures, Jason, but don't go too far."

"I'll go as far as I need to," Jason replies. "Whatever gets the job done. Now, we have a funeral to attend. I'm going to put some soldiers in the Core and head back to Tarus II."

His mind-wife shrugs. "Whatever works, love."

After returning to Tarus II, Jason shows everyone the reclaimed Core and continues explaining his future intentions. While a few people cheer, most simply nod, accepting that their Hero has finally stepped up to the plate. His victory over the Core gives them some inspiration, but the losses weighing on their mind continue to dampen their spirits.

Several hours later, Jason and a little over a dozen other people attend a private funeral.

The Wordsmith, Phoebe, Belial, Blinker, Makoto Ueda, and Hans Wagner all attend the funeral. Additionally, Chef Yamir, Salamander Ogie, Ogie's wife Jeera, General Chadwick, Corporal Hurent, Lieutenant Samuel, and Solomon's Nephew, Saul, also show up to attend.

Unlike the public ceremony for the millions of fallen citizens, this funeral only stands for two people: Sphinx King Kar, and the Wordsmith's daughter, Daisy.

Pictures of their faces rest upon two gravestones. Sadly, with neither of them having a body for anyone to bury, the funeral is mostly symbolic.

Blinker continues to sit on Belial's shoulder as they gaze at Kar's gravestone.

"Mephisto took my husband's body from me." She mutters. "I have to get it back. I can't let him desecrate Kar's legacy like that. He deserves to be buried with honor like he always wanted."

Belial and Phoebe stand next to each other. The Wordsmith's wife sighs. "You're pregnant, Blinker. You can't go chasing after Mephisto now. You owe it to Kar to have those kids first."

Belial nods. "Phoebe's right. Fairies only need a few months to give birth. Why don't you go back to the Fairy Queen's domain for a while and bear your children there? Raise them among the fairies, where the demons won't dare intrude."

Blinker shakes her head. "I never got along with those brainless idiots. They're always playing pranks and up to no good. If you haven't lived with the fairies, you won't understand how annoying they all are."

A few moments pass as a thoughtful glint appears in Blinker's eyes. "Well, there is *one* place I could go. I should visit Kar's mother, Marie. I wouldn't mind raising our children with the lizards. There's no chance the demons would try anything under Miss Marie's nose. She was also very loving and protective of Kar... so I bet she'd be alright with helping raise our kids. Then, once we've settled in... I can leave to chase down Mephisto and beat the crap out of him!"

Blinker sighs. "I barely even know the woman... and now I want to ask for her help after getting Kar killed. I'm the worst."

"Don't say that." Phoebe interjects. "You aren't at fault for what happened to Kar. Mephisto is. He planned everything, like a Viper slithering in the grass. He's your enemy, and he's *my* enemy, too."

While the three women talk, another group of people congregates together near Daisy's grave.

Jason, the Minotaur Chef Yamir, and Ogie all pay their respects to the Wordsmith's deceased daughter.

The old salamander sighs emotionally. "Poor lil' tyke. I'm gonna miss her. She always used to give me a big smile in the morning."

Chef Yamir echoes his sadness. "I loved cooking for the little one. She had an infectious energy about her."

Jason nods sagely, his gaze distant. "We have to work harder to make sure no other child suffers like Daisy did. As a father, I have to protect the children of humanity, as well as all the monster youngsters out there. I'm going to build a fortified location that not even a hundred Demon Emperors could penetrate without killing themselves. I will make sure something like Stormbringer never catches us offguard again."

Ogie's wife, Jeera, wanders over to her husband's side. Mister Hiro, as long as you do your best, I'm sure your little girl will smile at you from the Great Beyond."

Jason's expression darkens. "When people die, their souls end up in the River Styx. That means Mephisto might have Daisy's soul. Once I get everything sorted, I'm going to hunt that bastard down and take back all the souls of the people he's stolen. Daisy, Kar, and all the others, too."

Yamir blinks. "Are you serious? If he has Daisy's soul... then... couldn't you bring her back?"

"I don't know." Jason states. "But possibly, yes. I'm willing to risk everything if it means putting her soul back in a body. I can recreate Daisy's body with my Wordsmithing... I just can't bring her soul back from the Great Beyond. If it has somehow landed in Mephisto's grasp though... then there is a chance!"

A spark of light appears in the eyes of Yamir, Ogie, and Jeera.

"Really?!" Ogie asks. "That's great news! You-"

Before the salamander can continue, Jason raises his palm. "Don't say anything else, and keep your voice down. Beelzebub blasted the entire area with some sort of toxic, corrosive 'chaos energy.' It's entirely possible Daisy's soul was... I'd rather not say. I don't want to get anyone's hopes up, least of all Phoebe's. She's suffered enough because of me."

The other three nod quietly.

"Yes, of course." Yamir says, before lowering his gaze. "We can only pray..."

After a few moments, two figures walk up behind the Wordsmith.

"Ahem." A man says, clearing his throat. "Jason Hiro, ja? I wish to speak to you about somezing."

Jason turns around to look at the speaker, who turns out to be Hans Wagner, flanked by Makoto Ueda.

"Hans. Good to see you," Jason says, offering a weak smile. "What's up?"

"It is in regards to mein friend, Neil," Hans says. "Many believe zat he perished during zee Core collapse, ven zat hateful boy, Henry, left him behind. However, according to trace sensor readings, it seems his suit vas not destroyed ven zee Core crumbled. I believe he may still be alive."

The Wordsmith widens his eyes. "Really? So that could mean the demons did capture him. However, I've tried using 'Locate' to detect him, Daisy, Hope, and several others, but without any luck. If any of them are alive, then..."

Jason trails off, his meaning clear.

Hans shakes his head. "Nein. I believe zee demons have found some way to hide Neil's soul from your Vordsmithing. I don't know zee details, but it seems likely. He might be someone zey have designated a valuable hostage."

Both men fall silent, while Jason ponders Hans' meaning.

"The demons must have placed Neil in some isolated location. Maybe they placed a barrier around him which prevents my Wordsmithing from detecting him. The same might be true of Hope, too, but I don't think Ose managed to capture Hope before, during, or after the Stormbringer Attack. Something else is going on, and I don't know what..."

"I have nothing else to report," Hans says, throwing his palms up in exasperation. "Neil is mein good friend. I do not wish to imagine him suffering under zee demons' claws. I pray you can save him through your Vordsmithing, or through some other means."

"I'll do what I can," Jason promises.

Hans nods, then turns and walks away. However, after he leaves, Makoto Ueda stays behind. The Japanese man smiles half-heartedly, more out of politeness than for any other reason.

"Hiro-san, is good to see you again. I wish we speak under better circumstances." Makoto says.

Jason shakes his head. "It's enough that you came to pay your respects. Daisy liked you a lot."

"And I liked her, too. Such a charming child," Makoto replies. "I came to offer a shoulder if Hiro-san needs emotional support. Sometimes, great man have many burdens he cannot share with those closest to him. If you wish, you may visit me any time you wish. I have moved in with Saul outside of the city."

"Solomon's nephew..." Jason mutters, as he remembers Saul's face. "I haven't spoken to him in a while. Bah, we're not that close anyway. Thanks for the offer, I guess, but I'm doing alright."

"Very presumptuous of me," Makoto says, as he bows slightly at the waist and cups his hands. "Hiro-san has many friends and advisors. My guidance is shallow, and my wisdom limited."

"That's not true at all," Jason says, his smile strengthening for a moment. "You offered me valuable spiritual advice once, and I appreciated the assistance. Sometimes, an outside perspective can greatly help in a moment of crisis."

"Mhm. Yes, many thanks for your kind words," Makoto replies, before turning to walk away. "We speak again soon, I hope."

"Of course."

Makoto leaves Jason to mull over his words while taking his leave. As the Wordsmith mentally replays his life's mistakes, another group of people walks over, this one consisting of General Chadwick, Lieutenant Samuel, and Corporal Hurent.

"Jason, my boy!" Chadwick says, his voice much louder than the other funeral-goers. "How good to see you."

Pushed back by such a surprising amount of enthusiasm, Jason can't help but smile at Chadwick. "General. Thank you for your service during the Stormbringer Attack. Your leadership saved countless lives, including my wife's."

"Hahaha! I barely did anything, there's no need to thank this old man for doing his duty!" Chadwick laughs.

While the Wordsmith talks to the group of people surrounding him, Makoto Ueda slowly walks away from the funeral proceedings. His eyes flick to the darkening sky, as the sun slowly begins to set on Tarus II's horizon.

Life so fragile. So many die, but for what reason? Demons kill, humans kill, never does cycle of violence stop.

As the Japanese man walks, a flicker of light materializes behind him. Lasting for only an instant, nobody at the funeral notices as the firefly-sized speck rushes into Makoto's back, making him slow to a stop and freeze on the spot.

The Japanese man's eyes lose focus. He grinds to a halt and stares forward, his eyes still locked blankly on the sky.

After five minutes, he blinks wearily, a dazed look swallowing his face.

"...Where am I? What era is this?"

Makoto's voice takes on a curious cadence, different from how it normally sounds. He pauses to sweep his eyes from side to side, frowning as he takes in the unfamiliar sights.

"I do not recognize this sky. I do not recognize this location. The stars seem different. The smell in the air is foreign."

'Makoto' stretches his arms, then turns around to stare at the funeral proceedings with a look of confusion.

"These people... monsters standing alongside humans? It seems much has changed since I last returned. And that fellow there seems to have the aura of a Hero. How curious."

He nods slowly, while his thoughts turn inward, reflecting on the memories stored within his newly obtained body's vessel.

"...One hundred thousand years... demons have taken over Hell... Earth destroyed... so much has changed. I must reacclimate to this era if I hope to understand the proceedings of Karma."

'Makoto' turns away from the funeral and continues walking. This time, his steps appear more determined and full of conviction.

"I wonder how my protégé has fared."

AUTHOR NOTE: We're back with TCTH! I have a massive outline written for this story, which [you can read if you are a \\$10+ Patreon subscriber](#) (though keep in mind it is highly spoilery!). I have planned out the next 100+ parts of TCTH in surprising detail, leaving me with the simple task of actually writing it!

There will be more TCTH coming very soon, in the next day or two! Don't forget that you can [subscribe to CryopodBot](#) to get notifications for all of my posts, and that you can [join my Discord](#) to talk about the Cryoverse with other readers!

One other fun fact. Reddit has removed post archiving, so now you can comment on and upvote older posts! It makes me very happy Reddit has finally fixed that dumb policy :D

Part 294: Mirror of Samsara

Three days earlier, halfway across the Milky Way, beneath the surface of a certain planet.

Hundreds of demons and goblins trudge back and forth between a series of interconnected caves. These demons, low-ranking Burrowers, assist their small-statured monster subordinates in the slow, gradual excavation process of digging down further and further into the planet's bowels.

Magically-powered torches hang on the walls, illuminating the underground passages with eerie, purple light. Piles of debris lay here and there, typically dropped by the laziest workers too tired to haul their refuse to designated dumping points.

Makeshift wooden and steel lines, vaguely resembling human-made railroad tracks, line the many passages, allowing for the efficient transport of countless tons of ore and mineral deposits.

A pair of goblins walk up to one of the many foreman Burrowers while pulling along a wheeled cart full of rocks and gems.

"Report." Says the Burrower, as she squints to look inside the trolley.

"Five kilos of tainted copper, seven or so of iron, got a few diamonds thrown in," Rattles off the older of the two goblins. "Half a kilo of Tanzanite. Uhh, we found some random bones, too..."

The foreman frowns. "Bones? If they ain't from a Titan or angel, I'm gonna have to dock you. We don't have room to store a bunch of crap."

"We already done excavated all the good shit!" The goblin complains. "What more you think we're gonna find?! Earth is all tapped out! Ain't nothin' left but low-level ore and some crusty-grade gems."

The foreman shakes her head. "If you don't find anything, you don't find anything. But don't try and pad your numbers by throwing in bones. Now, go throw them in the incinerator and get moving. Put some hustle in your step. Master Orias has been getting disappointed at our results, lately."

Both of the goblins lower their heads and nod silently, but in their heads, they grumble countless obscenities.

Master Orias, this. Master Orias, that. The heck is that fur-faced cunt even lookin' for, anyway? We're scraping our ding-dang claws to the bone just to look for bits of rock and metal. What a waste! Ain't even any demonstone left here! It's all mined-out!

The goblins return to their work, while the foreman stays behind and heaves a sigh. She, too, appears dissatisfied.

"I don't get it," The young Burrower mutters. "We haven't found any Heroic Artifacts for millennia, let alone any decent gems. Earth is a lost cause. We ought to move on to a better world, if only Master Orias would just get some sense in his head."

Hardly have the words escaped her lips before a tired-sounding voice speaks beside her.

"Oh? Tell me how you really feel, Skully."

The Burrower, Skully, whips around on her heel and widens her eyes in alarm as she spots the figure of her revered master, the Demon Baron of the Stars, Orias.

"M-Master Orias! I, err, I didn't mean anything by what I said! Forgive me, I-"

"Calm down, I'm not going to bite your ear off," Orias says, while tiredly waving his hand. "I just got back from Ose's Operation Stormbringer. It seems everything is going smoothly. With any luck, she'll pacify the rest of humanity in just a few hours."

"Really? That's good news!"

Skully bobs her head excitedly, only to pause when she sees Orias's vague smile fade away.

"Master Orias? Is something wrong?"

The Baron of the Stars shrugs. "Not really. Probably not. I don't know, frankly. It just seems as if I cannot commit to freeing myself from my mortal shackles. Always, these obligations press upon me. They weigh me down and cloud my thoughts. I can't see myself ever not being 'part of this world.' My master would be disappointed if he knew."

"Your master?" Skully asks, leaning her head curiously to the side. "Duke Bael? Mephisto?"

Orias shakes his head. "Nobody you know, Skully. If you'll excuse me, I need to examine the excavation teams."

"Of course," Skully says, quickly casting aside any further thoughts regarding Orias's mysterious master. To low-level demons like her, the machinations of Barons, Dukes, and Emperors are simply too far above her station to matter. "See you later, Master Orias!"

Orias offers another casual smile. As he turns to leave, he pauses and glances at her.

"And Skully... do watch your words. You never know who might be listening, and who might take offense to your unrequested criticisms."

Skully turns pale. Before she can offer an apology, Orias disappears in a flash of light, leaving her grasping for straws.

...I had better do as he says. She thinks, nodding seriously to herself.

Meanwhile, Orias flickers around, casually burning a few dozen stones he keeps in a pouch by his waist. With quite literally hundreds of tons of gems and rocks saved up over the eons and almost no other demons capable of using them in the same way as himself, Orias doesn't fuss over the loss of half a kilogram of emeralds or sapphires.

Traveling beneath the destroyed surface of Earth, Orias zips through the maze-like corridors of dug-out tunnels while visiting his many prominent foreman placed in overseer roles, their duty to assist and manage the excavation efforts of slowly and progressively digging deeper into Earth's bowels.

The Baron of the Stars wears a gloomy expression as he receives the same bad news as he has for the last several thousand years.

Very little valuable ore left.

No heroic artifacts.

No notable discoveries.

After a few hours of chatting with one overseer after the other, the Baron of the Stars pauses to summon some refreshing, ice-cool water. He conjures it through a blue-colored sapphire gem, swallowing its contents to clear the stale taste in his mouth. The stench of sulfur pervades a significant portion of Earth's underground tunnels.

Orias sits in a seven-way junction, with tunnels and paths leading in multiple directions up and down into the Earth's crust. He flicks his eyes between the different

passages and sighs.

"An endless dream. Lazy, bereft of thought, lacking all wisdom and insight. Life is so... meaningless. Is this really all there is to the cosmos?"

Orias reaches into the folds of his robes. He pulls out a palm-sized mirror, one with a sizable chunk of its surface missing. The entire bottom-right section appears to have been snapped off, while other portions appear taped-together, with visible cracks separating the mirror into seven different portions, the final one missing.

"My master's artifact..." Orias murmurs. "I still haven't found the last piece after all these years. What will it take for me to finally reassemble the Mirror of Samsara?"

"Will anything even happen once I do?"

After staring at the broken artifact for several seconds, Orias sticks it back into the folds of his robes. He continues to sit and watch while small groups of goblins and demons wander past, many of them chit-chatting about banal observations, while a few offer friendly waves to Orias, their de-facto 'boss.'

After a long session of mindless ponderings, Orias rises to his feet. He starts to trudge down one of the hallways, only for a flash of light to appear ten feet in front of him. A Warper demoness, Ying-Ying, materializes while holding onto her blood-covered sister, Mara, the Baron of Games.

"Orias! Orias!" Ying-Ying shouts. "There you are! It's terrible! Oh, seven hells, have you heard the news?! We lost the Stormbringer War! The Hero reappeared and attacked viciously! He killed Ose and Bael, and then he murdered all of the demons surrounding Tarus II's human city, and then..."

Orias stands in place, listening while Ying-Ying babbles off the happenings he's missed. He eventually raises his palm and nods, gesturing to Mara's badly injured figure. "Let me help your sister, Ying-Ying."

"Oh, right!" Ying-Ying exclaims, as she gently lowers Mara to the dirt. "These big huge humans appeared, they were taller than the Slithering Spire! They beat Mara around mercilessly, she couldn't resist and barely managed to escape by the skin of her teeth. Luckily, I ran into her, or else..."

Orias snaps his fingers, causing a sapphire to crumble into dust in his palm. He gently massages Mara's face, throat, and stomach while spreading a layer of healing water across

her injuries. "Giant humans, you said? That sounds an awful lot like..."

The Baron of the Stars pauses, uncertain if he should continue that line of thought.

"...Impossible. The Titans perished eons ago. None remain alive. Must have been one of the Wordsmith's tricks."

Ying-Ying's expression becomes sullen as she watches Orias slowly ease her sister's pain. "I don't know if it was a trick or not, but Ose is dead, and so is Bael. Artorias got taken over by Uriel, Beelzebub blew himself up, and now, only Mephisto remains. He's our last Duke! We're doomed, Orias! Doomed! How can we survive against fleshbags who succeeded in killing our only Emperor?! It won't be long before they rush in and rip apart the rest of us! Not to mention they still have that traitorous slut Belial on their side!"

Orias glances at Ying-Ying. He averts his eyes, unwilling to say more.

Ying-Ying is only a grunt. She does not know of the Hidden Hells, and it is not my place to educate her. Mephisto will be our leader moving forward... but never has the First Hell suffered such a catastrophic setback. I can't imagine what events will take place next.

"...We will have to wait for Mephisto's guidance," Orias says unhurriedly. "Worry not. Hell is not such a simple place. The Wordsmith might be powerful, but he is far from unstoppable. We still have resources we can pull from."

Ying-Ying's gloomy expression momentarily clears up. "Ohhh, does this have something to do with the Overlords?"

Immediately, Orias snaps his head up and locks eyes with Ying-Ying. "Who told you about them? Where did you hear that name?!"

Startled by Orias's violent shift in facial expression, Ying-Ying flinches and pulls back. "I-I heard it from Mara, of course. I didn't tell anyone else, you know..."

"Speak not of the Overlords," Orias says, as he flicks his gaze around to make sure nobody else is within earshot. "Their existence is secret for a reason."

"Are they super strong?" Ying-Ying asks. "Can they protect us?"

"Hah." Orias chuckles bitterly. "Not a chance. They are as much our enemies as our zookeepers. So long as we stay within our pens, they pay us little heed. We will have to defeat the Wordsmith ourselves. Devils forbid if the Overlords hear of the beating we've suffered."

Orias pulls his hands away from Mara and nods.

"There. I've stabilized her injuries. My healing abilities are mediocre at best, but she'll be fine once you get her to the Blood Pits."

"Thank you for helping, Orias," Ying-Ying says, as she bats her eyes. "If there's *any* way I can repay you... don't hesitate to tell me."

Orias looks her dead in the eye. "I suppose I could always use help digging through the mud mines."

"Ahaha! Such a joker!" Ying-Ying laughs nervously. "I was just kidding, just kidding. If you think Hell's situation will turn out fine, then I already feel a bit better."

"I don't know about 'fine,' but the situation isn't untenable. Take Mara and leave, young one."

"Okay!"

Ying-Ying picks up her sister's unconscious form and waves her hand to summon a portal. However, midway into the motion, she glances at Orias and raises an eyebrow.

"That's odd. Orias, why is your chest glowing?"

"My chest?" Orias asks. He lowers his eyes, only to see a soft light emanating from his pocket. A flicker of alarm goes through his nerves before he forces a casual smile. "Oh! It's just one of my gems. No reason for concern. I'll see you later, Ying-Ying."

"Okay! Bye-bye, then!" Ying-Ying says, while flashing a cute smile. She steps through her portal and closes it afterward, leaving Orias alone.

The instant she disappears, Orias's right hand disappears into the folds of his robes. He plucks out the Mirror of Samsara and stares at it with a look of shock and bewilderment. Its exterior faintly glows with holy energy, burning his skin and hurting him somewhat, though not enough to cause him any immediate injuries.

"Ouch! What in the Seven Hells? Why is my master's Mirror reacting? Has something changed?"

A few seconds later, the sounds of voices approach Orias. He turns his head and watches as three different Burrower foremen come running up, looks of astonishment on their faces.

"Master Orias! Master Orias! W-we detected something with your special jewels! There's a concentration of Holy Energy deep underground, a bit further than we've dug before!"

Orias's heart skips a beat. "Lead the way!"

He and the three other demons quickly descend into the tunnel systems. They steal curious glances at the object in Orias's hands, one which clearly seems to emanate some sort of Holy Energy of its own, but when Orias doesn't explain anything, they keep their questions to themselves.

Half an hour later, they arrive at an unexcavated wall, one with a faint but clear sensation of holy energy resonating several kilometers in the distance. Orias glances at the broken Mirror of Samara in his palm, and his eyes widen as he observes its glow increase by a small but noticeable amount.

"Start digging into this section," Orias says. "Recall everyone and bring them here. Everyone, you hear me? The relic could be anywhere in a twenty kilometer radius. Dig up, down, forward, backward, any possible direction. Scour every nook and cranny. I'll help."

Orias places the heroic artifact back into his robes, which only slightly muffles its light while making it burn his chest. He ignores the pain and gestures forward.

"What are you waiting for? Dig!"

Orias pulls out an amber-colored jewel and snaps his fingers, temporarily obtaining the power of Earth Manipulation like the Burrowers around him. He assists them in the excavation efforts, moving as quickly as he can.

Minutes pass. An hour. A day.

Three days pass in the blink of an eye.

Orias and his subordinates hollow out a massive part of the Earth. As they dig, his thoughts become more frantic.

We're so close. I can practically smell it! It's the last piece of Samsara! I must obtain it!

While they dig, Orias's thoughts turn to the general geography of the location.

After the Overlords annihilated all life on Earth, countless fragments of civilization spewed out across the planet. We seem to be about 800 kilometers west of the Indian

region... even I didn't imagine my master's artifact would end up broken and cast so far away from its original resting place.

As the small army of a thousand demons and goblins dig, their pace begins to slow. They sense the closeness of the artifact, though its exact position evades them.

However, at some point, one of the goblins shrieks in delight.

"F-found it! Master Orias, I found it!!"

Immediately, a thousand pairs of eyes converge on that goblin's location. Before anyone can start to make a move, Orias teleports straight to the goblin's side, a look of fervency on his face.

"You did? Where? Show me!"

The goblin points toward a rock on the ground, seemingly ordinary, yet with a faint glow poking through a pinhole-sized opening on its top.

"Right here! I didn't dare touch it, since-"

"Good, good goblin!" Orias crows. He rudely pushes the goblin aside, yet the goblin offers no complaint. It, too, feels more than a little excited by Orias's passion.

Orias carefully excavates the rock with a bit of Earth Manipulation, then stands up and casts a quick glance at the goblin.

"You! Excellent work. I always reward the capable, so you may enjoy fifteen choices from my Golden Wares. Take whatever you like! As for everyone else, disband! I require absolute privacy!"

A chorus of voices speaks up in unison. "Yes, Master Orias! We obey!"

Minutes later, every demon and goblin in the vicinity retreats from the area, leaving Orias to stand alone in eerie silence. The Baron of the Stars breathes heavily, excitement on his face.

"...found it... we finally found it... the last piece of the Mirror of Samsara..."

His hands tremble as emotion threatens to overtake him. For over a hundred thousand years, he has dug through the depths of the Earth, searching for heroic relics, but especially pieces of his mentor's broken mirror.

"Master Buddha... at last... by fixing your relic, I might be able to speak to you once more."

Carefully, gingerly, Orias begins to peel apart the geode which has engulfed the last sliver of his relic's mentor. It takes him more than thirty minutes, but eventually, with the utmost care, Orias daintily extracts the jagged piece of the heroic artifact. It glows brightly as it now sits within less than two feet of the rest of itself inside Orias's pocket.

For a brief moment, Orias's heart stops. He plucks out the Mirror of Samsara and compares its missing piece to the small chunk held in his right hand.

"...a perfect match."

After two seconds of deliberation, Orias places the missing shard into the incomplete Mirror of Samsara.

Then, a transformation occurs.

For a brief moment, the Mirror of Samara radiates a divine light hot enough to force Orias back. He quickly but carefully sets the mirror on the ground, then jumps away from it, raising his hand to shield his eyes.

"Aargh! Holy energy, it hurts!" Orias cries.

As the light inside the Mirror of Samsara builds, a faint humming sensation rumbles in the air. Orias watches with rapt attention, forcing himself to gaze upon the sunlike object even though it scorches his pupils.

All of a sudden, the light retracts! It sucks into the center of the mirror, then transforms into a small bead of light which shoots out of the mirror and into the air.

Before Orias can react, the bead of light disappears into the soil above him, vanishing into the Earth's depths. The Mirror of Samsara becomes dull, like a dead object, no longer radiating even the faintest trace of holy energy.

The Baron of the Stars halts his breathing. He stands locked in place, gazing at the dead artifact with a look of total bewilderment.

"W-what happened? Master? Hello?"

He suddenly dives forward and grabs the artifact, examining it with all of his physical and spiritual senses. To his horror, the artifact appears so dead that he can't detect even the slightest remnant of its former glory.

"What happened?! Where did that bead of light go?! Have I screwed up? All my work, all this time, all this effort... for nothing?! Nooo!!"

As Orias loses his last sliver of hope for ever meeting his master again, that bead of light travels across the Milky Way, heading for a world he visited not many days earlier.

It enters the body of Makoto Ueda, merges with his soul, and reforges his very essence into something new.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Great Buddha, gazes at the world around him with ancient wisdom, a mind and soul that are both timeless and peerless.

"Finally. I have reincarnated."

Part 295: Meeting of the Hidden Emperors (Part 1)

Hell Harbor. Three short days after the failure of Stormbringer.

Beneath the surface of the lush, utopia-like world, in a hidden demonic compound several kilometers underground, in a facility reinforced by a combination of magic and technology, a lavish meeting room sits.

This room features a long, rectangular table with seats for up to fifty guests, in a chamber filled with all manner of demonic imagery. Paintings of various moments in demon history hang on the walls, while torches sit in between the paintings, giving off a soft red light and allowing those seated to admire the artwork from afar.

At the front of the room, a large pair of double doors opens onto a small platform which descends into the room's center, while at the opposite end, an elaborate demonstone chalice filled with virgin blood rests, along with a pair of gargoyle-shaped statues beside it, their figures frozen as if bowing in reverence to the goblet's contents.

At the head of the long conference table, an odd sight reveals itself. Two dark-skinned humans, an old man and his daughter, Benjamin and Lily Brown, sit quietly with their hands in their laps, awaiting the arrival of... other guests.

Lily, a fresh-faced eighteen year old girl, glances nervously from side to side every minute or so.

"Daddy. Are you sure they're coming soon? We've been waiting for hours."

This girl, the very same one who got her face kicked in by Rosalia just a few years before, appears to have learned some level of manners from that incident. Still, as a teenager, her energy and anxiety levels go through the roof as the minutes tick past with no arrival from her father's 'esteemed guests.'

"Kings never show up on time." Benjamin Brown says, adjusting his suit's arm-collar. "They make you wait as part of a deliberate power-ploy, my dear. The first to arrive carries both the highest and the lowest status. They mustn't appear too eager to come here, lest their minions think they have become subservient to my whims... the whims of

a *mere human*. At the same time, the first to show up will get the honor of choosing the best seat, the one which holds the most authority. It is a delicate balancing act."

Lily blinks in incomprehension. "...Are you messing with me, daddy? I doubt there's really all that much to showing up on time. It's just common courtesy to keep your appointment! These demonstone chairs are so uncomfortable, my butt is starting to hurt!"

"Shall I send a slave to fetch a padded cushion for you?" Benjamin asks.

Lily *humphs* in annoyance. "No! I'm a big girl. I can wait patiently."

Ben smiles. "Good. That's good."

Several more minutes pass. Lily continues to glance around, sighing melodramatically to herself.

"Sigh. Sigh! Daddy, is it true that Beelzebub died? I thought he could regenerate from anything, even death?"

"Last time Beelzebub detonated his body, he regenerated after just a few hours. This time, more than three days have passed, yet still we cannot detect even a hint of his soul's energy. According to the Oracles, the blast he unleashed on Tarus II was ten times mightier than the one he used to batter Uriel in the Labyrinth. It is likely that he overdrew his life reserves and... failed to regenerate."

A hint of disappointment appears on Lily's face.

"Oh. Is that so."

"Do you miss him?" Benjamin asks, suppressing a smile. "He was quite the attractive devil, after all. It wouldn't be unreasonable for you to fall in love with a male of his stature."

"F-fall in love?!" Lily sputters. "No way, daddy! Don't tease me! He was a piece of work, a real jerk! I'm glad he's gone!"

"If you say so," Ben replies, his smile turning mysterious. "Ah, to be young again."

Ben starts to say something else, but at that moment, a flicker of energy at the far end of the room catches his attention. The sensor modules inside his iris implants light up, revealing the presence of spatial transfer magic.

A moment later, five figures materialize near the blood-chalice, revealing themselves to be a group of Orcs dressed in elaborate robes, with one of the five wearing a set of ornate golden ceremonial armor. Their green skin appears surprisingly smooth to the touch, though their facial features appear only a bit less hideous than the average orcs one might encounter in the Labyrinth's hallways.

Benjamin's eyes flicker in recognition. "Oh? Two of the Ancients from the Hell of Calamity. I did not expect your eminent selves to show up first."

Of the five orcs, three of the lower-ranked ones step forward and pound their chests with their fists.

"Ancient Elder Maltus, Ancient Elder Huul! These two esteemed ones have deigned to show respect to this gathering!"

The two high-ranking orcs, standing several echelons above the weak, useless members of their species, ripple with a sense of power, authority, and majesty that smacks differently compared to the aura of a Demon Emperor.

Elder Maltus, the First Ancient, the second mightiest of all orcs in the Milky Way, steps forward. His glorious purple robes, emboldened with golden trim and the image of the original Zhurm, Sheol, emblazons itself across his chest. His mere presence causes Lily's throat to tighten.

"Benjamin Brown," Maltus growls. "My Zhurm apologizes. He is busy with a great many matters, and as such, cannot come to this... glorious meeting."

Benjamin smiles at Maltus, though the corners of his lips twitch ever so imperceptibly.

"Ah, yes. I'm sure the Zhurm has countless subjects vying for his attention. A lowly human like me is still humbled by your... majestic presence."

The other Ancient Orc, a female adorned in ornate golden armor, steps forward. Elder Huul clears her throat and shoots a nasty glare at Benjamin Brown. "How shameful for the First Hell to call for our esteemed presences, yet not send any of its elites to greet us. Ah, how far the Hell of Damnation has fallen! Ose dead, Bael dead, even your so-called shining star, Beelzebub... dead! Only Mephisto remains, yet that bone-headed brat lacks the guts to show himself before the Zhurm's mother! I am glad my son did not come, for he might put this whole Hell to the pyre if he were to experience such disrespect!"

Benjamin remains seated, in spite of Huul's words. "Your Elegance, lovely as always. Long has it been since I gazed upon your... *beauty*. Mephisto will arrive, soon. He is simply busy managing the First Hell's matters, as required with the fall of so many of our assets. I am merely his humble servant, here to guide the meeting until his arrival. Come, take a seat. I will call for refreshments."

Huul snorts derisively. "Refreshments. Always, you fleshbags know how to speak a few pretty words. Ah, but look at this charming daughter of yours. If you give her to me, I will bestow her upon my youngest son! He will ride this mare and ensure she bears ten fine spawn! Bahaha!"

Elder Maltus shoots a glance at Huul. Despite possessing a higher rank than her, he still hesitates to speak out against the Zhurm's mother.

"Lady Huul... Benjamin Brown may be a mere human, but his exploits during the Energy Wars-"

"Were ages ago! Just look at this decrepit old fart! He has long passed the glory of his youth!" Huul crows. "I show no respect to weaklings. He could never measure up to even one of my son's fingers!"

Lily frowns. She starts to open her mouth to defend her father, only for Benjamin Brown to erupt into laughter.

"Hah hah hah! Yes, Lady Huul, this old man has certainly lost much of his bite over the years. I am rusty, and my battle prowess isn't what it used to be."

Benjamin Brown pauses, as a strange look appears in his eyes.

"...But to imply that I have become weak and servile in my old age, would the esteemed guest dare to cross me in three blows, right here and now? I think you may find a *delightful* surprise awaits you."

Huul glances at Benjamin Brown, only for a shudder to run down her spine. For the briefest of moments, a hint of the famed Battle Devil reveals itself in Benjamin's eyes, the eyes of the man who lost his brother and flew into a berserk rage during the battle against the Fifth Hell, the Hell of Calamity. On that day, Benjamin Brown eviscerated more than ten Ancient Orcs, ripping them limb from limb and beating Huul herself so senseless that, were it not for the intervention of a certain Demon Emperor, she might have perished on the spot.

The Second Ancient hesitates for a moment. She gazes into the eyes of the man who once left a mark of terror on her soul, then turns away to clear her throat.

"Ahem... haha, yes, yes, you make a good point, fleshbag! Ah, where are my manners? This old woman is herself quite weak and dainty! Thinking of my current status, it would be unbecoming of me to spar during such an important occasion, such as this. Why don't we just let bygones be bygones? I think I shall take a seat."

Benjamin nods slowly. "Yes. That sounds like a wonderful plan. There are still so many more guests who will show up soon, after all."

The three low-ranking orcs stand off to the side of the room, keeping their mouths shut, while the two Ancients take their seats near the end of the table, opposite from Benjamin and Lily.

On the surface, their choice of seating appears random. Neither seating themselves at the direct end of the table, nor at the right or left-hand seats, they instead take up positions two seats down.

Benjamin notices this discrepancy and smiles inwardly.

It seems the Ancient Orcs still fear Emperor Gorn's wrath. They will not take the seat which they believe rightfully belongs to him. But if Emperor Auger should show up before Emperor Gorn, I wonder what sort of conflict will occur? Those two still violently feud, even after all this time. The competition for the title of 'Strongest Hell' will surely overflow at today's meeting.

After the two Ancients take their seats, the room's atmosphere turns noticeably colder. A certain tenseness lingers in the air, making it hard for Lily to catch her breath.

Elder Maltus turns his head to examine the pretty young girl. "The Second Elder spoke with a poor choice of words, earlier, but her general direction was not imprecise. This lovely young flower appears quite breedable! What is your name, child?"

Lily flinches under his direct questioning. The lewd intentions behind his words fluster her, making her look to her father for guidance. Benjamin Brown merely offers a slight nod to his daughter, forcing her to answer for herself.

"I am- my name is Lily Brown," Lily says, glancing sheepishly at Maltus. "I... I did not know orcs could be so... eloquent."

Maltus snorts. "Hmph. That is because the orcs we dispatch to the First Hell are the weakest, slowest, dumbest, and outright youngest of our kind. They have consumed precious little 'life water.' They have not earned their titles, nor have they baptized their weapons in blood. They are ignorant brutes, much like we Ancients once were, during the First Age. Before the First Zhurm established the might of the Orc Empire, our people were a mindless, brainless lot, killing and raping wantonly. Now, we are the mightiest monsters in all of the Seven Hells! We keep to ourselves, building up our power in secret, but we are more than happy for the greater universe to forget our true power. As a mighty human Hero once said, 'Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak.'"

"Sun Tzu," Huul says, snorting the name under her breath. "I met that male in combat once. He was a fearsome foe. I wished to breed with him, but he spat in my face. Hmph. That only made me desire him more!"

"Finding suitable breeding partners is so difficult in this era of wastrels," Maltus comments. "The once-mighty humans have fallen into disrepair. The First Hell barely houses any worthy mates. As the daughter of one of humanity's mightiest heroes, your genetics would enhance ours substantially. Why not join with us orcs and learn what a woman truly wants? We have many fine males who would-"

"My daughter will not join with the Orc Empire," Benjamin Brown says, cutting Maltus off mid-sentence. "She is a human and will bed with humans only."

Both of the Orc Ancients look at him with more than a hint of dismay.

"How unfortunate." Huul says, turning up her pig-like nose.

Even as the Orcs hide their dissatisfaction, Lily shifts in her chair uneasily.

Only bed with humans, hm? I probably shouldn't let daddy know about Belial, ehehe...

Just when everyone starts to settle into their seats, another flicker of light disturbs the air inside the underground meeting chamber. A single Demon Emperor materializes, alone, without any attendants at his side.

Benjamin's eyes flicker with recognition. "Yardrat, Emperor of the Void," He says, introducing the demon out loud more for his daughter's sake than for anyone else's.

The newcomer, a slender male demon with soft white hair, a pleasant smile, and casual white robes, resembles a demonic monk of some sort, a holy figure walking a pious journey. His dreamlike features immediately entrance Lily, causing her to blush madly as she looks at him.

Benjamin's daughter gazes at him like a lovestruck puppy. *How can a demon be so... handsome? So pretty?! He's like a supermodel!*

However, an instant later, the dainty-looking Emperor speaks with a voice so gravelly it reminds Lily of swords scraping against armor.

"Benjamin Brown. Emperor Auger could not attend this meeting. As you can imagine, he is as busy as ever. He has no interest in handling... minor mundanities."

Benjamin lowers his eyebrows. "Oh, is that so? Curious. This is the second time one of the Hidden Hells has not sent their highest leaders. Could it be that the Hidden Hells no longer put the First Hell in their eyes? Might this even be interpreted as a sign of disrespect toward the... First Emperor?"

A chill descends on the room. Despite their proud behavior only a few minutes earlier, both of the Ancient Orcs shift uncomfortably in their seats, imagining a pair of eyes fixating upon them from somewhere unknown.

Emperor Yadrat narrows his eyes. He gazes at Benjamin Brown like a venomous snake sizing up its prey.

"How could this small figure act so presumptuously? Emperor Auger is a very private individual. I speak on his behalf everywhere that I go. He values my abilities greatly. I would not dare to insult the... First Emperor."

Yadrat clears his throat.

"Ahem. But surely, given the events that have rocked the First Hell, the First Emperor might actually come out of his seclusion for once? Such a private individual hiding his face at a time like this... it does not speak of confidence to us servants of the pitiful, lesser Hells."

"I cannot, and dare not speak for the First Emperor." Benjamin Brown mutters. "I know as little about him as you. It is said that if a great calamity should fall upon the Labyrinth, he will reveal himself and save all of us. Why, according to some rumors, there is even a possibility he has... *broken through the barrier.*"

Yardrat flinches. "The barrier? Which one do you speak of?"

"I think you know well the matter to which I am referring," Benjamin says, choosing his words with care. "Since demonkind's earliest days, not one of your people has managed to reach a level beyond Demon Emperor. No matter how many souls you consume or what arts you perform, no demon can attain that forbidden level of power which even the Titans and angels once feared. But rumor has it... the First Emperor may have succeeded. Why else do you think the Overlords hesitate to intrude too carelessly upon our domain?"

Benjamin leans back in his chair and smiles. "Rumor has it that prior to the mind-wipes, Executor Nufaris planned to wipe out demonkind. It was only when the First Emperor revealed his power that the Overlords pulled back and beat a hasty retreat, agreeing to leave us to our devices. Not even the great Satan himself commanded such a level of fear. It truly inspires one's imagination, don't you agree?"

Yardrat stands in place, examining Benjamin's face. All he finds is a sea of rock-solid confidence.

"Bah. We don't know if there's any truth to such rumors..." Yardrat mumbles. Still, he quiets down and stops prodding the lowly human, instead opting to teleport to the head of the table.

Yardrat reaches for the seat directly opposite Benjamin Brown. However, the moment his fingers touch the coveted chair, he freezes in place, thinking better of his decision. Without another word, he takes a seat at the right hand side of that coveted chair, tacitly admitting that he is unworthy to sit at the seat of highest honors.

Once again, an uncomfortable silence fills the room. Lily clears her throat.

"Emperor Yardrat, is it? I am Benjamin's daughter, Lily. What sort of powers do you wield? It looks like something involving teleportation?"

Despite her fear of the Demon Emperor, Lily's curiosity toward his astoundingly good looks and youthful appearance make her babble along, hoping to engage him in idle conversation.

Yardrat flashes her with an icy stare.

"...It is impolite to fish for information regarding a demon's powers. *Especially* one so revered as myself. Learn some manners, wench."

Lily's cute smile freezes on her face. She awkwardly bites her tongue and looks away.

"Y-yes. Of course."

The young woman folds her hands on her lap, idly pinching and pulling at the hem of her pink dress, while her father says nothing.

Benjamin's words, spoken several hours earlier before they arrived at this meeting location, play back in Lily's mind.

The Hidden Hells are absolutely terrifying. Say nothing that would offend them. If you enrage one of these fickle-minded Emperors, not even I will be able to protect you. They can make you die a thousand deaths in a thousand different ways, and I will never know who committed the murder. Pray they do not come to hate you... or to lust over you. The machinations of greedy Devils are not to be underestimated.

Remembering her father's warning, Lily falls silent, no longer attempting to speak to the pretty-boy Yadrat any longer. Despite his youthful appearance, he is surely tens, if not hundreds of times older than her.

Hardly has the conversation died down before another fifteen demons suddenly materialize near the blood-filled chalice, this time appearing with a violent *bang!* An explosion of blood erupts at each of their fifteen positions spraying the room in plasmic essence and causing Lily to flinch in disgust.

Before the bloody spray can land on anyone, it suddenly freezes in the air and retracts backward, splashing noiselessly into the chalice.

Of the fifteen new arrivals, only three of them appear to be Emperors, while the rest are all merely pretty and handsome-looking attendants.

Fenrir, Emperor of the Night. A buxom woman with blood-red lips, pale white skin, and pitch-black hair streaked with splotches of white here and there. She wears lavish furs taken from the hides of fearsome beasts on her homeworld, which gives her an exotic appearance reminiscent of a succubus.

Beside Fenrir stands her loyal attendant, Dawn, the Lord of Caves. Dawn appears chipper and excited to be at the meeting, yet stays quiet as she remains by her master's side.

While Fenrir's vampiric appearance stands apart from all the other 'normal' demons in existence, the other two Emperors beside her appear just as attention-grabbing, only in

different ways.

Wolfram, the Emperor of Rending. Lupus, the Emperor of Scales.

These two Emperors also stand out from other demons thanks entirely to their fur-covered bodies. As descendants of the first werewolves created by the Evil Hero, Dracula, they sport powerful muscles, thick skin resistant to injuries, and iron-like fur capable of absorbing all types of damage that might cripple lesser Emperors.

As leader of the Werewolves, Wolfram towers more than nine feet tall, dwarfing the figures of every other demon in the room, yet still standing half a head shorter than the Ancient Orcs. He assumes a dominant posture, like an alpha wolf on the prowl for his equal. His beady yellow eyes flick around the room, examining those present with derision, as if they haven't any meaning to him.

Meanwhile, Lupus, a female werewolf, appears smaller than Wolfram, yet just as capable of shattering mountains and carving valleys for rivers to flow. Her furred body hides a secret; a second layer of defense beneath her iron-like fur. Scales, nearly as tough and durable as those belonging to the ancient dragons, give her a level of defense that perhaps only Bael himself might be capable of matching.

Both of the werewolves wear almost no clothing, only covering up their private bits with small strips of leather.

Benjamin Brown rises to his feet as he finally meets the actual leaders of one of the Hidden Hells.

"Ah, Fenrir, my dear. You are truly a sight for sore eyes. And Wolfram, Lupus, it has been a few millennia since we last spoke. I hope the two of you have fared well."

Fenrir crosses her arms, deliberately pushing up her breasts in a sensual manner. "Benjamin, darling, long has it been since I sampled your delectable fruit. It seems you've had some fun since we last 'sparred,' judging by that precious child on your right."

Lily glances at her father in confusion.

Has... daddy been involved with this Fenrir woman? I don't recall him mentioning her.

"This is my youngest daughter, Lily," Benjamin says, gesturing to her. "Come, have a seat, all three of you."

Lupus raises her eyebrow. "Fenrir, you have quite the *interesting* taste in males. I didn't take you for a fleshbag-lover."

"Do not judge the delicacies which you have not tasted for yourself," Fenrir says, batting her eyes innocently. "Benjamin Brown has bested many of Hell's mightiest women. Why, I hear he even enjoyed a short fling with miss Silvia herself. I do hope she shows up... she's such a *fun* character."

"I'll take your word on that." Lupus mutters.

Wolfram, however, remains silent. The massive werewolf male barely glances at anyone in the room, aside from Yardrat.

Emperor Yardrat meets Wolfram's gaze. "Have something to say, piss-ant? I can smell your musk from here."

Wolfram grunts. "Tsk. It seems Little Auger didn't show. What a pity. That pup always tucks his tail between his legs when I come barking."

"His lack of interest in this farce has nothing to do with you." Yardrat snaps. "Do not test my master's patience... or mine. I am not as slow to action as he... nor as *forgiving*."

"Heh heh..." Wolfram chuckles. "All bark and no bite. The Fourth Hell will always come up short to the Third."

"Now, now," Fenrir says, waving her delicate hand and revealing her painted-red nails. "This is no time for buffoonery. Let us take our seats. I am quite interested in what might happen once this meeting finally gets underway."

Up to this point, while all of the Demons so far have chosen to sit as far away from Benjamin Brown as possible, the Hell of Blood's participants surprise Lily by walking over and sitting directly next to her, on her father's right-hand side of the table.

Fenrir sits next to Lily, while Dawn sits between her master and the two werewolf Emperors.

"Lily," Fenrir says, smiling prettily. "Such a beautiful name. This is my assistant, Dawn. She is the Lord of Caves. She likes pretty girls, such as yourself."

Dawn leans forward to look past her master. "Hihi! I am Dawn! Very nice to meet you! It is always my plea-sure to speak to such beau-tiful human girls! So young and tasty, very delec-table, if I don't say so myself!"

Despite the odd references to 'taste,' Lily doesn't detect any hostile intentions behind Dawn's words. "Well, maybe after this meeting we'll get to talk some more! It's nice to meet you, too!"

As she leans back in her chair, Lily exhales a sigh of relief.

At least not ALL the demons in the Hidden Hells are colossal jerkbags! I might even make a 'friend' here... or better!

While the two juniors converse, Benjamin Brown locks eyes with Fenrir. She bats her eyes seductively, opting to speak to him via telepathy.

[Oh, Benny. Your child is so cute! Tsk, if only I could bear a girl from you, I would be so pleased.]

[You flatter me,] Ben says, smiling back, his expression going a bit beyond 'polite' into the realm of 'lurid.' [I have been quite busy attending to various matters in the Slithering Spire. Otherwise, I wouldn't mind if we spoke a bit more often.]

[Mmm, yes. I do miss our time spent together,] Fenrir says. [By the way, Kristoff apologizes for not coming. You know how he is. He detests all these political ploys. He'd rather spend his energy sucking the blood out of some delectable boy-toy.]

Benjamin snorts. [That's not all he's going to suck out.]

[Oh, you.]

While the two of them silently converse telepathically, at the other end of the table, Yardrat gazes at Fenrir with a look of silent contemplation.

Emperor Fenrir, the wily she-devil herself. Her position at Benjamin Brown's right hand side is anything but coincidental. If I were to ask, she'd surely say she just wants to draw close to her old flame... but what sort of fool am I? There's more to her seat than meets the eye.

His eyes narrow to slits.

Those rumors regarding the Battle Brothers must be true. Their bodies really were empowered through vampiric arts. And since the Battle Brothers worked directly under Mephisto, the current 'leader' of the First Hell... it is likely she intends to sink her claws into the Hell of Damnation and make herself the Second Emperor. Hah. Her ploys are transparent. That idiot, Mephisto, has led the werewolves straight to the rabbit's den.

He thinks himself capable of seizing control of the First Hell, but in the end, he's nothing more than Fenrir's unwitting pawn.

Yardrat's eyes flicker with insight.

No... perhaps not. Mephisto controls the River Styx. And now, none exist, save the First Emperor, who can oppose his wanton dipping into its waters. Could it be... is the reason he has not come here because he wishes to undergo his ascension, undisturbed?

Yardrat shudders.

The last time a Great Necromancer walked the Earth, his name was Valac. He forged an unstoppable empire of demons and undead that nearly wiped out the angels and Titans. If it hadn't been for Satan's return, Valac might never have perished. Mephisto as a Duke makes for a worrisome pawn, but as an Emperor, capable of wielding the power of life and death... he would genuinely become someone not even Fenrir could control!

While the Emperor of the Void ponders the true implications behind this meeting, Lupus snorts loudly, as if laughing at some unspoken joke.

"Haha. Oh, what joy it brings me to see that Ose perish to her own hubris. Even before she became an Emperor, I could never stand her smug attitude. Knowing we will soon have a far more *worthy* Second Emperor lifts my spirits."

Benjamin Brown turns his head to face Lupus. "You forget... no matter who assumes the position of Second Emperor, they will only hold that title until Diablo's reawakening. He might be comatose now, but he will eventually awaken and reassume control of the First Hell."

"Diablo..." Lupus repeats, her eyes turning misty. "Mmm. A real man, that one. Not soft and dainty, like Beelzebub... or Yardrat. I like it when men can punch through planets. I suppose if he returns, it won't be such a bad thing for the Seven Hells."

"I disagree!" Wolfram interjects. "The First Hell's decline is all Diablo's fault anyway. He failed to kill that Hero when he was just a brat. He allowed the Black Queen to run wild. Grawf! He has lost his prestige!"

Huul, the Second Ancient Orc, snaps her head to the left to look at Wolfram. "Hey! Watch your mouth. Don't even think of disrespecting Diablo in front of me! Lest we forget, it was Diablo's transformation which helped annihilate ninety-five percent of

Heaven's forces during the War in Heaven! You could kill a thousand mighty foes and still not reach a fraction of the Emperor of Annihilation's achievements! Even the first Orc Zhurm paled before Diablo's greatness, let alone the likes of your people, who had yet to enter the Creator's eye!"

Yardrat crooks a faint, nasty smile. "Lady Huul speaks the truth. Emperor Diablo is not a demon you can casually insult. There is a reason my master did not quarrel with him running the First Hell. Diablo possessed the necessary... qualifications."

Momentarily mollified, Wolfram merely crosses his arms and turns up his nose.

"Hmph."

Realizing he cannot possibly dare to continue insulting one of demonkind's most decorated and mighty warriors, Wolfram decides to keep his mouth shut. A wise choice, given the attitudes of the people he even calls his friends.

Fenrir bats her eyes at Benjamin. "Speaking of Diablo, where is that lovable fellow? I should very much like to go and pay my respects to him."

The human shakes his head. "Sorry. No can do. Only three demons know of Diablo's location. Even I'm not sure where they hid him while he sleeps. He's in a vulnerable position, so until he reawakens, nobody is allowed to know where he rests."

"Oh, that lazy goof..." Fenrir comments flippantly. "He always did love a good nap. I'm sure he's enjoying his well-deserved sleep, lest we forget his conquests during the Energy Wars. He's been working so hard ever since Satan passed away... such a shame about those rumors, though."

Benjamin and the others present raise their eyebrows. "Rumors?"

"Oh, didn't you hear? I suppose Ose's dirty little secret hasn't gotten out, yet," Fenrir says, her tone mysterious. "Then again, the Wordsmith *did* kill all the witnesses to her filthy confession. Once everyone has arrived, perhaps I'll let you know."

Benjamin scrutinizes her face, but finds no signs of lying. "...Alright. We'll go along with that-

Before he can finish his words, the two great doors behind him suddenly fly open, and a single red-haired demoness walks in, a maniacal look on her face.

"Hello, boys! Did you ugly little cunts miss me? Sorry I'm late, the spatial storms were CRAZY on the way over! Bahaha!"

Ben turns around to look behind himself, frowning when he sees her.

"Fae. The Emperor of Terror," He says, in a low, pained voice. "...Lovely to see you."

"Oh, piss off," Fae says, as the skinny, bony-looking demoness strides in the door. Her raggedy-red hair gives her the appearance of a beggar just strolled in from the street, while her ratty clothing looks like something she pulled off a fifty-year-old corpse lying in a ditch. Absolutely nothing about her evokes the majesty of a so-called Demon Emperor.

After she enters, the door closes behind her. She strides past Benjamin and the rest without paying them any heed, opting instead to meander toward Yadrat at the far end of the table.

"Hey! Slime-face! I told you to wait for me! Can't you see I had to get my nails done? This is a special occasion, so what kind of shit-faced brat leaves a delicate lady like me in waiting, huh?? I had to blow up like three Warpers just to get here! Such a pain in my ass!"

Yadrat stares at the demoness with a look of disgust. "I waited long enough. I assumed you weren't going to come."

"Hah! More like you hoped I wouldn't! Don't fuck with me, Yar-brat! You're just jealous of my good looks!"

To everyone's surprise, Fae strides right up to the seat of honor, pulls it back, and plops down.

"Wow, what a comfy chair! And to think not one of you losers had the balls to sit here! Bahahaha, the guts of the 'Hidden Emperors' turn more and more to shit every day! Ain't that right, Orc-face One and Orc-face Two? To say nothing of the hairy mutts seated next to the bloodsuckers, bahaha!"

Looks of anger go up around the table. The more Fae speaks, the more vile and pointed her words become. However, nobody speaks up to defend themselves, not even Wolfram. Something about her powers, abilities, and past history make them hesitant to get on her bad side.

"We're just waiting for the other Emperors to show up," Fenrir says, her tone muted and somewhat diplomatic.

"Yeah, yeah," Fae blabbers. "Where's the grub? Where's the booze? How can you have a big, ugly table like this but no refreshments?! If Bael were here, he'd know how to treat a

lady! Oh, but too bad! You idiots went and got Hell's Best Boy killed! Fuckin' bunch of losers!"

Lily listens silently, but doesn't dare to stick her neck out and instead takes refuge behind Fenrir, making herself as small as possible. With Fae's wild antics, she definitely seems the 'crazy' type of demoness her father warned her to avoid the most.

Benjamin Brown and the others continue to wait, while Fae spews her hateful gibberish. All the while, the minutes tick past.

So many have already arrived, Benjamin thinks. And yet in total, not even half of the Hidden Emperors have shown their faces. I still expect many more to come.

Part 296: Meeting of the Hidden Emperors (Part 2)

After Fae's appearance, more than half an hour passes before another group of demons shows up. Surprisingly, when the giant double-doors to the room open, a massive group of half a dozen Emperors, Dukes, and their attendants walks in, with more than thirty attendees in total.

Benjamin Brown turns slightly in his chair to inspect the new arrivals, then mutters under his breath. "Oh? The Hells of Isolation and Lust showed up simultaneously. Interesting."

The Hell of Isolation, founded by the brother and sister Emperor duo, Shax, the Emperor of Resonance, and Murmur, the Emperor of Whispers. Its group consists of two Emperors and a Duke, along with their attendants.

First among the Sixth Hell's guests is Melody, the Emperor of Suppression. Despite her sing-songy name, her appearance is somewhat macho, with a relatively toned and muscular body, thick, full black hair that stretches down to her waist, and teeth studded with jewels. She wears an absurd amount of jewelry around her neck, on her face, and all over her hands. Even her bare midriff reveals a couple of piercings in her belly.

"Sup, losers?" Melody asks, her tone harsh. "Now that the life of the party's here, let's get started! Hahaha!"

She flashes a thumbs-up to Fae, who grins back in response.

"Finally, someone fun!" Fae replies.

Behind Melody stands Guura, the Emperor of Control. A playful-looking young girl with white and pink streaked hair, she appears to be only a young teenager, though when it comes to demons, appearances can be deceptive. She waves cutely to everyone, especially the members of the Hell of Blood. "Hey guys!! What's up?"

Guura wears a loose-fitting blue jacket, a bit more practical than Melody's tank-top and shorts. At her side hangs a loose collection of small musical instruments, including a flute, a harmonica, and a clarinet.

Emperor Fenrir smiles at the newcomers. "Ah, friends from the Hell of Isolation. How... quaint."

Finalizing the Hell of Isolation's big shots, a pudgy-looking male demon waddles in, his black dress shirt appearing just a bit too small for him, allowing his fat rolls to stick out over his pants. Dorma, the Duke of Delicacies, flicks his eyes around the chamber, scowling in annoyance. "Eh? No food? What kinda meeting is this? A gathering for 'poors'? The First Hell really has lost its marbles!"

After the Hell of Isolation's members enter, a group of Demon Dukes follow behind them. As members of the weakest Hell, the Hell of Lust, not a single Emperor appears among their ranks. Instead, their Hell is the most well-known for possessing a massive quantity of Demon Dukes.

Founded by Belial herself, the Hell of Lust is ranked as the Second Hell, though its combat strength rests at the absolute bottom. Were Belial not its official backer, it would have ranked Seventh for all eternity, even below the Hell of Corruption.

Three Dukes from the Hell of Lust follow the members from the Hell of Isolation.

Jahn, the Duke of Cuddles. An effeminate-looking male with pale pink skin, wearing waifish and breezy white clothes strides in first. As the leading Duke, he holds the most authority. His narrow eyes give him a bewitching appearance, while his incubus tail flicks around with a mind of its own, as if searching for the next person he might choose to be his lover.

"Hello, everyone. This pretty mister apologizes for showing up so late. I was having such a good chat with my friend Guura, I lost track of the time. Our delay is entirely my fault."

Right beside Jahn stands Silvia, the Duke of Whips. She stands surprisingly tall, with a slender body that makes her look like a walking red beanstalk. She towers over Jahn, wearing a black dominatrix-looking set of leather clothes that makes it appear she is the 'alpha' in their relationship. However, anyone who knows them knows that they hold no particularly strong feelings for each other. She simply doesn't like to let everyone think he is the strongest member of the Second Hell.

"Benji, darling," Silvia says, smiling coyly at the lone human male in the room. "It's been... a while."

Benjamin glances at Fenrir for a moment before turning to meet Silvia's gaze. "Indeed, it has."

Finally, the last demoness is none other than Bree, the Duke of Intoxication. Her presence is the most glaringly off-putting of all the demons who have assembled so far. She stumbles into the room, tripping over the doorframe and nearly falling flat on her face. Her slovenly clothing, at least three sizes too big, hangs off her rail-thin figure as if it were stolen from a street beggar and given to a drug addict. She curses loudly as she enters the room.

"Jesus Christ! Holy shit, which one of you fuckin' morons installed a death-trap in front of the goddamned door?! I nearly broke my nose walking in!"

Yardrat, still sitting at the far end of the table, feels his eye twitch reflexively.

"Ugh. And here I hoped *she* wouldn't show up..."

His whispered observation echoes in the minds of the other demons present, even if they don't vocalize their thoughts. Bree, one of the loudest and most obnoxious demons in Hell, is well known for her proclivity of using very un-demonic curses taken straight from angelic and human society.

The six guests from the Hells of Isolation and Lust once again surprise the demons present by taking up seats as close to Benjamin Brown as possible. Silvia, however, surprises no-one by picking the seat closest to the human, on his left-hand side, directly across from Lily.

"Who's this cutie?" Silvia asks, her eyes momentarily examining the child across from her. "She looks a lot like you, Benji-dear."

"She's my daughter, Lily," Benjamin replies, smiling warmly at Silvia. "I brought her here to... expand her horizons."

"I wish I could have a cute daughter like her," Silvia says, as she shoots a knowing glance at Fenrir next to Lily. "But we demonesses are doomed to live without experiencing the joys of motherhood."

Benjamin starts to speak, only for Bree to suddenly raise her voice. "Mother of god! That little brat ain't even got any tits! How's she 'sposed to get a guy without knockers?? Fleshbag brats are as flat as boards these days!"

Several demons nearby reflexively grind their teeth together at the sound of Bree's grating voice. Some of them shoot her nasty looks, but they don't speak up, worrying she'll turn that horrid voice and alcohol-laden breath in their direction. In the past, those who have told her to pipe down have ended up with quite the earful, so the rest know better than to even dignify her presence.

However, among those present, there are a few demons who don't mind Bree's mannerisms. Fae, still plopped down in the seat of honor, waves her hand excitedly. "Yo, Bree! Did you bring anything to drink? This meeting looks like it's gonna suck ass! Throw me something!"

"Course I did!" Bree shouts back, her conversation with Fae drowning out all the others present. "Here, brought somethin' strong just so I could fall asleep. It'll knock you off yer' tits!"

"Fuck yeah!" Fae cackles, as she grabs a small flask thrown across the table by Bree. "The rest of these stodgers don't even know what they're missing! Bahaha!"

Dorma, the Duke of Delicacies, eyes the flask with more than a hint of jealousy. "I bet that tastes pretty good. Here, Bree. I was thinking of you, so I brought along my own 'special present.' You'll like this!"

He tosses a skull-shaped flask a few seats down to Bree, who catches it reflexively, her body physically incapable of ignoring any object which might contain alcohol.

"Three's a party!" Bree laughs. "Thanks, Dorma! You're the goddamned best!"

As the three of them begin drinking together, growing progressively more intoxicated despite their physical distance, the other demons and Benjamin all roll their eyes.

Benjamin, in particular, eyes the positions the Hells of Isolation and Lust have placed themselves in, as well as the Hell of Blood.

These seating choices weren't chosen randomly. Three of the Hidden Hells are making the deliberate choice to align themselves with the First. Hmph. Shax's Hell, I can understand. He always was something of a human-lover. All peace, no war, that silly hippie bullshit that got him killed. And the Hell of Lust, well, they depend on humans to empower their succubi and incubi. But what I can't understand is why the Hell of Blood has chosen to align itself with the First. Is it only because Fenrir and I were once...? There must be another reason.

Unaware of Fenrir's machinations through Mephisto, Benjamin Brown can only postulate in his head the reasons behind her choice to sit as close to him and Lily as possible. As for the other Hells who have chosen to sit as far away as possible, their reactions are only natural. They resent the First Hell for superseding the command of Valac's Lantern, and thus, the River Styx.

Guura, the Emperor of Control, kicks her legs back and forth under her chair. "It's so quiet. Why don't you guys play some music or something? Get a band in here, liven this shebang up a bit!"

Melody groans in annoyance. "I told you this was going to be a boring meeting, but you never listen. Why do you think Viola didn't come? She hates stuffy gatherings like these. You're such a friggin' airhead."

Benjamin Brown examines the demons present.

The Hell of Lust brought three Dukes. Jahn, Silvia, and Bree.

The Hell of Blood brought Three Emperors. Fenrir, Wolfram, and Lupus.

The Hell of Punishment only brought Yardrat and Fae. Auger himself didn't deign to show up, nor did Glinch... not that I'm complaining. I'd rather never see Glinch in the flesh again...

The Hell of Calamity has yet to dispatch a single demon. Only the First and Second Ancient Orcs showed up. Even Ashura didn't think this meeting was worth showing up for.

The Hell of Isolation dispatched two Emperors and a Duke. Melody, Guura, and Dorma. Viola didn't show, because she detests meetings like these.

That only leaves... the Hell of Corruption. Yama has yet to show. There's no chance he would miss a meeting like this.

We almost have all of the major players. Once they arrive and Mephisto shows up, we can get the proceedings underway. Hmph. Perhaps I should have prepared refreshments after all. I didn't anticipate it would take several hours just for these lazy demons to get off their asses. Lily's bound to be getting hungry soon.

The many demons present engage in quiet conversation. Some of them, such as Fenrir, opt to speak telepathically. Other keep their voices low, while a few of them remain utterly silent.

Fae continues to sit at the seat of honor. She pulls her chair back and props her feet up on the corner of the table, crossing her legs and leaving her shoes to sit uncomfortably close to the two Ancient Orcs.

Huul glances at Fae, frowning in annoyance. "Disgusting."

"Got a problem, granny?" Fae asks, taunting the Second Ancient. "Maybe you should say it to my face! Hahaha! As if a bloody green-skin has any right to talk to others about nastiness!"

A look of rage flashes in Maltus's eyes. The First Ancient stands up, rising from his chair to send a gaze filled with fire at the Emperor of Terror. "Foolish wench. Speak not ill of my species, lest I remind you why the Fifth Hell is the most feared of all the Seven Hells!"

Fae doesn't flinch. "Go ahead, take a swing, you ugly little *goblin*. Maybe I should remind you why my title is Emperor of *Terror*, hahaha!"

Their spat draws the attention of the other demons present. A few of the attendees frown, uncertain of what the results will be if an Emperor from the Fourth Hell battles an Ancient Orc from the Fifth Hell.

Privately, even the most open-minded demon who is aware of the Seven Hells will often wonder whether their rankings are truly appropriate. After all, for the Hell of Lust to be ranked second is most certainly a farce predicated entirely on the leadership of the disgraced Second Emperor, Belial, someone who lacks even the right to show up to a meeting such as this one.

And as for the Fifth Hell... despite its seemingly low position, everyone present knows it might actually be tied with, if not stronger than the Hells of Blood and Punishment.

Only the machinations of Fenrir and the existence of Emperor Auger, privately considered to be the strongest of all Emperors, leave these questions in flux, presently lacking a resolution.

Maltus sneers coldly. "Do you think I won't dare to maim you in front of all these... *esteemed guests*?"

"Cut the crap." Fae says, her smile turning equally frigid. "You orcs are so pompous. You sling around threats of the 'Zhurm's wrath' this, and 'Orc Pride' that... but compared

to a Demon Emperor, you monsters will always come up short. We all know the supposedly legendary Sphinx fell to a single Duke."

Fae's blunt words cause almost every demon present to frown. Despite the fact that all of them absolutely believe in the truth she states, under ordinary circumstances, they would never utter such slander casually. After all, while monsters might be weaker than their demonic leaders, they still perform many important functions in demon society. It wouldn't do if they were to rise up and start fighting back, demanding more rights and freedoms. Better to let their inferiority persist in a state of flux, a nebulous concept nobody would rather voice out loud.

"Fae. That's enough." Yardrat says. As an Emperor from the same Hell, he speaks up, using his borrowed authority from Auger. "You've gone too far. Apologize to the Ancients. They are mighty beings who stand on a... *similar* level to us Emperors."

Fae shoots a wicked glance at Yardrat and sneers. "Oh, please. So diplomatic! Don't act as if you think any differently from me! Orcs are inferior to demons, and so are all the other monsters! They're hardly fit to lick my boots."

Huul rises to her feet, mirroring Maltus. She nods slowly as she glances around the table.

"Good. Good! So this is how the Fourth Hell looks down upon the might of monsterkind! It seems you've all forgotten the true power my people possess! My son could crush any one of you in equal combat, yet you speak such wicked words when he isn't present!"

Sensing the change in atmosphere, Benjamin Brown stands up from his chair. "Now, hold on. All of you, settle down. This meeting is not the venue to settle long-standing quarrels. By the authority of the First Emperor-"

"The First Emperor can lick my ass!" Fae interrupts, startling the other demons with her heretic words. "He ain't even here! Big spooky Super-Emperor hasn't ever paid me a visit, so I don't believe he exists! He's just some bogeyman the First Hell made up to scare the rest of us into submission. Well, if your First Emperor is so damn tough, maybe he ought to straighten that pesky Hero out himself, eh? And slap these orcs back to the Ancient Era too, while he's at it! Bahahaha!"

"Fae!" Yardrat barks. "I said that's enough!"

"Here, here!" Fenrir says, raising her voice. "Speak not ill of the First Emperor. I personally witnessed his power when he forced the Overlords to back off, all those years ago! He saved us all!"

"You saw him with your own eyes?" Fae asks. "Then what's his name? What does he look like?! You don't even know! I bet your memories are fake! If he can erase memories, he can change them too! So, I say it again! If the First Emperor exists, let him strike me down right here and now!"

Despite Fae's increasingly provocative words, the two Orc Ancients actually calm down somewhat. Maltus and Huul share a look between each other, as well as an amused chuckle.

Haha. This foolish toddler. She actually dares to insult the First Emperor in front of all the others. Even if he doesn't kill her here, she'll surely suffer a gruesome end later.

Huul settles down first, lowering back into her seat. She grins jovially, shaking her head at Fae's stupidity.

"What an imbecile. I was going to beat the daylights out of you, but it would stain this matriarch's claws if I exchanged blows with a buffoon."

Maltus echoes her sentiments. "Agreed. Slandering the First Emperor is a death sentence. What little respect I had for miss Fae seems to have evaporated into the wind."

He sits back down, leaving Fae momentarily befuddled.

"Yeah? Well guess what, idiots? I'm still here! He didn't strike me down, because the First Emperor doesn't even exist! You idiots are all so gullible, falling for the First Hell's ploy."

"The Overlords fear the First Emperor." Benjamin Brown says, his voice quiet. As he sits back in his seat, he shakes his head. "That alone should be all the proof you need for his existence. Do you really think they would turn their weapons away from us... just because of some illusory ghost?"

Fae rolls her eyes. "It doesn't matter what you say. I know he doesn't exist. That's why I'm still alive, and why I'll stay that way. You're all just afraid I might be right. If I am, it means we've all been duped by a sham! Sounds an awful lot like something a bunch of idiot fleshbags would fall for, eh?"

After Fae finishes talking, the table becomes eerily quiet for a few long, painful moments.

Several demons try to appear unmoved, but their eyes turn reflective.

Not a single person present, the highest echelons of the Seven Hells, have ever seen the First Emperor in the flesh. Those who seem to remember him, including Fenrir herself, only remember the events of his ascension, his shocking rise to power and the moment he terrified the Overlords into beating a hasty retreat.

Under such circumstances, they can't help but ask a simple question.

Does the First Emperor truly exist, and if he does, why does he keep his identity a secret?

While this unspeakable thought percolates in the minds of everyone present, Fae offers a smug smirk, nodding in satisfaction to herself.

Good. It seems my words have gotten through to some of these morons. Even if they deny the truth, there's no other explanation. The First Emperor is clearly a fake. The rest of this 'meeting' should prove more interesting now, heh heh heh...

While many demons become lost in thought, a powerful aura sweeps across the room. Its might stands so far above those seated that some of them snap their heads up in alarm.

"The First Emperor?!" Yardrat mutters, surprise audible in his voice.

The doors to the room swish open quietly, allowing a pair of Demon Emperors to stride inside. Immediately, the breath that everyone was holding tightens in their chest as they gaze at the new arrivals.

Serena, the Emperor of Soul Whispers, one of the strongest demons in the Fifth Hell, strides forward. Her appearance is both wispy and illusory. Her beautiful white dress trails on the ground behind her, while her limpid eyes gaze forward blankly, without sight. Her hair rests atop her head in a pair of buns, while white and red paint covers her face, giving her a distinctly Chinese aesthetic, something which few demons deliberately imitate, given its human origins.

She pauses after stepping into the room. Her princess-like appearance causes the blood of many to boil as they gaze at her with widened eyes.

"His majesty, Emperor Gorn." She says, before stepping aside.

Behind her, an absolutely massive, towering Demon Emperor enters the room. Out of pure respect, almost every sentient present rises to their feet, showing respect to the second-ranked most powerful Emperor in existence, a being many privately equate as having nearly as much power as Auger himself.

Gorn, the Emperor of Many Faces, quietly steps forward. His seemingly bottomless well of mana physically sickens many of the weaker attendants in the room, intoxicating them as if they had inhaled a powerful sedative. The low-ranking orcs and demons standing off to the side shudder as they try to stay on their feet. Only Benjamin Brown and his daughter remain wholly immune to Gorn's presence, due to their inability to sense the power of his magic. Even so, Benjamin's internal sensors give off countless warnings, making his eyes widen in surprise.

Emperor Gorn has grown this mighty? Has he not yet reached the peak of what an Emperor can achieve?

The Emperor of Many Faces wears a simple black robe with no particular adornments. His face appears feral, with a bushy, pointed beard sticking out of his chin. His white hair is both regal and refined, yet his tall, muscular body seemingly gives him the illusory figure of a massive were-bear, a monster who might end up set off by the slightest provocation.

As Gorn walks into the room, he gently takes Serena's hand in his. They stride past the other demons without offering them a single glance.

"Emperor Gorn," Benjamin says, while keeping an eye on the alarming readouts of Gorn's mana in his peripheral vision. "You have come."

Gorn pauses for a moment, his gaze distant.

"How could I miss this event? I am not a fool, like Auger. I fear no-one. I only wish to see the events that will change the trajectory of the Seven Hells with my own eyes."

He finally looks at Benjamin, sending a shudder down the human's spine.

"...You have aged considerably." Gorn says. "Time is not kind to your species."

Benjamin lowers his head. "No, it is not."

"Mmm."

Gorn continues walking to the far end of the table. He pauses before Fae, the only demoness in the room who remained seated when he entered.

"Hello, Fae." Gorn says.

Fae glances at him casually, as if realizing he has just arrived. "Oh, heya Gorn! Long time, no see, buddy! Look, I kept this seat warm for ya!"

She climbs out of the chair, then steps aside, giving Gorn a good-natured slap on the back.

"I'm gonna go sit with my gal, Bree! It's more fun over there anyway!"

The moment she steps aside, Gorn removes her from his thoughts.

"Mmm. Despite what others say, you can be quite sensible at times."

Gorn takes his position at the seat of honor, finally displacing Fae. Despite the hopes of everyone present, he doesn't give the loudmouthed woman a violent beating like they thought he would. Instead, Fae wanders over and plops down beside Bree, bringing an end to the tyranny of her tongue-lashings with little more than a short exchange of words.

Serena sits beside Gorn, at his right-hand side, next to Yadrat and across from the two Ancient Orcs.

"Emperor Gorn." Huul says, offering a polite smile to the publicly-renowned, second-mightiest Emperor, the leader of her Hell. "It seems your seclusion was fruitful. You have once again increased your power."

Gorn slowly closes and opens his eyes, as if in a daze.

"Soul manipulation is far from a precise science. I have made gains. I have suffered losses. Ultimately... my strength increased a little. That is all that matters."

Emperor Gorn's polite demeanor hides the truth of his personality, the quiet and tense fear he brings to all those who truly know him. Not only has his body been baptized in blood countless times, but his conquests during the Energy Wars left many other Emperors shaking in their boots. Those who opposed him ended up ripped to shreds. Those who bent the knee only barely managed to escape with their lives.

His eyes, the eyes of an ancient predator, sweep across the room, forcing anyone whose gaze he meets to look away. Only one demoness feels no fear before him, her name being Fenrir, the Emperor of the Night.

Fenrir eyes Gorn icily, sizing up his progress over the past few millennia.

Gorn has not held back in his efforts to obtain power. He is even more terrifying than I recall. But pure strength is not always what wins a war. Auger and Gorn may hold their feud up as the pinnacle of what demons can attain... but the Hell of Blood will not fall behind. During this meeting, we will achieve total dominance, and it's all thanks to little Mephisto.

She curls the corner of her lips into a faint smile, but otherwise says nothing.

With Gorn's arrival, all other conversations fade away. Only the bravest person would dare to provoke him, or those lacking all sense of propriety. Surprisingly, even the loudmouths, Fae and Bree, keep their lips sealed.

Gorn snorts.

"Humph. It seems almost everyone is here. Yet still, one persistent little hold-out lingers in the shadows. Come out, Yama. Your flair for theatrics is beginning to annoy me."

The other Emperors and Dukes raise their eyebrows. They sweep their senses around the room, yet not one of them manages to detect anything out of the ordinary. However, just as they begin to doubt Gorn's words, a sinister voice drifts into their ears from every direction.

"Heh... heh... heh... we were planning a fun little surprise, but you caught us in the act. How embarrassing..."

The torches on the walls flicker for a moment, then go out. Darkness engulfs the room, though every being present still retains their sight, aside from one. Benjamin Brown's ocular implants instantly switch to a variety of visual modes, while the other demons and monsters possess vision superior to ordinary humans, allowing them to see in the gloom. Only Lily Brown finds herself awash in darkness, unable to see even two inches in front of her face.

On the ceiling above, an amorphous blob of shadow congeals itself into a massive face stretching across the sky. Two blood-red dots appear in the darkness, making Lily nearly wet herself in fear.

"Honored guests... we are the humble leader of the Hell of Corruption. We wished to make a dramatic entrance, yet that silly Gorn fellow took away all

of our fun! Heh heh heh... we do hope this meeting will turn out productively."

Yama, the Emperor of Shadows, keeps true to his name by avoiding the light. As a being of pure darkness, he both fears and reviles it. Yet, where it is absent, his powers surpass all other demons, even Gorn and Auger themselves.

"So many beautiful women..." Yama says, as his comically small red eyes jump between all the female demons and non-demons alike. **"Oh, how this humble Emperor longs to add you all to our harem! Hehehe... we have suffered many unfortunate losses, of late."**

Silvia and the other members of the Hell of Lust roll their eyes. "Enough with the theatrics, Yama. Get down here and join us, already. This meeting has delayed for long enough."

Yama's body congeals into a human-sized blob of shadow. He melts across the ceiling and falls smack onto the center of the table, instantly transforming into a four-foot-tall vaguely demon-shaped blob of darkness.

"This young one... she meets our tastes quite nicely," Yama says, as he flickers forward to arrive right in front of Lily. **"Too bad she is not a virgin, or we would be even more pleased, hehehe..."**

The young girl nearly screams in fright, but to her surprise, her father stands up and reveals a flash of light in his palm.

"Do not test my patience, Emperor of Shadows. Sit your ass down. I do not take kindly to *rapists*."

A glowing flicker of starlight appears in the human's hand, illuminating the look of rage on his face. For the first time in her life, Lily discovers that her father can reveal such an expression, one she's never seen him use before.

Immediately, Yama recoils, as if slightly pained by the barely-glowing light in Benjamin's palm.

"Hehehe... so you expected our arrival and prepared accordingly. Clever fleshbag! But you were a fool to reveal this delightful female to us. Do not be surprised if she disappears one day from under your nose!"

The light in Benjamin's hand suddenly quadruples in brightness, forcing Yama back a second time and further brightening the chamber.

"If she does, then I'll know which Hell is responsible!" Benjamin barks.

Fenrir narrows her eyes. "Step back, Yama. You won't touch Benjamin Brown or his family."

Silvia nods. "Benji is not one you can provoke. He is a friend of my entire Hell."

Yama snaps his head toward the two women.

"Tsk. Fenrir might have some qualifications to run her mouth, but a mere Duke does not! Your so-called Second Hell is a disgrace! We alone could wipe it out in an afternoon, so do not test our patience! We might just take you as one of our playthings yet!"

"You'd risk making an enemy of the Hell of Isolation," Emperor Melody says, gazing at Yama's shadowy figure without a hint of fear. She curls her lips into a mocking grin, exposing her diamond-studded teeth. "The Hells of Lust and Isolation are like sworn brothers. Threaten them, and you'll piss us off, too. I knew the Shadow Emperor had some guts, but I didn't think he was a fucking idiot."

Yama's Hell, much like the Hell of Lust, holds its own special distinction. While the Hell of Lust lacks even a single Emperor, the Hell of Corruption not only possesses just one single Emperor, but a complete lack of Dukes, Barons, and Lords.

Indeed, the Hell of Corruption exists entirely due to Yama's presence. Only he, his Shades, and his Shadow-walkers populate the Seventh Hell's confines.

Thus, when pressed by a fellow Emperor, Yama's threats lose some of their bite. Faced with threats from the Hell of Blood and Isolation both, Yama can only slink back and offer a coy smile.

"Heh heh... this humble Emperor knows when we have met our match. We will stay quiet and observe this meeting from a safe distance. Do not let us sully the mood, for we shall gaze upon the lovely flowers from afar!"

Without another word, he dissipates into smoke, then floats upward and returns to the ceiling. After a few seconds, Yama's presence fades away, becoming invisible to all but the most mana-sensitive Emperors, such as Gorn. Many of the women at the table shiver

uncomfortably at the thought that they cannot sense Yama unless he wishes for them to do so.

Benjamin Brown takes a few moments to collect himself. He sends a command through his implants to the torches on the wall, causing them to reignite. With their light returning to the conference room, Yama's threat becomes noticeably smaller.

I won't let that sexual predator touch my daughter. Ben thinks. Perhaps... it was a mistake bringing Lily here. In any case, it is too late for doubts. I will simply have to keep a close watch on her, moving forward.

With Yama's arrival, Benjamin Brown can finally exhale, releasing some of the tension in his limbs.

"Alright. Everyone has arrived. Emperor Auger did not show up, and neither did a few of the others... but those present should be sufficient to discuss these important matters moving forward. I trust you will relay the proceedings here to those who need to hear them."

Benjamin offers a pointed glance at Yardrat, who speaks for Emperor Auger. Yardrat faintly nods, but says nothing in reply.

"Very well then," Benjamin says. "In lieu of Mephisto's arrival, I hereby call this meeting to order. It's time we discuss the threat of the Wordsmith and what measures we shall take to deal with him."

Part 297: How to Kill a Wordsmith

Benjamin Brown silences the meeting hall with a declaration of war. However, what he receives in response are several seconds of awkward silence before Yardrat finally speaks.

"I beg your pardon? I was under the impression the purpose behind this meeting was to determine which Hell's members would ascend to the First Hell in order to fill the gaps left behind by all of its lost elites. Dealing with the Wordsmith is a mere trifle by comparison."

Several of the elites present nod their heads in agreement. The Second Ancient, Huul, speaks up immediately after him. "Just because the First Hell was incompetent does not mean the rest of us are the same! Just seven short years ago, the Hell of Damnation boasted the fighting powers of Diablo, Belial, Bael, Agares, Barbatos, and Mephisto. Considering Diablo's status as the legendary Archdemon and Belial's as the Second Emperor, none of us voiced any complaints. But today, only Mephisto remains, while the rest have perished, fallen comatose, or turned traitor!"

The First Ancient, Maltus, adds on to his junior's sentiment. "Not only that, but you even hurriedly added Ose and Beelzebub to your ranks, yet both of them perished as well. Promoting two juniors two ranks was already a mark of shame for the so-called First Hell, one which made it quite the laughingstock, but at least Ose served her time during the Energy Wars. How you could have the gall to feed souls to a babe like Beelzebub still eludes us!"

Benjamin Brown weathers the criticisms stoically, not even flinching as several representatives from the Hidden Hells openly mock the First Hell to his face.

"Ose may have been a bit of a hasty case, but Beelzebub was hardly unworthy. Besides, Beelzebub promoted himself, originally. He wielded the legendary Soulfire, a power thought lost to the Ancient Era. He swallowed the souls of enough humans to evolve from Lord to Baron, and his feats during the Battle Against the Black Queen earned him the chance at promoting to Duke."

"You're evading the point." Maltus replies, his voice cold. "The First Hell has flailed about drunkenly for seven years, now. You released the Wordsmith and the Black Queen, only to suffer self-inflicted wounds as a result. Now, you change the pretense of this

meeting to one where the rest of us have to clean up your mess. No orc worth his salt would stoop so low without speaking first of the rewards!"

Gorn, seated at the end of the table, reveals a light smile. "These juniors speak the truth, Mister Brown. It is the job of the First Hell to clean up its mess. If you wish to enlist anyone's help, you should take the proper measures by promoting eligible demons to lead the Hell of Damnation. Naturally, the Hell of Calamity holds the most worthy members. I doubt anyone here would be so foolish as to quibble over this... minor issue."

The Emperor of Many Faces slowly glances at Yardrat, his provocative words aimed squarely at Yardrat's leader, Emperor Auger. The Emperor of the Void does not miss this distinction.

"Have you forgotten, Gorn? My liege, Auger, is the publicly recognized mightiest Emperor in existence... short of his eminence, the First Emperor. That is why our hell is ranked fourth and yours, fifth."

"And yet both of ours are ranked lower than the Hell of Blood, to say nothing of the Hell of Lust. Clearly, the old rankings mean nothing," Gorn sneers. "I think it's high-time we... *adjusted*... the old rankings. My Hell possesses the most Emperors. We are most fit to replace the First Hell."

From the middle of the table, Lupus, the Emperor of Scales, speaks up. "Replace? Hoho, your ambitions betray you, Many-Faced Emperor. This discussion is not about replacing the First Hell, lest we shift from seven Hells to six! It is merely about moving a few assets to the First Hell in order to establish leadership."

"The First Hell is rotten to the core," Gorn says, snorting hot air through his nose. "And I mean that in the most literal sense. Fleshbags have risen up and taken over the Labyrinth's Core, stealing access to our food supply. Only two Warp gates remain, both located at the furthest reaches of Hell. The First Hell is filled with fat, groveling weaklings. Countless millennia of being on top have softened their ambitions. If we must lose one of the Seven Hells, so be it. Six is more of a demonic number anyway."

Seated on Gorn's right-hand side, Serena speaks up, her sightless eyes fixated forward on the far wall.

"My king is right. The First Hell no longer holds any real significance. We must replace its hierarchy with that of the Fifth Hell before dealing with the Wordsmith. This new Hero may be powerful, but so was King Arthur, and he, too, fell to demonkind's might."

Serena's soft, gentle voice contrasts with her overbearing words. Despite the Emperor of Soul Whisper's dainty figure and pure white dress, giving her the appearance of a willowy twig that might break at the slightest touch, all of the leaders present know better than to underestimate her.

Before anyone else can speak, Benjamin Brown raises his voice.

"You overstep your authority, Emperor Gorn. I presently speak for the First Hell, and I will continue to do so until Mephisto arrives. Speaking of which, I suppose it's time to address the Duke of Mist specifically."

Gorn's expression remains impassive when the lowly human challenges him directly, but inside his heart, an ember of hatred ignites.

Benjamin continues. "Mephisto was wildly successful during the Stormbringer Invasion. The First Hell lost nearly all of its elite assets, but according to the intelligence I've received... Mephisto obtained several worthwhile returns. He not only whisked away Bael's body from beneath the humans' noses, but Ose's as well, in addition to Monster King Kar. That means Mephisto now possesses the souls and bodies of two Emperors and one Duke. What do you think will happen once he... evolves to the rank of Emperor?"

A jolt of realization shoots through a few of the less-informed Emperors and Dukes present. Yardrat appears less surprised than the others, while Gorn and Fenrir reveal wildly different expressions.

"Another hasty promotion." Gorn growls. "Mephisto is not worthy to lead the First Hell! He is only a Duke, one who will soon be newly ascended to Emperor! Have you forgotten Ose's failures after her botched promotion? The First Hell requires a leader with eons of experience. A stable leader who knows what he is doing."

"I agree," Yardrat quickly interjects. "And who better to lead than my liege, Auger?"

Emperor Serena turns her head in Yardrat's direction, though her eyes don't fix onto him. "Auger has chosen not to come, revealing his fear. My King is absolutely superior when it comes to a leader's demeanor. Further, all the Hidden Hells would rise up if forced to submit themselves to... Auger's methods."

More than half of the guests nod silently, well aware of the costs associated with Auger's 'blessing.' The ability to share and transfer powers necessarily requires submitting oneself entirely to the Emperor of Distribution, after all.

Benjamin Brown sighs. "Once again, Gorn, your ambition precedes you. You claim that Mephisto is unworthy. By whose standards does that statement hold true? He was Satan's protégé, trained by the Devil himself. Mephisto swiped Valac's Lantern from the angels, stealing their power of resurrection for your people and benefitting all Seven Hells as a result. When the Black Queen attacked, he did not hesitate to unleash a secret trump card to stop her; the body of Leviathan itself, thought lost during the ancient Energy Wars. And during Stormbringer, he crushed the humans all by himself several times. To say nothing of him possessing multiple Emperor-level bodies and souls..."

The human stares directly into Gorn's eyes. "Once Mephisto ascends, can you say with absolute confidence that, in a battle between only yourselves and the powers you control... you would come out on top?"

Gorn, the mightiest being in the room, meets the human's gaze. On the surface, he appears unmoved. However, in the back of his mind, he recalls the infamous tales of the previous High Necromancer, Valac, who nearly brought angelkind to their knees all by himself.

The rise of another elite Necromancer would cast a heavy wrench into Gorn's plans. However, when faced with the facts, even he finds it difficult to speak up regarding Mephisto's supposed unworthiness.

Luckily, Serena interjects, saving her king from an awkward moment.

"Mephisto does indeed possess the qualifications. However, I worry what fate the Seven Hells will face once a High Necromancer arises once again. Lest we forget, Emperor Valac was a cruel being, someone who frequently killed his lessers to enrich himself. While his power was all but absolute, so too was his tyrannical fist. Mephisto will face all of the same temptations, the desire to kill and enslave other demons and turn them into his undyingly loyal minions. I do not look forward to this possible future."

For once, Benjamin Brown appears stumped. He glances at his daughter for a moment, then to Emperor Fenrir. Unsure of what to say, he instead offers a lame excuse.

"...I do not believe Mephisto will go that far."

"Your beliefs matter little to me." Serena says, pressing the topic. "I have spoken to Mephisto on many occasions. He is a small-minded fellow with aspirations far too large for his capabilities. He is greedy to a fault and will assuredly cause the future I have predicted. I may not be an Oracle, but it hardly takes a seer to portent Mephisto's actions

after his rise! Without Diablo and Belial to keep him in check, I know in my heart the terrible fate he will thrust upon us."

"You speak so casually of small minds," Emperor Fenrir says, as she leans back in her seat casually. "Yet you also speak of Mephisto's broad aspirations. I see that hypocrisy runs deep in the leaders of the *Fifth* Hell. Mephisto is by far the most suitable candidate for the position of Second Emperor. Perhaps *you* have forgotten this one fact, but I have not: The Seven Hells are presently no more than prisoners locked in a cage. The Overlords hang over us, their threat a weapon that could sever our heads at any moment."

Fenrir continues. "Mephisto is perfect for the role of Second Emperor because he alone possesses the ability and foresight to lead our people out of the darkness and into the light. After the mind-wipes, we have lost countless pieces of crucial information regarding the Overlords, which has forced us into a passive position, never daring to lift our heads and meet their eyes. Yet our 'benevolent' leaders have offered us the privilege of survival and a few paltry worlds upon which we may live."

"Mephisto offers us a new possibility!" Fenrir concludes. "We can finally rise up and break the shackles which have locked demonkind down! We can defeat our oppressors and seize control of the galaxy! This is the future we demons deserve!"

As Fenrir looks around the room, the expressions of the demons she meets turn icy. They silently shake their heads, disapproving of her stance.

Silvia, seated on Benjamin's left-hand side, is the first to speak. "Do you even hear what you're saying? Demonkind has grown no stronger since the Energy Wars, while the Overlords have continued to expand and conquer the Milky Way. The First Emperor only managed to scare them away with the threat of a pyrrhic victory, one which would cost them dearly but still eventually result in our destruction. No matter how highly you evaluate Mephisto, he cannot possibly pose the Overlords more of a threat than the First Emperor himself!"

Emperor Guura bows her head meekly. "Don't you guys think you're talking a *little* too casually about fighting the Overlords? If they're listening right now, we could all end up in hot water, you know!"

Benjamin waves his hand flippantly. "I took every precaution. If the Overlords can monitor this facility, they have truly expanded their capabilities."

"You don't need to worry about the Overlords," Fenrir says, answering Silvia and Guura both. "You all fear our oppressors, but what you don't know is that their strength has declined substantially over the past fifty millennia. I'll bet nobody here even knows about the *war* they've been fighting."

Despite his intense distrust toward Fenrir, Emperor Gorn can't help but perk up his ears at her words. Not only him, but Yardrat and the other Emperors all sit up a little straighter in their chairs.

"What's this about a war?" Asks the Second Ancient, Huul. "They're fighting each other now?"

"To be frank, I don't know the details," Fenrir says. "I've tried investigating, but my... *servants* haven't been able to pierce their intelligence nets, or to comprehend their technology. The Overlords are highly secretive, and the mental blocks they put on all of us affect me just as much as the rest of you. Even so, I've observed the signs of a terrible war ravaging their defenses. Their space-fleets appear to have substantially dropped in both quality and quantity. Many ships operate on skeleton crews. In particular, their observation platforms have reduced in number over the years. I don't know *who* they're fighting, but I do know that the Overlords are either losing or suffering an eternal stalemate."

Fenrir bats her eyes as she turns to look at Benjamin Brown.

"You haven't heard anything, have you, love?"

The human slowly shakes his head. "I have not. If anyone would know, it would be Diablo or Ose... but they never told me about any war. Diablo used to offer regular reports to the Overlords, and Ose was due for her first in just a month or two... until she died. Beyond them, the Overlords always kept a tight grip on those who knew their secrets. It would defeat the purpose of the mind-wipes if anyone here were to learn more about their workings."

"Emperor of the Night. How do we know you aren't making this supposed war up?" Yardrat asks, delivering a pointed glance at Fenrir. "Have you any proof to back up your claims?"

Fenrir shakes her head. "Not particularly. Only reports delivered to me by my *pets*... before they collapsed and died. You'll just have to take my word on it."

After she finishes talking, the room becomes quiet for a full minute.

Several Emperors and Dukes look at each other, sometimes raising their eyes to the ceiling in thought.

The concept of dealing with the almighty Overlords differs drastically compared to dealing with war-weakened Overlords. This possible dichotomy echoes in the minds of all the demons and orcs, making them dwell on Fenrir's postulations.

Even Gorn appears thoughtful. The Emperor of Many Faces strokes his white beard attentively, while his eyes glaze over.

Emperor Fenrir is many things, including a liar. But, she is neither suicidal nor foolish. If I assume that she still cares for demonkind, she would not lie about this possibility. Rising up against the Overlords would result in demonkind's extinction, and that is something nobody seated here desires. Therefore, if she has made these claims, she must have some level of confidence...

Yardrat also falls into thought.

Auger will wish to know of this news. Mephisto might be capable of defeating the Overlords given their supposed weakened state, but Auger himself is equally capable of such a feat. His powers would be perfect for a counter-attack and invasion.

Surprisingly, Gorn's consort, Serena, is the first to speak.

"I believe in Fenrir's claims. In this instance, I do not think she is lying. However, I must ask an important question. Are the enemies of the Overlords our friends? Might we possibly ally with them to achieve dominance, or is this war of theirs a civil war, instead? In the latter case, both sides might turn their weapons against us and wipe us out. In the former, an alliance could still result in our destruction if the Overlord's alien enemies backstab us afterward."

As the conversation turns toward the direction of an uprising, Benjamin Brown suddenly stands up and slaps his hand against the table.

"All of you! This discussion has diverted far enough from its original premise! Have you forgotten? We are here to discuss dealing with the **Wordsmith**! All this talk of superseding the First Hell and dealing with the Overlords is ludicrous when we are potentially facing demonkind's greatest threat to ever exist *aside* from the Overlords!"

Emperor Gorn rolls his eyes. "Ah, yes. The *terrifying* Wordsmith. Do feel free to enlighten us regarding his unparalleled power."

The First Ancient, Maltus, snorts derisively, echoing Gorn's sentiments. "I hear that brat is a pacifist, someone who hesitated to take any offensive actions following his appearance. He lived and fought passively, with only his deviant clone actually posing a minor threat to the First Hell. Even then, the clone has gone missing, leaving us with only the meek and mild original Hero to deal with!"

Several demons chuckle to themselves. They shake their heads, knowing full-well that the so-called legendary Hero is only a mere boy who has shrunk into his shell and tried to eke out an existence on Tarus II.

However, Benjamin's eyes harden as she sweeps a death-glare around the table.

"I expected better from the Hidden Hells. Have your eyes climbed up your asses? Your intelligence is outdated! Let me inform you all on the power this 'brat' actually possesses!"

He continues. "The Wordsmith came to Ose's residence, hoping to settle a peace treaty with her. She rejected him, and he left, only to vanish into thin air. However, his arrival spooked Ose, causing her to launch Stormbringer ahead of schedule."

Bree, the Duke of Intoxication, laughs gutturally. "You actually have the balls to speak of that embarrassment in front of all of us? Bahaha! Jesus Christ, the First Hell is a real shitshow!"

Benjamin continues, unhindered by her interruption. "The First Hell attacked, intending to capture both of the Wordsmiths. One of them was to go to Emperor Yama. The other would be kept for Ose's own purposes. I'm sure I need not explain what possible motives she might have had in mind. Even so, the human's 'passive' defenses proved incredibly robust! It took several days for the First Hell's elites to push past the Hero's battle lines."

Fenrir interjects. "Ose could have crushed the humans a lot sooner, love. She was merely hoping to capture a few important individuals alive, in particular, the Hero's wife and child. They would have made for great bargaining chips if the Hero eluded her."

Some of the Emperors frown at Fenrir's interjection. Once again, the information she possesses seems to exceed theirs by several margins, leaving them to feel somewhat inferior to the Third Hell.

"In any case," Benjamin says, "the Hero returned! And when he did, he possessed a weapon of unimaginable power, a divine angelic artifact that gave him access to nearly unlimited amounts of mana! This information was reported by countless witnesses during the battle! Now I ask all of you... what artifact, pray tell, could possess such a vast and limitless magical energy?"

Suddenly, the expression of every demon changes. Yadrat rises from his seat, a look of alarm on his face. "That's impossible!"

"And yet the evidence speaks for itself!" Benjamin shouts, pointing a glare directly at the Emperor of the Void. "The mana signature differed slightly, but without a doubt, it belonged to Camael. It couldn't have been anything but the divine blade, Excalibur!"

"Excalibur!" Gorn yells, his previously cool expression giving way to a momentary flicker of dread. "That artifact vanished ages ago! I thought the Overlords obtained it?!"

"Maybe they did." Benjamin says, his voice cold. "And yet the facts lay bare. Jason Hiro visited Ose on Hell Harbor, then vanished for multiple days. When he reappeared, he possessed the ultimate weapon, capable of slaying even the Archdemon himself. Where he obtained it, we don't know. It is entirely possible Jason Hiro traveled to the Overlords' home world and stole the divine blade from under their noses. It's also possible he used his unique abilities to locate the sword elsewhere in the cosmos."

Of all the demons present, only Fenrir and the werewolves from the Hell of Blood appear unmoved. Having already learned this information due to Fenrir's spies, they soak in the atmosphere, nodding silently to themselves.

Fae, the Emperor of Terror, frowns deeply. "Now, hold on just a second. Are you *sure* it's Excalibur?"

"What other artifact is known for possessing such a vast and limitless mana supply?" Benjamin answers with a question of his own. "Admittedly, the mana signature did seem a little different, but that could be explained by a variety of factors. Perhaps the Wordsmith disguised Excalibur's signature when he stole it. We don't know. His powers were already the most versatile of any Hero in history... now he also possesses the power to back it up."

"He can *do* that?" Fae asks, momentarily incredulous. "Shit! This punk's not bad!"

"Perhaps we have underestimated the Hero after all," Jahn, the Duke of Cuddles, mutters. "A Hero *with* Excalibur and a Hero *without* Excalibur are two entirely different entities."

"Based upon my observations," Fenrir says, seizing control of the conversation, "Jason Hiro actually possesses quite the weak soul. While he was able to wield Excalibur's power to seal countless Warper portals, he eventually slowed down and stopped. The most likely explanation is that his soul ran itself ragged. Compared to King Arthur, Jason's soul probably comes up short."

"That hardly eases my worries," Yardrat says, shuddering to himself. "It's the bloody divine sword! **The divine sword!** No doubt, Arthur's complete soul resides inside it, guiding Jason's hand. I would fear a jackrabbit guided under the wing of the Hero-King, let alone the Wordsmith!"

"If you think that knowledge will harm your beauty sleep," Fenrir says, "wait until you've heard the rest. Not only does the Hero possess Excalibur, but he also possesses Solomon's Crown. At the end of the Stormbringer Invasion, just after Beelzebub detonated his body in a brilliant final flash of power, the Wordsmith's daughter ended up perishing to that attack. Enraged, Jason Hiro instantly slew Bael, as well as more than two million surviving demons. He brutally wiped them out within mercy. Why, just this morning, he annihilated all of the First Hell's forces inside the Labyrinth Core. It is likely that he is preparing a campaign of conquest."

Gorn's expression falls. "So... that's how the invincible Duke of Pain fell. I didn't know the details."

Even Yardrat's previous cockiness shrinks to a fraction of its former self.

"...My Liege is aware of the details surrounding Jason's power, Wordsmithing. Apparently, the Hero can cast any sort of magic just by speaking a single word. However, previously, he was limited by a pitiful mana pool and his pathetic moral sympathies. Simply put, he was a soft-bellied boy. Now, however, neither of those weaknesses exist."

Emperor Fae leans back in her chair and shakes her head.

"Wow! Way to go, First Hell! You really screwed the pooch this time! You raised a fucking monster!"

"I am well-aware." Benjamin says. "That is why I must state again... it doesn't matter who ascends to the position of Second Emperor, or any of your other machinations. If you don't deal with this Hero now, while he has yet to fully consolidate his power... it will be the beginning of the end for the Seven Hells. Every moment we spend talking is another he will use in expanding his power."

Bree laughs. "Haha, I bet you'd like that, fleshbag! If Jason Hiro rises up, you'll finally be free to piss off with the rest of your people. No more bowing your head to us bloodskins, eh?"

The human representative hesitates for a moment.

"I have already cast my lots in with the First Hell. I still... I still hold some allegiance to humanity, to be sure. But I do not agree with this Hero's goal. Demonkind and humanity lived a stable existence, coexisting in peace. It was better, before. No father wants to raise his children while a Sword of Damocles hangs over their head. My days of fighting are long over."

Gorn sneers. "Peace? It sounds you've lived a good life in the Slithering Spire. You ended up quite well after the events of the Energy Wars. You don't even know how bad your compatriots had it. Now, they will live better under the Hero's protection... are you sure you want to betray them all for your own peace? Might you even, perhaps, turn against all of us to join the Hero on his mission?"

Several eyes flick from Gorn to Benjamin in expectation. The human slowly sits back down in his chair, an uneasy look in his eyes.

"I am a human. However, I am also a man of honor. Marie and I signed the treaties all those eons ago. We will abide by them. At least I will, though I cannot speak on her behalf."

"It warms our hearts to hear your passion for kissing the boots of demonkind," Yardrat says, his tone harsh. "If only all the rest of your people were so enlightened."

Gorn raps his fingers on the table. "Our goal seems clear. We must eliminate the Wordsmith as quickly as possible. However, our previous discussion still holds some level of importance. Therefore, I have a... *suggestion*."

Hearing the most powerful demon in the room voice a 'suggestion' causes several other Emperors to fidget uncomfortably. Never would a self-serving entity like Gorn

speak politely unless he had some ulterior motive.

Benjamin nods slowly. "Go on."

"I suggest that whoever lands the killing blow on this young, fledgling Hero should be designated the Second Emperor," Gorn says, as a predatory smile stretches across his face. "Naturally, the one who succeeds will also elevate his Hell to supplant the First. If Mephisto is as capable as you claim, then he will succeed and put all of our worries regarding his capabilities to ease. Of course, if he doesn't..."

Gorn trails off. He averts his eyes casually, leaving the implication hanging in the air.

Fenrir frowns. "Mephisto was chosen by Satan to be his successor. Just because he has not yet had an opportunity to shine does not mean you have the right to supplant him under any circumstance. The Hell of Blood-"

"Is clearly in collusion with Mephisto," Yardrat snaps, interrupting Fenrir. "We may not pay attention to all of the mundane details that occur outside of our hells, Emperor of the Night, but do not think the rest of us naïve. Several witnesses reported seeing the Battle Brothers assume vampiric powers. Your defense of Mephisto indicates that you and him are working together to supplant the First Hell! I'll bet the reason Stormbringer failed may have even had something to do with Mephisto's deliberate machinations!"

"Outrageous!" Wolfram barks, rising to defend his fellow Emperor. "Watch your mouth, you little shit! How dare you imply my lady would collaborate to kill Ose! That claim has no basis in reality!"

Yardrat slowly blinks his eyes. "When did I say such a thing? You seem to be putting words in my mouth. Though, now that you mention it, that does present an... interesting possibility. Don't you think?"

Emperor Serena turns her head in the Hell of Blood's general direction. "Ose's death certainly seemed preventable, in hindsight. Her rushed actions, her unnatural failures to predict the human's combat capabilities... these do not line up with the infamous Ghost's tactics. I recall during the Energy Wars, as a mere Baron, she brought humanity to its knees. How could such a famous individual suffer so many simultaneous failures?"

Benjamin Brown glances at the Emperor of Soul Whispers. He frowns and falls into thought before turning to look at Fenrir.

"That... does seem a bit odd, now that Serena mentions it. Lady Fenrir, you wouldn't possibly...?"

Before Fenrir can defend herself, Gorn speaks.

"How strange it is that Fenrir has remained abreast of the tactical situation both inside and outside of the Labyrinth while the rest of us have remained in the dark. She seems to know everything, doesn't she? Not only the Hero's movements, but the artifacts he possesses, the events which occurred during Stormbringer, and even things Sir Benjamin himself doesn't know. My, she certainly is... full of surprises."

Two dozen heads swivel to gaze at Fenrir. The Emperor of the Night remains calm and collected, while icily sweeping her eyes from left to right.

"Unlike the rest of you, a bunch of ignorant brutes, I always maintain a close watch on the galaxy. It is not my fault you lot live in decadence, sealing yourself off from the important happenings outside of your Hells. As for this rumor I had something to do with Ose's death... simply absurd. As women of substantial intellect, the two of us were like birds of a feather. I had nothing to do with her death. Rather, you should turn your attention to the traitor Belial, who brutally pummeled Ose, along with the help of the Fairy Queen and several other mighty individuals."

Fenrir casually reaches up and plays with a few strands of her luscious onyx-colored hair.

"Besides. Don't you lot find it odd that Ose didn't ask anyone but Yama for assistance? The reason she fell had nothing to do with me, but instead, her own hubris. Ose genuinely believed herself infallible. She thought she was smarter than the rest of you and wanted to prove her ability by taking down both Wordsmiths alone. All she had to do was ask, and I'm sure any of you would have barked like dogs for a chance to help her. After all, like Yama and the Emperor of Infiltration herself... I'm sure you would have enjoyed the chance at obtaining one of the Wordsmiths for your own purposes."

Even Gorn finds himself entranced by Fenrir's silky voice. He swallows heavily, imagining the possibilities of adding the Wordsmith's power to his many 'faces'.

"Nobody here trusts you, Fenrir. But whether you had anything to do with Ose's death or not, it no longer matters. She's dead, the Wordsmith isn't, and we have to settle both of these issues once and for all."

Benjamin purses his lips.

"Regarding your previous proposal, Emperor Gorn. Well... I can't say it's orthodox... but allowing the Hero-Slayer to ascend isn't the worst idea I've heard. Truth be told, it seems a fair competition, and it would allow a worthy demon to take the place of the Second Emperor. I think I should add another point, though. Whoever manages to successfully kill or capture Belial should also be added to the list of possible ascenders."

"Mmm. Belial." Gorn growls, his voice tainted with disgust. "Satan's Whore. A floozy who rose through the ranks purely by chance. I always knew she was too kind for her own good. But still... defeating her will prove troublesome. She has always been the Second Emperor for a reason."

"Perhaps not." Fenrir says. "I happen to know something else that you don't. In fact, Ose beat Belial not once, but twice, during Stormbringer. It was a total victory. The only reason she didn't kill the former Second Emperor was due to interruptions by third parties on both occasions."

The demons blink in surprise. Second Ancient Huul is the first to reply. "How is that believable? Belial was considered undefeatable during the Energy Wars. Her sheer physical strength and healing abilities alone made her almost impossible to wound, let alone kill."

"She has lost her edge." Fenrir states. "In my opinion, Satan's death rocked her emotionally. She lost her heart, and her fighting spirit. Now, she's become easily susceptible to emotional barrages. In fact, Ose used those gaps in her mental armor on both occasions, throwing Belial's emotions into disarray. It isn't that her body and powers have become any weaker, but..."

Gorn finishes Fenrir's sentence. "...but the mind is just as important a component of any warrior's power. I see. In that case, Belial isn't as invincible as we thought."

"So much has changed." Yardrat mutters. "Truly, time stops for no demon."

The Hells of Lust and Isolation, having not cared much about the outcome of this meeting, have mostly remained silent. However, sensing a lull in the conversation, Melody pipes up.

"Alright! So is it settled, then? Are we gonna gang up and attack the humans all at once, or what? Whoever kills the Wordsmith becomes Second Emperor. Boom, boom,

done! Stop running your mouths off and decide already!"

Benjamin shakes his head. "It's not that simple, Emperor Melody. Until we receive-"

Suddenly, in the middle of Benjamin's sentence, the double-doors to the room blast open, swinging inward with incredible force!

Every participant in the discussion whirls around in shock, only to see two demons stride inside, both of them instantly evoking several varied and conflicting feelings.

Emperor Gorn gazes at the duo who have entered, his eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"Emperor Ose! Duke Bael!"

Bael strides in first, with Ose following behind him. The overweight Duke looks only a little worse for wear, with a fully healed body that still bears the telltale signs of necromancy, including ash-grey skin and cracks running along his face. Ose behind him appears about the same, her figure sharing the same necromantic magic signature.

As he walks through the doors, Bael snorts.

"Hello. Did anyone miss me?"

Part 298: Reviving the Fallen

A few hours earlier, elsewhere on Hell Harbor.

The Baron of Leprosy, Ozzar, slowly walks through the Hall of the Damned, his skinless feet audibly *clinking* against the floor. He stands tall and proud, more than happy to identify himself as a valuable servant to the reigning necromancer, Mephisto. Rotted black and red rags stick to his bones, their former glory having faded after countless eons away from the light of civilization. Given the Baron's inability to smell the world around himself, he pays no mind to the unbearable stench of death which wafts from his figure.

Ozzar casually walks through the hallways illuminated with green torches, fire which burns differently from ordinary magical torches. Those possessing any life inside themselves will find their internal organs slowly beginning to glow red under the torchlight, while those revived through the power of necromancy will glow green instead.

The Baron's skull, possessing two ruby-red eyes, remains locked-forward while he walks. Thoughts silently bubble within his mind, causing a wicked smile to dance upon his face.

The preparations are complete. We have finally rebuilt the bodies of my Master's fallen servants. The Monster King, the Emperor of Infiltration, and the Duke of Pain are ready for him to revive.

Heh heh heh... we had to sacrifice countless slaves to attain the nutrients required for their revival. A quarter of a million, by my count. Even so, fully rebuilt bodies are far more valuable to Master Mephisto than barely functional corpses. At last, the necromancers will rise again, mightier than ever. The living will fear the dead, as they always should have.

While Ozzar thinks quietly to himself about his anticipation of the coming events, another Demon Baron waddles over to him, their figure hunched over painfully, as if they've suffered a shattered spine, yet learned to live with it.

"Ozzar, Master Mephisto has just returned," The newcomer says, acrid green vapor belching from his mouth. "He is eager to begin the revival ceremony."

Azuth, the Baron of Marshlands, clasps his boney hands together as he speaks to his superior. Ozzar, in return, merely casts a sidelong glance at his junior.

"We mustn't keep the Master waiting." Ozzar mutters. "Move with haste. Assemble all the acolytes. We must bear witness to his rise today, on behalf of all of devilkind. Consider yourself fortunate to observe the rise of the future First Emperor."

"Yes. Yes!" Azuth crows, cackling to himself with a loathsome voice. "Kekeke, the Master truly deserves this reward. Long has he awaited his ascension to the rank of Emperor! The other demons plotted against him to delay his promotion, but no longer do any such barriers remain!"

* * *

Not long after, all the Barons, Lords, and other menial servants of Mephisto assemble inside a massive underground chamber more than half a kilometer wide and a full kilometer tall. Buried deep beneath Hell Harbor's crust, this facility is none other than the place where Mephisto conducts his most heinous, abominable, and outright gruesome 'experiments' with the living and dead. Were any respectable demon to hear of the horrors that occurred in this underground world, they might set the whole place aflame.

Along with the assembled demons, countless corrupted human followers cloaked in black robes also dot the area. These humans stand and stare blankly, their minds having long-since been erased and mutilated by the demons around them. They mindlessly clutch ritual-daggers with blades bent into the shape of the letter S, ready to use them at a moment's notice, once the ceremony has concluded.

Mephisto phases through the ceiling. He levitates toward the ground below, where three bodies rest atop ceremonial platforms, each one surrounded by demonic pentagrams etched into the floor with blood.

"Welcome, everyone to this momentous occasion," Ozzar says, as he begins to pace back and forth in front of his levitating Master. Ozzar directs his words toward the more than one thousand assembled necromancers. "Soon, we will witness the rise of our Master, the greatest necromancer to ever walk the ethereal plane. Long ago, we believed that only the great Valac was worthy of our praise, but times have changed. All of us wield the same power as our ancestor, yet it is Master Mephisto alone who succeeded in achieving the greatest gains."

Mephisto slowly stops his downward movement to hover just ten feet above the three bodies of Kar, Ose, and Bael. Their hands and claws rest across their chests in an X-shape, while their eyes remain closed, as if enjoying a peaceful, blissful slumber.

"Why did Emperor Valac fail?" Ozzar asks, his question rhetorical. "For millennia, we pondered the answer to that very question. Naturally, the answer was revealed to us by our current Master, who has illuminated a great many truths about necromancy. Valac was a mighty being indeed, capable of slaying Titans with a swing of his scythe, but he was far from invincible. In the end, it was his inflexibility and inability to truly comprehend the full powers of necromancy that led to his death."

"Take for example, the manner in which Emperor Valac resurrected corpses. Always, he used the same method. He strictly controlled the movements of bodies by placing their original souls inside their original vessels. This granted every resurrected figure the same power as when they were alive, but it also put a terrible strain on his soul! Countless sentients fought back against his control, and while they eventually failed, their efforts led to a gradual weakening of his powers, allowing the Archangels to hunt him down and assassinate him! But today, Master Mephisto has revolutionized necromancy by varying up his methods of control."

As Ozzar speaks, he wanders toward Kar's body and smiles.

"Imagine if Master Mephisto were as foolish as Emperor Valac. Today, he would place the soul of Monster King Kar back into his body to forcibly control him. While our Master would succeed, it would result in a waste of soul-power on his part, and King Kar would certainly fight back. Instead, as part of our Master's brilliance, he has learned to use powerful bodies more adeptly by placing compliant souls inside of them. Behold! Master Mephisto, display to us your glory!"

Ozzar deeply bows at the waist, while all of the other necromancers and enslaved humans follow his lead.

Mephisto nods along with Ozzar's performance, clearly pleased by his junior's showmanship.

"Ksss. Very good. You mussst all watch ass I disssplay to you the techniquesss I have refined over time!"

Mephisto dramatically waves his hand, conjuring Valac's Lantern before himself. The ancient artifact hums with the power of millions of souls, but a few of them shine much

brighter than the rest.

After dramatically holding out the Lantern, Mephisto reaches into it and extracts a brilliantly bright light, one which causes all of the necromancers to raise their heads and gasp. The distinct aura of a non-demon makes some of them twitch in revulsion, but otherwise, they remain silent.

"Thiss sssoul belongsss to none other than King Kar himssself!" Mephisto proclaims. "Ah, but what a ssshame. He will not return to hisss body. No, for he iss much too troublesssome, and I am no fool. Emperor Valac once tried to control a fellow Emperor, Sssatan'sss lover, Nerisssa, through such a method. Ssshe rebelled againsst his ordersss, leading to the losss of a perfectly usssable Emperor. What a pity!"

Mephisto holds Kar's soul in the palm of his hand. The soul momentarily struggles to fight back, but eventually, Mephisto places it back into the Lantern, where it becomes inert. A moment later, he pulls out another bright, but significantly less lustrous soul.

"During the battle againsst King Kar, I sssuffered two terrible lossse..." Mephisto explains. "He ssslew both of the Battle Brothersss. Duriel perisshed, losing hisss body in itsss entirety. Then hisss sssoul wasss devoured by Zamiel, resssulting in Zamiel'sss evolution to Duke! However, the Monssster Royalsss also obliterated Zamiel'sss body, and thusss, I wasss left with only hisss sssoul."

Ozzar gestures toward the soul in Mephisto's hands. "As you may have already guessed, our Master will merge Zamiel's soul into Kar's body! This will give him the power of the Monster King, but he will also retain all of his previous abilities, as well! While he will regrettably not possess the Sphinx's magic, Zamiel will still have the true might of a Demon Emperor, along with all of King Kar's physical strength! He will become unstoppable!"

Mephisto chuckles. "Kekeke. Compared to Valac'sss sssloppy methodss, mine require far lesss effort, but repay me with far greater rewardss."

The Duke of Mist descends to Kar's body. Without any fanfare, he places the soul inside of Kar's brain, then activates the fusion of mind, soul, and body, sealing them together.

Ozzar continues to narrate Mephisto's actions for the lesser necromancers present, those not nearly as adept in the necromantic arts as Mephisto and himself.

"While our Master's techniques are quite potent, they do have a few downsides. The fusion of different souls and bodies will often result in instabilities. It will likely require a decent amount of time for Zamiel to acclimate himself to the physique of his new body, as well as merge himself with its power. Weak souls placed into strong bodies will often need to grow to achieve their full power. Strong souls placed into weak bodies may overload their physique, detonating themselves in a violent and gruesome death! Therefore, soul compatibilities are something you juniors must pay attention to in your future escapades."

The room falls silent as Mephisto and Ozzar both wait for the results of Zamiel and Kar's fusion. After more than ten minutes pass, Zamiel finally blinks his eyes open, while his head lolls from side to side.

"Uhh... uhhh..."

"Welcome to the realm of the dead." Mephisto says, his tone emotionless. "How are you feeling, little missster Zamiel?"

Zamiel opens his mouth to speak.

"Phhbluh. Bllluh. B-b-bluh."

His crocodilian face, while not possessing the signature massive and elongated jaw of Kar's pre-Sphinx self, still appears shaped differently from Zamiel's former body. His lizard-like tongue requires a lot of effort to get into place and weave through his razor-sharp teeth.

"Where... whud happ-ed...?"

Zamiel shudders as he tries to stand up, and a jolt of electricity shoots through his veins. He collapses back on the ceremonial altar, coughing and sputtering for breath.

Ozzar immediately fills Zamiel in on the happenings following his death, allowing the former Duke to comprehend his new situation.

"You're... you're kidding! Ugh. I'm stuck in a... a croc body now?"

Ozzar snorts. "Rejoice, Young Master, Zamiel. You have finally obtained the power of an Emperor. You still possess all of your old abilities, and may yet gain access to Kar's magic as well, if you luck out."

With a painful shudder, Zamiel forces himself to a seated position. Dizziness strikes his soul, but he manages to rebalance himself, eventually raising his swampy-green claws

to gaze at them with a mixture of disgust and fascination.

"...What, like, I can use that croc's earth manipulation powers? His Sphinx magic, too?"

Mephisto shakes his head. "Kar'sss earth manipulation abilitiesss, perhapsss. But hisss Sssphinx Magic, no. I failed to capture it before hisss death. Now, the Monssster Queen alone possesssses that power."

"Tsk. Damn shame, but I'll take what I've been given." Zamiel mutters. His eyes turn misty as he remembers his fallen brother. "But... but Duriel..."

"He isss gone." Mephisto states. "Duriel'sss sssoul hasss merged with yoursss. Asss expected of Emperor Krisstoff'sss magic. The Familial Bonding technique isss truly formidable."

Ozzar interjects. "Not all souls who cross bodies can use the powers of their new and former selves. Some are less adept than others. You'll almost certainly still possess your weapon-summoning powers, but as for Kar's earth manipulation... don't worry if you fail. Some things are simply not meant to be."

Zamiel waves his scaled hand absentmindedly. "Like I care. I'm back to life, but my little bro isn't. What's it all even matter anymore, man..."

The younger necromancers mutter amongst each other, observing Zamiel's condition.

"He appears to be quite stable."

"There's some disorientation from changing bodies, but the acclimation period was surprisingly short."

"That's just proof that Master Mephisto is a true expert!"

Mephisto hovers away from Zamiel. He levitates between Ose and Bael's bodies, both of them placed fewer than five feet apart on their respective altars.

"Master Mephisto!" One of the necromancers says. "Are you going to place obedient souls inside of Ose and Bael's bodies, too?"

Mephisto doesn't answer. Instead, Ozzar walks to his Master's side and speaks in his place.

"Bael was a good friend of our Master, and he is also one of the most respected demons in all of our people's history. It would be unbelievably disrespectful to place

another soul into his vessel. As for Ose, while her soul is certainly powerful, Mephisto intends to reunite her true body and soul together. He has some... business with her. She has humiliated him far too many times in the past, even when she was only a Baron. Furthermore, she dared to steal the title of Third Emperor from him following Diablo's fall. Our Master deserved that promotion far more than her, and look at how the ancient Devils have repaid her! She will soon become our Master's personal toy!"

Mephisto chuckles quietly under his breath.

"Heh heh heh... yesss, I will make Ossse pay for her insssolence againsst me, but I will allow Bael to retain hisss unique traitsss. I have no intention of controlling my old friend... not unless he turnsss againsst me. But ass for Ossse, she ssshall sssuffer a thousssand humiliationsss. Were I still virile, I might even have sssome other ussesss for her. Kekeke!"

His lewd implications linger for a moment before dissipating into the wind. As necromancers, all of them have long since lost their demonhoods, along with all the other aspects of the flesh that make them whole. Such is the cost of manipulating the damned.

The junior necromancers and acolytes fall silent. They watch with rapt attention as Mephisto reaches into Valac's Lantern yet again, this time extracting two brilliantly glowing souls, one of them glowing just a bit brighter than Zamiel's did, and the other even more so than Kar's soul.

"Ksss. The brightnesss of a sssoul indicatess its magical proficiency," Mephisto explains. He holds aloft the dim soul, one which pales only a little bit compared to Kar's, then raises the other one, which appears almost like a star in the underground space, the tiny orb of energy forcing some of the weakest acolytes to avert their eyes.

"My fallen friend, Bael," Mephisto says, as he holds the lesser of the two souls. "Toward the end, he and I had a few... disssagreementsss. He did not approve of my methodsss during Operation Sstormbringer, but I will not begrudge him for thossse minor failingsss. We have been friendsss for agesss, and sso, I ssshall ssshow him the appropriate level of ressspect he dessservesss."

Mephisto places Bael's soul into the Duke of Pain's body, but pauses for a minute to sadistically poke at Ose's soul.

"Ass for thisss foolisssh wench... kekeke! Long have I awaited my chance at revenge. Ssshe will have no choicce but to follow my orderss."

Mephisto places Ose's soul into her body, the brilliantly glowing Demon Emperor aura fading as it slides into her brain.

The Duke of Mist turns to address his audience.

"Now, then. After my three minionsss have awakened fully to their powerssss, I will be able to ssseize the sssoulsss necesssary to evolve to the rank of Emperor. What foolsss would have the gall to question me when I alone posssesss the power of three Emperorsss and a Duke at my disssposssal? Not even the Hidden Emperorsss would dare, kekeke!"

Once again, silence fills the room. Mephisto stands motionlessly, waiting for Bael and Ose to wake up. To nobody's surprise, Ose's eyes begin to flutter first, showing the superiority of an Emperor's soul as she slowly returns to the realm of the half-living.

Mephisto and Ozzar turn to stand on both sides of her body. The Emperor of Infiltration blinks several times as she regains consciousness.

"Uhh... oh, devils... my head... hurts..."

Mephisto chuckles as he leans in a little closer to her.

"Welcome back, my pretty little ssservant. Thingsss are going to be different between usss, now."

As Ose blinks away the mist of death from her eyes, she tilts her head slightly to look at Mephisto.

"Huh? ...The fuck are you on about? And get away from me, you're acting creepy as hell, bro."

Mephisto pauses. He stares at Ose more intently, while a faint frown crosses his face.

"...Your ssspeech is... a little ssstrange, Ossse. Perhapsss your sssoul hasss sssuffered sssome trauma?"

When Mephisto moves in a little closer to scrutinize Ose, she awkwardly raises her hand and slaps at him.

"Yo, cut it out, bro! Damn, your breath smells like ass! And who are you callin' Ose, punk? I'm Bael! Ain't you even got eyes??"

Mephisto freezes for a moment. Then, he recoils in surprise.

"What?! Bael! No, that'sss not possssible. I placed Ossse'sss sssoul inssside her body! How could it possssibly be yoursss?!"

He turns to look at Ozzar for confirmation. The second-mightiest necromancer nods along to Mephisto's words. "I watched the whole process myself, Master Mephisto. You placed the brilliantly shining soul of a Demon Emperor into Ose's body. How could it have been Bael's soul? He's only a Duke! There's no way his soul could have somehow been mightier than Kar and Ose's, both!"

Several acolytes mutter to themselves, confused by the ceremony's change in tone.

Hardly have Mephisto and Ozzar begun to reconcile this screw-up before Bael's voice speaks behind them.

"You did **what?!** Imbecile! Mephisto, you bloody moron! How could you make such an elementary mistake?!"

Both necromancers turn in unison to see 'Bael' sitting up on the platform, but with Ose's soul inside of himself. The former Third Emperor, now stuck inside the wrong body, looks at Mephisto in annoyance.

"You absolute buffoon! I predicted that you couldn't resist bringing me back, but I didn't think you would mess things up this badly! Swap our souls at once! On the double!"

Mephisto momentarily becomes flustered. Stuck between the harsh words of Ose and the shifting gazes of his fellow necromancers, he fumbles for words.

"Keh, err, yesss. Of coursse. A minor inconveniencce. I cannot believe I would make sssuch a sssloppy missstake. Bael'sss sssoul somehow iss even more powerful than yoursss! How could I have failed to noticcce thiss dissscrepenccey?"

Quickly, Mephisto reaches into Bael's body to grab at Ose's soul. However, the moment his hand touches the layer between her body and soul, a jolt of pain shoots up Mephisto's arm, making him shrink back in pain. "Aaargh! What in the ssseven hellsss?!"

"Master! Are you alright?" Ozzar asks.

Mephisto winces in pain, but quickly shakes the numbness out of his bones. While Ose sits and scowls at him, he reaches back into the divide between her soul and body, only to once again get blasted out by an unknown force!

"Ksss! Ssstop resssissting me, wench! I am trying to placce your sssoul into the correct body!"

Ose's scowl turns downright hideous. "Resist you?! Do you think I'm as stupid as you, Mephisto? There's no way I want to stay trapped in this fat, disgusting, jello-faced blob! I

much more prefer my own figure! Now, stop pissing about and put my soul where it belongs!"

Bael, meanwhile, stuck in Ose's body, pats himself all around, then raises his eyebrows and nods. "Huh. So this is how tits feel."

"Stop groping my body!" Ose snarls. "I'll beat you half to death, Bael!"

Suddenly, Bael's hands go downward, to another precious hidden place. His eyeballs nearly pop out of their sockets.

"No! Oh, man! This ain't good... where's Little Bael?! Hurry up and get me out of Ose's body, Mephisto! This ain't a joke anymore, bro!"

Mephisto's flustered movements become even more exaggerated. He switches from trying to pluck Ose's soul out of Bael's body, instead trying to pluck Bael's soul out of Ose's body.

The feedback he receives becomes five times worse. When Mephisto tries to extract Bael's soul, a violent pulse of mana blasts him arm away and sends him flying backward, where he lands just a few short yards from the crowd of junior necromancers.

"Master Mephisto!"

"Is the Master alright?"

"He looks badly injured!"

It takes several seconds, but eventually, Mephisto manages to pull himself together. He staggers to his feet, a look of incomprehension stuck to his face.

"I... don't... undersstand..."

Mephisto slowly hovers back to Bael and Ose, sweeping his eyes from one to the other.

"It... it ssseemsss you are both ssstuck in the wrong bodiesss. Some unknown forcce isss preventing me from extracting your sssoulsss."

Ose steps off the platform while glaring daggers at Mephisto. "I know how necromancy works, imbecile! Don't lie to me! Necromancers can swap and control the souls of the dead as they please! That applied to Valac and you as well! So why would I believe that you can't put me back in my own body?"

Mephisto throws his hands up in exasperation.

"I don't know! Thisss hasss never happened before, not in all of my yearsss!"

Bael scratches the side of his head.

"Oh. Uh, actually. I bet I know, hehe."

"You do?" Ose asks.

"Yup. See, it's cuz... well, I didn't really believe it in the past, but I guess I've got a pretty strong soul or somethin'. Yeah, that's what Satan told me. And since my soul was once a part of my body... that's just how it is!"

Ose stares at Bael in disbelief.

"B-Bael. You absolute... nimrod! I won't accept this! I won't!"

The former Duke of Pain shrugs. "Eh, oh well. Shit happens. But hey, now that I'm back from the dead... anyone wanna play a game of Sticks and Bones?!"

Ose facepalms.

"I hate you so *fucking* much."

Part 299: Mephisto's Screw-up

The atmosphere in the Hall of the Damned turns awkward as the junior acolytes adjust the weight of their feet, shooting nervous glances at one another. The hundred or so human slaves wielding ceremonial daggers, once put in place to spill their blood in a moment of jubilation, now appear relatively useless, given how poorly the ceremony's final step has proceeded.

Ose lifts her head up and growls in Bael's deep voice, "All of you. Out. This stupid ceremony is over."

Upon hearing the orders of a reigning Demon Emperor, now in the body of a Duke, many of the necromancers stiffen in response, unsure of what to do. A few of them start to step back and retreat, only to notice that the rest haven't yet made up their minds.

Mephisto glowers at Ose. "Ssstupid woman! I may have messsed up a little, but you are ssstill my ssslave now! My necromancy makesss me your sssuperior! Even if my final momentsss weren't assss glorioussss assss I would like, I still hold the power of two Dukessss and two Emperorsss! My asssscensssion is all but guaranteed! Now, sssit down and ssshut up!"

He infuses the power of necromancy into his speech, willing Ose to bow her head and obey his orders.

...However, Ose doesn't comply. She merely gazes at him with even more disdain, as if having personally observed his IQ drop an additional ten points.

"You're giving me an order? And yet, for some reason, my body does not obey. Oh, I think I know what's happened. Much like how you cannot pull out Bael's soul or mine, it appears your necromancy cannot forcibly control our actions, either. What a shame! You've proven yourself an even greater disgrace than I first thought, Mephisto."

Instead of meekly bowing her head because of Mephisto's orders, Ose clumsily stands up, towering above the diminutive Duke of Mist. Mephisto's eyes widen as Ose conjures a small but exceptionally deadly ball of lightning, then flings it at him!

BOOM!

The blast of mana-infused thunder crashes against Mephisto's ethereal form and sends him flying ten feet back. He bangs off another unused altar and flops to the floor, groaning in pain.

"Rrrgh! Osssse!"

"Oh, shut up." Ose mutters, her tone dull. "You've trapped me in the body of a lardass, and you've even lost control of my actions. So much for your supposed 'superiority' to Valac. You aren't even half the demon he was."

Ose conjures another ball of lightning, then turns her frosty gaze toward the assembled necromancers.

"Need I repeat my last order?"

Her tone sends a shiver down the exposed spines of the skinless, organless demons. They shrink back and scurry away, half-dragging the human sacrifices with them.

Not long after, only five entities remain inside the titanic underground chamber: Mephisto, Ozzar, Zamiel, Bael, and Ose.

The Duke of Weaponry, now in Kar's body, shakily rises to his feet, almost tripping over his tree-trunk-sized legs. The immense bulk of his new body stands in sharp contrast to his formerly small self.

"Geez, Ose. You may have swapped bodies, but you're still a giant cunt."

Mephisto shakily climbs up as well, having been thrown aside and humiliated in front of his fellow necromancers for the second time today. His rage burns hotter than ever, but he immediately realizes he is not Ose's match.

I have made a terrible mistake. Mephisto thinks. I placed Ose inside the body of demonkind's mightiest Duke. Not only does she still possess all her lightning power and supreme intellect, but Bael's invincibility, to boot! And somehow, the power of his soul has chosen to protect her! Since when have such a series of unfortunate events happened to any necromancer in all of history?!

When Mephisto turns to look at Ose, she merely sneers at him. "What's the matter? Are you mad at me? Got something to say, piss-ant? I'm all ears."

Mephisto glares at Ose for only a brief moment before turning his attention to Bael.

"Ksss. Bael! Have you already forgotten? Ossse iss the one who killed Emperor Ssshax. You sssaid sso yourssself!"

Bael continues to sit on his ceremonial altar, a look of boredom on his face. "Yeah. And? I'm over it, bro. Live and let live. I already killed the broad, got my revenge. What more you want me to do? Kill her again? Sheesh, you need to stop holding grudges, Mephist-bro. It's bad for your health."

Ose tilts her head in Bael's general direction. "Oh, so you've forgiven me? That's what I like about you, Bael. You're such a simple soul."

"Don't get it twisted, sister." Bael replies, as his eyes momentarily darken. "I didn't say I 'forgived' ya. It ain't my place to do that. I'm just not gonna piss and shit myself over stuff that happened a long time ago. I already done beat your ass until you died. Ain't no point continuing with all that noise."

"Whatever." Ose says, rolling her eyes. "This conversation has wasted enough of my time. Mephisto, inform me of what has happened after my death. And make it snappy!"

The Duke of Mist glowers at Ose. However, when faced with the fact that she and Bael have somehow escaped his control, all of his previous plans for grand conquest of the Seven Hells fall apart. He slumps his shoulders in defeat, then begins to explain to her the events of the past several days.

After more than thirty minutes, Mephisto finishes his explanation.

"Hmph. It seems that after I fell, Jason Hiro underwent a drastic personality change. I suppose that makes sense, given his daughter's death. You may not have been able to obtain her vaporized body, but surely you obtained her soul?"

Mephisto's gaze turns complicated. "Naturally, I wisshed to do sso, but I have ssscanned all the sssoulsss in my lantern, and yet not one of them bears the mark of heroic energy. I believe Beelzebub'sss immolation destroyed her sssoul in itsss entirety."

Mephisto throws his hands up melodramatically, but Ose appears less convinced. "You said before that Beelzebub's explosion had some sort of strange energy in it? Something that resembled my brother's mana?"

"Ksss. That iss correct. It alssso ressembled the attack you unleasshed upon Jasson Hiro, which sstopped him from interfering with the battlefield for a sssignificantly long time."

"I borrowed Gressil's nullification ability to put the Hero into a coma." Ose says. "But for Beelzebub to also unleash that sort of energy... frankly, I always thought only Gressil could create it."

Ose leans backward, intending to prop herself up against the altar. However, in a moment of ungainliness, she misjudges the distance and slips, tumbling ass-over-end to land on her back atop the altar.

"Argh! Bloody hell!" Ose complains. "This fat, blobular body has no sense of touch whatsoever! My proprioception is a complete mess!"

She quickly fumbles around and lifts herself back up, swinging her legs over the edge to try and regain her sense of dignity.

"Anyway!" Ose snaps. "My brother refers to his ability as 'nullification.' He once mentioned something about it being the 'power of chaos,' whatever that means. I thought he was screwing with me, but perhaps it's a real thing. I'll have to interrogate him, next time we meet."

After a moment of pause, Ose shakes her head. "Mephisto, you said the Hero's daughter must have been obliterated by Beelzebub, including her soul?"

The Duke of Mist nods. "That isss my besst guesss."

"Does that mean that, when Beelzebub detonated himself, you didn't obtain any other souls? It would be quite the coincidence if only Daisy Hiro's soul were annihilated, but the others weren't. Don't you think?"

Mephisto blinks in surprise. "I... had not consssidered that possssibility. Yesss, I did obtain more than a million other sssoulsss, including demonsss and humansss alike."

"Did that child truly die, then?" Ose asks, narrowing her eyes. "Something smells fishy about all of this. Perhaps one of the Hidden Emperors yanked her away at the last second?"

Mephisto slowly shakes his head. "I planted a Wraith not far from the Hero'sss makeshift home. He hasss tried ssseveral timesss to locate his child through Wordsssmithing. He hasss failed. It ssseemsss likely ssshe hasss died."

Ose snorts. "Don't be so sure. That brat possessed a frightening amount of magical power. Not only did she summon multiple ethereal Titans through some unknown method, she also wielded a surprisingly effective level of telekinesis. She even bolstered

her father and a few others through that bloody impenetrable shield of hers during Beelzebub's detonation. How could she die so easily? Most likely, a Hidden Emperor snatched her away at the last second and hid her somewhere even Jason's Wordsmithing couldn't locate her."

Suddenly, Ose frowns.

"...Come to think of it, there's one other entity who might be able to hide the child's presence. Damn! How could I have overlooked this crucial fact?!"

Mephisto waits while Ose collects her thoughts.

"It's Gressil! My own brother! Of COURSE! I was in such a rush at the start of Stormbringer that I overlooked the most obvious culprit! No wonder I couldn't locate Hope or Jason during while the war raged. I'll bet my damned brother captured the Wordsmith's clone and hid him somewhere even the Oracles couldn't detect. It all makes sense now!"

Mephisto hisses under his breath. "And the rumorsss that Jason hasss obtained Excalibur?"

Ose's heartrate spikes. For a brief moment, her pupils shrink to pinpricks.

"What? Excalibur?!"

"Yesss. I sssensssed Camael's mana when Jassson Hiro firssst appeared. At that moment, all the dissscrepenciesss made sssenssse. Didn't you theorize that the Hero had obtained sssome sssourcce of limitless mana? Excalibur fitsss the bill nicccely."

For several seconds, the room becomes quiet. Ose lowers her gaze. A few drops of sweat congeal at the back of her neck.

"...Damn you, Mephisto. You're right. That's the only explanation. Jason Hiro must have left Hell Harbor, traveled to Volgarius, and stolen Excalibur from the Sealed Vault. Many of humanity's mightiest artifacts were taken by them during the end of the Energy Wars. Through his Wordsmithing, he must have caught the Overlords unaware. I've kept his existence a secret from them, so it's not unlikely he blindsided them somehow... and then he returned just in the nick of time- aha! So that's why he had to Wordsmith remotely! He must not have been able to teleport such a great distance back to Tarus II!"

Ose quickly fits the pieces of a 'puzzle' together, her erroneous conclusions substantiated by the bits and pieces of intelligence that she believes must be true.

"The damned Heroic Blade itself. No wonder Stormbringer failed. Doubtless, Fenrir and some of the quicker-witted Hidden Emperors have already realized that Jason possesses Excalibur. This isn't entirely a bad thing. I know better than to let a tragedy go to waste. Stormbringer's failure can still lead to great results in the future."

As if her earlier stumble never happened, Ose quickly stands up again and wanders away from the ceremonial altars. She begins pacing back and forth while muttering to herself.

"Nobody knows where Hope is, yet, but if my guess is correct, I have a shot at taking him for myself. However, taking him away from Gressil would normally be all but impossible... except now I possess Bael's body. I should be immune to damage, meaning that even if my powers don't work while in my brother's presence, my physical strength should be quite overwhelming."

The Third Emperor suddenly balls her hand into a fist, raises it above her head, and swings it in a downward arc toward her stomach, putting all of her strength into the blow.

THUMP!!

The power of Bael's invincibility results in no damage whatsoever as Ose reveals a cunning smile.

"Perhaps Mephisto's screw-up isn't so bad for me after all. I still possess my lightning abilities, my intellect, and now I also possess Bael's raw power. Had I entered my own body, that little dipshit necromancer might have succeeded in controlling me, but he failed, and now I've been given a second lease on life. Yes, this could do quite nicely."

She keeps her voice low, but with Mephisto's enhanced hearing, he still easily makes out every word. The High Necromancer frowns in annoyance, but says nothing. At this point, any struggle against her will truly be futile.

Ose spends half an hour testing out her powers and abilities. She conjures orbs of lightning, blasts of electrical energy, and even zips around with her Lightspeed Dash. After confirming the efficacy of her powers, she slowly nods.

"I suppose not everything can go perfectly. Bael's body is still only that of a Duke, in the end. My abilities have degraded to a Duke's power level, but the combination is still quite deadly. Given these circumstances..."

Ose whips her head toward Mephisto and barks and order. "Alright, you! Cough up one million souls. On the double! I'm going to re-evolve to the rank of Emperor!"

Mephisto's expression turns to rage. "What! No! I refusse! You had your chancce, and I have only managed to accrue a few million sssoulsss from the Ssstormbringer War! A million of thossse are mine! The ressst are alssso mine!"

Ozzar also steps up. "The High Necromancer speaks the truth! You failed during Stormbringer, while he succeeded! No matter how arrogant you are, you don't have the right to demand souls from the River Styx! Only Bael or the Hidden Emperors can grant you that authority!"

Indeed, despite materially only ever possessing the power of a Duke, as the legendary Balrog and one of the most well-liked demons in history, Bael has always held claim to the right to divvy out souls from the River Styx as he pleases. No other demon possessed that privilege, not even Mephisto, despite his supposed full control of Styx's waters. The only other instances of demons obtaining souls from its waters were through the formal petition process afforded to all the lower-ranks, earned through their merits, and special exceptions granted by an assemblage of the Hidden Emperors, bestowed upon those deemed fit to step into the highest ranks of demon society.

Ose scowls at Mephisto, but grits her teeth and for once doesn't immediately snap back at him.

"Tsk. Fine! You make a good point. Bael! Grant me the right to promote to Emperor. You did it once, so you can do it again!"

Mephisto pales at her words, realizing he won't have the right to refuse if Bael goes along with her ploy. Fortunately, Bael merely scoffs at her words.

"Huh? The hell're you talkin' about, lady? First you steal my body, *and* Little Bael, and now you want a handout? Get real. You killed Shax, and I done swept that under the bridge, but don't think you're gettin' a reward for your shoddy performance. Sheesh. The kahunas on you today."

The Duke of Mist breathes a sigh of relief, while Ose groans in exasperation.

"Bael! Don't be such a hardhead, not at a time like this! It's not my fault the Hero obtained Excalibur. It's *Excalibur*, dammit! I seem to recall King Arthur trounced you

twice with that infernal weapon! I had no way of countering it in time. *That's* why Stormbringer failed!"

Bael rolls his eyes and makes a mocking lip-flapping motion with his fingers. "*Blah blah. It's not my fault. Waa, waa.* Just own up to it, Ose. You fucked up a whole buncha times. I took a chance promoting you to Emperor, but clearly I coulda' done better. There's no sense in handing such a large haul over to you again."

Mephisto visibly perks up. "Yesss, Bael. You have the right idea. Inssstead, I ssshould be the one-"

"Naw, not you either, bub." Bael growls. "I might be dumb as a rock, but I ain't as stupid as a boulder. I saw what you did to the little guys at the end. You were gonna kill 'em all to add to your boney-army. I won't let a selfish bastard like you take over, either. It's time I started lookin' elsewhere for the next leader of the Seven Hells. It'd sure be great if ol' Deebs woke up soon... but that ain't likely."

Despite Bael's immediate refusal, Ose doesn't relent. "Listen to me, Bael. I understand you're mad about Shax. What I did was wrong-"

"Just Shax?" Bael interrupts. "And what about Satan too, huh? Yeah, you knew what your momma was up to, but you didn't tell anyone! Cripes, like mother, like daughter. Ol' Triple-Tits Lucy really raised the shittiest, most ungrateful little brat, didn't she?"

Ose presses on. "...And so, I have made many errors. I'm not perfect, but I'm still smarter than the other demons. Not even Fenrir is capable of manipulating human technology like me. With the Wordsmith now empowered by Excalibur, aren't I our best shot at defeating him? I alone possess the knowledge and know-how necessary to empower our people's future! You know that!"

Bael frowns. "Doesn't matter. But I'll tell you what. You want what you lost? Then earn it back! The Hidden Emperors are all gettin' together. You go there and lay out a plan that'll make us beat the Hero. I owe that punk for what he's done. I gave him a chance to cool down, but instead, he blasted all my friends to dust! If you can give us a shot at killin' him, then I'm down to try it."

Before Ose can reply, Bael raises a finger. "But hey! None of your usual bullshit, Ose. I mean it! No tryin' to capture him alive and steal his power, or any of that other crap. Just get in, blast the little runt, and get out. Your greed has already fucked us once. I ain't takin' it up the butt twice!"

After a momentary pause, Bael adds. "Though, now that I think about it, I *am* in your body now. Say, did you ever take it up the butt, Ose? Just askin'."

"That's none of your business!" Ose snaps. "For Devil's sake, Bael!"

"Sheesh, learn to take a joke, will ya?" Bael chuckles. "But seriously. Get a plan going quick. No bullshit."

Ose rolls her eyes. "Fine. I suppose it's better than nothing, and I *did* make a few critical miscalculations during Stormbringer. I need to redeem myself."

Watching from the sidelines, Zamiel claps his hands. "Great! Now that we've got that mess all sorted out, are we done here, or what? I'd like to stretch this new body out and see what it can do."

Bael nods. "Same, pal! I guess you and me are in the same boat, stuck in weird, ugly bodies. But oh well! Shit happens."

"My body is *not* ugly," Ose growls. "Seriously, Bael. Are you *trying* to piss me off?"

The Duke of Pain swings his legs over the side of the altar and starts to stand up. "Yup. It's a lot of fun. That's why I do- oh shit!"

Not used to the skinny, twig-like body of Ose, Bael echoes his fellow body-swapper by losing control of his movements and tripping awkwardly over his feet. The Duke of Pain crashes face-first against the marble floor, then bellows painfully.

"Aaaarghh!! Oh, devils! Aaaah! I broke my legs! Oh, fuck-fuck-fuck! The pain, the agony! It hurts so bad! Uwaaaa!"

Mephisto, Ozzar, Ose, and Zamiel all widen their eyes in disbelief as the Duke of Pain curls up into the fetal position and sobs profusely.

"Boo-hoo-hoo! Oh, geez, oh brood-mommy! This boo-boo hurts real bad, oh it's terrible! My poor legs, so weak, so fragile! I broke 'em for good, aaaahh!"

Confused beyond belief, Ose trots over to Bael's side, only to spot two tiny red marks on his knees.

"Imbecile! You barely even bruised the skin! Stop blubbering like a baby and pick yourself up! I can't stand the sight of you making a mockery of my beautiful figure!"

Bael continues to sob, oblivious to her words. "Someone kiss the boo-boo! Kiss it, please! Make this terrible pain go away!"

A dark cloud descends over the other demons. Ozzar glances at his Master.

"Is Bael going to be okay?"

Mephisto groans.

"He isss jussst an idiot. You get ussed to it."

Part 300: First Hell's Return

The doors to the Hidden Emperor's meeting hall fly open, allowing 'Bael' to stride in first, followed by 'Ose.' As Bael enters, Emperor Gorn rises to his feet in surprise.

"Emperor Ose! Duke Bael!"

Ose, now inside of Bael's body, reveals a self-confident smirk. "Hello. Did anyone miss me?"

Some of the guests immediately detect a slight difference in the cadence of 'Bael's' voice. Given the clear and obvious signs of necromancy on the First Duke's body, they momentarily chalk up the discrepancies to his potentially altered vocal cords. After all, not all parts of an undead person's body retain their previous range of motion.

That is, until 'Bael' continues walking forward without announcing Ose's presence behind him.

"Oh, devils. Look at all of the prim and proper bedfellows sitting around, discussing how they might carve up the First Hell and divide the pie amongst themselves. I don't have to hear a word you've spoken to know exactly what sorts of things you lot might discuss. You're more predictable than the idiot whose body I've come to infest."

Ose's words instantly startle everyone in the room, including Benjamin Brown himself. The human stares with wide-eyed fascination at the figure of the First Duke, disbelief in his eyes.

"...Bael? No. You're not Bael. That manner of speaking. Could you be...?"

"Ose. Yes, you catch on fast." Ose says without missing a beat. "Mephisto performed a remarkable experiment and placed the soul of the smartest demon inside the most powerful body in all the Seven Hells. Truly, his genius knows no limits."

Gorn's eyes shift from Ose to her former body standing behind her, a frumpy frown on its face.

"Err... then... the soul animated inside Emperor Ose's body must be... Bael's?"

Bael raises his hand sheepishly and waves. "Uh. Sup, guys. I'm a girl now. Life comes at ya fast."

After the two of them have introduced themselves, another pair of figures walk into the room from outside. This time, several seated Emperors stand up in alarm as they recognize the distinctive mana signature of an Emperor-level monster, as well as Mephisto.

"That crazy bastard!" Emperor Fae shouts, a huge smile stretching across her face. "Hahaha! Mephisto did it! He reanimated King Kar to be his undying servant! This meeting is about to get mighty interesting, now! Bahaha!"

However, Kar also reveals a distinct change in his persona when he speaks.

"Wrong. I'm not Kar. I'm Zamiel. I just have to live inside this stupid lizard's skin cuz' the boss lost my original body."

Emperor Gorn, unlike many of his fellow demons, remains seated. He gazes at the newcomers with a mixture of fascination and worry. He gazes past the three mightiest newcomers to the comparatively diminutive Duke trailing behind them.

Hmm? Duke Mephisto has not advanced himself to the rank of Emperor. I expected he would do so before coming here, as a show of authority. Why would he not evolve himself before we could state our disapproval? Perhaps he has some other plans... such as extending an olive branch of goodwill for us to hang from. No doubt, Mephisto intends to see which of us will speak out against him first before he dramatically evolves right before us. He's craftier than I thought.

Hardly have those thoughts passed through Gorn's mind before Yardrat vocalizes almost exactly the same thought.

"Duke of Mist! What a pleasant surprise. I see that you have succeeded in solidifying your base of power. You aren't even an Emperor yet, but you already personally wield the might of two Emperors and a Duke. Truly, your machinations startle this humble Emperor's soul."

Everyone waits for Mephisto to raise his voice and boast about his 'impressive accomplishments,' but he remains silent, bowing his head slightly, as if ashamed. Before anyone can reconcile this odd behavior, Ose suddenly bursts into laughter.

"Hahaha! Oh, yes. Mephisto's 'loyal servant,' you've got me! I am nothing more than this High Necromancer's weak-willed slave. Hahaha! **WRONG!** You imbeciles! My soul was much too powerful for that dull-witted buffoon to control, and so I have retained

control of my mental faculties! Not only myself, but Bael, too! Mephisto does not control either of us in the slightest!"

Ose violently slaps her chest, while her expression doesn't shift even in the slightest from the impact. A powerful shockwave radiates outward, nudging all the seated guests in the room a little away from her and making them realize the true horror of the mightiest and smartest demons fused into one body can accomplish.

Emperor Fenrir's face pales visibly. "What? Mephisto does not control you? But how can that be? Necromancers should always..."

She pauses momentarily, while a series of thoughts run through her head. Then, she turns her head toward the Duke of Mist.

"You fool! You should have made yourself an Emperor before attempting to take over Ose and Bael's souls! Your soul was too weak to control theirs!"

Emperor Fenrir's grand ambitions, her plans to set up the pawn known as Mephisto on the seat of the Second Emperor while elevating herself to the position of Third instantly crumbles before her eyes. With Mephisto losing what should have been one of the mightiest personal power bases in the Seven Hells, her previous performance of a calm, collected, and well-in-charge Emperor reveals dozens of cracks to those observing her.

"Haha. How unfortunate." Gorn chuckles, as a broad smile crosses his face. "Sometimes, even the best laid plans can fall apart due to a subordinate's incompetence. Isn't that right, Fenrir?"

Some of the slower-witted guests finally realize, thanks to Fenrir and Gorn's words, just what her true plans were. They remain silent, listening to the exchange with looks of surprises on their face.

Ose rolls her eyes. "You always think you're smarter than you actually are, Fenrir. Don't even try to compare yourself to me."

She strides forward and arrives at the head of the table. Then, she turns her head toward Benjamin Brown.

"Move."

The human leader pauses for only a split-second before nodding his head, standing up, and gesturing to his daughter.

"Come, Lily. We must make room for Ose and Bael."

Despite his original intention to abdicate his seat to Mephisto when the Duke of Mist arrived, Benjamin immediately realizes that the necromancer has lost any chance of controlling the First Hell. Once again, his position has reverted to that of a mid-weight general, rather than a full-on commanding officer.

Lily nods, then stands up. "Yes, daddy."

After they vacate their chairs, Benjamin leads Lily around the table to where the Hells of Isolation and Lust sit. He takes a seat beside Bree and Fae, at the mid-section, with several seats between himself and Yardrat.

Fae smirks. "You got bitch-slapped, fleshie. Doesn't that just boil your blood?"

"I was only ever guiding the meeting in the First Hell's stead," Benjamin says, without a trace of regret on his face. "I never claimed to be a leader."

"Hmph. You're no fun."

Fae returns her gaze to the head of the table, where Ose takes her seat. Bael waddles over and plops down on her right-hand side, beside Emperor Fenrir.

He grins cheekily at the Emperor of the Night. "Hey. What's up, toots? You're lookin' perky today. And so am I! Finally got myself a big pair of honkers!"

Despite her poor mood and the realization that several of her ambitions have shattered, Fenrir can't help but send Bael a good-natured smile. "I suppose I could be worse, Duke of Pain. Or should I call you an Emperor? If you have taken up residence inside Ose's body, and if your aura is that of a Demon Emperor, then I suppose Hell's mightiest warrior must have finally taken up his rightful place among the rest of us."

Gorn raises an eyebrow. "Yes. I, too, wonder about that. And Ose, while your soul radiates the power of an Emperor, the rest of your aura is clearly only that of a Demon Duke. Hehe. Not to call your... *qualifications* into question... but it does seem a bit odd for a Duke to lead this meeting."

Despite Ose possessing Bael's body, and despite the fat of his glob-like stomach, somehow, her posture reveals a sort of elegance and grace nobody has ever seen from the Duke of Pain. She folds her hands together and rests them on the table, while leaning forward and exposing a toothy smile.

"Yes, Gorn. I think you do make a good point. I, a mere Duke, dare to lead this council. I suppose you *should* call into question my capabilities."

Yardrat frowns.

Ose agreed with Emperor Gorn? To what end?

Ose continues to smile, baring her teeth in an oddly demure manner. However, as the seconds pass, and her expression doesn't change, the other Emperors begin to feel a bit unsettled.

The Duke of Cuddles, Jahn, shifts in his seat. "Ose? Have you anything to add?"

Ose flicks her eyes to the Duke seated on her left.

"I was just mulling over a few random thoughts in my mind. Mostly, I was thinking about what a bunch of gossiping failures the group seated here today are. Rather than focusing on immediately exterminating the threat of the Hero, all of you would rather shuffle around pieces on a chessboard, playing the same old games you always have. Surely, before I came here, you lot were entertaining thoughts of giving the title of Second Emperor to whoever killed the Hero. No doubt, someone must have floated the idea to give the position to whoever killed Belial. Have I guessed correctly?"

Jahn's incubus tail flicks around behind himself, weaving through a small hole in the back of his chair. Its movements reveal the mild annoyance in his heart.

"Yes. We did. And your point?"

Ose's smile grows more wry. She slowly lowers her head and chuckles.

"So predictable, every last one of you. You know, I underestimated that boy, and I paid the ultimate price. Now, our enemy wields the greatest weapon demonkind has always feared. From the first time Camael's revealed Excalibur's power during the War in Heaven, to the mass extinction event caused when King Arthur slew seventeen Emperors from three separate Hells with a single stroke, we have never known any emotion but absolute terror in the face of Excalibur."

Ose's smile disappears.

"And yet right now, all of you are so calm, so collected, and so dignified! Have you grown soft? Have your brains turned to mush?! We are all in imminent peril, yet you have not immediately set aside your differences to strike down that human!"

Gorn raises his palm. "Calm down, Ose. We know the power Excalibur wields. That is why we must carefully decide on a course of action-"

"There is NO time for inaction!" Ose snaps. "You fool! Jason Hiro stole Excalibur from the Overlords. The OVERLORDS! Do you realize what that means?! Even if he doesn't kill us all, the Overlords might! The moment they discover the Divine Blade has gone missing, they will set upon the human worlds and annihilate all of human life. Then, they will storm the Labyrinth and execute every human on the spot! What will that mean for us? It will result in our loss of the souls which empower us! It will result in our total stagnation, and thus, our ultimate decline!"

Ose slaps her hand against the table. "Even if the Overlords don't kill us, according to the old treaty, they have every right to wipe out our soul supply if a human Hero emerges capable of threatening their rule! And with the soul supply gone, we will never again amount to anything in their eyes! Our situation is so dire that you cannot possibly fathom it, and yet still you lounge around, debating who will obtain this scrap of power or that!"

Yardrat speaks up. "But the First Emperor, surely he will not sit idly-"

"The First Emperor is neither omniscient nor omnipotent!" Ose replies, interrupting him mid-sentence. "He poses a grave threat to the Overlords, especially while they battle against the Plague, but if this Hero continues to gain power, the Overlords will have all the justification needed to cripple us forever! That is the fate we fear most! You cannot even begin to fathom the terrifying weapons those aliens possess!"

Ose steadies her breathing. Her expression becomes eerily calm as she returns to a posture of confidence.

"All of you only possess only the barest, most faint memories of the Overlords. They left enough behind to give you vague sensations of their capabilities. Diablo and I are not the same. I have worked with the Overlords on many occasions in my unique capacity as a technology-capable demoness. I have seen the horrifying might they wield. I know better than to second-guess whether they possesses the ability to annihilate us. Even with their war-time capabilities stretched thin, we are not their match. A toothless tiger is still more than capable of shredding you with its claws."

Emperor Fenrir slowly taps her fingers on the table. "You mentioned something about a 'plague.' What did you mean?"

For a few moments, Ose falls silent. She pauses, as if debating how to answer Fenrir's question, before ultimately shaking her head.

"I cannot say. I am not allowed to leak information of such a sensitive nature to anyone, least of all any of you. All I can say is that the foe our enemy faces is one so terrifying that, were we to face them, we would perish within a day."

"The threat is that significant?" Gorn asks, unsatisfied with Ose's explanation. "So, you mean to say the Overlords are not fighting a civil war within their own ranks. Could we not ally with their enemy-"

"NO!" Ose barks. "Open your ears, dullard! Look into my eyes! Do I sound as if I am speaking of an enemy that would befriend us? It would destroy us! We should be glad we have experienced 100,000 years of stability! Were it not for the Overlords, we may have already disappeared without knowing what struck us."

Ose pauses to add emphasis to her next statement.

"And besides... the Overlords are losing the war."

"What?! Losing?" Benjamin Brown replies, alarm in his voice. "Is the situation truly that dire?"

"It is." Ose answers, chilling the crowd. "If we somehow were to miraculously defeat the Overlords, we would instead be the ones fighting their war. Our military capabilities pale by several orders of magnitude compared to theirs. We have no space fleets to speak of. Even with my abilities, constructing enough starships for us to stand a chance would require centuries, time which we do not have."

"If the situation is as dire as you say," Yadrat interjects, "then how can we hold even the slightest hope? Are we not doomed no matter what we do?"

A lull appears in the conversation. Ose becomes uncharacteristically silent, while she continues to debate what she can and cannot say.

"I understand that many of you laughed at me for Stormbringer's failure. All my efforts, gone to waste. In every meaning of the world, that operation failed completely and utterly with no upsides. It was... a tragedy. But the tragedy you know of is only the tip of the iceberg."

She continues. "I had to try... to capture the Wordsmith. It is our only chance. The Wordsmith's power is something which most certainly *will* reshape the balance of the

war. The only question is whether demonkind would lose or win from this scenario."

Ose sighs. "Shortly before Stormbringer, Jason Hiro came to me in private. He sought a meeting with me, intending to strike up a peace treaty between demonkind and humanity. In exchange, he promised to grant us the ability to evolve our ranks without using the power of souls."

The First and Second Ancient orcs both stiffen in surprise. Huul voices her shock. "What?! To evolve without souls? Is such a feat even possible?"

Ose slowly nods. "If I had to wager a guess, I would say that it might be, but only through the Wordsmith's magic."

"We would become reliant on the Hero." Yadrat states, seeing the problem immediately. "But, considering the threat our galaxy faces, this... 'plague.' Does that not seem a worthy trade?"

"Under such a treaty, we would become subservient to the Hero." Gorn says. "Hmph. Prior to Stormbringer, the Hero was still a weak boy living a cushy life on Tarus II. Ose must have believed she could get a better deal for our people, and especially *herself*, if she managed to capture and enslave the Hero herself. I must say, in her shoes, I'd have done the same."

Emperor Fenrir's expression, unlike the rest, appears relatively calm.

"Perhaps. But now we've damned ourselves. Not only have we killed the Hero's daughter and made him our mortal enemy, but he has also obtained the most frightening weapon known to our people. Previously, we only faced extinction from this mysterious 'plague,' as well as a possible attempt on our species by the Overlords. Now we also face the wrath of a young hero led by King Arthur."

"I acted too greedily." Ose replies, her voice low. "If we were to somehow obtain the Hero's power, we could still succeed in my original plan. Obtaining the ability to empower any demon without souls would completely change the dynamic of our war. Forget the Overlords. I would not even fear their enemy if that were to happen. Demon Emperors are exceedingly powerful. Our biggest issue is that there are too few of you. Even a hundred Emperors would not pose much of a threat to the Overlords. But a thousand? A hundred thousand? Perhaps even a million? They would tremble if our shadow so much as grazed them."

"And consider the other possibility," Ose adds. "What if, through our experimentation, we discovered a method to break through our limiter? What if we could step into a realm beyond Demon Emperor?"

"Yes. That possibility does sound truly wonderful," Yardrat replies, smacking his lips derisively. "Oh, but what a coincidence, you intended to monopolize the Hero's power all to yourself. And Emperor Yama. We should be so fortunate if a few meager drops trickled down to the rest of the Seven Hells."

Ose chuckles wryly. "Hehe. Yes. I did intend to take all the power for myself, originally. You're not wrong. What can I say in my defense, but I am still a demon, in the end. Naturally, the tides have changed. We cannot afford to play nice with the Hero. We must kill him at once, before he reaches a power beyond our abilities to control... or one which will alert the Overlords to his presence."

Gorn cocks his head. "I do not understand, Ose. If the Hero is our only hope of defeating the Overlords and the Plague, then why would we even consider killing him? Surely, we should still make every attempt to capture him alive."

Ose gestures behind herself, to Mephisto, who continues to stand silently and watch the proceedings like a street beggar who has lost everything.

"We can still use the power of Wordsmithing even if Jason Hiro is dead. Previously, I would not have liked to give Mephisto such authority, but what choice do we have, now? We have to slay both Wordsmiths and use their powers through necromancy. We must move swiftly, without alerting the Overlords."

She pauses.

"...But, in fact, there is something I have neglected to mention. It is also possible the Overlords know of Jason Hiro's existence, or *will* know, soon. I received a communication from a highly-ranked Overlord, someone who makes even me feel fear. She knows that we have lost control of the Core. I tried to handwave away the issues with talk of a minor human insurrection, but knowing this particular individual's deductive capabilities, she will bring an inspection team... and soon. I must intercept her arrival and ensure I deliver a narrative beneficial to our people."

"If the Overlords discover Jason Hiro's existence, let alone what his powers entail," Yardrat says, "what exactly will their response be, Ose? You know them better than the rest of us."

Ose lightly raps her fingers against the table.

"There are a few possibilities. Total annihilation of humanity is only one of them. Given their fear of Heroes, it is the most likely eventuality. However, when we consider just how poorly their war is going..."

She shakes her head.

"It is also possible, though not probable, that they will consider a treaty or enslavement of the Hero. They, too, may see what I see in his potential might wielded for their benefit. However, capturing or enslaving him will require the Founders to divert resources they simply don't have. Annihilation, by contrast, would be far simpler."

"If the Overlords obtain the Hero's power, then will we not simply cease to be any sort of threat?" Yadrat asks.

"Naturally," Gorn says, answering Yadrat's question. "No matter how you look at it, only Jason Hiro possesses the power to change this war and save the whole galaxy. Well, not just him, I suppose. There is also his clone..."

For a brief moment, all of the Emperors fall silent.

Bael, of all people, is the first to speak up.

"Err. I mean. Don't it just seem like y'all should give away one of the Wordshits to the Overdorks? Like, if they don't know his clone exists, we could be all secret-like and stash the bugger away for ourselves."

Ose turns to Bael and blinks. "That... that is a surprisingly good idea, Bael. But I thought you wanted us to kill the Wordsmith. Not capture him."

Bael shrugs. "I didn't know the 'sitch' was this complicated. All this yammerin' has my ears ringin'. Look, if these Motherlords find out about the Hero, then they're gonna wanna take him. But if they don't know we got one, we can be all sneaky and use that other kid ourselves. Seems pretty simple ta' me. Even Hell's biggest dummy can figure that much out."

Ose narrows her eyes. "Yes... Hell's biggest dummy, indeed."

After eying the Duke of Pain for a moment, she looks away.

"Well. Bael has brought up a decent backup option I hadn't considered. Never have two Heroes existed in tandem. Should the Overlords learn of the Hero's existence, we will

have more possible avenues worth pursuing. In fact, now that he mentions it, we might even consider-"

Suddenly, right in the middle of Ose's speech, a deep rumble rattles the underground chamber, as if a bomb had detonated somewhere nearby. Ose pauses mid-sentence to flick her eyes around the room.

"What's going on?"

Every Emperor and Duke quickly rises to their feet. They go on the alert, not sure what just happened.

"Is it the Overlords?!" Lily asks, her voice tightening up in fright.

"I don't think so," Ose says. "But for a brief instant, I thought I detected Holy-"

BOOOOM!!

The roof of the chamber suddenly rips away, yanked upward into the sky. A violent shockwave blasts downward and flattens all the weakest demons, monsters, and humans present. Even Benjamin Brown barely manages to stabilize himself against the table, while his daughter's head bangs against it and instantly knocks her unconscious.

"HAHAHA!" Cackles a masculine voice from above. "Hello, little bloodskins! It seems I have located thy wretched hiding place!"

Every Emperor and Duke raises their eyes skyward, where they spot a single armored demon hovering in midair, the unmistakable power of a Demon Duke radiating from his body.

"Barbatos! No, wait, it's Uriel!" Yadrat shouts. "It's the Archangel! How did she get here without alerting us?!"

Uriel raises her hands overhead, conjuring a massive orb of holy energy.

"HAHAHA! Feel free to answer that question in the Great Beyond, after I damn thee to **OBLIVION!!**"

Part 301: Archangel's Rampage

The darkness of night covers one of Hell Harbor's miniature continents, the one upon which the Hidden Emperors have decided to gather for their meeting. However, amidst the darkness, a single radiant light shines like a star, illuminating the area around it for several miles.

Uriel, the Archangel of Retribution, cackles evilly as she holds a truck-sized ball of holy energy above her head.

"OBLIVION!!"

She hurls the sphere straight down, directly toward the center of the gathered Emperors and Dukes.

Immediately, every combat-capable warrior springs into action. The weakest attendants dive to the deck, seeking to defend themselves from the demon-damning light of divinity. Ose, possessing Bael's all-but-invincible body, jumps directly toward the light, experiencing a split-second of glee as she realizes that the once-agonizing radiance no longer causes her anything more than mild discomfort.

At the same time, Emperor Yadrat sweeps his hands to his sides, casting a wide-area temporal spell that grabs more than two dozen of the weakest entities in the area, including several dukes and both of the humans, and teleports them multiple miles away to safety.

Wolfram, the Emperor of Rending, and Lupus, the Emperor of Scales, also jump forward to meet the divine light. As werewolves, modified demons with physiology altered by the Dark Hero Dracula, they suffer far less damage from the power of creation compared to other demons.

The Ancient Orcs, Maltus and Huul, mirror the others by stepping up to battle the Archangel. As monsters, they possess no inherent weaknesses to demonkind's greatest threat. Both orcs summon the power of their innate battle-rage to roar at the sky, sending raw mana upward to meet Uriel's death-ball as it rushes toward them.

Gorn, unlike all the others, takes a step back. Not out of fear, but because in this opening moment, he cannot offer much assistance. However, even in only the span of

mere seconds, his mind churns at a hundred miles an hour.

Uriel's energy does not seem to have changed much since the last time I saw her. What a fool! Ose alone managed to cripple and subdue her the last time they fought. How can she be so stupid as to attack a gathering of demonkind's mightiest forces? I had better put an end to her threat myself, once and for all! That alone will grant me a sizable amount of prestige in the eyes of the other Emperors.

Uriel's bomb explodes when it collides against the power of both Ancient Orcs. Their shockwave shield proves only slightly inferior to Uriel's attack, but it still manages to shove away a sizable portion of the holy-bomb's destructive energy. Even so, at least twenty percent of the divine light shreds through the improvised and hastily-executed shield, phasing into the bodies of all the demons present and making them scream in pain.

Yardrat's skin crackles like a firecracker, acting as if someone had thrown boiling oil directly onto him. "Aaaargh!"

Emperor Fenrir shrieks in pain. She staggers backward, shielding her eyes from the brilliant sun-like radiance. "Accursed Archangel!"

Of the Hell of Lust's members, only one remains; Jahn, the Duke of Cuddles. As the most adept member of his Hell at combat, aside from Belial herself, he alone can put up something of a fight against an Archangel. Even so, he too drops to his knees and cries out in pain as Uriel's divinity scorches him at the cellular level.

The instant the holy bomb's radiance drops, the previously charging orcs, werewolves, and mighty demons pounce at Uriel, ready to rip her apart.

"You stupid, arrogant bitch!" Lupus roars, as she rears her werewolf claws back. "You've damned yourself to a bloody death by coming here!"

She and Wolfram tear at the Archangel the instant they come within range, only for their claws to crash against an almost invisible barrier of holy energy. Still, they shatter it with a single strike and follow up with a second, only for Uriel to teleport away through Barbatos's portal magic.

She instantly reappears just a few feet away from Ose.

"I had better take care of the Duke of Pain first!" Uriel laughs.

Mistaking Ose for Bael, Uriel conjures a portal and punts Ose through it before she can react. Then, the Archangel seals it shut.

Uriel grins to herself with glee.

I've sent the Duke of Pain to the farthest side of this accursed world, deep beneath its seas. Even Yardrat will need some time to locate and bring him back. With him out of the way, this next part shall be far easier.

Yardrat, still suffering from holy energy burns, grits his teeth and transmits a message through a telepathic link that he and every other demon in the Hell of Punishment share with their leader.

[My liege, Emperor Auger! Archangel Uriel has appeared! Send reinforcements to my location!]

An instant later, Yardrat receives only a few curt words from his master in return.

[You will be enough. Remind the others what a fraction of our Hell's power looks like.]

Suddenly, a massive amount of demonic energy surges into Yardrat's body. The Emperor of the Void gasps in surprise. A faint look of greedy delight enters his eyes, while a maniacal grin flashes across his face.

[I will not disappoint you, my liege!]

Uriel begins moving at remarkably fast speeds. She conjures her four constructs and spreads them out to attack multiple targets at once. The gravitic cube forces a few of the weakest Emperors to their knees, but only for a few moments. Fenrir quickly pulls herself up while glaring hate-filled daggers at the Archangel.

"Wicked wench. You scarred my face."

The artillery orb shoots oscillating blasts of fire, water, air, and earth in all directions, knocking the orcs and werewolves back a little, but barely slowing them down for the most part.

The female angelic construct shoots holy energy-filled arrows at various targets while also summoning magical barriers. The male construct raises its sword and shield, then charges at Emperor Gorn to engage him directly.

Gorn sees the construct charging him and laughs. "Trying to tickle me, Uriel? You'll have to do better than that."

While Uriel and her constructs engage multiple targets, Yardrat rushes toward the Archangel, flickering in and out of reality. His existence momentarily becomes intangible, vaguely resembling Mephisto's mist-form. Multiple blasts of holy energy pass through his body, while he conjures two spears of bone out of nothing and grips them with both hands.

Boom!

Yardrat and Uriel crash against each other like the tides against a beach. She summons two spears of light and battles against him in melee combat, effortlessly parrying his comparatively sloppy strikes. In the moments where one of her constructs gets crushed by one of the other Emperors, she traces a rapid pattern with the tip of one spear to resummon it while deflecting Yardrat's follow-up attacks with the other.

"What's the matter?" Uriel taunts Yardrat. "Is Auger too busy to visit me in person? Hath thou been designated his middling stand-in?"

"Speak not ill of my liege, you ancient fossil!" Yardrat roars. His body suddenly grows a full foot in size, while he gains an equivalent amount of muscle. His bone-spears transform into a single metallic greathammer, which he uses by brutally smashing it against Uriel's armor and knocking her backward, directly into the path of Lupus and Wolfram.

The two werewolves grab Uriel's right and left arm, catching her off-guard and pinning her in place. Before she can pull away, Yardrat's hammer turns into a longsword and the Emperor of the Void rushes toward her.

"Die!"

Yardrat flickers through reality, displacing time itself for an instant and reappearing directly in front of the Archangel. He brutally impales her stomach, but instead, his attack passes through her body like air.

Before he or either orc can figure out what just happened, Uriel's figure fades away as if it had never been there.

THUNK!

A brutal punch crashes into the back of Yardrat's head, knocking him for a loop and sending him flying into Huul's chest. The Second Ancient grunts as he crashes into her

and both go flying. Only the First Ancient, Maltus, remains standing. For a brief moment, surprise flashes through his eyes.

What just happened? How could Uriel vanish from my grasp without casting a spatial spell? That technique somehow seemed... illusory.

Fenrir keeps away from the main battle. She stays beside Bael and Fae, summoning a layer of blackened energy to engulf her body. Her eyes turn as black as the night, while black flames burst into existence on her hands, a ethereal black wings sprout from her back.

"Bael, Fae. I will attack the Archangel's soul. You will cover me."

The Duke of Pain, now something of a pseudo-Emperor, scratches his head. "Huh? Wait, hold up, toots. I can't help you! I don't got my big strong body anymore. I'm stuck in Ose's flimsy little... thing."

"Just use her lightning abilities or something," Fenrir says, hesitating for a moment. "Wait. Don't tell me. You're too dumb to figure them out."

Bael nods. "Yup. How the hell am I 'posed to shoot zappy-zaps? I ain't got no idea."

"Then what can you do?" Fenrir replies with a question of her own. "Make it quick! Something about the Archangel seems different from the last time she appeared."

As Uriel engages with ten simultaneous opponents, Bael simply shrugs.

"Dunno. Nothing, I guess? I'm kinda useless right now. I'll just sit this one out. You guys can handle one little flappy bird."

To Fenrir's shock, Bael plops into the demonstone chair and leans back, lounging around while the other Emperors fight Uriel with everything they have.

"Bael!" Fenrir shouts.

"Seriously. I ain't got nothin' ta' offer," Bael says, waving his hand nonchalantly. "Kinda sucks, too. I can't even feel the Balrog in me no more. It's fine though, you guys've got this."

Fenrir hesitates for a few seconds before sighing.

That makes sense. Bael lost his durable body and he can't use Ose's powers. She received all of the gains in their trade, while he got nothing. He deserves better.

"Fine!" Fenrir says. "But if that's the case, then you should leave. You're in danger, here."

"Meh," Bael replies. "If I die, I die. Already done happened once, wasn't that bad. Felt like I got a good night's sleep. Anyway, good luck with the pigeon! I'm gonna catch some shuteye."

Fenrir turns to Fae, the Emperor of Terror. "And you?"

Fae shakes her head. "Don't look at me. My powers ain't no good for fighting a bloody Archangel! I kill armies, not elites. I'm gonna head out and leave the rest of you to deal with the ugly chicken."

While Fae runs away to save herself, Bael leans back in his chair and closes his eyes, leaving Fenrir to her own devices. She gives up and decides to charge toward Uriel, summoning the mana within herself to prepare a beam of dark soul energy.

"Have a taste of your worst trauma, Archangel!"

Two invisible lasers congeal inside Fenrir's soul and fire from her eyes. They race toward Uriel, locking onto her mana signature like a pair of ravenous sharks.

Meanwhile, Emperor Gorn crushes Uriel's masculine construct for the fifth time, doing so with the utmost ease.

Alright. It seems I should try 'Vermilion' for this battle. It always leaves quite the impact on those who witness it.

Gorn motions with his finger. He conjures a miniature portal in front of himself, one the color of blood-red, demonic miasma. A red and yellow theater-style mask plops out of it and lands in his hands. It appears surprisingly artistic, with a beak-like nose indentation, two elaborate 'wings' sticking out where the mask meets the ears, and its overall design resembling a fiery bird.

I still remember the day I received the inspiration for this mask, Gorn thinks, as he lifts his hand to pull at his face. *It was the same day I saw an image of the Phoenix emblazoned upon a human church.*

Gorn pulls away his 'face', which turns out to be a mask itself. Immediately, a cascade of fiery red and black flames explode around himself, engulfing him in an appearance-shrouding haze for several seconds. As Gorn removes his mask, he places the other one,

Vermilion, onto his face, igniting a second flash of brilliant fiery light which engulfs him a second time.

Emperor Gorn's muscles shift and pop. His original mask vanishes into a miniature portal, and his body changes in size to a small, fiery bird the same size as Gorn's original self. His arms turn to wings, while his legs become short, stubby claws. Fire burns across his figure without harming him, and a savage light appears in his eyes.

"Skree! Behold, the power of the Vermilion Bird!"

Gorn spreads his wings, sending a fiery shockwave in all directions, one which causes a few of the other Emperors not locked in combat to widen their eyes in surprise.

"Gorn's Vermilion Face! It feels a bit more powerful than the last time I saw it!"

"I haven't seen that face in at least fifty thousand years!"

Gorn launches himself toward Uriel at the same time as Fenrir. Fenrir's attack strikes the Archangel first, immediately causing Uriel's back to tighten up as the Emperor of Night's soul-piercing glare blasts Uriel's soul.

Horrific visions appear in Uriel's mind. For a moment, every awful trauma she's ever experienced flashes before her eyes. She remembers the loss of all her family members, the moment when Barbatos bit down and chewed off her face, the loss of agency she suffered when that wretched bloodskin consumed her soul.

As these terrible traumas ravage her mind, her combat capability plunges downward. She momentarily freezes up, allowing Wolfram to rake his claws across her chest. He tears away a massive chunk of flesh and armor, spraying Uriel's blood in a wide arc, while Lupus follows up with a spine-shattering kick to the Archangel's back. The two of them end up flinging Uriel in Gorn's direction, who races toward her with flames in his wake.

"Burn, she-angel!"

Gorn becomes intangible the moment he is about to strike Uriel. He phases through her body, allowing the flames behind him to travel past her defenses and scorch her insides.

Uriel shrieks in agony. "Eeeyaaah!!"

All at once, the attacks she so easily defended just moments earlier come whaling on her from all directions like an avalanche. Yardrat's mighty warhammer smashes her helmet and nearly batters her unconscious. That strike sends Uriel flying toward the Duke

of Cuddles, who rears back for a mighty kick to blast her back into the sky. Jahn strikes Uriel with deadly precision, sending her hurtling toward both Ancient Orcs. Maltus and Huul motion with their hands to summon two pairs of one handed, enchanted war-axes. They each chop down and cut into Uriel's chest, shattering the majority of her ribs and piercing multiple vital organs.

In just ten short seconds, Uriel receives a beatdown so violent that she becomes utterly unable to fight back. The two Ancient Orcs send her flying to the meeting room below, where she crashes into and obliterates the table, crumbling the demonstone into fine powder.

For a brief moment, the Emperors pause to look at Uriel's body.

"Bird-brained wench." Maltus says. "Ose alone defeated Uriel last time. Coming to fight the majority of Hell's elites was nothing more than a suicide mission. Perhaps her desire to reunite with her fallen brethren has finally broken her sanity."

"Don't underestimate her!" Fenrir shouts. "Keep attacking! Destroy every last inch of that Archangel! Leave nothing to chance!"

"But what about Barbatos?" Jahn asks. "And Artorias?"

"Losing a pair of Dukes is hardly a sacrifice compared to eliminating Hell's second most dangerous foe," Fenrir replies. She races toward Uriel and raises both of her hands, spreading out her fingers to strike like a pair of vipers. "We must kill her today!"

Right as Fenrir is about to connect, Uriel wakes up. She motions with her hands and conjures a portal beneath her body. Before Fenrir's killing blow can land, Uriel falls inside the portal and closes it up behind herself.

Boom!

Fenrir strikes the ground, whiffing her last attack.

"Damn! She got away! Yardrat, find her!"

Yardrat, a demon more adept in portal and spatial manipulation than even the most elite Warper, frowns in response.

"I'm looking for her. Give me a minute."

Seconds after he speaks, a portal opens up in the sky and Barbatos's mana signature reappears, making all of the assembled Emperors lift their heads.

"That was a good warm-up." Uriel says, as she cracks her neck. The violent injuries she suffered less than ten seconds earlier no longer appear on her body, but neither do the armor plates that protected her stomach and chest. "I suppose now, 'tis time to treat this battle more seriously."

"How did you heal so quickly?!" Yadrat asks, genuinely shocked. "Since when did Uriel's healing waters restore such grievous wounds in such a short time? Even Belial can't heal wounds in so short a time!"

Uriel doesn't reply. However, beneath her helmet, a deep grin reveals itself.

Hehehe. Brothers. These bloodskins cannot possibly fathom the lengths to which we have prepared. We must obliterate their ruling class by the end of this day.

Inside her head, a pair of Archangels stand at attention, ready for anything.

Michael, the Archangel of Courage, smiles ever so slightly. "Long has it been since my blade tasted a bloodskin's marrow."

Raphael stands beside him, his gaze focused and intense. "Sister. This second phase will require a certain level of deception. Remember, in the end, we are only three. Act weak when thou art strong, and strong when thou art weak. In this way, we will teach the souls of these demons the art of humility."

Uriel keeps her voice low. "I learned my lesson a long time ago, eldest brother. Worry not. I will not fail. I *cannot*."

The Archangel once again conjures her four constructs. She spreads them out, sending the female construct to engage Emperor Fenrir in close-range combat, and the male to do the same for Gorn. The masculine light-form angel uses its shield to beat back Gorn's flames, and its sword to poke at him every so often, while the female relies mostly on her holy barriers to obstruct and annoy Fenrir.

"These toys serve only to annoy me!" Gorn chirps. He scorches the male construct to ash, only for another one to appear in his path. "They are useless!"

Uriel re-engages with all the other demons, orcs, and werewolves. Even when outnumbered twelve to one, she still holds her own, relying on her light-spears and her long-ranged support constructs to alter the gravity or bombard any enemies who draw too close.

Yardrat, both werewolves, and both orcs launch a five pronged attack on Uriel, striking at her from all directions. The Emperor of the Void wields Auger's mightiest abilities, allowing him to become a monster similar to a half-Balrog. He slaps aside Uriel's spears and tries to grab her throat, but she slips out of his reach like an elusive mongoose fighting a cobra.

"What are you hoping to achieve?!" Yardrat shouts, annoyed that he still hasn't managed to land a killing blow. "Did you come here only to play around, Uriel?! All you've done is play defense while we slap you around! Don't tell me this is the extent of your abilities?! You will tire, and we will prevail!"

"Believe whatever fiction thou liketh!" Uriel laughs. "My goals are beyond thy comprehension!"

Suddenly, Uriel's eyes glow white. In an instant, her movements change. Like a switch flipping, every facet of her psyche undergoes a complete alteration in their patterns.

Her two spears shatter into particles of light, leaving her completely exposed. Before the demons can take advantage of her moment of weakness, she flicks her fingers and conjures a single longsword into her hand.

"Come, bloodskins." 'Uriel' says, her tone somewhat deeper, now dripping with condescension. "I tire of these games."

In an instant, Uriel's right arm swishes around her body at a speed far too fast for any of her enemies to follow. Her eyes dart from left to right, up and down, seeing not just the movements of her enemies, but their future actions, the angles of their upcoming attacks, and even the intentions within their hearts.

BANG-BANG-BANG!

Uriel's sword crashes against the orc's enchanted axes, Yardrat's warhammer, and the claws of both werewolves, freezing their momentum for a split-second. An instant later, dozens of deep slashes slice across their bodies, causing the orcs to cry out in pain, along with Wolfram and Yardrat. Only Lupus doesn't suffer a severe injury, but a small cut does worm its way past her iron hair and dragon-like scales.

"Aaargh, shit!" The four Emperors cry in unison, as they immediately take a step back. Lupus follows an instant later. Her eyes widen as she senses a dramatic change in Uriel's fighting stance and overall demeanor.

Lupus sucks in a quick breath. *Uriel doesn't specialize in one-handed blades! What just happened?!*

Yardrat also narrows his eyes. *That movement, that speed! I've only heard about it in the legends! Could it be? Has Uriel somehow learned to mimic the abilities of her long-dead brother, Michael?!*

Uriel's gaze, more arrogant than ever, sweeps across her enemies, savoring the fear in their eyes.

"Hmph. This bunch are mere children compared to the Emperors of the past. Belial was the only demon to ever give me a good fight."

Uriel's eyes glow again, causing her posture to change. Her longsword reverts into a pair of spears, and she returns to her previous self.

"'Tis time to claim our first blood." She says, her voice alarmingly calm.

As she speaks, Fenrir struggles to kill the annoying construct that has been dogging her for a fifth time. After breaking through its holy barriers and crushing its head, she starts to move toward the Archangel of Retribution, only to scowl in anger as that same annoying pest regenerates in front of her for a sixth time.

"Bloody hell! This gnat can't hurt me at all, but it sure knows how to get in my way!"

She swipes her black-flame-covered hands at the construct once more, intending to break its shields and body just as she has several times previously. However, as Fenrir goes for the kill, a momentary lapse in her concentration, caused by the repetitive and predictable nature of fighting this useless construct, causes her to miss a small but crucial difference in its behavior.

The female construct's eyes glow.

Fenrir absentmindedly glances in Uriel's direction, confused about why the other five Emperors facing her have pulled back.

"Did something happen?" Fenrir wonders.

She continues to robotically attack the construct, but pays its weak body no mind. In the instant her concentration lapses, the construct flickers out of reality, leaving her grasping at the air.

Fenrir notices the discrepancy a moment too late. "Hm? Wait, where did-?!"

Just as that question starts to materialize in her thoughts, the construct flickers back into existence behind her.

"Hoho. The young are so easy to fool," The construct says, as it stabs its fingers into the back of Fenrir's head. They pass through her skull and tap against her very soul, causing her physical form no physical injuries.

Fenrir doesn't get a chance to react. Her body slumps over, and the light fades from her eyes.

She perishes in the blink of an eye, not giving anyone in the outside world even a second to react.

At the same time, Emperor Gorn blasts apart another annoying construct, the masculine one with its sword and shield. That construct falls apart like a wet piece of paper, yet rematerializes a moment later to once again block his path.

"Blasted fake angel!" Gorn chirps. "Skree! Stop getting in my way! Burn to ash!"

He scorches it with his demonic flames, then grimaces as it reappears yet again.

"I'll kill you a million times if I have to!" The maddened Emperor of Many Faces roars.

He lunges toward the construct, but at that moment, he notices a change in the situation above as Uriel singlehandedly deflects five attacks and deals grievous blows to the Emperors arrayed before her. This shift in the battle also causes him to turn his attention away from the annoying but weak construct to the more alarming Archangel controlling it.

What was that? It looked like Uriel wielded a single sword at a level far beyond her capabilities. Her movements seemed to be at the level as the Archangel of Courage. But is that possible? Did she somehow obtain his sword skills, or did she practice to his level in secret?

In that moment of confusion, Emperor Gorn also fails to notice a change in the construct that has reappeared before him. Its eyes glow white, and it raises its head to look at him.

"The bloodskins have grown soft in their age of decadence," The construct murmurs.

Gorn flicks his gaze to the construct.

What? The false angel speaks?

As that question occurs in Gorn's mind, a strange sensation swells within his body. The Emperor of Many Faces feels a slight electrical jolt in his brain. A half-second later, his vision turns foggy, and a blossoming sensation of emptiness spreads across his neck.

What's... happening... everything suddenly feels so... cold.

He slowly closes his eyes. His body sways for a moment, then loses its footing.

Plop.

Emperor Gorn slumps to the ground. His head rolls off his shoulders and bounces away, and a spurt of blood cascades from his severed neck.

Raphael, the Archangel of Wisdom, and Michael, the Archangel of Courage, succeed in fooling their enemies. They take out two of the mightiest Emperors in just five short seconds, eliminating Uriel's greatest threats.

The other Emperors sense the abrupt disappearance of two demonic mana signatures. They whirl around and gasp in wide-eyed shock as they see the leaders of two separate Hidden Hells laying lifelessly on the ground.

"Emperor Gorn!" The two Ancients cry out.

"Emperor Fenrir!" Both werewolves exclaim in unison.

Raphael and Michael move to obliterate the bodies of both Emperors, but before they can land any attacks, Fenrir and Gorn suck into the ground, landing in Mephisto's clutches.

"You graverobber!" Lady Huul shrieks. "Murderers! Thieves! What have you done to our king?!"

Uriel's cold smile spreads even wider beneath her helmet.

"Two bloodskins down. And this is only the *start...*"

Part 302: Raphael's Secret

Half a minute earlier.

Raphael, the Archangel of Wisdom, and Michael, the Archangel of Courage, assist their sister in combating the many Demon Emperors arrayed around them. While Uriel suffers the attacks of over half a dozen Emperors in unison, the two errant Archangel souls in her body manipulate two of the constructs she has summoned, in secret.

Raphael remotely controls the female construct. He does not give her specific commands, but instead gives vague orders to be as annoying as possible, slowing Fenrir down and causing her to lower her guard against the seemingly 'weak' and 'useless' construct.

Michael does the same, but with the male construct and Gorn.

"Remember, brother," Raphael says to Michael. "These demons are both sly and dangerous. Alone, our sister would lose against any three of them. Even Ose herself managed to defeat Uriel with less than half a dozen Dukes reinforcing her. If we hope to slay a few of these ancient monsters, we must use psychological warfare. Wait until I give the signal to take direct control of her Servants."

Michael nods. "In recent days, verily, I hath questioned thee many times, Raphael. But still, I have not lost faith in thy leadership. I know, in my heart, that all of thy seemingly wicked deeds must have been performed for some... some benefit to our people. Some selfless reasons. None hath suffered as much as thee."

"Good. That is good, Michael," Raphael says, smiling kindly. "No matter what, we are brothers. Archangels. *Equals*. We must ensure the monsters we created meet their ends at our hands. That is how we will do right by the galaxy we have harmed."

Michael nods. "Mmm."

They both fall silent, waiting for the right moment to strike.

At one point, five Emperors surround Uriel from all sides. Two orcs, two werewolves, and Yardrat all work together to launch what would, under normal circumstances, prove a deadly attack against the unprepared Uriel.

However, in the eyes of the Archangel of Wisdom, this change in the battle's dynamic proves nothing more than a mere trifle. He sees through the formation in less than a second.

[Sister. Swap with Michael.] He orders.

[Yes, brother.] Uriel responds.

Suddenly, Michael's soul-form vanishes and Uriel's appears. She stands at the alert, not a trace of worry on her face, while watching as Michael completely catches the demons off-guard. Michael's swordplay, peerless in its ability to cut and deflect, and perhaps faster than light itself, allows him to completely shatter the deadly formation surrounding his sister's body.

Less than five seconds later, Raphael speaks again.

[Michael. Swap with Uriel.]

Michael doesn't reply. He merely gives up control to his sister, trading places with his sister's soul.

These three Archangels, all errant souls, are simultaneously capable of controlling Barbatos's body at any moment and releasing their true powers. This feat, only possible due to more than a hundred millennia of Uriel reshaping Barbatos's essence to allow the flow of divine energy, gives them an unparalleled amount of flexibility in how their souls can flow through these pathways.

The moment Michael returns, Raphael gives another order.

"The time is right. Our enemies are distracted. We will take control of Uriel's Servants."

A faint smile crosses Michael's face.

"Verily, I shalt enjoy this."

Michael and Raphael both vanish, seizing full control of each of Uriel's constructs. Michael takes control of the masculine one, using its sword to decapitate Emperor Gorn in a single stroke. His swordplay, peerless and invisible to the untrained eye, ends the second-strongest Emperor's reign before he even knows what happened.

Raphael lacks such a swift killing move. But, in the end, his methods prove far more terrifying.

The Archangel of Wisdom becomes an illusion of himself. He reappears behind Emperor Fenrir's body and reaches out with his soul, grabbing onto hers before she can even detect his presence.

"Hellspawn." Raphael mutters. "Play with me a while."

In Fenrir's eyes, the world remains the same. She jumps away from the construct that grabbed her and shivers.

That was close! What happened? How did this fake angel move fast enough to evade my senses?

Fenrir strikes a defensive stance. She eyes the female construct with far more apprehension while ignoring the battle against Uriel.

"What are you?" Fenrir asks. "Speak, angel! You tried to trick me!"

Raphael chuckles quietly. "Hoho... you want to know this old man's identity?"

Before Fenrir's eyes, the space around Uriel's construct vibrates for a moment. Within a tenth of a second, the construct's form changes drastically, changing to reveal a figure feared by all Demon Emperors.

Fenrir sucks in a breath. "Raphael! No, that's impossible! We killed you! I saw your death with my own eyes!"

The Archangel nods somberly. "Aye, indeed my death came at the hands of Satan the Devil. 'Twas my great fortune that my soul ended up sealed within one of Camael's rings. And now, it has afforded this ancient one a rare opportunity to return from beyond the grave. Hoho!"

Fenrir's pupils dilate and contract several times in a fraction of a second. The terror of unexpectedly witnessing an additional Archangel throws her thoughts into chaos, making her realize all sorts of horrifying possibilities.

"No wonder Uriel came here alone! She wasn't by herself after all, she must have had..."

Fenrir pauses. She whips her head around to look at the other demons, only to realize something has gone horribly wrong. The night-time battlefield now appears completely empty, with no sounds of fighting anywhere in the vicinity.

A sinking feeling expands in the Emperor of the Night's stomach. She turns to look at Raphael again, only to see the old man standing calmly, smiling at her without a care in the world.

"Verily, thy thoughts are that of a greedy, selfish being," Raphael says, his words slow and measured. "Thy plans rest on the Hell of Blood's rise, its overtaking of the other Hells, and thy eventual climb to the position of Second Emperor. But ahh, what if thy plans were to fall apart here? Imagine the shame thou shalt feel when all thy machinations fall to dust? Such a tragic loss, no doubt."

"What did you do to everyone?" Fenrir asks, ignoring Raphael's taunts. "How did you hide them from me? No... did you put an illusion spell on *me*?"

Raphael's smile widens a little further. "This old angel is quite weak, and he is hard of hearing. Couldst't thou be experiencing some troubles, young one? Do feel free to speak up in the time thou have left. Thy existence will not be long for this world, after all."

"Don't screw with me!" Fenrir roars. "I'll rip you to pieces, Archangel!"

She charges at Raphael, conjuring all of her demonic power into a vicious soul attack. The moment she draws within range, Fenrir splits herself into six soul-forms, all of them traveling away from her original position to encircle the Archangel. Leathery, bat-like wings sprout from her back. She attacks the Archangel from all directions, giving him no room to escape.

An instant later, Fenrir crushes Raphael's body, splattering the old man into a bloody mess of guts and sinew.

However, Fenrir does not smile or gloat. Instead, her heart turns cold.

"That was too easy! Show yourself, Raphael! Don't try to fool me! I know you're still alive!"

The world around her, the meeting-place of the Hidden Emperors, becomes noticeably darker and more shrouded in fog. Raphael reappears, facing Fenrir's six selves without a hint of fear.

"Hoho! This old one simply wanted to play a little prank on thee! Hee-hee! Was it quite funny? Dids't thou experience the joy of a prank played well?"

"If you're going to fight me, then fight me!" Fenrir barks. "Stop wasting my time, wretched fossil! You belong in the dirt, along with the rest of your kind!"

Raphael's playful smile fades away. He eyes the demoness with an expression that rapidly grows darker and more malevolent.

"Yes. In the dirt, this old one belongs. Thou art right, hellspawn. Sadly, he must return from the abyss itself to avenge those he has failed. And so, here he stands, ready to personally wreak havoc on those who ended his happiness."

Raphael grabs the edges of his clothing. He slowly disrobes, revealing countless horrific scars on his chest, mottled patches of skin, and burn marks that no passage of time will ever heal. The skinny and frail-looking Archangel wears only a light set of pants to cover his dignity, but allows the Emperor of the Night to see his beaten and battered body.

"I have killed countless entities far mightier than thee, hellspawn. Worry not about thy so-called friends. Thy comrades will perish, as shalt thou, here and now. All thy ambitions will crumble before this ancient warrior."

"I won't die here!" Fenrir screeches. "But I **will** bury you where you stand!"

Fenrir and Raphael engage in a vicious battle to the death. Raphael's body, though seemingly weak, reveals a hidden wellspring of power as he regenerates from even the most violent and horrific deaths at Fenrir's claws.

For several hours, the two of them strike grievous blows against one another. Slowly, Fenrir's sanity begins to crack. She grows more and more desperate as the Archangel of Wisdom cunningly outwits her, dealing glancing blows that continue to slow her down more and more.

"How can you be so durable?!" Fenrir shrieks. "Just die already! DIE!!"

The world around her, having long-since faded into an infinite, blackened abyss, no longer reveals even a hint of the battlefield she once remembered. The fight against Uriel, once the most pressing thought on Fenrir's mind, becomes like an ancient memory.

A fist strikes Fenrir's face. She goes flying and crashes against the ground, pain blinding her vision and making it hard for her to see. At that moment, Raphael appears before her and grabs the top of her head.

"This is the part where I seize thy soul," Raphael says, smiling coyly.

The Archangel reaches out of himself and grabs onto Fenrir's soul, intending to rip it away from her body.

However, in that split-second, Fenrir's eyes turn as black as death itself.

"Taste your nightmare!" Fenrir screams, as she fires one last, desperate soul-attack at the Archangel holding on to her.

Raphael, unable to release the Emperor of the Night, shudders violently as this beam of darkness attacks his very core.

Suddenly, the pitch-black world around them changes to its total opposite; a stunningly bright realm of pure light. Fenrir's eyes burn from the radiance of a holy energy so pure it makes the Archangel of Wisdom's mana feel like puddles of mud splashed alongside the road.

In Fenrir's vision, a faint figure appears, a mere apparition, a long-lost shadow of power that none in the galaxy have ever observed, or still remember.

The Emperor of the Night trembles with fear.

"Who... who is that? Who's there?!"

Raphael convulses, while his hand remains stubbornly locked onto Fenrir's head.

The distant apparition, so powerful and pure that it fills Fenrir with a nameless terror, speaks softly to someone unseen.

"Why must you rebel? Have I not given you life? Have I not treated you with dignity and respect?"

The speaker receives no answer. Instead, a violent pain transmits through its consciousness directly to Fenrir's brain, making her shriek in pain.

"Eeeeyaaah!"

The Emperor of the Night watches in horror as the brilliant radiance surrounding her grows noticeably duller. The mighty presence fades away, and the blackness of the void once again swallows the brilliant light, leaving only the shuddering and suffering Raphael behind, along with herself.

Raphael finally recovers from her last-ditch attack. He opens his eyes and glares at her with a look of pure hatred.

"That vision was not thine to see."

Fenrir shudders. "You... you killed him! You murdered..."

Raphael gnashes his teeth. "That was my greatest secret, the one thing which should never be spoken of. For thy putrid eyes to observe it, thou shalt die a thousand deaths. I will not even consume thy wretched soul, but purify it to nothingness, forever."

Tears bubble up in Fenrir's eyes. "You killed him... you killed him... but he loved you! He loved you like his son!"

"PERISH!" Raphael howls, as he squeezes his hands, compresses her soul, and blasts it with the full might of his Archangel power.

"Aaaah!!"

Fenrir releases one last cry of pain before the light fades from her eyes. Her 'body,' the representation of her soul, scatters to ash in Raphael's palm. He remains standing while she crumbles to dust, staring hatefully at the fallen demoness.

"T'was no mistake..." Raphael murmurs. "I did what I had to. I made the choice to empower myself. T'was not wrong. It wasn't!"

The Archangel of Wisdom reflects for a moment on that moment in time, that ancient choice he made, one which changed the flow of power in the cosmos forever.

"...Only Solomon knows." Raphael whispers. "But I cannot kill him. I can only pray he keeps the secret safe, forever. 'Tis my one last desire."

As Raphael's soul-battle with Fenrir ends, his perception of time slows down, reverting to its normal state. The Illusory Realm he constructed, one which has allowed him to defeat even his mightiest foes, including Satan himself, grants Raphael yet another victory among the trillions of others.

Raphael returns to reality, watching as Fenrir's lifeless husk falls to the floor before him.

In the timeline of Uriel's battle, only a single second passed between the moment of Raphael touching Fenrir's soul and the fading of the light in her eyes. But to the Archangel and his victim, more than half a day had passed.

Raphael glances in Michael's direction, noting the fallen figure of Emperor Gorn.

[Good work, little brother,] Raphael says. [Thou hath performed admirably.]

He rears back his fist to destroy Fenrir's body, only to groan as he realizes it has already disappeared into the floor, along with Gorn's corpse.

For a brief instant, Raphael reflects on the secret Fenrir glimpsed, the one truth he never wishes anyone to know.

As much as her soul would have empowered me, I cannot allow any others to remain in the mortal plane who know the truth. Raphael thinks. That is why... even Cassiel and Muriel...

A flash of regret appears on Raphael's face.

Perhaps t'was a mistake. Perhaps I should never have done what I did. But the dead can never return. That is the cruelty of this universe. That is the cruelty and unfairness we must all endure.

Raphael and Michael both fly back to Uriel's side, while the gazes of all the demons fall upon them.

This old man cannot fix all of his mistakes, Raphael thinks. But at the very least, he can purge these wretched sinners from existence!

Part 303: The Unifier

Emperor Gorn and Emperor Fenrir both die instantly, far faster than anyone around them could have imagined. Uriel's seemingly weak and useless Holy Constructs somehow end their lives with one move, causing their auras to vanish and the other Emperors to spin around and look at them in shock.

Emperor Serena, Gorn's consort, quickly moves away from his body even as it falls into the ground. She sightlessly gazes in the general direction of the masculine construct before her, the one which now bears Michael's Archangel aura.

"Murderer." Serena says, her limpid voice containing neither hatred nor hostility, but only an emphatic truth.

Michael's gaze fixates on her fleeing figure. Her princess-like appearance does nothing to warm his blood or stay his hand. In his eyes, all he sees is a filthy *bloodskin*.

Without any warning, he rushes toward the blind Emperor and swings his blade. However, his sword passes through her without stopping, and she disappears into particles of light, only to reform half a mile away, unharmed.

"Emperor Gorn!" Maltus shouts, fire in his eyes. "Filthy Archangels! You **dare** trick us?!"

Raphael chuckles audibly, as he flies back toward his sister. "Hoho. Verily, thou intendeth to slay my sister, yet once thy comrades fell, thy anger rose like the flames of a fallen people. There can be no reconciliation between us, hellspawn."

He and Michael quickly travel back to Uriel's side, while both of the Ancient Orcs, those who served under Gorn, gaze at them with fiery eyes. Never did they imagine the leader of their Hell would perish so miserably, unable to defend himself.

Maltus's chest heaves up and down. He grits his teeth and summons all his strength to his body, readying himself to go on the attack!

However, Elder Huul, his junior and his Zhurm's mother, calms down quickly. She eyes the Archangels with a look of cold calculation.

"Maltus. It is time. Activate the Unifier."

Her words immediately cause the First Ancient's rage to freeze in place. Shocked beyond belief, Maltus shoots her a look of suspicion. "What? Lady Huul, without the Zhurm's permission, we cannot reveal-"

"I am his mother. I helped design it." She states, still locking eyes with Uriel. "I'll take responsibility."

Maltus's rage quickly cools down. In its place, a look of elation appears, followed by that of unmistakable greed.

"Heh, heh, heh. If you insist, Lady Huul."

Their conversation does not go unnoticed by the demons around them, nor the Archangels. Emperor Fenrir's comrades, the werewolves from the Hell of Blood, also appear enraged beyond belief, but they keep their anger in check, waiting for the orcs to make their move. In their heart of hearts, they feel a slight fear toward the cunning Archangels who managed to take out the Hell of Blood's leader in a single move.

Yardrat, too, eyes the orcs with suspicion.

What is a 'Unifier? He wonders. Our intelligence has reported no such item before. Could it be a code-word?

Ancient Maltus reaches into the folds of his luxurious purple robes, then pulls out his hand to reveal a palm-sized black obsidian crystal.

"Behold, fellow Emperors," Maltus says, his voice tinged with excitement. "The pride of my species. The Unifier! No longer will our people sit on the sidelines, content with our meager lot in life! We will avenge our fallen king and take our place at the top of the Hell of Calamity!"

Maltus crushes the pitch-black jewel. A wave of purple and black mana explodes into existence, causing every spectator to take at least a few steps back, including the Archangels. Elder Maltus grabs Huul's golden shoulder pauldron, allowing the black energy to envelop both of them. The initial ball of mana transforms into a hardened set of onyx armor, swirling around them like a hungry raven.

Raphael's eyes widen as he witnesses this scene. "Impossible... that mana signature... a dragon?"

The unmistakable purity of draconic essence sickens every spectator in the area, causing their stomachs to flip-flop in their bodies. Once the blackened ball of energy

finishes crafting a set of powerful-looking armor, it shoots up into the sky and explodes like a bomb, transforming into a giant magical formation which hovers over the battlefield.

This last change causes an uproar among the demons, none of whom have ever seen anything like it. Yardrat, in particular, begins to sweat.

A magical formation! Have the orcs and fairies begun to work together? Have they unlocked the mysteries of draconic energy? That must be the case!

"Murderous angels!" Maltus roars, as he once again wields his pair of one-handed axes. "Today, you and all the rest will learn why orcs should be the RULERS of the cosmos!"

He and Huul launch toward Uriel at frightening speeds. Their seemingly simple weapons now radiate an oppressive draconic might, weakening the mana of everyone else in the area.

In that instant, Raphael pieces together at least one part of the puzzle.

This is no coincidence. The orcs have somehow become masters of artifact creation! That 'Unifier' tool was barely inferior to Camael's works!

Uriel engages in battle with both Ancients, resulting in a firestorm of annihilation. She trades blows with them, relying on the power contained in Barbatos's body and her own Holy Barriers to forcibly withstand Maltus and Huul's brutally savage onslaught.

Boom! Boom!

Uriel's light-spears shatter again and again, their inferiority to the dragon-energy-infused weapons of the orcs becoming clearer with every strike. Michael tries to assist his sister by wielding his sword at a speed even the orcs can't deflect, but his body and weapon prove grossly inferior to his former self.

Yardrat analyzes the battle from his spectator vantage point. *Projections and constructs, made up only of solidified mana, simply cannot compete with flesh and blood bodies infused with draconic mana. These Archangel souls might possess all of their original abilities, but their raw power is grossly inferior to their former selves! It's no wonder they had to assassinate Fenrir and Gorn when their guard was lowered, otherwise they would have failed in an instant!*

"Assist the Ancients!" Yardrat shouts. "Kill these Archangels, once and for all!"

A flood of Emperors joins the orcs in battle, only to find themselves unable to fully commit. The level of draconic energy radiating from the orcs' bodies physically sickens the demons, making their bodies weaken when they draw too close.

Even without the assistance of the other Emperors, both Ancients continue battling the Archangel and her brothers.

Raphael's strengths lay mostly in illusions. He keeps away from the main attack and mostly focuses on confusing his opponents. Unlike the demons, his Archangel soul stands a tier above draconic energy. He doesn't become weakened by it, and can even fight against a dragon on relatively equal terms.

Uriel's body flickers from side to side, causing the orcs to miss some of their attacks. Those that hit inevitably crash against Uriel's barriers or her armor, reducing some of the damage the dragon-power can deal.

However, the alarming increase in power that the orcs receive puts them easily at the level of top Demon Emperors. Every strike they land causes Uriel's body to shudder and groan. Considering the physical power she wields only amounts to the level of a Demon Duke, she inevitably loses more and more ground to both of the orcs.

Boom!

Maltus's axe crashes against Uriel's helmet, making her cry out in pain. She hovers backward, wincing for a moment as a throbbing migraine strikes her soul. In that moment of weakness, Huul lands a double-slash on Uriel's chest, blasting her out of the sky and toward the ground below!

Just before Uriel hits the ground, a shadow-spear suddenly comes from nowhere and impales her spine from behind. The Archangel howls in pain and slashes at it with a hastily summoned dagger of light, freeing herself. She climbs to her feet, only to see Emperor Yama slink into the darkness, grinning at her like a Cheshire Cat.

"No, no, now is not the time for us to make our move," Yama says. "Consider that a little taste of our power. Heh heh heh..."

Uriel clutches the bloody hole in her stomach, then falls to her feet. She hastily waves her hand, dematerializing Michael and Raphael's constructs and resummoning them at her position.

She exchanges no words with her brothers. One look is all Raphael needs to see the gruesome injury Yama dealt.

The orcs fly downward at their fastest speed, intending to crush Uriel before she can heal. However, Raphael summons a portal and throws his sister into it, allowing his body to be used as a meatshield for the descending orcs. They crush him and Michael both, but fail to land a killing blow on the Archangel yet again.

"Come back here, cowardly chicken!" Maltus yells. "Where have you run off to, now?!"

A few seconds later, Uriel steps out of a portal in the sky, then closes it behind her. Her seemingly life-threatening injuries from before no longer appear anywhere on her body, and her battle fatigue vanishes as well.

"Here I am, little orcs," Uriel says, taunting the two Ancients. "I had to freshen myself up a bit."

Yardrat's eyes widen. *Again! How has the Archangel healed her injuries so quickly? Yama's casual blow should have left her at death's door. Only a healer of Belial's caliber could have mended those wounds, and yet somehow Uriel did so in only a few seconds?!*

His expression becomes grim. *Uriel only possesses the body of a Duke, but her Archangel power puts her at the same level as a Demon Emperor. If this battle were merely one of attrition, we should win easily, and yet somehow she has survived all this while. Since when did her healing abilities grow so frightening?*

Uriel's eyes glow for a moment. Once again, her posture and demeanor changes.

"Hoho. Too many enemies, and so few friends. I think we might not win if the battle keeps shaping up like it has so far!"

The speaker, Raphael, swivels his head around, momentarily engrossed in the feeling of once again possessing a flesh and blood body. Still, he doesn't let this sensation distract him.

The Archangel of Wisdom waves his hands, summoning a dozen portals all at once, each of them linking to different locations.

"Hee-hee! Come now, young ones! Make way for this poor old man to educate the young!"

Suddenly, a flood of more than three thousand Elemental Constructs pour from the portals. Fire Golems, Water Golems, Earth, Wind, Light, Dark, and even Iron Golems all

come rushing out, having been pre-built by Uriel for just this moment. The Emperors all flinch in shock as a huge army of Golems charges their position, the sheer number of them frightening them out of their wits.

"Don't be fooled!" Yadrat exclaims. "Uriel can't possibly create this many golems! They're only illusions!"

An instant after he says that, one of the 'illusions' swings its fiery fist at him.

BOOM!

Yadrat gets smashed backward, flying directly into the ground beneath him. Just before he impacts the dirt, the Emperor of the Void flickers in and out of reality, halting his momentum and allowing him to reorient himself in midair.

"...Never mind! They're real!"

Raphael hovers in the sky. His eyes flick to each of the assembled Emperors, while also watching as the two Ancients come roaring back to fight him.

[Hoho. Well, I wouldn't say that Yadrat boy was too far off the mark. I might have mixed in a few illusions to beef up the numbers! Now, brother, 'tis thy turn to battle these orcs.]

Raphael's eyes glow with light for a moment, allowing Michael to swap into Uriel's body. Raphael and Uriel split off into Uriel's constructs, turning them into pillars of support for the Archangel of Courage.

Michael grins. "There's just something about a flesh and blood body that a false one cannot emulate..."

The moment the orcs reach Michael, thinking he's Raphael, they receive a rude surprise. Michael summons a single longsword into his right hand, along with a shield of light in his left. He rockets toward the Ancients and delivers a hundred precisely aimed attacks, stabbing through minuscule gaps in their dragon-armor.

"Argh!" Huul cries, a single second after feeling fifty stinging stabs across her body.

Maltus also cries out in pain, but neither orc relents. The wounds on their bodies instantly seal shut and rapidly heal, bolstered by the power of the dragon empowering them.

The formation in the sky, created by fairy magic, momentarily glows as it activates its auxiliary healing functions. It absorbs the injuries both Ancients suffered, transferring them to orc slaves placed somewhere in the high capitol on their homeworld. Those slaves instantly perish upon receiving their deadly wounds, while fresh new ones are rotated in to allow for additional 'wound transferences.'

Michael frowns. His 'lethal' blows only momentarily slow the orcs down, and in fact barely even hurt them before they resume battle, seemingly unaffected and just as strong as before.

How strange, he muses.

The other Emperors fight desperately against the horde of elemental Golems. While the strength of Uriel's summons aren't high, their durability and regenerative abilities prove ludicrous.

"Bloody hell!" Emperor Wolfram howls. "It's one thing after another! How many tricks does this Archangel have up her sleeves?!"

* * *

A mile or so from the battlefield, Emperors Melody and Guura, from the Sixth Hell of Isolation, sit by themselves, not engaging with the battle.

Instead, they sit with Dorma, the Duke of Delicacies, snacking on some delicious meats and veggies.

"Hey," Guura says. "We should bring Bael over here. He's in danger, you know?"

Melody snorts. "Bael's napping. He'll be fine."

"Ya, but he don't got no powers now, ya know?"

Melody chomps down on a leg of chicken, then shrugs her shoulders. "If he smells the grub, he'll come."

"You think we should help fight the Archangel?" Guura asks.

"Nah. Screw that noise," Melody replies. "Sounds like a real drag. Remember what Shax always said. 'Don't stick your nose up somebody else's butt.'"

"Melody... I don't think those were his words."

"Eh, close enough."

The two girls chomp some chicken while Dorma waddles over and plops down beside them, a big bowl of turkey soup in his hand.

"So, how's the battle going?"

Melody shrugs. "Uriel took out Emperor Fenrir. Gorn too."

"Ooh, how exciting!" Dorma squeals, elation on his face. "We haven't had this much excitement in a long time! Are you going to play a song?"

"Those losers don't deserve my music," Melody replies. "Man, where's Fae and Bree? We should get them in on this action. This chicken is the shit!"

"Thanks," Dorma says, his face all smiles. "I put some special seasoning on it! Made it just the way my broodmother always liked it!"

"Alright! Totally radical," Melody laughs.

Guura frowns. She turns around and looks behind the group, in the opposite direction of the battle taking place, where she observes a flicker of light materialize in the distance.

"Hey! Who's there?"

Slowly, a demon begins walking toward the three members of the Hell of Isolation. His youthful appearance doesn't ring any bells, but his confident swagger makes even Melody turn and take notice.

"Eh? I don't recognize you. What's your name, punk?"

The young demon smiles, revealing a toothy grin.

"Oh, it's no surprise you don't recognize little old me. I don't come out often, after all, and this body is a *new model*. Since there's an Archangel or three in the area, I thought I might pop over and see what the big fuss is about."

Melody continues munching on her chicken, but she eyes the demon warily. "You're an Emperor? Weird. I've never met you before. Are you Belial?"

"No, no. I'm not Belial," The man says. "You and I haven't spoken much. I like to keep to myself, you see."

Melody scrutinizes the young Emperor's face, especially his odd purple hair, permed and falling from his head in waves. He wears an Egyptian-style garment, complete with white robes, a golden pointed hat, and a few amulets of various Egyptian gods hanging from his neck.

"Wait... I do know you..." Melody says, pausing her chewing. "Aren't you... the Glyphmancer?"

The man motions with his hand. He conjures a magical card between his middle and index finger, then smiles.

"So you've figured me out? Just keep quiet for now. I'd like to make a big show when I arrive."

Guura doesn't recognize him. Even so, she gestures to the table and spread of food before her.

"Hey, Glyph-guy! Want some grub? The chicken's real good!"

The newcomer follows her gesture with his eyes.

"Ah, some of Dorma's delicacies? Why yes, I think I will. It won't hurt to wait a few minutes before I make my glorious entrance. Gorn already died, after all, so I'm a bit too late to save him."

As the man sits down and begins to eat, he raises his eyebrows and nods at Dorma.

"Well, I'll be. This is some good chicken. Excellent work, Dorma."

The Duke of Delicacies flashes a thumbs-up, then slaps his stomach.

"Enjoy, brother."

Part 304: Uriel's Counterattack!

Despite the relative weakness of Uriel's Golems, their sheer quantity allows them to outnumber the less-than half-dozen Emperors present by fifty-to-one. With Gorn and Fenrir dead, only Lupus, Wolfram, and Yadrat remain on the battlefield, while the two Ancient Orcs directly combat Uriel. Serena keeps her distance, since her abilities don't allow her to directly fight outside of pre-planned battles. Each of the three non-Orc Emperors becomes completely suppressed, forcing them to slowly eat away at the fire, water, and other such elemental golems surrounding them.

Raphael and Michael take up positions behind Uriel, manipulating her summons themselves, while she focuses on battling the two Ancient Orcs. To all of the Archangels' surprise, the Golems weaken considerably once the dragon-empowered orcs draw within range, allowing Huul and Maltus to shatter them with singular blows.

"Thy power is quite alarming!" Uriel says, as she holds up her arm to forcibly deflect another of Huul's brutal blows. The impact knocks Uriel fifty feet backward in the sky, but also gives her a moment of breathing room. "How didst thou mimic my sister's artifact creation abilities? How hath thou channeled the power of fallen dragons?!"

"That is for us to know, not you, Archangel!" Huul shouts.

Her axes beat down on Uriel time and again, forcing Uriel back step by step. Maltus weaves around behind Uriel, looking for opportunities to strike when her guard is down. Several times, he delivers brutal chops to her back, breaking through her hastily summoned holy barriers with ease.

"No tricks will save you today, Uriel!"

As the two orcs rush at Uriel in unison to deliver a killing blow, they find themselves momentarily surprised when her figure vanishes and reappears off to the side; a position too awkward for them to immediately pivot and attack.

BOOM!

A blast of holy energy fires from Uriel's palm and crashes into Huul, sending her flying.

"Aaargh!"

Uriel appears noticeably worse for wear. She shoots a momentary look of gratefulness to Raphael, who saved her with his illusion magic.

We haven't many trump cards left to play, Uriel thinks. We've already used up two-thirds of the Holy Water Raphael helped me formulate. Once it runs out, I won't be able to heal my wounds so effectively anymore. I did not anticipate a pair of orcs would prove such deadly enemies.

Her expression turns heinous. Uriel dives downward, to the planet's surface below. She crashes into the dirt and burrows underground, disappearing from everyone else's senses.

Moments later, Uriel bursts back out, her blackened armor appearing far more brilliant than before. Hardened diamond plates sit atop and between the gaps of her demonstone armor, completely repairing all the damage her armor has suffered. In her hands, a pair of hastily-assembled diamond spears reinforced with holy energy rest, ready to be used in battle.

Huul, having recovered from that unexpected holy energy blast, pairs up with Maltus to rush directly at Uriel.

"And here I thought you'd run away!" Huul taunts.

Uriel's eyes darken.

"I never flee, foolish servants of evil. Even when my life is on the line... I HOLD MY GROUND!"

An unexpected wellspring of power surges within Uriel's body. She gazes at the two incoming attackers from above, coils strength into her legs, and leaps straight at them!

Expecting the Archangel to parry their blows as she always has, the Orcs instead receive an unexpected surprise when she charges toward them at a terrifying speed. Just before Uriel and the Ancients collide, they rear their weapons back to attack, and so does she.

Foop!

Uriel vanishes!

For a quarter of a second, both Ancients can't even process her sudden disappearance.

Then, she reappears from a portal directly above them, bearing down on their backs.

SKRIK!

Uriel's two spears impale both Ancients through their spines, continuing to increase their speed until they crash into the ground.

"Aaargh!"

They collide with the planet's surface, smashing a pile of boulders beneath them into dust when they impact.

For a brief moment, every Emperor on scene shoots a look of astonishment at Uriel and the Orcs twitching beneath her feet. Huul and Maltus struggle to tear the diamond spears from their backs, but Uriel continues blasting them over and over, stomping their heads into the dirt and otherwise beating them faster than their formation can repair their bodies.

"Didn't thou thinketh such a childish formation could confuse my brother, the Archangel of Wisdom?" Uriel taunts. She grabs Huul by the back of the neck, lifts her up, and smashes her face-first against Maltus's body. "My brother has long-since seen through thy inferior attempts at emulating the ancient dragons."

The other Emperors put twice as much power into their attacks, momentarily clearing a gap in the Golems slowing them down. Yardrat, in particular, manages to give himself a few seconds of breathing room. Before Uriel can land a killing blow, he motions with his hands to summon temporal magic aimed at both Ancients.

Foop!

Uriel lunges her spears at the heads of both Ancient Orcs just a half-second too late. They vanish from her sight and disappear, traveling somewhere else in the galaxy. With its source of energy gone, the formation that sustained them fades from the sky above.

Uriel's spears uselessly strike the dirt. She turns her head to sneer at Yardrat.

"Oh? Does the little bloodskin want to play?"

The Emperor of the Void shivers. Had he been just a second too slow, both of the Ancient Orcs would have perished right then and there. Even after saving their lives, he couldn't prevent them from suffering horrific, life-altering injuries.

I have no love for the Orcs, nor any of these other Emperors, but when faced with three Archangels, we must put our differences aside!

Several Golems charge at Yardrat, once again pinning him in a tough position. His most feared enemies are the holy-type Golems, who drastically weaken and burn him. With holy energy being the bane of demonkind's existence, not even Yardrat can easily battle against Uriel's most potent weapon against her enemies.

The Archangel of Retribution sends a telepathic message to her brothers. [We don't yet have all of the bloodskin Emperors here yet. Should we proceed?]

[I would prefer to see more,] Raphael says. [Once we reveal our true power, we will not be able to activate it again for a very long time, sister. We must eliminate as many Emperors as possible today. The Hero is still not reliable. We must pave a path of blood if he is to save humanity.]

Uriel nods. [Then we shall wait until the moment is right, brother.]

The Archangel of Retribution flies into the sky. She summons a massive orb of holy energy above her heads, identical to the one she conjured at the start of the battle. Its size balloons to the diameter of a school bus, vastly exceeding the size of her body.

Yardrat and the other Emperors gasp. With the Ancients gone and only the werewolves left, plus with Uriel's Golems slowing them all down, none of the Emperors assembled can possibly muster a shield capable of defending themselves and the others from such a terrifying amount of Holy Energy.

"Once again, bloodskin filth!" Uriel shouts. "I say to all of thee! Fall... INTO **OBLIVION!**"

Uriel hurls the massive sphere directly into the center of the battle being fought, giving no thought to the damage her constructs will suffer.

Yardrat curses. "Shit!"

Wolfram and Lupus grimace. Even with their innate resistance to holy energy, they won't get off easily if that orb strikes them.

Serena, having kept away from the main battlefield, doesn't stand within the blast zone. However, her heart tightens when she sees the orbs flying at the others.

A few miles away, Emperor Fae and a smorgasbord of Dukes from the Hells of Lust and Isolation watch the battle with surprise in their eyes.

"Where are the reinforcements?!" Fae snarls. "As much as I'd love to cream some Archangels, my powers ain't no good for fighting their kind! We need the other Emperors,

pronto!"

One of Huul's attendants, a relatively high-placed Orc equivalent to a Demon Duke, shoots a glance at Fae. "I have called the Hell of Calamity for help. Someone is on the way."

"Both of your bosses just got creamed!" Fae shouts. "Whoever you called for, they had better get here fast!"

The moment the words leave her mouth, Uriel's holy energy orb explodes.

BOOM.

A flash of light ignites in the darkness, forcing every spectator to look away, lest their eyes go blind.

The explosion blasts apart a massive crater on Hell Harbor's surface. All of Uriel's Constructs end up shredded to nothingness, while the three Demon Emperors momentarily black out and fly backward, crashing into the dirt.

Yardrat, never getting even a second to teleport himself away, ends up with the worst injuries. Terrible holy burns give him blisters across his whole body. Multiple broken bones prevent him and the other Emperors from moving, while they waver on the edge of consciousness.

Serena flies over to their side. Having avoided the explosion, she isn't injured, but none of her abilities revolve around healing or defense. She cannot do anything more than examine the other Emperors and try to protect them with her body.

Serena's expressionless face remains as placid as ever. She confirms that neither Yardrat nor either of the Werewolves are at immediate risk of dying. However, with Uriel still in pristine condition, they won't live much longer.

Indeed, the Archangel of Retribution sneers as she brandishes both of her diamond spears and opens a portal in front of herself.

"Looks like the bloodskins only amounted to this much," She says.

As Uriel starts to move toward her portal, a voice speaks from somewhere between her and the three downed Emperors.

"Temporal Cricket, **Evoke!**"

A flash of light radiates from a previously invisible Demon Emperor, one who nobody else observed until this very moment. Three bolts of mana fly out of that invisible figure and rush into the bodies of Yardrat, Lupus, and Wolfram. Five seconds later, all of their injuries and grievous wounds disappear, returning them to their condition from a minute before.

From the darkness, an invisible demon reveals himself. A young male with purple hair, golden-and-white robes, and a necklace with several carved images of Egyptian gods appears as if stepping out of an illusory world. His dashing good looks do nothing for the many men and women present, but even so, his appearance is still attention-grabbing, even more so than Yardrat's.

The Emperor of the Void jumps to his feet, while sweat drips from his forehead. Realizing he has somehow escaped death, he looks around and quickly spots the newcomer.

"Hey! Are you the one who saved us?"

The young demon smiles. "I am."

"I owe you my thanks," Yardrat says, before pausing to scrutinize the other. "Although... your face is wholly unfamiliar to me. Who are you, fellow Emperor?"

"That's not unexpected. I don't get out much," The young demon says. "For now, you just stay there and watch. I'll take out these Archangels myself."

"You don't stand a chance," Yardrat says. "I'll help you-"

"That won't be necessary." The young demon says again. "Trust in this fresh-faced newcomer. I alone am enough."

The young demon flourishes his right hand, causing a golden card to appear between his index and middle finger.

"Ooh! Lucky draw."

The moment Yardrat spots the card, he sucks in a breath.

Hold on. That's a Tarot card! This fellow must be from the Tarot sect. But they only have one Emperor, so he must be... Yumagi? The Glyphmancer?!

Just as Yardrat comes to that conclusion, the newcomer holds his card over his head.

"Wrath of the Lich Dragon, **Evoke!**"

A wellspring of Eldritch energy conjures inside his body, then fires toward Uriel at a terrifying speed. The Archangel of Retribution quickly summons five Holy Barriers to protect herself, while the image of a black-clad dragon crashes against them.

BOOOOM!

The dragon crashes through one of Uriel's barriers, then the second one, the third, and finally the fourth, before dissipating. The Archangel of Retribution manages to block the attack, but her body tenses up after doing so, the amount of energy she expended proving far beyond her initial estimations.

Yumagi casually flicks a clump of hair crossing his forehead, revealing several marble-sized glowing lights beneath his hairline. Each of them glows different colors, including gold, silver, black, and red.

"Archangel of Retribution, Archangel of Wisdom, and Archangel of Courage. Well met. I am Emperor Yumagi. It is your great privilege to face me in battle once again."

Raphael gently flaps his wings, putting himself ahead of Uriel.

"Yumagi. I know thy name. Thou art the one who founded the heretic Tarot cult."

"So you *do* remember me!" Yumagi laughs, while wearing a smug grin. "These days, I like to keep to myself. My goal, of course, is to craft the mightiest Tarot cards in existence. But what good are cards and games if I don't have any worthy opponents? Finally, I can see how far my crafting has taken me... and how high I tower above the peasants."

Raphael narrows his eyes. "Thou art a vile demon, like the rest. Coming here today will spell the end of thy life. Perhaps, if thou hadst brought reinforcements, thou mayest have lived to see the sun rise one last time."

Emperors Wolfram and Lupus both frown as they listen to the conversation.

"Emperor Yumagi?" Wolfram mutters. "I don't recognize that name. I've never seen this guy before."

"I haven't seen him myself," Lupus replies, her voice low, "But I recognize his name. He's been around for a frighteningly long time. He rose to prominence shortly after the War in Heaven. There are many questions swirling around the source of his rise and how he appeared seemingly out of nowhere, all those eons ago."

"Is he strong?" Wolfram asks. "We already lost Gorn. Surely, this new kid can't be any better than him."

"Don't be so sure about that..." Lupus warns. "The Tarot Sect is supposed to be a formidable powerhouse of the Hell of Calamity. Gorn has always afforded them absolute privacy. The most prominent member we've seen in recent years is Mara, the Baron of Games, but she only leads the house's 'collection activities'. She's hardly the most noteworthy member there."

Wolfram spreads out his claws. "Well, we should still help this Yumagi fellow out. There's no way he can take on three Archangels by himself."

Lupus flicks her gaze over to Yardrat, who remains in place, not deigning to help the newcomer out. He remains on the alert, just in case Uriel launches another sneak attack, but otherwise keeps his feet firmly planted on the ground.

"Let's wait a while and see what Yumagi can do," Lupus whispers. "Besides. Kristoff is on the way, and so are several other Emperors. Once they all arrive, we'll easily crush the Archangels. We just need to hold out a while longer. Let's not risk our necks, or else we might end up like our mistress."

Wolfram's eyes turn malicious. "Those Archangels are such scum. To assassinate her in such an underhanded way... I'll never forgive them."

"Nor will I." Lupus concludes.

Emperor Yardrat transmits several telepathic thoughts to his master, Auger.

[What do you mean he won't come?] Yardrat hisses. [We need Glinch! These Archangels are truly oppressive!]

[I cannot force the Stitched Emperor's hand,] Auger replies. [For now, I am speaking with Fae. I will grant her abilities more appropriate for this battle. As for you, if Yumagi fails to impress, here are three powers you might find useful. I have held a few more in reserve.]

[Yes, my liege,] Yardrat replies, as he senses the arrival of several new demonic abilities slipping into his body. [If it was only Uriel, then Berserk Strength would have been enough. But with the addition of Michael and Raphael, brute force won't be enough to triumph over the Archangels.]

[You are far smarter than others give you credit,] Auger says. [Strike fast, and strike hard. No mercy. With Gorn defeated, there is no Emperor more appropriate to rule the Seven Hells than me.]

[Naturally, my liege. I will make your name feared.]

On the battlefield, Emperor Yumagi raises his palm to the sky. Immediately, five monsters materialize around him. These creatures appear unlike any that have naturally evolved on worlds over time, as they come from his own creativity and the power of his Tarot Cards.

One of them is a miniature green drake, capable of spitting poison, with three heads filled with razor-sharp teeth. Its body size is only ten meters long, making it look like a baby compared to the terrifying ancient dragons.

Another is a strange rat-looking monster, with corrosive black smoke falling from its body. The smoke scars the soil around it, withering and dissipating any plants to ash. Two saber-teeth stick out of its mouth, used for impaling unsuspecting prey.

Another creature is an amorphous blob with a pulsing red center, and an outer transparent green layer of jello-like mucus.

The last two are a pair of birds with iron and steel wings, looking like something a human roboticist might create if they suffered a horrible nightmare. The metal birds shudder where they stand, as if they'll soon fall apart if they remain in service for a moment longer.

Yumagi points at the Archangels.

"Alright, you lot. It's time to duel."

Part 305: Beyond the Grave

Elsewhere in the cosmos, on the planet Tarus II.

A midday sun hangs atop the horizon, warming the planet to a comfortable spring-time temperature. Humans, monsters, and a few scattered demons work together to rebuild the ruins of the former Hero City, now named the Fortress of Retribution. While some haul away broken rubble, others start mapping out construction grids for new buildings, ones which the Hero will create through his enhanced Wordsmithing capabilities, once he has the time to spare.

Jason Hiro sits on a bench with his wife. His mind-wife's body projects spiritually before the two of them through his Wordsmithing. Not only does his mind-wife stand before them, but three other people as well.

Gabriel, the Archangel of Power, towers over everyone present. Standing almost ten feet tall, his spiritual self somehow seems more imposing than his physical body ever was. He crosses his arms and gazes into the distance, taking in the sights of a world he can walk around in for the first time in eons.

Shana, the little girl Jason rescued from a necklace artifact inside Marie's underground bunker. The little blonde-haired girl gazes at Phoebe's physical body, momentarily confused by the existence of both her spiritual and physical selves.

And finally, Sir Lorent, Phoebe's nephew. Mordred's Butcher hooks his arm around Spirit Phoebe's shoulder, while bowing his head politely toward her physical self.

"...And that is where his story ends." Sir Lorent finishes explaining. "After your disappearance, King Arthur wept profusely. He died during a terrible battle against the demon armies, killing several of their Emperors in one last glorious strike. I was born shortly after his death."

Despite having already heard the story, spiritual Phoebe still listens intently to Sir Lorents' depictions of past events, while her physical self appears absolutely enthralled.

"To think my king would fall in such a dramatic way..." Phoebe says, her tone wistful. "I wish I had been there for him."

"King Arthur never once begrudged you for your choice." Lorent Berthold says. "Indeed, after your disappearance, it is said that he beat his chest in grief, wishing he had listened and set the innocent demons free. He created many reforms aimed at identifying demons who bore no ill will toward human society, but with his reputation, he never succeeded in enticing any of them to live within his border walls. Compared to the demons I see inside this city's walls now, Arthur lived and died without ever affecting any particular change between the species. I am sure my king's father would be proud to see the ground you have broken with our enemies."

Phoebe sighs. "It wasn't me, it was Jason. I will always try to give demons the benefit of the doubt, but I have to be pragmatic."

Jason nods along to his wife's words, though his eyes carry a hard edge. "I tried with all my might to spread olive branches to the demons. Then they repaid me by murdering my daughter. Perhaps Arthur had the right idea after all."

Sir Lorent shrugs. "Whether demons are good or bad, I do not care. If they treat me well, so too will I show them mercy. And if not, my wrath will call forth blood to wash the land. Your anger is perfectly understandable, given the circumstances."

Phoebe smiles at the little girl hugging her spirit self's leg. "Shana! You're so cute! I can't believe you got stuck in that artifact for all those years. You remind me of..."

She pauses for a moment, then clears her throat.

"Well. That... I shouldn't say things like that. But look at you, such a cutie! I bet Samantha will love you to heck and back!"

Shana turns her head away and blushes shyly. "Two mommies. Very strange."

Mind-wife Phoebe shrugs helplessly. "I sort of adopted Shana, since we're both spirits. She's just confused that you're me and I'm you. She'll warm up to you, in time."

Jason summons a spiritual bench for his mind-wife and the rest to sit down, that way they don't have to stand awkwardly.

Once everyone plunks down, Shana sits in spiritual Phoebe's lap and kicks her legs slowly. "Mama. Why people working?"

"They have to rebuild the city," Spiritual Phoebe explains. "There was a big explosion and it broke a lot of houses."

"Oh."

Physical Phoebe leans her head against Jason's shoulder. "Do you have a grand plan formulated, yet?"

"Not quite, but close," Jason answers. "First, I'm going to build up and fortify this world to become untouchable. The demons won't dare poke their heads in here once I'm done. We won't be relying on a few piecemeal embattlements, but wartime fortifications to ensure our survival. After that, I'll make the Core utterly impenetrable as well. Finally, we'll start training assault teams with guerilla and hit and run tactics. We need to bleed the demons bit by bit, since they so drastically outnumber us. Meanwhile, I'd like to fortify Maiura and some other worlds, giving us fallback locations, just in case."

Gabriel's eyes glimmer with surprise. "Thou seemeth to have thought this matter through, Hero."

"What can I say?" Jason asks, rhetorically. "I won't screw up again, not like I did before. Hope had the right idea. He was out there hitting the demons where it hurt, rescuing human slaves from their clutches. If I could Wordsmith all the slaves out of their demon oppressor's hands, I'd do so in a heartbeat."

Lorent cocks his head. "Then why don't you? This matter should be well within your capabilities."

"Wordsmithing isn't omnipotent. It has a lot of flaws. Now that I better understand the nature of souls, I also understand my limitations," Jason explains. "Much like how I can't target someone with my Wordsmithing without locating their soul first via 'Locate,' I can't just target an area of people if they aren't directly in my line of sight, or if I haven't already figured out their exact position beforehand. I could locate humans individually, one by one, and teleport them back to the Core, but that would take forever. Better to build up an unstoppable army which can do so in my stead."

"These new measures are quite sensible." Gabriel says. "Based on talks I have had with thy wife, I believe automating thy powers might prove effective. Unlike Camael's artifact crafting abilities, thou can't use thy Wordsmithing in exceptionally creative ways by creating constructs that perform automated tasks in thy stead."

Spiritual Phoebe blinks her eyes slowly. "Jason has already been thinking about making a machine that converts energy of all types into energy compatible with demons. We'll be able to promote the few demons living on Tarus II to Lords, Barons, Dukes, and

maybe even Emperors, assuming his plan works out. Making other types of machines isn't a stretch... but it'll take me some time to work out the schematics."

Physical Phoebe smiles. "I'll help you with that."

The group continues chatting for a while, discussing all sorts of things.

At one point, Physical Phoebe widens her eyes in surprise. "Really? Ose was *that* little girl? The one I rescued from Camelot's dungeon, all those years ago?"

Her spiritual self nods. "Yes. I honestly couldn't believe it at the time, but it's true. For her to have lived all these years with hatred for humanity... I feel as if I didn't do enough to help her when she was a child. She lost her brother in that dungeon, along with other friends and family. Camelot is where her innocence went to die, and where her hatred of humanity stems from, most directly."

Physical Phoebe sighs deeply. "It's too bad, but she's dead, now. I suppose it's better this way. There's no way I could help her, now."

"No. She isn't dead." Jason states. "Mephisto took her body, and her soul. She will return as one of his necromantic creations. Whether he gives her any autonomy or not will depend on how the Duke of Mist intends to use her. However, based on everything we've observed-"

Jason pauses mid-sentence. For a moment, his eyes glaze over. He turns his head to the west, in the general direction of the warpgate.

"...That's strange."

"What is it?" Physical Phoebe asks.

"The two sentries I placed outside of the Core yesterday have sent me a telepathic transmission. Apparently, a soldier wearing an exosuit has just arrived from outside the Core."

"What? Is it Hope?" Phoebe asks, her voice rising an octave. "Or maybe Neil?!"

"I... don't think so." Jason replies. "They're wearing a Spectre suit. Hope and Neil like to wear more... combat oriented exosuits. Uh, give me a minute, Phoebe. Me and the spirits will go and check this out."

"Hey! Don't leave me here," His wife pouts. "You can't just take my soul along for all the fun while I stay behind."

"Oh, fair enough. Let's both go, then." Jason says. "**Return.**"

Jason's four spiritual companions disappear and return to his mind, while only he and his physical wife teleport directly to the Core, leaving behind the Fortress of Retribution in their wake. On arrival, they find Jason's two lookalikes standing before a soldier in a nondescript Spectre exosuit.

The newcomer flinches when Jason and Phoebe arrive, but otherwise doesn't react.

"...Where is Neil?" The soldier asks, their voice somewhat robotic and lacking any unique vocal identifiers. Neither Jason nor Phoebe can tell anything about them, including their gender.

The Wordsmith raises an eyebrow. "Commander Neil is currently presumed dead, though I have my suspicions as to whether he survived or not. Who are you? Why are you using a voice-encrypter? State your name and rank."

"I can't do that." The soldier says. "I need to speak to Neil. Or... failing that, his assistant, Debra."

"I'm the commander of humanity's forces." Jason says. "State your name and rank, and take off that armor. If you refuse... you do know I can forcibly strip it off with my Wordsmithing, don't you?"

Phoebe takes a step forward. "You're wearing a Mk II. Spectre exosuit. Who gave that to you? I only handed them out after the Core fell to the demons, so there's no way someone could have slipped through the warpgate and evaded the demons."

The soldier's head slightly turns to face Phoebe, but still, they don't share any reaction.

"I... I cannot say. Please do not make me reveal my identity. I need to speak to Debra."

"What you *need* to do is start talking. *To me.*" Jason says, his tone growing noticeably colder. "I'll give you one last chance to tell me who you are. Don't make me take action myself."

The soldier becomes noticeably flustered. "You... you don't understand. I can't reveal my identity. I-I shouldn't. It's not... well, I just *can't*. Okay?"

Jason's eyes sweep over the soldier a second time, taking in every detail about their exosuit.

Slim build. Could be a young man, maybe a woman. Why would they be so insistent on not telling me who they are? Maybe Neil was working on some secret experiment? Something he didn't want me to see?

The Wordsmith shakes his head. "I don't trust people who try to keep secrets from me. You leave me no choice. **Disengage.**"

The Trooper doesn't even get a chance to protest. Before they can vocalize a rebuttal, their T-REX rapidly disintegrates, sucking itself back into its chest containment module.

The Wordsmith and his wife stand for several seconds, completely stunned by the figure in front of them. Jason's pupils expand and contract, as he involuntarily takes a step back.

"That's... that's impossible. You... you died. Amelia? No, how could it be you?!"

Phoebe covers her mouth with her palm. Her chest heaves as several completely wild and fantastical thoughts run through her head.

Hoarhiim destroyed the world Amelia was on. Jason confirmed her death with Locate. Was she necromantically revived by Mephisto? But why does she not have any of the markers of necromancy?! And why is she here, at the Core, wearing one of my exosuits? Mephisto couldn't have obtained one of those... could he?

Amelia Greyheart, the Black Queen, stands before Phoebe and Jason with a look of guilt on her face. She averts her eyes as the two people she wanted to see least look at her with expressions of shock and horror.

"It's... it's not what you think." Amelia mutters. "I'm not... no, that doesn't matter, right now. Listen to me, please!"

Amelia's eyes brighten as she takes a step toward Jason.

"Hope is in trouble! Gressil captured him, and he's holding him prisoner! He's torturing Hope right now, even as we speak!"

Jason, still unable to fully come to terms with the woman before him, hesitantly reaches out a hand to touch her face, before quickly pulling it back.

"You died! Don't just- don't just brush this aside! How are you here?! What the hell happened, Amelia?"

"I want to know, too." Phoebe says, her voice turning noticeably colder. "Lest we forget, you tried to kill Jason... twice. Why should we trust anything you have to say?"

Amelia bites her lip. "It's not what you think. I... Hope... Hope brought me back to life. He resurrected me from the dead. I've been living with him for the past six years."

Her words cause Phoebe and Jason both to experience another shock.

"That's unbelievable!" Jason shouts. "Where? Maiura? Of course, I never went to visit Hope there. It makes sense he'd do something like- no, but hold on! I have personally confirmed that Wordsmithing can't resurrect the dead! You're lying to me!"

Amelia shrugs helplessly. "Am I? The proof stands before you, Jason. I'm right here."

The Wordsmith's eyes become unfocused. He looks away from Amelia, unable to maintain his gaze on her while so many confusing thoughts rebound inside his head.

Amelia died. She died. I know she did! I didn't even want to believe it, but I saw the proof myself! I tried several Words of Power. I looked into my memories and saw what Hoarhiim did to her. I saw her last moments of pain as Joan of Arc pinned her to the ground...

A faint pressure builds up in Jason's chest. For the first time in ages, a gash rips across his heart, making him feel a sensation which is somewhat alien, and yet comforting as well.

I thought she was dead. I thought she couldn't come back. How did Hope do it? Does that mean... there's some way I could bring Daisy back, too?! Is there a way I can revive others who have fallen?!

While Jason's thoughts race, the denizens in his Mind Realm sit silently and listen. In his moment of panic, Jason accidentally projects his thoughts to all of them.

His mind-wife lowers her head and sighs.

Beneath all of these thoughts, it seems... Jason still cares deeply for Amelia. He hasn't forgotten about her, even after all this time. Maybe that's why Hope brought her back. He did lose me to Jason, after all.

In the real world, Physical Phoebe doesn't miss the changes in her husband's expression. She momentarily falls silent before turning to Amelia.

"You say Hope was captured by Gressil. That is ugly news, indeed, but how do you know this? And more importantly, I want to know why we should trust you. What's to stop you from going on another planet-slaughtering spree? Frankly, I'm sickened by your presence... especially after remembering the atrocities you've committed."

Amelia lowers her head.

"I... I'm not the same as in the past. I don't have magic anymore. It's all gone, and so is... Blaarjiim. Hope brought me back, but he either couldn't, or wouldn't, bring back Blaarjiim."

Amelia bobs her head slowly, as if she's having trouble believing her own words.

"It's better this way."

Jason, after assembling his thoughts, groggily returns his attention back to Amelia.

"So, Gressil has captured Hope, you say? And we have to... rescue him?"

Amelia's eyes immediately brighten. "Yes. Please! I don't know if you and Hope have any issues between each other, but you cannot let Gressil take over Hope's body. He's going to use the power of Wordsmithing if he succeeds!"

Jason nods slowly. "Yes. I... you're right. I have to save Hope. It won't be good to let him fall into the claws of- but *how* did he resurrect you? You have to tell me at least that much, Amelia."

The Wordsmith's mind pivots back to his original thoughts, making him once again see a faint light at the end of a tunnel: A chance at resurrecting his daughter.

Amelia's reply doesn't give him much inspiration. "I don't know the exact details. You'll have to ask Hope after we rescue him."

"No. You're lying!" Phoebe abruptly shouts, catching Amelia and Jason both by surprise. "Don't lie to us, *Black Queen*. You know how Hope revived you, so spit it out! Tell the truth, for once in your godforsaken life!"

Amelia winces under Phoebe's barrage, but doesn't relent. "I don't know, okay? I don't know! He just... did. He never told me how he did it. Listen, I've given you what you need, okay? Every second you delay is another second Gressil draws closer to stealing Hope's power. You cannot allow that to happen! I NEED you to save him!!"

The sheer emotions in her response make Phoebe widen her eyes.

"Wait... this isn't just about protecting Hope from Gressil. You... lived with him for six years. Were you and him-"

"We were intimate!" Amelia shouts, as tears well up in her eyes. "There! Is that what you wanted to hear?! While Jason got to ride off into the sunset with you, what did Hope get? NOTHING! Jason just cloned him and threw him away, like trash! Neither of you gave one god-damn about him! When I met him, he was broken-hearted, feeling nothing but anger and emptiness inside! Don't preach at me when you don't know the least bit about empathy, *Phoebe!*"

Amelia bites off the last word, making the Wordsmith's wife wince. For a brief moment, a powerful sense of shame wells up not only in her heart, but Jason's, too.

Several seconds pass. Phoebe doesn't reply, and neither does Jason.

The two of them reflect on Amelia's words.

Jason remembers the original reason he made Hope; to assist Neil in the Core and take care of the duties he himself didn't want to bother with.

Phoebe recalls the moment she had to pick between Jason and Hope, shortly after Jason cloned himself. She even remembers seeing a faint look of betrayal in Hope's eyes, though she brushed it off as unimportant at the time.

After a period of contemplation, Jason breaks the silence.

"I... you're right. I treated him terribly. He was just a tool to me. Maybe that's why he hates me so much. No... it's not a 'maybe.' That's definitely the reason. I was so stuck up, arrogant, and full of myself."

Jason sighs.

"While Hope worked on taking out the demons and rescuing humans, I bunkered up on Tarus II and lived life care-free. I just did whatever I wanted, taking only the minimum steps to prepare for a possible demon invasion. Because of my lack of discipline, my spoiled attitude... Daisy had to pay the price."

Amelia's eyes flicker. "Daisy? Who's that?"

The Wordsmith purses his lips.

"My daughter. She was my... my daughter. And now she's dead."

Realization swells within Amelia's thoughts.

"That's why you want to learn how Hope brought me back. So you can revive your daughter."

Jason nods.

"Yes."

"Then... I don't think..." Amelia starts to say, before correcting herself. "...I pray that Hope will be able to give you the answers you need."

"Me too." Jason mutters.

The three of them fall silent for half a minute.

Phoebe eventually speaks. "Well, time isn't on our side. Let me gather the others. We'll need to assemble a team to rescue Hope. I want Samantha in on this, too."

Jason nods absentmindedly. "Yeah. Let's move quickly."

"And Debra?" Amelia asks. "Do you know where she is? Is she still...?"

"She's alive," Phoebe says. "Why do you need to speak to her?"

"Oh, um, it's not her specifically," Amelia says, as she brushes a strand of long black hair behind her ears. "It's more that she's a proxy for Neil. Neil and Hope were close, you know."

Phoebe gazes at Amelia with suspicion for a moment.

Another lie. What is she hiding?

But she doesn't vocalize her thoughts.

"I see. Well, right now she's back inside the Fortress of Retribution, inside her private office. We'll drop you off there, then pick you back up when we're ready to head out and grab Hope."

Amelia cocks her head. "The Fortress of *Retribution*? That sounds ominous."

Phoebe chuckles wryly.

"Yes. Well, a lot has changed in the last few days, Amelia. A lot has changed..."

Part 306: Saving Humanity's Hope

Ten hours later, Jason and Phoebe finish assembling a small but lethal army of humanity's remaining elite commandos, few as they are. After explaining the situation to them, the Hero ends up with General Chadwick, Lieutenant Samuel, Corporal Hurent, Belial, and even Yamir, the minotaur cook.

In addition to these leaders, five thousand human commandos come along, all outfitted in various types of lethal weaponry. A few of them wear basic T-REX exosuits, but the majority don specialized Spectre, Rhino, Hummer, and Clinician battle-armors.

Jason and the rest gather up at the top of the Fortress of Retribution's plateau, waiting for the final preparations before they all head to the Warpgate and head inside the Labyrinth. Already, the midday sun has set, and darkness covers the land.

"Is this everyone?" Jason asks.

Phoebe nods. "Pretty much. We just need to get the star of this little show."

"I don't trust her." Belial snaps. "How can either of you?! Jason, don't tell me you're letting your old feelings cloud your judgment! This is Amelia we're talking about, the bloody Black Queen! Let me remind you, she killed many millions of people! She's pure evil! She even killed my HUSBAND!"

Privately, Jason think to himself that killing the Devil was likely doing the universe a favor. However, he doesn't give voice to that thought.

"I know you hate Amelia, but she doesn't have a trace of magical power anymore," Jason says. "Whatever method Hope used to bring her back, it seems to have stripped away her powers. Either that, or he removed them after the fact."

"I don't care about that!" Belial hisses, barely able to keep her voice down. She shoots a sidelong glance at the commandos and commanders standing at attention, ready to move out as soon as the Hero gives the word. "Don't you think we're bringing too few soldiers? Five thousand isn't even worth sneezing at! If that girl is some pawn of some Emperor, and if she's lying to us, we could all die dog deaths! Don't you see how dangerous this whole situation is?"

"The fact stands that Hope hasn't returned, and I can't sense him with my Wordsmithing," Jason says, his voice calm and steady. "Or, more specifically, I *can* sense him, but his presence is so weak and scattered that I can't get a lock on him, let alone a general location. He's still alive, and Amelia can lead us to him. I owe him this rescue, even if it puts my life at risk."

Phoebe gently rests a hand on Belial's shoulder, opening up her helmet so she can look the succubus in the eyes.

"I don't trust Amelia either, Sam. Not even a little. But her love for Hope is real, it's genuine. She definitely lied about certain parts of her identity, but not about Hope. We have to rescue him... we *have* to."

Belial opens her mouth. "But-"

"No buts," Jason interrupts. "If you don't trust her, then keep your eye on her. I don't intend to let her out of my sight. Better yet, tell me everything you can about Gressil. I barely know anything about him, other than what I saw when I first awoke in the Labyrinth. Just thinking about his appearance gives me the shivers."

Realizing neither Jason nor Phoebe will back down, Belial relents. She takes a step back and sighs.

"Um... fine. Fine. Gressil is, uh... well, to be honest, I'm not entirely sure about him. I know he was Lucifer's adopted son, and Ose's older brother. I don't know anything about his abilities or rank, though. I never personally interacted with him, certainly not in the past fifty millennia. I've never been one to hang around other demons."

Jason frowns. "That doesn't give me any useful intel. He's the prison-warden, so he must be decently high ranking, right? Is he a Lord? Baron? Duke? Emperor?"

Belial holds up her hands helplessly. "I don't know. Frankly, the only thing I do know about Gressil is that nobody likes him, and many fear him. He's... reclusive. Hostile. Violent. He tortures prisoners to the point where rumors say you can hear their screams even outside of Faith's End."

She pauses for a moment, as a faint memory appears in her mind.

"Oh, I do remember one time I saw him. It was before the end of the Energy Wars. Demons and humans were right in the heat of their fighting, the most violent part of that

conflict. I met with Lucifer out of obligation, not desire. Satan needed me to speak to her about some mundane matter, and he was too busy to talk to her himself."

"And you saw Gressil?" Phoebe prompts.

"Yes. Him and Ose both. They were... well, they weren't a happy family. Gressil wasn't a bad person at that time, at least that wasn't the impression I got. He actually seemed like a decent guy. He sat off in a corner while Lucifer and Ose grilled me on the information I was delivering. Something about tactical reports of soldier movements. Anyway, I glanced over and saw Gressil... playing with butterflies."

Jason blinks twice. "Um. Butterflies?"

"Yes. Glowing green butterflies. I remember thinking that they were quite eye-catching. From what I remember, they were somewhat fake-looking, as if they came from a dream. Far too beautiful to be from this world. I made a mental note that they must be illusions. If you hadn't prompted me, I'd probably not recall that moment... it's just..."

Belial lowers her eyes.

"...Gressil seemed so *sad*. The butterflies looked more like a ritual he used to calm down, and less like something he did for fun. He seemed like such a distant person, someone unaccustomed to contact with other demons."

"Like a coping mechanism?" Phoebe asks.

"Rumor has it that Lucifer was a somewhat unpleasant mother," Belial answers. "And from all the times I had to bite my tongue and suffer talking to the bitch, I can't see how that assessment was wrong. She hated males more than anything else in the world; a trait Ose inherited. I can't imagine Gressil had a pleasant upbringing."

"Fantastic." Jason snorts. "So he might have mommy issues. One of you two, be sure to give him a good slap if he acts up."

Neither Phoebe nor Belial laughs.

"That's all I can remember," Belial concludes. "He probably has some sort of illusion magic, and he's mentally unhinged. We'll have to act carefully around him."

"You're the Second Emperor, even if the other demons now refuse to accept that title," Phoebe says. "It's *him* who should be afraid of you. Not to mention we have humanity's Hero right here. If Jason uses his Wordsmithing seriously, no demon will stand a chance against him. You saw what he did to Bael."

Belial hesitates for a moment before replying.

"...I suppose you're right. Although, you shouldn't speak so highly of me. After all, I never seem to win battles, these days. I'm not as good as I used to be. Even Ose... she beat me senseless."

"That was just a bad matchup," Jason comments. "She poked at the gaps in your armor, your emotional blind spots. If it was a contest of pure strength, you'd never lose."

"You can say that if you want," Belial replies. "But I don't believe it. Not anymore. Since Satan's death, I... I just don't have the capacity to fight with all my heart anymore. There's a gap in my chest, a void that I can't fill up with anything. It always weighs me down... every single day."

"Sam..." Phoebe whispers. "I'm always here if you need to talk."

"Thanks, Phoebe," Belial says, offering a weak smile. "That means a lot to me."

Belial takes a minute to compose herself, while Jason leaves the two women to walk over to General Chadwick and Lieutenant Samuel.

"Do you know anything about Amelia?" Jason asks. "You and Neil were close."

The portly Norwegian puffs up his chest. "We *are* close, Jason. Neil is still alive. I know it in my heart."

"Right. But do you know anything about Amelia?"

"Afraid not," Chadwick says. "I know Neil kept many secrets close to his chest. Amelia is probably one of them."

"So you're telling me nobody knows if she's really one of ours or if her story checks out?" Jason asks. "Even if I assume she might be telling the truth, I cannot fathom what method Hope used to bring her back to life. It's beyond me."

Lieutenant Samuel lifts his chin. "You can't bring people back from the dead? I thought your Wordsmithing was practically omnipotent."

"It's not, I can assure you of that," Jason answers. "I tried a bunch of different methods for bringing people back. Nothing worked. Solomon even explained what the revival process would require... those who die end up having their souls pass on to what he called the 'Great Beyond'. I don't know exactly what it is, but it seems to be some sort of unbreakable barrier in the universe, or physics, itself. You need a tremendous amount

of magical power just to pull a soul back. I doubt even my new Cube-tool would have the power necessary."

Chadwick and Samuel shoot glances at each other, unsure of what to think.

"Yeah, this bitch don't pass the smell test for me," Samuel says. "Somethin' ain't right about her. I think you ought to talk to Debra. Seems Debra knows something. With your Wordsmithing, you could make her talk."

Chadwick shakes his head. "I don't approve. Debra is Neil's most trusted confidante. She's on our side, and certainly wouldn't do anything to put humanity in harm's way."

"Yeah?" Jason asks. "Like that other kid? What was his name... Henry? You guys sang his praises, but he was the one who trapped Neil inside the Core. Trust seems to be given out a little too sparingly these days. Let's not forget the infiltrators who killed Elder Skarde, or the ones who took over the Atlas Cannon. Our people are still only human, General. You'd do well not to put too much faith in them."

"Henry was... an exception," Chadwick murmurs. "I deeply resent his actions. Stupid kid. Foolish brat. I don't know how Ose coerced him, but we'll be carrying out an investigation after I return from this mission. I have him locked up and under heavy surveillance."

Jason waves his hand flippantly. "Whatever gets the job done. Give me a minute. I'll go and pay Debra a visit. Amelia should be done chatting with her, by now. It's about time we all head out."

"Yes, Commander." Chadwick says, as he takes a step back.

"**Teleport.**" Jason says, vanishing with a flicker of movement.

* * *

A moment later, Jason reappears a quarter of a mile away, outside the makeshift stone house built for Neil's assistant, Debra. Like the several-hundred other buildings in the immediate vicinity, it contains only the barest amenities, hastily thrown together to provide a simple shelter from the elements. It lacks even a single window, looking more like a generic cube slapped into the middle of the barren wasteland around it.

Jason gives the house a once-over, then takes a step forward. Hardly has he begun his approach before the front door opens with some effort and a fully exosuitied Amelia steps out, with Debra following behind her.

"I was about to go and join up with you and the others," Amelia says, her faceless helmet providing no window into her expression. "But I guess everyone must be ready sooner than I expected."

Debra remains silent, merely gazing at Jason from behind Amelia, her eyes giving no insight into her thoughts.

Jason faintly smiles, though his expression lacks any warmth. "Yeah, we're ready. Debra, I hope you two had a fun conversation."

Neil's assistant nods. "We did, yes. Thank you for giving us some privacy."

Jason's eye twitches. "Either of you mind finally telling me what's going on? Why the secrecy? If I wanted, I could have Wordsmithed to listen in on your conversation, but I didn't. I'd prefer to hear the truth from your mouths."

Debra flinches, only to immediately relax her posture.

"It's... it's better if you don't know, Jason. Not right now, anyway. You should focus on saving Hope first, and Neil, too. They'll tell you anything relevant once the time is right."

"So you *are* hiding something from me," Jason growls. "Well, what is it? Spit it out!"

"If you want to know, you can always just read our thoughts," Amelia says, her tone flat. "Don't pretend like you've ever been good at keeping your curiosity satiated. I seem to recall you peeping on me during a particularly... ugly moment in my life. If you want to know, just look. It's not like I can stop you."

Jason's anger becomes mollified. He averts his eyes and shakes his head.

"No. Never mind. I... I won't do that. Not to you."

For a moment, neither Amelia nor Debra says anything.

Debra eventually takes a step back to return to her house. "Make sure you return safely," She says, before walking away.

After Debra steps inside her home and closes the door, several awkward seconds of silence pass before Jason raises his head.

"We should really be going." He mutters.

Amelia's helmet dissipates into nanite particles. The moment her face appears, she locks eyes with Jason.

"It wasn't your fault, you know."

Jason blinks. "Pardon?"

"Hoarhiim... he's the one who, um... who hurt me. You never wanted that. He forcibly took over your body and made you do... all sorts of awful things to me. It wasn't your fault."

The Wordsmith frowns deeply. "I never said it was."

"Yes, you did. Or rather, Hope did. Many times. The look of guilt on his face... you and him share all the same memories prior to his creation. I know you still feel a lot of guilt, just as he does."

Jason's frown turns ugly. "I don't know why you're bringing this up-"

"Because you need to hear it!" Amelia interjects. "Don't think I don't see the way you look at me, Jason. You aren't as unbreakable as you pretend. I understand just how much you've lost. Not only me, but Kar, as well. I didn't get to say goodbye to him. Then your daughter, too... your heart must be in immense pain, but you just keep all those emotions bottled up. Hope is no different. He also hides his suffering, not wanting to 'inconvenience' anybody."

Jason's expression softens. "You don't know me. I've changed a lot in the last six years."

"I know you have." Amelia replies. "I can see it in your eyes. But you're not the only one who's changed... so have I. Right now, you have the same eyes I did, all those years ago... when Satan took Levvy from me."

"Levvy..." Jason mutters. "Leviathan? The dark dragon?"

Amelia crosses her arms and looks away.

"Dark dragon... no. He was a good boy. A hurt soul. He lost all his brothers, his sisters, and his mother, too. He was lonely, just like me. All anyone else ever saw in him was a scary monster, or a beacon of power. He just wanted to be left alone. He gave up everything to save me. Not once, but twice. The day Satan killed him... I just wanted to rip the whole universe to shreds. And now, you have that same vicious hatred bubbling under your surface."

For once, the Wordsmith doesn't offer a snarky comment. He merely lifts his eyes to look out at the darkened horizon, and the stars in the sky.

"Well. I guess you're not wrong. I am still... utterly enraged. Heartbroken. I don't even know how I feel. It's just a tangled mess in my stomach."

"It will consume you." Amelia says. "Hatred begets hatred. That's what Hope taught me. I want to be a better person. The problem is... I still have that hatred in my heart. Only now... it conflicts with this other feeling..."

Amelia pauses, unsure how to phrase the next part. She gives up and shrugs.

"I can probably explain it better later. For now, let's just get going."

Jason nods. "Yeah. Let's do that."

After a few more moments of silence, Jason speaks again.

"Teleport."

He and Amelia vanish from the spot, reappearing smack in the middle of his assembled army. Amelia sweeps her gaze across the five thousand soldiers and frowns.

"Only this many?"

"They'll be enough." Jason says. "I would like to rescue as many people from Gressil's dungeon as I can. Considering how narrow and cramped the Labyrinth corridors are, we'll have a good choke point if the demons try anything."

"Rescue people, huh?" Amelia mutters. "Well, I've seen the condition of his prisoners. There won't be many worth saving..."

"Even if we can only put them out of their suffering, that will be enough for me," Jason replies. He turns to see his wife and Belial walking up. "I brought Amelia. We're ready to go."

"Took you a few minutes," Belial says. "Hope you two had a good *chat*."

Jason shrugs. "We did."

While Belial maintains an air of relative hostility toward Amelia, Phoebe appears remarkably less so. Knowing she has a spiritual self inside of Jason mollifies any worries she might have about his feelings for the former Black Queen.

Belial puffs out her chest as she approaches Amelia.

"Listen here. I don't like you. In fact, I hate you. I don't want to speak to you, or even look at you. Understand?"

Amelia bites her lip. "Because of Satan."

"Yes!" Belial snaps. "I never liked you, not even one bit! Frankly, I should have killed you myself during that battle against the Archdemon! I tried my damndest, but failed because of my own weakness. Now, there's nothing you can do to stop me. If you make even *one* shifty sidelong glance at anyone here, I'll cut your head off!"

Amelia remains unmoved. "I don't think you will, Belial. You're not that kind of person."

Belial's right hand suddenly morphs into a gruesome-looking executioner's blade, a massive one-handed scimitar with a curved blade.

"TRY ME! I've already killed more demons in the last week than my entire existence before now, a thousand-fold! Adding a husband-killer to the list won't even make me bat an eye!"

Still, Amelia appears unmoved. She shoots a look at Jason, Phoebe, and Belial in equal measure.

"You've all changed in the past six years, and not for the better. That's... too bad. But understandable."

She stares Belial in the eyes.

"You hate me for killing Satan... but you weren't even there on that day. Do you even know what happened?"

"I know *enough*." Belial replies.

Amelia shakes her head. "After we save Hope... you and I should talk. There's... something you don't know."

"Is it about Lucifer?" Belial asks, a malicious smirk on her face. "I know she set Satan up. If she were still alive, I'd have a bone to pick with her, too."

"Lucifer? No." Amelia replies. "I didn't know she had anything to do with him showing up when he did. No, it's more about... I'll tell you later. Every minute we delay is another minute Hope suffers."

Belial snorts. "It must be nice. You still have a chance to rescue the man you love. If only the *rest of us* were so lucky."

Phoebe steps in between Amelia and Belial. "Alright. I think you two have said enough. Jason, we're ready. Let's get moving."

The Wordsmith glances in the direction of the distant Warpgate, far to the west, now surrounded by heavily reinforced walls on all sides.

"Yeah. Let's go. I just pray we're not too late to save Hope..."

* * *

As the Wordsmith's army departs to leave the city's confines, a single trooper appears behind them, kitted out in a stealth-type Spectre exosuit.

This trooper watches for several minutes as the Wordsmith's rescue team departs Tarus II through its Warpgate and heads deep into the Labyrinth.

His helmet opens up, revealing the face of Makoto Ueda.

"Hmm. The Hero leaves to make a long journey. His path is uncertain. The ramifications of his actions make peering beyond the veil of Karma... difficult."

The man holds up his hand. A spark of spiritual energy appears for a moment, then vanishes, erased by the weakness of his veins.

"My abilities have weakened after so many reincarnations. It will not be long, now. I must find my successor. Orias... he alone holds the key to unraveling the Great Mystery."

Makoto Ueda's eyes glow pure white for a moment. His helmet closes up, sealing his head away inside his exosuit. Then, his body shimmers and turns invisible.

He makes his way toward the Warpgate, heading for a dangerous destination.

He must locate his successor.

He must find the future Karmic King.

Part 307: Inferno's Return

An endless blackness stretches out in all directions. Darkness. A void encompassing the spectrum of infinity, beyond the sight of any mere mortal. So vast is its scope that if one had an eternity, they could never comprehend the possibility of it lacking a border.

In this vast void, a single figure hangs, unmoving.

Beelzebub.

The Duke of Inferno groggily floats about, his soul faded and lacking all of its former luster. No longer does he appear to be the invincible Duke of Inferno, but instead, a speck of a speck, a mote of dust floating in the cosmic void.

As the muddle-headed demon lingers in the darkness of the abyss, a voice speaks to him.

Well, well, well. Look who's come back already.

Beelzebub slowly opens his eyes. He lifts his hand to look at it, though the exertion taxes him greatly. Yet, even in the infinite emptiness, his soul glows like a faint beacon of light on the horizon. He easily makes out five faded fingers, barely glimmering in the gloom.

"Where... am I? What happened?"

You died again. Idiot. I warned you, but you didn't listen. You never do... and that just makes my job harder.

Beelzebub blinks his eyes.

"This voice... sounds... familiar... Creator?"

Yup. It's me.

A faint, ghostly apparition appears before Beelzebub for a moment, briefly coalescing into a vague reflection of Beelzebub's appearance before fading away.

Oh, I'd love to talk to you face-to-face. Too bad. I don't have much power these days. Projecting my voice is about all I can do.

The Duke of Inferno listens absentmindedly before closing his eyes.

"I... I was... on Tarus II... and then-"

You blew yourself up. I told you you should try to be a better person, but did you listen to me? Of course not. Who am I anyway, but the Creator of the cosmos. Nobody important... grumble grumble...

"For a so-called 'Creator,' you seem awfully undignified." Beelzebub mutters.

And how should I speak? Should I use 'thee's' and 'thou's' like my so-called children? Should I talk all high and mighty, just because I was once an almighty being capable of breaking down and reforming the universe? Those who talk like that are usually just miserable underlings. That's why powerful people like to dress casually.

The Duke of Inferno opens his eyes and frowns. "I have no reason to believe you're really the Creator. For all I know, that damned Hero planted something in my head and this is all just some hallucinatory dream."

...Fair point. I can't demonstrate my power, since I don't have it anymore. I lost it a long time ago, to someone I considered my own flesh and blood. These days, I can barely even interact with the physical world through a few chosen mediums. Some all-powerful 'god' I am.

"What? Someone took your power? Am I understanding you correctly?"

That's right. A miserable, greedy little bugger. Cute kid, though, or so I thought at the time. Ah, how becoming a Father can warp a man's views. I let that little tyke get away with so much... and I paid the price for it. But it's fine. I lived a good long life. Several eternities, if you'd believe it.

"I don't understand. How could you live for an eternity?" Beelzebub asks. "That means infinity. Surely, you had to have a beginning."

Tsk. Right, sometimes I forget how small the idea of time is to a mortal. You think in terms of years, or centuries, or eons. For me, an 'eternity' is merely another measurement of time. It means the length of time measured by the creation, expansion, and collapse of what you call a 'universe.' I lived through several of them.

Beelzebub's frown deepens. "Several eternities... several universes... but what do you mean? Isn't there only one universe?"

Currently? Yes. One universe which lives, dies, and reappears. Humans call it a 'Big Bang.' It's more of a... Karmic Cycle. The details aren't that interesting, at least not to

you. Trust me when I say you don't need to learn more about how Reality works. The Akashic Sequence is not for the weak-minded.

"I... see." Beelzebub says, softening his brow. "Never mind all that, then. Where am I, now? Why has my body not regenerated?"

The Creator sighs.

If only it were that easy. Do you really think your body is immortal? You do not even understand the power which sustains you. The gift of Nirvana is something that few can properly resonate with. You may believe that you obtained it through your own merits... but you did not. Someone gave this gift to you, and its power is finite.

"Nirvana..." Beelzebub mutters, as gears turn in his head. "I have heard this word before... but somehow, its meaning seems exceptionally profound."

And so it should. Nirvana is a unique ability which has only ever belonged to one entity; myself. When my son stole my power, he gave it to another, who then placed it inside of a unique artifact. That artifact is now known as the Phoenix.

Beelzebub's eyes widen. "The Phoenix! Yes, I have heard of it before. Master Agares told me one of the ancient angels unleashed its power to kill some old Demon Emperor during the War in Heaven."

Now you're starting to put the pieces together. The Creator says. Yes. Your power of rebirth comes from none other than the Phoenix itself. Regenerating simple body parts is a simple feat for even a single of the Phoenix's feathers. But for its Nirvana to protect your soul from collapsing and passing into the Great Beyond, even Nirvana will have its limits. You have already detonated your entire body once. Doing so a second time put a fatal amount of pressure on your existence.

"A fatal amount of pressure? So... am I dead?"

Not yet.

The Creator pauses.

Your existence is... trapped in a transitory state. Frankly, were it not for a lucky coincidence at the moment of your detonation, nothing could have saved you. However, as luck had it, the original Phoenix itself was in close proximity to you at the moment of your death. And so, a small amount of your life-force was preserved. You can still regenerate... one last time.

"Wonderful!" Beelzebub crows. "Then why are we even talking? I must regenerate at once and get back to teach those humans a lesson they'll never forget!"

Again, the Creator falls silent.

When he replies, his tone turns cold.

You still don't understand, Beelzebub. You're just a babe in my eyes. A selfish bastard who nobody likes. You only think about yourself. You never put anyone else's needs above your own.

Before Beelzebub can interject, the Creator continues.

Even so, I sense a spark of potential inside you. Deep down, in the depths of your heart, you have a certain level of compassion and empathy. You sense the plight of your fellow demons and wish to rectify their living situations. You remember what it was like as a young imp, climbing the ranks to become a Lord, a Baron, and eventually, a Duke.

You do not enjoy the suffering of others. You hate the corrupt system. You wish to burn it all down, but always, you allow your own selfishness to get the better of you.

It's too bad. I keep holding out for the possibility that you'll change... but when you return this time, there won't be any second chances. You won't be able to revive again, Beelzebub. You've run out of do-overs.

The Duke of Inferno's agitation lessens as he listens to the Creator's words.

"Then, what are you saying I should do? Fight to free my fellow demons? Give up and kowtow to the humans? My pride will not allow that!"

The Creator's tone softens. *I have lived for many eternities. I have guided several universes from beginning to end. Always, life has a way of turning order to chaos, and chaos to order. No matter how I influenced people, they always came to blows. Selfishness, pettiness, all of those attributes surfaced no matter how I influenced them. For the first time since I came into being, I have taken on a more passive role.*

He continues. *I don't want to tell you what you must do, Beelzebub. There is no meaning in my doing so. Rather, since you are one of the few entities I can still communicate with, I would much prefer that you learn from your mistakes and become a better person. It is easy to strike down your enemies. It is hard to empathize with them.*

Beelzebub snorts. "I see. So you want me to become more compassionate to my inferiors. Shall I spread my cheeks and let an army enter? Compassion is for the weak. There is no meaning in it."

That is where you are wrong, the Creator says, his tone ominous. *If everyone fights, they will always wallow in misery and pain. If they get along, everyone will live happily. I only want to see one eternity's worth of sentients enjoying themselves, without causing harm to one another. In all my eternities, not once have I gotten to see that sight. It makes me feel...frustrated. I was once all-powerful, yet short of forcing my will onto the minds of others, I could not bring them the happiness I thought they deserved.*

Beelzebub clicks his tongue.

"Well, how about that. The almighty Creator is a romantic sap who hates conflict. I suppose that's why your own son took you down, huh? You didn't have the guts to fight back."

Destroying him would have been easy... The Creator murmurs. *But never have I hurt my creations. Always, they bring about their own ends. All my children, all those I loved, died eventually. Even when I made them immortal, they killed each other for power, glory, and status. Jealousy. Hatred. In a way, I was glad when my son turned against me. My death meant I could no longer blame myself for the woes of future eternities.*

"Hmph. You say you're glad you died, yet here you are. You're not even dead, old man. Maybe you'll come back someday, in spite of your complaints."

No. I am unable to return. The Creator opines. *Already, the Akashic Sequence has selected its candidates for my replacement. Much as how I replaced the Creator before me, and they replaced the Creator before themselves, so too must the unending cycle revolve. As much as this may shock you, Beelzebub... you are one of those candidates.*

Beelzebub's body jolts in alarm. "What? Me?! You're saying I could become an all-powerful Creator like you?!"

Mmm. Yes. All-powerful. All-knowing. All-encompassing loneliness. It is the greatest curse anyone can endure. An existence where, no matter how badly you fuck up, or how expertly you perform, you will never make any meaningful gains. I've seen the birth of every star, every atom in the universe. I've watched galaxies burst into existence and

decay into nothingness. I've heard every word every molecule imagined. Frankly, even though I find you to be a complete and irredeemable asshole, I wouldn't wish the curse of becoming a Creator on you or anyone else.

"If you hated the job so much, then why not give your power away to someone else?" Beelzebub asks.

Someone has to be a Creator. If I give up the position, the next Creator is liable to force it back upon me, so wretched is its all-encompassing loneliness. Everyone wants more power, Beelzebub. But once they have it, and once they reach the ultimate height, they realize there never was any point in obtaining it in the first place. There's nothing left to strive for.

Another vague apparition flickers in front of Beelzebub for a moment. A faint ghostly image of a man rubbing his eyes appears, then fades away.

I'm getting tired. It's not often I talk this much. I do enjoy the sensation of weakness, though. It makes me feel alive. Once you've had everything, you can truly appreciate what it means to have nothing.

The Creator chuckles.

Hehe. And speaking of which, I think it's about time for you to go back, Beelzebub. This second revival won't be like the previous one, so prepare yourself. You're going to understand my point better than ever, given the circumstances.

"...You didn't do anything weird to me, did you?"

Sorry! Connection's cutting out. Can't understand you!

"Hold on a minute! Creator? Creator! Explain yourself!"

New phone, who dis?

The last thing Beelzebub feels is a strong pulling sensation on the back of his head as his vision fades away.

Tarus II.

Two soldiers in T-REX exosuits pace around the perimeter of the half-mile-wide crater left behind by the Duke of Inferno when he detonated his body in a terrific nuclear explosion. This bowl-shaped basin, now named Tragedy Crater in memorial to the lives

lost, takes up an uncomfortable amount of space on the plateau, drawing most people's gazes to it at least once in a while.

The soldiers, a man and a woman, cast casual glances at the crater, as well as away from it. They can't help but heave deep, pained sighs whenever they see the painfully slow rebuilding efforts taking place in the distance.

Crude, square lodgings get constructed via Phoebe Hiro's specialized energy tools, capable of synthesizing basic housing for a single individual or family within a few hours. With so many people homeless, most of them have to sleep on the streets, though at least the Environmental Shield keeps them safe from the elements.

The troopers chit-chat with each other as they walk.

The male trooper speaks first. "I heard Commander Jason just headed into the Labyrinth to find Commander Hope. Rumor has it a group of Demon Emperors captured Hope and hid him in a tower somewhere."

"Huh. Someone else told me differently," The female trooper replies. "They said we didn't have enough food to feed everyone, so the Hero was going to capture and kill some monsters to feed us all."

"That's ridiculous. Jason could just Wordsmith us more food if that were the case."

"Yeah? Like how he could Wordsmith us better houses? His power has limits, you know."

"I dunno. This whole war... it just sucks. My brother died during Beelzebub's last attack. Imagine, he made it to the very end, then died thanks to one last middle finger from the Creator."

The female soldier shakes her head. "I lost both of my sons. Even named one of them Jason, in honor of our Commander. I thought that name was supposed to bring him good luck. Turns out, it was a bad choice."

"Sorry to hear that. There's no easy way to deal with a death. At times like these- huh?"

The male soldier perks his head up and turns to the left. Inside Tragedy Crater, a flicker of movement catches his attention. A naked man tumbles down the crater's edge and bounces off the sides several times, rapidly rolling toward the bottom.

The soldier immediately motions with his hand to turn on his wide-band communicator.

"All troops, this is Corporal Reynolds! I've got movement in the hot zone! Looks like someone fell inside! Keep your weapons at the ready; it might be Beelzebub!"

"Shit," His partner curses. "And right when the Hero left!"

"We still have the Demon Containment Unit," The man says. "Commander Jason made sure it was ready in case of any eventualities during his departure. Now, let's move!"

Both soldiers brazenly leap into the crater, while a hundred others quickly arrive at the upper perimeter and point their weapons toward the figure tumbling toward the bottom of the bowl.

Within seconds, Corporal Reynolds and his companion arrive beside the fallen figure. They level their weapons at the person, only to immediately breathe a sigh of relief.

"Pale skin. No horns. This can't be Beelzebub. Roll him over."

The man issues an order to his companion while keeping his gun trained on the naked man's dome. His partner slides over and rolls the fallen figure onto his back, wincing empathetically as she observes the face of an old man with wrinkled skin, copious amounts of facial hair, ash-grey skin, and pale brown eyes.

The old man wheezes painfully.

"Uhh... uhh... hu-hurts..."

"He's a civilian!" The woman says. "Facial ID isn't giving me a lock, but he's definitely human. I think this old man wandered too close to the edge and fell into Tragedy Crater."

Her companion scrutinizes the old man's face while his T-REX gives out detailed scans and readings.

"Medic! We need a medic!"

Within minutes, a pair of figures appear at the top of Tragedy Crater, two of the local doctors who have taken over in Belial's absence.

One of them is a male nurse of some minor renown.

The other is none other than Rosalia, a recent demon convert who helped save lives during the brutal Stormbringer Attack.

Both of them stand at the top of the crater and wait while a pair of Hummer-troopers airlift the old man out, then place him onto a movable cot.

The male nurse quickly inspects the old man. "He's lucky. A few microfractures, but no broken bones. This fellow is made of some tough stuff."

Rosalia narrows her eyes as she examines the seemingly ordinary old man. However, she says nothing, and instead gestures vaguely in the direction of the makeshift hospital building, a pale shadow of its former self.

"Let's get this old man to a sick-bed! I'll take personal care of him!"

Hardly have the words left her mouth before the old man turns his head to look at her, shock in his eyes.

"Cough... cough... R-Rosal...?"

"It's going to be okay, Grandpa Ned," Rosalia says, offering him a sweet smile. "I'll take good care of you!"

Corporal Reynolds shoots her a look of surprise. "You know this man? We don't have any records on him."

"Of course I do! He's Old Man Ned! Uhh, he lived away from the main city, in the forest. His wooden hut must have gotten destroyed during the blast. Then he wandered back in and... you can guess the rest! He's always kept to himself, so it's no surprise you don't know him."

Corporal Reynolds nods, then inputs her testimony into his report.

"I see. Well, if you know him, then that's good enough for me. Alright, get this man somewhere safe so he can heal. Everyone else, return to duty, and continue watching the perimeter!"

The various commandos head back to guard Tragedy Crater, leaving Rosalia and her subordinate nurse alone with the old man. The two of them wheel their patient half a mile to the hospital outpost and put him inside a small makeshift tent.

"I'll take over here," Rosalia says, her voice oddly more cheerful than usual. "Thanks for all the help, Davey!"

"Are you sure you don't need any help?" The nurse, David, asks.

"I'm good! I've helped out Old Man Ned lots of times, he'll be fine. He's a little senile, you see!"

"Oh, alright. Take care, then, Rosalia."

As the man turns to leave, he fails to notice the look of horror on the patient's face.

Beelzebub rasps out a plea for help.

"N-no... ple-ease... don't... go..."

His weak voice practically gets swept away by the wind, leaving him alone in the tent with Rosalia.

The obese demoness chuckles giddily to herself.

"Oh, what fortune, Mister Beelzebub! I don't know what happened and why you're so weak, but at least you're not screaming in pain like last time! And what happened to your horns? Why is your skin pale? This is quite the mystery? But I'd recognize *my* Mister Beelzebub anywhere, teehee!"

The Duke of Inferno shivers violently.

"R-Rosalia... I... cough..."

"It's just the funniest thing," Rosalia says, as she gazes at the ceiling and speaks more to herself than to Beelzebub. "I actually prayed yesterday to the Creator that you would end up alright, and he delivered you right to me! Since that hussy Belial isn't here, nobody will know when I whisk you away! I can save you all to myself, and nobody will take you from me. Especially not that *shut*, Ose! That filthy little whore! She tried to seduce you, but she lost you and the Creator himself delivered you right into my hands! Ah, how He works in mysterious ways!"

Rosalia hums a merry tune to herself before reaching into a box filled with medical supplies. She ignores Beelzebub's weak protests while continuing to mindlessly babble to nobody in particular.

"Excellent work on that explosion too, I must say. You killed SO many stupid humans, it made me weep tears of joy! These lowly mongrels just aren't worth my time, but I *had* to come here because of that damn Gressil's orders. Bluh! How dare he order me around?! Anyway- oh, here it is!"

She pulls out a clean cloth from the medical bag, as well as a chemical agent known best for its sedative effects. She douses the rag with a hearty dose of Chloroform, then leans over and presses it against Beelzebub's face.

The weakened Duke of Inferno widens his eyes in horror. He tries to fight back, but his pitifully weak body can barely move, let alone fight off the wiles of his unexpected captor.

"Shhh, quiet!" Rosalia says, as her voice becomes more distant. "This is for your own good, Mister Beelzebub! I'll make sure to hide you somewhere safe, where nobody will ever take you away from me again..."

Beelzebub's consciousness drifts away, with only one last thought lingering in his mind.

Curse... you... Creator...

Part 308: Approaching Faith's End

A small army, 5,000 strong, consisting of male and female humans, monsters, and even a few scattered demons, makes their way into the Labyrinth. Led by humanity's Hero, the Wordsmith, they begin a tactical assault on the unsuspecting Labyrinthian denizens while slowly and steadily advancing toward the halls of Faith's End, Hell's primary prison.

Jason Hiro stomps forward, leading the charge. His exosuit allows him to brazenly walk forward without fear of any demon's attacks. His glowing eyes flick from side to side as he uses a familiar set of Words of Power he first created back when he lost his vision.

"Perception. Infrared. Sonar. Detection. Tracking. Targeting."

A wireframe-like view of the world spreads throughout the Wordsmith's vision. His head swivels around with mechanical efficiency as he points at upcoming corners and calls out the positions of unseen enemies.

"Thirty-four meters ahead. One Demon Lord. Two minotaurs. Three goblins and a half dozen orcs."

Without missing a beat, he adds in a Word of Power.

"Nausea."

His magic directly strikes the soul of that group of enemies, instantly forcing them to their knees. They all heave up their guts, making them helpless against the human army as they turn the corner and gun them down.

"Up ahead, another group," Jason says, as he outlines another set of enemies.

This time, before the humans can get close, those monsters turn tail and flee.

"Never mind." Jason says.

As the Wordsmith's metal boots pound against the floor, his wife takes up a position at his right, while Amelia stays on his left, and Belial lingers behind all three. Unlike the humans, Belial doesn't bother wearing an exosuit, as it would only hamper her powers.

"These hallways look different from how I remember," Amelia says. "Do you know the way to Faith's End?"

The Wordsmith quietly nods. "I know it well. It's where I first woke up in Hell."

After a momentary pause, he adds, "It hasn't all been bad, though. I've made a lot of friends. Even married a hot lady."

Phoebe snorts. "So romantic."

As the Wordsmith's army continues gunning down monsters and demons, the word gets out that an elite human killing force has entered Hell's halls. Despite Jason's anticipation, not a single powerful enemy bars their way.

The Wordsmith frowns.

"I expected to see a Hidden Emperor, by now. A Duke, at the least. Certainly a Baron. What's going on, Samantha?"

The Emperor of Passion shrugs, a motion he picks up with his 360-degree omnivision.

"I don't know," Belial replies. "Certainly, the Hidden Emperors won't like to get involved with the First Hell's matters, but you have practically dismantled their entire leadership. I can't imagine Fenrir or the others would let a chance to assert their dominance slip past."

"Maybe they're all afraid of Jason." Phoebe suggests.

"Unlikely. You don't know how *arrogant* some of the Hidden Emperors are. Take Gorn, for instance. He is one of the mightiest Emperors I know. If I had to fight him, I don't know if I would come out on top. He has equal ambition to rival his strength, too, which is what makes him so fearsome."

"But you're the Second Emperor," Phoebe says. "Even if that title was taken away from you, it implies you're the strongest Emperor in existence, aside from the First."

"That title was given to me during the Ancient Era," Belial says. "I was absolutely the strongest aside from Satan, back then. These days... I'm not so sure."

Jason listens to her concerns and nods. "I'll have to keep an eye out for him, then. Gorn, huh? The Emperor of Many Faces. Sounds like a scary guy."

"I try not to talk to men like him," Belial says. "Or most other powerful demons. They're all fairly stuck-up and snotty. Fenrir especially gives me the shivers."

"Sounds like a good choice to me," Amelia mutters. "I'd do the same."

* * *

In the rear of the human army, Lieutenant Samuel wears his Rhino-type T-REX. His heavily armored figure intimidates any enemies who might be foolish enough to strike at their flanks.

Beside the Lieutenant stands one of fewer than a hundred demons living among the humans, and one of only two Lords in their ranks, a female demoness named Kiari, the Lord of Gnats. Her long brown hair is somewhat stringy and sticky, as bits of mucus adheres it to her skin. She wears simple woven clothes, while thousands of tiny bugs crawl around on her skin, giving her a rather nasty-looking appearance. Her face, somewhat plain, doesn't make her look particularly ugly or pretty, but the gnats nibbling at her skin would cause most men to avert their eyes in disgust.

Kiari periodically turns around to look behind the army. Her gnats swarm in the distant hallways, transmitting information to her telepathically.

"We have a few more followers," She says to Samuel. "Couple of orcs. Both undead. They might be Mephisto's."

Samuel doesn't reply for a moment. He merely turns his head to look at her, then returns to facing forward.

"...Sir?" She asks.

"I may have been assigned to walk with you," Samuel says, "but I don't have to talk with you. Cut the chit-chat. Only warn me if someone dangerous shows up."

"Have I... done something to offend you?" Kiari asks.

"Something like that. You're a demon. Demons killed my family. I'll never trust your kind."

The Lord of Gnats winces. "I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't know. I've always sympathized with how humans were treated. I've just been too weak to change anything..."

"Tell it to someone who cares." Samuel growls. "I don't want to talk to you or look at you. Once this mission's over, we'll never speak again."

A few soldiers walking ahead of Samuel turn their heads back to observe the conversation, then return to facing forward, thinking better of getting involved. After Samuel's heroics in the Stormbringer Attack, the vast majority of people deeply respect his opinion.

Kiari lowers her head. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to offend you. I'll be quiet, now."

Moments later, a trooper in front of Kiari turns around and lowers his helmet to look at her.

"With all due respect to the Lieutenant, I have a different opinion. I heard about the good you did after Beelzebub's... detonation. Your gnats helped us find several people buried under rubble, including my daughter. I want to sincerely express my thanks to you, miss Kiari."

The Lord of Gnats lifts her head and blushes. "R-really? I'm glad to hear that. Was she that little girl in the raggedy white dress? She was very sweet."

"She had some burns, but was otherwise alright, and she made a full recovery," The soldier says. "A lot of demons are awful monsters... but anyone who stands on our side deserves my respect. It's brave of you to fall in with humanity when we're so weak, especially when the so-called 'Hidden Emperors' might appear at any time and attack us. Good things will definitely come for you in the future."

"I don't know if humanity will make it," Kiari says, "but I just want to make a difference, like Miss Belial. I've always admired her kind heart. I just wish my people weren't so... brutal."

The soldier reactivates his helmet, then turns to face forward again.

"We can only pray the Hero manages to rearrange the natural order. Demons like you give me hope for a better future... one where we can all live in harmony."

Samuel snorts. "If we ever get there, and I *doubt* we will, it will only be after our boots stomp the skulls of countless bloodskin oppressors. Call me skeptical, but I have little hope for the future."

Kiari sighs. "Me too, honestly. It's all so... bleak."

* * *

The human army marches inexorably toward Faith's End. The closer they draw and the more enemies they crush, the fewer that oppose their way. The hallways soon become utterly barren as every remotely intelligent sentient steers clear of the small but frightening force walking into their land.

"We're getting close," Belial says. She furrows her eyebrows immediately after. "But something feels... off."

"In what way?" Phoebe asks.

The Emperor of Passion pauses for a moment. She stares down an upcoming corridor and frowns deeply.

"I... can't sense anything up ahead."

Jason nods slowly. "My omnivision can't see forward at all. It's as if a huge, bubble-like void is blocking my vision. Some sort of... anti-magic energy."

For a brief moment, the Hero and Second Emperor exchange concerned glances. Jason's faceless helmet meets Belial's gaze, and they nod.

"We'll move forward slowly," Jason says. "This might be a trap. Could the Hidden Emperors have anticipated my coming here?"

Amelia pipes up. "When I first showed up here, Dawn told me she couldn't come along with me. I didn't think much of it at the time, but now I'm wondering if this wasn't the reason why..."

"Dawn?" Jason asks. "Who is that?"

"Um. She was a Demon Lord," Amelia explains. "The Lord of Caves, to be exact. I hadn't met her before. She told me Fenrir knew Hope was here..."

"Why didn't you mention her before?" Belial asks, turning to frown at the former Black Queen. "You're telling me *Fenrir* had one of her underlings lead you here? This reeks of a trap! What else aren't you telling us?!"

Amelia winces, though her expression remains hidden behind her helmet.

"I... well, now that you mention it, there is one other thing I've just recalled... I really ought to have mentioned it sooner."

"And that would be?" Belial asks.

"...Gressil. Um. Dawn told me that he is a Hidden Emperor. Specifically, the Emperor of Chaos."

Jason and Phoebe both whirl around to look at her. The Wordsmith's tone turns harsh. "What?! How could you leave out such an important detail, Amelia? Are you KIDDING me?! Don't you think we'd want to know we're about to walk into the lair of a god-fucking-damned EMPEROR?"

"Seriously!" Phoebe shouts, her anger just as pointed. "Is this a game to you?! We only brought five thousand soldiers! We could die here!"

Amelia lowers her head. "Sorry. When Gressil attacked me, I... I had a lot of things on my mind. Some details kind of slipped away. And I was scared for Hope, so... I didn't think to mention a few things."

The Wordsmith audibly groans, but doesn't maintain his anger. "Gah! Alright, fine. We know now, so Gressil won't catch us by surprise. Belial, can you tell anything about this strange anti-magic field? What's causing it?"

The Emperor of Passion shakes her head. "I can't tell much of anything. It doesn't seem corrosive to our souls or something terrible like that, but I won't be able to activate any magical abilities if we enter. Neither will you."

Jason hesitates.

"So, no Wordsmithing?"

"Probably not." Belial answers.

The Wordsmith pauses for a full minute, weighing the pros and cons.

"Emperors cannot be defined by common sense. A casual slap can kill ten humans, even if they wear exosuits. If neither you nor I can use our magic, we'll be sitting ducks."

"Not quite." Belial says, her expression turning serious. "You forget. While I do possess potent healing and transformation magic, my true power comes from my physical strength. Among all the Emperors, I am unmatched. Even when lacking my magic, I can go toe to toe with any other Emperor in a battle of fists."

"Maybe so, but Gressil seems to have at least some abilities revolving around illusions," Jason says. "And if he's an Emperor, those illusions will be even stronger than when you saw him as a young Lord. I've seen the illusions Raphael could unleash, and they were quite frightening."

"But what about the anti-magic field?" Phoebe asks. "Won't that prevent Gressil from using his illusions?"

"Oh, yeah..." Jason mumbles. "That's a good point. But why would he deliberately cripple himself?"

"Maybe the anti-magic field is what has prevented you from locating Hope," Belial suggests. "And Neil, too, I'd wager. They're both probably imprisoned here where your Wordsmithing can't detect them. I'll bet that's why Ose wanted to capture Phoebe and Daisy... she would have put them here and issued demands, while you wouldn't be able to sense their presence."

"Ose and Gressil are brother and sister," Jason mutters. "The facts add up."

Neither Jason nor Phoebe says anything about Belial's casual mention of their daughter. Just the sound of her name pains their hearts terribly.

"Gressil might be weakened in this anti-magic bubble," Phoebe observes. "But then again, he might not. We should prepare for the worst. Jason, can my spiritual self construct a device for you? We'll want a last-ditch item in case the worst happens."

Jason nods. "**Projection.**"

His mind-wife materializes next to Physical Phoebe. The two of them chat for a few minutes while the army takes up defensive positions, keeping their eyes peeled for any enemy ambushes. Despite their relatively low numbers, not a single demon or monster approaches them.

Ten minutes later, Mental Phoebe pulls back into Jason's brain with a blueprint held in her hands.

"It's not a magical device, but a technological one. Considering the short amount of time we have, we can maybe crank out a couple hundred of these; enough for our most important soldiers and VIPs."

Jason looks into his Mind Realm at the blueprint his mind-wife has conjured onto one of the 'servers' in his brain.

"A teleportation device?"

"Yes," Mental Phoebe says. "It's a one-time use beacon that will teleport anyone it's attached to back to the Core. We can use it to escape if Gressil somehow traps us."

"I see," Jason says. "I can't connect to the Cube from inside the Labyrinth, but my internal magic reserves should be enough for two hundred of these. Give me, like, twenty minutes."

Jason immediately begins Wordsmithing, using the blueprint in his brain as the scaffold for its construction.

"Synthesize. Synthesize. Synthesize. Synthesize."

Each Word of Power lowers his mana drastically, forcing him to dip into the Mana Beads placed inside his body. After consuming twenty-five of them to make one hundred and seventy-three micro-teleporters, he stops with only five mana beads left to spare.

"I'll keep a few in reserve. If we use these teleporters, we'll have to leave thousands of soldiers behind... so let's try to avoid that choice if possible. I don't even want to imagine what Gressil would do to our men if we left them for him as prisoners."

Amelia shudders. "No. You don't."

With that reality settled, Jason spends another few minutes transmitting orders to all of the soldiers behind him.

* * *

At the rear of the army, Kiari listens intently as Samuel relays the orders to her.

"An anti-magic field? That's strange," Kiari says. "I haven't heard about anything like that at Faith's End. I don't think it will prevent me from speaking to my gnats, but I won't be able to control them."

Samuel shrugs. "Then stay behind and head back to the Core. You'll only get in our way if you can't use magic. That's why we brought you, after all."

"I can still be useful!" Kiari protests. "Won't you just give me a chance? I want to help Hope and the rest of the prisoners, too! I'm doing my best, here."

Samuel pauses when the male trooper from earlier turns to look at him.

"...Alright. You can come, but don't be shocked if the situation goes south. If fires start breaking out, I'm getting my fellow *humans* out alive first. Understand?"

Kiari's shoulders sag. "Yeah. I understand."

"Good. Let's move out, then," Samuel says. "Everyone, get ready to march on the Wordsmith's mark!"

Elsewhere in the Labyrinth, a single human wearing a stealth-type Spectre exosuit walks down the halls with poise and grace. The man's footsteps make no sound, as the soles in his boots dampen the vibrations to a nearly undetectable level.

This man, Makoto Ueda, now possessed by the soul of Siddhartha Gautama, the Hero known as Buddha, makes his way toward a destination called forth by his mind: A junction far off at the remote edges of the Labyrinth, where one of only two Warpgates still controlled by the demons remains open.

As Buddha walks, his eyes sweep from side to side.

He does not speak. He only observes and contemplates.

Silently, the reincarnated Hero walks directly toward a pair of female Demon Lords guarding the long hallway leading to that specific Warpgate. When the two demons see a human approaching them so brazenly, without any backup, yet wearing one of the feared 'demon-killing suits' from the Core, they jump into action.

"Intruder! It's a fleshbag!"

Buddha walks without fear. Each step he makes appears as if performed by an illusory dancer, one who has mastered the art of walking on water and swimming with the wind.

A halberd of fire materializes in one of the Lord's hands. She charges toward him with a cry and swings her blade down.

Buddha casually steps to the side, evading the blow with ease. As if having fought this female a thousand times, he gently dances along with her movements, ducks her side-slashes, and spins around behind her to deliver one precise palm-strike to her back.

THUMP!!

Buddha's palm hits the middle of the Lord's spine, paralyzing her body for a moment and driving the wind from her lungs. She collapses to the floor, sputtering painfully and choking on her own phlegm.

At the same time, the other Lord advances toward him while spinning a pair of rapidly revolving wind-whips all around her body like a hurricane. The sheer speed of them dazzles the eyes of any who happen to spectate her. Dozens of goblins, orcs, and other demon grunts wait for her to engage the human, some of them visibly shocked by the fall of the first Lord.

The second Lord's whips tear apart the ground and walls surrounding her body. Their tips lash the Labyrinth's earthen surface, spraying debris in all directions and whipping up a cloud of dust to spray upon herself and the unknown human.

Buddha does not flinch. He calmly advances toward the demoness, as if ignorant of the terrifying speed and cutting power of her whips.

"Stupid bastard!" The demoness roars. "My whips will rip you to shreds!"

She whirls her weapons twice as fast, making them move far too fast for a mere human's eye to follow.

However, Buddha closes his eyes as he walks. He only listens to the sound of the world around him and its reverberations. He steps directly into the sphere of destruction and moves his body several times in imperceptible ways. With each movement, the whip-tips pass him with less than a millimeter to spare, not even nicking his armor.

Silently, like a snake diving upon a helpless hatchling, Buddha terrifies the Lord out of her wits by sidestepping her furious assault, dodging every conceivable attack, and bending around behind her to deliver yet another palm-strike to her spine as well.

THUMP!!

The Lord coughs violently, then falls to her knees and collapses on the ground a moment later. The magic in her body sputters and bubbles as an intense, unseen reaction assaults it, making her unable to conjure her demonic power.

As Buddha continues forward, he opens his eyes once again.

"I pray that you will find the light, young one. This servant does not kill, and so, your life will be spared."

Alarmed by the fall of both Lords on the scene, the other demon grunts hastily and clumsily lob fireballs, hurl rocks, and shoot arrows at Siddhartha Gautama. However, the reincarnated Hero easily sidesteps these attacks, walking forward with only slightly jittery movements as if he were casually dodging raindrops falling from the sky. Countless deadly projectiles with enough force to crush his chest and armored figure into mush harmlessly whizz past him. His steady and unstoppable advance causes the demons attacking him to feel a nameless fear in their hearts.

"Who the hell is this?! Is he the Wordsmith?!"

"Fuck if I know, but I don't get paid enough! I'm not sticking around for even one second longer!"

Many of the cowardly grunts turn tail and flee, leaving only the orcs and monsters to stop Buddha's advance.

They fail.

Buddha easily dodges the clumsy attacks of the orcs, slaps aside the goblins, and spine-palms a few snake-like Nagas who show up near the end.

Before long, he arrives at an open warp-gate, one which displays an image of a dark underground tunnel not dissimilar to the Labyrinth itself.

Buddha pauses for a moment. His expressionless face turns bleak for a moment as he shakes his head.

"Earth, gone. All its life. All its karma. The day the Volgrim destroyed it, my avatar perished as well. I could not undo the damage. How unfortunate... now, too much time has passed. Even so, my successor still remains alive. I must search for the spark necessary to reignite the Akashic Sequence. Only then can the Karmic Cycle begin once again."

After pausing for a moment longer, Buddha strides through the Warpgate, leaving the Labyrinth behind.

The two Lords from earlier weakly crawl back to their feet, looks of pain on both their faces.

"...Who was that? I can't even control my magic right now."

"My back, ugh... my *back*," The other moans. "In just one hit... that fellow wasn't normal. We have to inform the Demon Council of this perimeter breach."

The first one nods, then slumps back to the ground. "In a few minutes. Gotta catch my breath, first."

"Yeah. Same."

Part 309: Prison Assault

Jason pauses at the edge of the anti-magic bubble surrounding Faith's End. While his eyes easily peer forward into the darkness, aided heavily by the improved visual sensors in his exosuit, his omnivision completely vanishes at the bubble's edge, unable to penetrate it.

The Wordsmith sucks in a quiet breath.

"Alright. Here goes."

He steps into the invisible barrier. His omnivision rapidly fades away, like a fire smothered beneath a heavy blanket. Within just five seconds, he loses the entirety of his wireframe worldview, making him unable to even see outside of the bubble's confines.

Reflexively, Jason takes a step back, exiting the anti-magic bubble. After three full minutes, his omnivision gradually restores itself.

"Damn. This thing is frightening..." Jason mutters. "I lost my ability to sense all the mana inside myself. Even after I left the barrier, it took me a good couple of minutes to regain my magical powers."

Inside his head, Jason's mind-wife speaks.

"Jason, it's worse than that. I completely fell asleep once you stepped inside. None of us inside your Mind Realm were able to remain conscious inside that anti-magic field. It seems to have a profound effect on errant souls."

The Archangel Gabriel nods. "I have lived for countless eons. Verily, not once have I encountered anything quite like this. However, it does resemble the mana which paralyzed thee when Ose struck thy body near the end of the Stormbringer Attack."

"That's what I thought, too..." Jason murmurs.

Behind the Wordsmith, Belial steps forward. She enters the anti-magic field and waits for a half-minute before stepping back out. Surprisingly, she regains access to her healing magic significantly faster, with only ten seconds needed for it to restore itself.

"Your soul is too weak," Belial explains. "My soul is that of an Emperor. Yours needs far more energy and time to perform the same feats that mine can. Mine is also significantly more resilient to external influences. It took almost twenty seconds for the

anti-magic to smother my abilities, versus just five for you. Even so, the effect was just as total for me as it was for you. I can't use my powers in there at all."

"We still have to go in." Jason decides. "Every minute we delay is another minute something even worse could happen to Hope. Gressil's torturing him in there. We have to save my clone as quickly as possible."

Without any delay, Jason steps into the anti-magic bubble and begins marching forward. Belial follows after him, along with Amelia and Phoebe, and the rest of their army.

General Chadwick's regiment takes up the front-guard. They quickly and systematically begin spreading out through the many hallways inside Faith's end, with some having stairs that lead up, while others go down.

The corridors remain eerily silent, with no guards of demonic or monster origin patrolling the halls. Many decayed lanterns hang from the ceiling, their flames having died out millennia ago. Other sconces hang limp from the walls, soon to eventually fall off and clatter to the floor.

It doesn't take long before the human army reaches the first of many prison cell doors. They open them quickly and prepare to shoot anything rabid that might attack them. Instead, they find human, demon, and monster corpses in various states of missing or rotting body parts.

Several of the weaker-stomached men and women shrink back from the horrifying sights. One man yanks open his helmet and wretches all over the floor when he walks in on the body of a badly mutilated human boy, someone whose entire lower torso appears to have been chewed off him bite by bite while he was still alive.

Even Chadwick, the stoic general, flinches upon entering a room and seeing a particularly gruesome sight of two succubi burned alive and fused into one, their bodies chained together in some twisted display of brutality.

"Dreadful. Unnatural, vile beings. Neil was not wrong about these... *creatures*."

Even so, the human army does chance upon a few survivors in the early rooms. One of them is an old man with rotted, blackened teeth, missing both of his eyes, and with maggots crawling around under his skin. The old man croaks painfully when his door opens.

"No... don't... hurt... don't hurt..."

"Jesus goddamned Christ," One of the soldiers curses. "Fucking hell. Someone get this man... I don't even know! Medical attention!"

Jason's expression turns darker and darker. The more he sees of these horrors, the more his thoughts churn silently.

I've been so ignorant. What the hell was I thinking? Make FRIENDS with the demons?! While Hope has been out here witnessing this suffering on the daily, I was living it up in the ol' Hero City. I can't believe myself. The demons are so much worse than I ever expected... and I can only imagine what sort of monster this Gressil is if the outer layers of his prison are this bad.

Jason's thoughts don't get picked up by the denizens of his Mind Realm. Phoebe, Gabriel, Sir Lorent, Shana, and even the Phoenix all go inert, unable to contact the Wordsmith in any way. Having grown used to their conversations in his head, Jason finds the silence unnerving.

Phoebe appears equally mortified. Despite her tough will, her innate compassion and empathy nearly brings her to tears several times upon witnessing some horrific sight inside one of the prison cells.

Of the main group, only Amelia and Belial appear relatively unmoved. Amelia, because she has already seen the terrors of Gressil's torture, and Belial, because she knows well the horrors her people can unleash.

"You see?" Belial asks, her voice cutting through the gloom. "This is why I hate 'hanging out' with my people. Gressil might show us an extreme example of demonic violence, but he's hardly alone. Even the most casual demon cruelty would churn your stomachs."

Phoebe's eye twitches. "I hate this. I hate it so... so much."

She hugs Jason's arm and doesn't let go, no longer willing to look into the cells. Jason, for his part, instead forces himself to look at and swallow in the suffering and agony of these prisoners, burning their pain into his retinas.

"I have stood by for six years too long..." Jason murmurs. "But no more."

Minutes turn into hours.

After six full hours, the human army spreads out across the halls, becoming more and more wary the deeper they draw into Gressil's dungeon. They begin to find more people alive, but in states of far worse mental trauma. Unlike the forgotten prisoners barely kept alive in the outer cells, the ones in the middle and inner areas are more likely to be kept alive for Gressil's amusement... as well as those of his less savory guests.

Eventually, the humans run into their first contact. They open a cell door to find a pair of orcs sexually assaulting an old man and his wife, laughing to themselves while their victims scream and beg for mercy.

The moment the cell door opens, both orcs whip their heads around in surprise.

"Huh? Who you? This our turn!"

BLAM! BLAM!

Fifteen bullets fire into the room, splattering the orcs' heads, arms, and spines against the wall. Both monsters die without knowing what hit them.

"Medics!" One of the soldiers barks. "Request immediate trauma support!"

A pair of Clinicians decked out in battlesuits enter the room and quickly begin to treat the two elderly victims. Their cries and whimpers of pain make even the most stoic military veteran wince in sympathy.

"We'll take care of you... we'll take care of you."

Jason receives a report of those victims. His expression turns downright awful.

"There are bound to be more. Search every room. Kill any monster or demon or, hell, even kill any humans you catch performing such vile acts. Show these subhumans they are not welcome in *our* universe."

The more Jason sees, the more his thoughts begin to turn cruel.

I get it now. I see why Hope has acted the way he has. I can't believe I actually looked down on him, once. He was always right, and I was wrong. I've been far, FAR too soft on the demons.

Jason opens up one of the cells himself, only to find a half-dozen goblins surrounding a small human girl, perhaps just ten years old, doing incredibly vile and unspeakable things to her.

In the blink of an eye, a thousand emotions rage through the Wordsmith's head. Before Phoebe can react, he yanks out of her grip and storms into the room, his eyes turning bloodshot with rage.

"GET YOUR FUCKING HANDS OFF HER!"

The Wordsmith swings his fists like hammers, putting the full might of his exosuit behind his punches. The goblins don't even get a second to react before the terror of death engulfs them. Jason shatters their heads like watermelons and tears them limb from limb. He releases a bloodthirsty, inhuman scream of rage while crushing one of the goblin's heads with both his hands. He grabs the last one by its feet, lifts it overhead, and swings it against the wall with a violent SPLORT!

The Wordsmith's rage results in him killing all six goblins without the faintest shred of mercy. For several seconds, he can't even stop himself from punching the pulverized puddles of blood and gore left in their wake. He screams in a mixture of pain and anger while slapping their entrails around, before eventually going quiet.

The Wordsmith breathes heavily. Jason loses focus in his vision for ten full seconds before shaking himself out of his rage stupor to look at the barely-breathing little girl.

"Ph-Phoe...be... help her. Help the girl."

Shakily, Jason tries to stand up, but the strength goes out of his legs. Tears stream down his face, inside his exosuit, while Phoebe hastily steps inside to place a teleportation beacon on the child, whisking her back to the Core.

Immediately after, Phoebe turns to her husband.

"Jason. Jason? Are you... are you okay? Speak to me. I've never seen you... act like that..."

Her eyes lower to Jason's gauntlets. His exosuit, now soaked in the blood of six goblins, appears like a weapon straight out of a horror movie. The normally silver-colored suit appears covered in bits and entrails, giving Jason the fresh look of a serial killer.

Jason shakes his head.

"I... I lost control. I got so... so angry. Is she okay? Is the little girl okay, Phoebe?"

His voice trembles. The man behind the mask chokes on his emotions, unsure of what just came over him, so powerful was his primal, fatherly instinct.

"I don't know if she'll be okay." Phoebe answers, her tone neutral. "I sent her back to our medics at the Core. They'll take care of her, now."

"Good. That's good... that's good..." Jason repeats.

The Wordsmith falls silent for a good long while.

"...How could they do that to... to a little girl? She wasn't much older than... than Daisy. Are these demons nothing more than incarnations of pure evil? Am I even doing the right thing by trying to integrate them into my ranks?"

Phoebe hugs her husband's side.

"You are. We are, Jason. The demons in this prison... the monsters here... they don't represent- they aren't the ultimate be-all, end-all of their species. They're just sick, unfeeling..."

Phoebe pauses to gather her thoughts.

"Remember Sam, Jason. Remember her. She is proof that good demons exist. You can't let the bad ones crowd out the good."

"But you SAW what those fucking goblins were doing!" Jason shouts. "Them, the orcs, the imps... all of them! I'll bet eighty percent of our enemies are utterly irredeemable, and the other twenty percent are at the very least complicit! What am I even fighting for?!"

Phoebe slowly shakes her head.

"I don't know, Jason. I don't have all the answers."

* * *

After twelve hours of scouring Faith's end, Jason and his army manage to clear out more than ten thousand cells in the outer and middle ranks. Eventually, they reach the inner regions, where they begin to encounter even more monsters and demons inside the cells. Sometimes, they will even run into a few stragglers in the hallways, those on their way from or just departing their latest victim.

Of course, not all the oppressors in the prison use their captives for mere sexual gratification. Many of the more twisted ones prefer to use violence, torture, and mutilation, as they cut into and maim the prisoners while reveling in their screams.

Jason's earlier rage slowly begins to morph into a sense of twisted satisfaction as he rips the prison guards and other undesirables to pieces. For brief moments, flashes of glee

cross his face as he grows more and more used to bursting into rooms and ripping apart the occupants inside, those perpetuating their evils onto their helpless prey.

The Wordsmith eventually pauses after killing his fiftieth enemy. For a moment, a thought appears in his head.

...Killing demons is fun. It's quite enjoyable, really. I don't even feel a bit guilty about it. In fact, I ENJOY doing it. I'm completely in the right! All this time, I thought killing would make me a monster... but am I really a monster if I only enjoy killing other monsters? I'm the good guy here. I'm the Hero. This is what I should have been doing all along!

Phoebe doesn't miss the rapid changes in her husband's demeanor. Her expression slowly shifts to one of discomfort after watching Jason march into a room and easily rip apart a half dozen orcs while prying them off their three female captives. Jason activates another few teleportation nodes to send the women back to the Core, but when he exits, he finds his wife standing outside the cell with her arms crossed.

"Jason. We need to talk."

The Wordsmith pauses. He looks at his wife.

"About what?"

"About you. You're... you shouldn't be..."

"Enjoying myself?" Jason asks.

"Something like that." Phoebe concedes. "You're a good man with a heart of gold. But this... this isn't like you. I don't enjoy seeing you like this."

Jason hesitates. Hearing such blunt criticism from his wife makes him stop and re-evaluate himself.

"Am I going too far?"

Phoebe slowly nods. "I think so. You know as well as anyone that I have no love for the demons. Even so... I would never *enjoy* killing them. A life is sacred, no matter what. Do it as a duty, if you must, but do not become someone who enjoys the act of killing. You'd... you'd make me cry if that happened, Jason."

The Wordsmith's helmet opens. He allows his wife to look into his eyes.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I... I've been getting so swept up by my anger. I guess I'm trying to make up for what happened to Daisy. It feels like if I kill enough demons, monsters, and other sick individuals-"

Before Jason can finish his sentence, one of the troopers comes walking up.

"Sir. We've found something significant. You need to see this."

Jason turns his head slightly to look at the newcomer. "I'm... right in the middle of something."

"General Chadwick insists," The trooper says, his voice becoming strained. "We've found a... unique door. It's not like any of the others. We suspect it's holding a VIP."

Jason's annoyance at being interrupted vanishes.

"It must be Hope. Recall everyone and tell them to converge on that position."

"Yes, sir. I'll lead you there."

As the trooper turns to walk away, Jason shoots Phoebe a glance.

"We'll talk about this later, okay? But... I'll consider what you've said."

Phoebe nods. "That's all I want, hubby."

Jason reactivates his helmet, then he and his wife follow after the man, walking down several winding hallways, stepping over the bodies of multiple dead monsters and demons, all of them slain and dragged out of the cells to rot in the halls.

Minutes later, Jason and Phoebe catch up to Belial and Amelia, both of whom stand in a narrow cramped hallway with dozens of other troopers, all of them aiming their weapons at an unopened door.

The first thing Jason notices is a small sign on the door, one that shows the word, *Forbidden*. The next thing he notices are the more than two dozen latches and locks keeping the door locked tightly.

"Any idea who or what is in there?" Jason asks, his voice raising an octave.

"One life sign. Barely detectable," Amelia replies. "I don't think it's Gressil. It might be Hope, though."

Jason frowns. "Nobody has seen Gressil yet? Have any troopers gone missing? Any dead or injured?"

"Negative," Another commando responds. "Everyone is alive and counted for. No injuries. We've been extremely fortunate."

Jason knots his brow into a frown. "Maybe *too* fortunate. Open the door. Let's see who's inside."

"Yes, sir."

As the Wordsmith's army closes in on the door, Amelia's gaze fixates on the Wordsmith. Through her eyes, Gressil sees everything.

The Emperor of Chaos stands some distance away, well outside the humans' visual range.

"So. They've found 'Birdie.' Good. She hasn't been responsive for a while. I'll have much more *fun* with her if the humans manage to perk her spirits up. Haha."

The prison-master smiles.

"So many fun things are happening. It wouldn't do if I didn't say hello to the Wordsmith. Ah, but theatrics. I can't let Belial and the rest think less of me. I'll have to wait for the right... opportunity. Yes. It's high time things changed around here... and the Wordsmith is so deliciously *embroiled* in Chaos. Haha. Haha."

Elsewhere in the Labyrinth, at the Core, controlled by humanity.

A single goblin walks out of the Core, past the two Jason-lookalikes parked outside. Immediately, both of the emotionless automatons whirl to face the small creature, ready to attack and crush him into atoms.

Without batting an eye, the goblin speaks.

"I am Grima, the hospital's devoted servant. I have business in the Labyrinth. I must trade for medical supplies with my fellow goblins. Please excuse me, for I am in a hurry."

The autonomous Jasons stare at the goblin silently for a few moments before returning to put their backs against the wall. Satisfied, Grima continues walking, as if lacking a care in the world.

Thirty minutes later, he walks well out of the surveillance range of the Core personnel. The goblin reaches into the folds of his clothes to extract a small, bean-sized device of unknown origin. He lightly squeezes it in his fingers, then slides it into his ear.

"This is Distant Outpost Apprentice Explorer, Kotori. Fourth Class, First Aspect, Melder. This one was assigned to observe the demon-controlled world of Tarus II. This one requests a pickup at Retrieval Location One-One-Six-Seven. This one possesses knowledge of extreme importance to the Founders."

Several seconds pass.

Eventually, a voice responds through the 'bean' in Kotori's ear.

"Identification confirmed. Explorer Kotori, we have not received any reports from you in more than twenty orbital cycles. Explain."

The goblin straightens his posture a little. "This one originally did not have anything of note to report. However, in the past six orbital cycles, this one has uncovered information that will benefit the war against the Plague. This one does not dare say anything else without express permission from a Seventh Class Observer or higher."

"Noted." Comes the reply. "This one will report your activities to this one's superiors. Proceed to the specified retrieval location. Do not transmit any additional information over this unsecured channel."

"This one contemplates. This one comprehends." Kotori says, before closing off the line.

'Grima,' a goblin-type Changeling, continues advancing through the Labyrinth after pocketing the listening device once again.

It makes its way past many different monsters, demons, and other similar types, all without pausing its gait.

As an ordinary-looking goblin, Kotori attracts no attention whatsoever. Despite being a low-ranking Changeling with inferior skills in species-assimilation, it can still pass visual inspections with little effort.

Kotori walks down many different hallways, but it pauses all of a sudden. Its eyes flick into the distance, where a glimmer in the darkness catches its eye.

"Hm?"

The Changeling walks forward until stopping before a metallic band laying on the ground, a simple but precious-looking object made of gold, with diamonds and other jewels encircling its diameter.

Kotori stares at the object for several seconds without its expression changing in the least.

"What a curious coincidence. This one does not understand why it would chance upon Solomon's Crown in the middle of a random Labyrinth hallway. The last this one heard, one of the Wordsmiths possessed the Crown before it seemingly vanished."

Carefully, Kotori bends down and picks up the Crown with the tips of two fingers. Unable to sense the holy energy contained within, Kotori knows well it must not attempt to put on the Crown, since it is not a human and certainly not a Hero.

"What a fortunate find. The Founders will reward this one amply when this one reports its discovery. This one will make a substantial contribution to the war effort and elevate its rank tremendously."

Without dilly-dallying for a moment longer, Kotori continues advancing toward its goal, a secret place somewhere in the Labyrinth that not even the demons know about.

Soon, the Changeling will deliver news to the Founders and the rest of its species capable of rocking them to their very cores.

Part 310: Little Lost Birdy

Creeeek.

The prison door marked 'Forbidden' slowly opens. Its ancient, rusted hinges squeal as if suffering from arthritis. Two commandos step into the room and swivel their guns toward a dark corner.

"What in the name of-?!"

The first trooper shouts in shock. His eyes fixate on the figure laying on her side, curling against the dark corner, terrified out of her wits. Multiple shackles and chains bind her ankles and wrists, tying her to the dungeon wall. Given her body's weakness, she stands no chance of breaking free.

Jason, Phoebe, Amelia, and Belial all enter a moment afterward. They follow the trooper's line of sight, and all four of them wince sympathetically.

"Oh my god," Phoebe whispers. "That... that poor girl."

"What's happened to her back?" Amelia asks. "Did... did Gressil experiment on her?"

"No." Belial says, as her expression calms down. "Those are wings. She's an angel."

A bolt of shock travels through everyone present.

"An angel?!" Jason asks. "But her wings! The feathers! Th-they're..."

"Stripped bare." Phoebe adds, her tone filled with heartbreak. "Oh, lord in Heaven... what horrors has this woman suffered?"

While the humans all hesitate, Belial quickly steps toward the angel on the ground. Her body, covered in hundreds of deep cuts, lacerations, burns, and scars, makes her look more dead than alive. Her dull blue eyes flicker weakly, yet she still tries to push away from Belial as the demoness leans over her.

"I won't hurt you," Belial whispers. "I'm here to help."

The angel's eyes widen in horror when Belial speaks. Without saying a word, her gaze flicks to the horns atop Belial's head, her blood-red eyes, and her crimson skin.

"Nnn... nnn..."

The angel's blood-matted white hair drags across the ground as she pushes herself into the corner with what little strength she has, shrinking back from Belial in terror.

"Sam, she's scared of you," Phoebe says. She quickly steps in front of Belial, blocking her from the angel's view. "Let me."

Belial flushes with embarrassment.

"Oh. Right, yes, I don't imagine she would... like my kind..."

The succubus retreats, while Jason and Phoebe kneel over the angel and pop open their helmets to reveal their faces. They activate dim lights on their suits to illuminate themselves so the angel can see them.

"You're an angel..." Phoebe says. "Poor girl. Poor, poor girl. Don't worry. We're here to help. You're safe now."

Jason bites his lip. "Her body's in bad condition. I can't Wordsmith to heal her. Belial's magic won't work, either. We definitely can't move her with her body this injured."

"I have a solution," Phoebe says, as she keys in a button on her exosuit. "I'll treat her with nanites. We can heal her once we reach the Core."

"Alright," Jason says. He waits for a few moments while his wife materializes a nanite-injection syringe. His eyes sweep across the naked and mutilated angel.

"I'm Jason Hiro," He says, trying to offer some comfort. "I-I'm a human. Not just any human, but a Hero, like King Arthur, or Joan of Arc. Do you know about Heroes? We're the good guys. I definitely won't let anyone hurt you, okay? Never again."

The angel looks at him, but says nothing. Her body language loses a small amount of tenseness, but otherwise, she still maintains a sense of vigilance.

"Her face might not be injured," Phoebe explains, "but her throat is far too scarred for her to speak."

"That's alright," Jason says. "She doesn't need to talk. We just need to heal her and get her the hell out of here. We must be close to finding Hope."

From behind Jason, Belial speaks.

"Have either of you noticed? There's a halo above that angel's head."

Jason turns to look at Belial in confusion, then back at the girl. He finally notices a weak, barely noticeable, circular ring of light hovering above her head.

"A halo? Oh, I guess that makes sense. Angels always have halos in fiction... but I don't remember seeing them in any of Raphael's visions..."

"Angels don't have halos." Belial says. "Not pureblooded angels, anyway. But Lazarites do."

Phoebe perks up her ears. "Lazarites? Wait, do you mean humans resurrected into angelic form? Like the ancient biblical story of Lazarus?"

"That's right," Belial says. "Through the power of the Lazarus Tower, the Archangels created a method for dead humans to be reborn as a pseudo-angel, a halfblooded creature known as a Lazarite. This girl isn't a pureblood; she was once a human who resurrected through the Lazarus Tower's magic."

Jason falls silent. In his head, he connects multiple pieces of a puzzle based on what Raphael told him during his flashbacks of the Ancient Era.

The Lazarus Tower... Valac's Lantern.... Resurrecting humans into angelic bodies? That was the purpose of the tower? I see. That would have allowed the angels to rebuild their forces following the War in Heaven, giving them new angels capable of fighting the demons. I knew there had to be more to the story! And when Mephisto stole back Valac's Lantern...

"I'm ready," Phoebe says, as she holds up a syringe. "Don't worry, 'miss angel.' This will heal you."

"Phoebe presses the needle into the angel's heart and pushes the plunger. A few seconds later, she extracts the needle, noting with a sad expression that the angel didn't even seem to notice the needle's presence, so terrible was her pain.

At a speed visible to the human eye, the angel's wounds begin to heal. While none of her scars disappear, the worst-festering wound seal up, and some of the rotted injuries manage to cleans themselves. Unfortunately, her right leg appears too far gone, with its entirety black from gangrene.

Phoebe chews her lip. "If she were a human, she'd have died countless ages ago. It's a miracle she's still alive."

"Or a curse," Jason snarls. "Gressil did this. That son of a bitch... I'll make him pay."

At the mention of Gressil's name, the angel's eyes widen in fear. She discovers a wellspring of strength and pushes away from Jason and Phoebe, curling back into the

corner once again, even crushing her broken and mutilated wings by doing so.

"No, no," Phoebe says, shooting a dirty look at her husband. "Don't just say his name, Jason! Here, send me back to the Core along with the angel. I'll take care of her until everyone else returns."

"Are you sure?" Jason asks.

"Yes. We can't leave her here a moment longer."

Jason sticks his thumb over his shoulder. "Then take Belial with you. She can heal the angel."

"No." Belial says. "If Gressil truly is an Emperor, you're all in danger here. I'll stay with you until you return. The angel has survived this long without any medical care; she'll only do better with Phoebe in the Core."

Jason hesitates.

"...I can't go back until I find out what happened to Hope. Alright, Phoebe. You take the angel back to Doctor Fathy. Belial and I will continue with the rescue operation."

Phoebe nods, then turns to look behind her husband. "What about you, Amelia?"

"I'm staying here," Amelia says. "I'm not here for some angel girl. I'm here for Hope."

"Alright." Phoebe replies.

Jason's wife snaps the rusted shackles binding the angel's wrists and ankles. Removing them reveals disgusting, pus-filled scar-tissue. The angel's rail-thin body tells a tale of absolute starvation, torture, and barbarism worse than any horror movie could depict.

Phoebe places a teleportation beacon on the angel, then on herself. She offers Jason one last look.

"You'd better return. Don't you dare make me a widow."

Jason offers a weak smile. "I'll return. Promise."

Phoebe activates the beacons, teleporting herself and the angel out of Gressil's prison and back to the Core.

The Wordsmith rises to his feet. A strange look crosses his face.

"I'll have to ask Gabriel about that girl when we return. Can't contact him now. Belial, did you recognize the angel?"

The succubus shakes her head. "Nope. There were billions of Lazarites at one point. The angels used them as meatshields in the war against my people. In the final battle between angels, demons, humans, and the Volgrim, rivers of blood flowed through Heaven. I thought every last angel had died... but to think Gressil had secretly hidden one away beneath everyone's noses."

Amelia anxiously looks toward the doorway. "Whatever, she's just a Lazarite. Look, can we get back to searching for Hope? He's the reason we came here, you know!"

"Yes," Jason says, "But the fact an angel has survived past the Energy Wars is extremely important. There must be some reason Gressil kept her here. Aren't you even the slightest bit curious?"

Amelia lowers her helmet, revealing a cross expression. "No, Jason, I don't care about some stupid angel girl. Maybe if she were a pureblood, I'd care, and even then, that's a stretch. Hope is more important! Besides, something about her..."

The former Black Queen trails off, as if uncertain about a feeling in her heart.

"Fine, let's get back to looking for Hope," Jason says. "Who cares, anyway? She's just the only living angel we know about. No significance at all, no sir. Heaven forbid I might hold some curiosity over her identity... grumble grumble..."

The Wordsmith, Belial, and Amelia exit the cell, flanked by the two troopers from before. Jason informs General Chadwick of their discovery, as well as the other leaders with him.

Chadwick narrows his eyes. "A Lazarite, you say? I've heard of them. Did she have the signature halo above her head?"

"Yes," Jason says. "But how would you learn of Lazarites?"

"It was an open secret among the higher levels of human militaries," Chadwick explains. "Back in my day, I served under King Haakon as one of his generals. During the Great War, most soldiers and civilians had no idea that angels and demons truly existed, but the upper ranks knew well. I'll bet you aren't aware that the most pious and godly believers could even earn special favors from Heaven in the event of their death."

Jason blinks. "Special favors? Such as?"

Chadwick glances down the halls before continuing. "Those who prayed a lot and performed meritorious deeds for the angels would have the unique right to reincarnate as

High Lazarites. Effectively the same as normal Lazarites, but they could lead legions of their own into battle. There were other privileges, but..."

"But now isn't the time to talk about these things," Jason says, picking up on Chadwick's meaning. "Tell me about that stuff later. In the meantime, let's keep looking for Hope!"

* * *

Half an hour passes. The humans continue sweeping through Faith's End, but all they find are more mundane prisoners, not Hope.

"We've searched almost everywhere," Corporal Hurent says, "There aren't many cells left to check. If Hope isn't in them..."

"We haven't run into Gressil either," Belial says. "I'll bet he took Hope and ran away! That devil-damned coward."

Hardly have the words left Belial's mouth before a shudder runs down her back. Purely out of instinct, she spins on her heel and glances down one of the side corridors, where, in the darkness, a little blonde girl stands, all by herself.

Belial's eyes shrink to pinpricks.

"No! Impossible!"

Jason follows her gaze.

"Daisy?!"

The sight of his daughter standing in a random Labyrinth corridor sets off alarm bells in the Hero's head, but those instantly collide with panicked thoughts of how his daughter might have somehow survived and ended up here.

Then, 'Daisy' speaks.

"Haha. Does this form surprise you?"

A deep, masculine voice speaks from the child's mouth. Belial snaps out of her shock first, then narrows her eyes.

"Gressil! You... how dare you summon this... illusion!"

The little girl smiles creepily.

"Illusion? Haha. Haha. Is that what I am? Daddy, look at me. I'm your little girl. You killed me, daddy. Haha. You won't even cry for me. You must not love me. Haha. Haha."

Gressil's deep, raspy voice violently conflicts with the image of a sweet little girl. Thanks to the disharmony of voice and appearance, Jason manages to shake himself awake, realizing that this sick illusion before him is not the daughter he lost.

"You piece of shit. How **dare** you toy with my emotions."

'Daisy' continues to grin, exposing her toothy teeth.

"Oh, but your pain gives me such joy, Wordsmith. Haha. Every human has a weakness. Every demon. Even the angels..."

The little girl cocks her head.

"You took something from me without asking. That is stealing, you know. Oh, but this weak demon does not stand a chance against the powerful weapons of humanity. I guess I'll have to meekly stand aside. You can have my beloved Birdy... but you'll have to treat her well. A very bad person hurt her several times, and now she doesn't scream like she used to."

"BASTARD!" Belial shrieks. Before anyone can stop her, the demoness lunges toward Gressil and rears her fist back.

BOOM!!!

Belial swings her fist down at Gressil's body, but her punch passes through him harmlessly and smashes into the floor, rattling the Labyrinth for a mile in every direction, even causing some of the human commandos to stumble and fall.

After the explosion of dust settles, Belial raises her head and involuntarily jerks in fright when she finds the Emperor of Chaos standing right in front of her, his figure having returned to its normal form. No longer does he assume the visage of Jason's deceased daughter, but instead, his own two-headed body covered in glowing red eyeballs.

Several commandos aim their guns at Gressil, but nobody pulls the trigger, as they wait for orders from their commanding officers.

"Such a brute." Gressil murmurs. "Demons like you are the worst, Belial. You always hurt those around you. You, especially, like to play the 'good girl.' You're so kind, so empathetic. You wouldn't hurt a fly. Isn't that right? You're not like me, a *monster*."

Belial retracts her fist and takes a step back, eying Gressil warily. The Emperor of Chaos remains rooted in place, seemingly unmovable, like a mountain of flesh. He slightly

leans toward the succubus and sneers.

"Ah, but that isn't true, is it? Look at all the demons you've killed. It was only 'self-defense,' of course, but you did seem to enjoy ripping them to shreds with your claws. Hmm. Maybe you and me aren't so different after all."

"Shut your mouth!" Belial roars. She launches another mountain-shattering punch at Gressil, but her strike once again passes harmlessly through him as his body vaporizes into smoke.

Gressil's voice speaks again, but this time from behind the wall of human commandos, on the complete opposite side of the corridor from where he started.

"Like I said. We aren't so different."

Jason, Belial, and everyone else whirls around 180 degrees, shocked at the Emperor of Chaos's rapid teleportation.

"W-where is Hope?!" Amelia shouts. "I know you have him!"

Gressil's smirk falters. He shoots a look of disgust at the woman.

"**Quiet.** No false image may speak to me in that tone. It seems you haven't told the others who you really are. But I know. I know all too well..."

Jason's eyes flick to Amelia's armored figure. Her exosuit prevents him from seeing her expression and glean a clue as to her emotions.

"What do you mean, Gressil?" Jason asks cautiously, returning his eyes to the Emperor of Chaos. "And why should we trust anything you have to say?"

The prison warden eyes his heroic counterpart.

"I am many things, Wordsmith. A liar is not one of them. Believe what you like, or don't. By the way, I would like to congratulate you on your... evolution. You've filled out quite nicely since my sister's little operation. Already, you've killed a number of demons not inferior to the blessed Joan of Arc... but you've a ways to go before you reach Arthur's level."

"I don't keep a running tally," Jason says. "Every life lost is a tragedy. Pain and suffering is NOT commendable! I only kill because I must."

"Of course. *Of course.*" Gressil replies, his tone creepily soothing. "Ah, but there are trillions of demons in the universe. You haven't even dripped a drop in the bucket yet."

You *have* succeeded in agitating the greed of the Hidden Emperors, I'll give you that much. They'll make a move soon to attack you. I will certainly enjoy the show, when it occurs."

Belial arrives at Jason's side. She eyes Gressil carefully, realizing she cannot sense whether the body before her is real or illusory. Without knowing, she doesn't dare to attack again.

Instead, her eyes drift to the second head on Gressil's body, the one hovering over his left shoulder.

"...Wait. That... that face."

A look of recognition appears in Belial's eyes.

"Lucifer?"

Gressil's expression darkens.

"You only just noticed? What a pitiful Second Emperor you are. Nobody questioned that woman's disappearance all those years ago. I didn't bother telling them, either. Not after the price I paid to finally... *silence* her."

Belial's pupils shrink and dilate repeatedly.

"Oh, Seven Hells... you *ate* her?! Your own mother?"

"I DID NOT!" Gressil suddenly roars, as he takes a menacing step toward Belial. The sounds of several guns readying to fire does nothing to stop him as he stomps toward the Wordsmith's battle lines. "I JUST WANTED HER TO SHUT UP! TO NEVER SPEAK AGAIN!!"

Seeing the advancing figure of an Emperor, Jason gives the order. "Open fire!"

Hundreds of bullets, plasma shots, and other assorted ordinances burst into existence and fly at Gressil, however, all of them pass through his body, dissipating him into the wind.

An instant later, as if stepping out of the air itself, Gressil reappears inches from Belial. Her heart skips a beat, but she fails to evade him as he lunges out his upper-right hand and grabs her by the neck.

"SATAN'S WHORE!" Gressil roars. "YOU SHOULD HAVE SAVED ME!!"

Several guns swivel to face Gressil's new position. They unload on him, but he vanishes once again, teleporting behind the army with Belial in hand.

BOOM!

Gressil smashes the Emperor of Passion against the wall. He raises his lower right fist to punch her, but Belial retaliates with a punch of her own!

THUMP!

Gressil instantly loses his grip and flies backward, crashing into the wall behind him just a few feet away. He plows through it, into an empty prison cell, and lands on the floor in a heap.

Belial's lips curl into a nasty snarl. "Don't think you stand a chance against me, Lucifer's spawn. If we come to blows, you'll always end up with the short stick."

Gressil lays on the floor in the cell, motionless, for a few brief moments. Then, he slowly raises his head.

"Don't say her name."

"Who? Lucifer?" Belial asks. "And why not?"

The moment she finishes asking that question, Gressil's otherwise dormant second head begins to stir. Both of its eyes open, along with the third one on its forehead.

"Hmm? What's all this racket? Brat! Are you trying to piss me off?!"

Gressil's left arm curls into a fist. Belial tenses up, expecting him to lunge at her. Instead, in a shocking twist, Gressil punches himself!

Thunk!

He punches his right head, the primary one he used before. In that moment, Belial makes a few mental connections.

Lucifer is... alive? Inside of him? And she can possess his body? But how?!

Gressil winces from the punch.

"Mother... mother, no-"

"Don't even speak to me!" Lucifer shrieks, her shrill voice grating on Belial's nerves. "You're worthless, just like Diablo! Pathetic little insect that he was!"

As she speaks, Lucifer happens to glance in Belial's direction. She pauses and blinks, while a sadistic smile crosses her face.

"Ohoho! Well, well, well, look who it is! Satan's Bitch, the queen slut herself!"

Lucifer jumps to her feet, taking full control of Gressil's body as her consciousness awakens more and more. A fervent look of excitement passes over her face as she greedily eyes the former Second Emperor up and down.

"You look as slutty as ever, succu-brat! I should have known you'd come here to seduce this ignorant boy of mine!"

"Seduce Gressil?" Belial asks, narrowing her eyes. "I wouldn't dream of it. I have standards."

"Bitch!" Lucifer shrieks. "He might be a pathetic little shell of a man, but he's ten times the demon you'll ever be! A thousand of you couldn't compare to my brat!"

Belial flicks her gaze down the hall, to Jason and the others. Realizing they won't be of much help if Belial and Lucifer come to blows, they hesitate on what to do.

Belial flicks her hair behind her ear. "I didn't come here to yap at you, Lucifer. I came here for Hope. Give him to me. *Now*."

"Hope? What hope?" Lucifer asks. "Hahaha! You've gone off your marbles, Belial! If you want 'hope,' I'll give it to you! I'll torture you so badly that you'll 'hope' I kill you!"

Lucifer lunges at Belial and raises all four of Gressil's fists to attack. At the same time, the third eye on her forehead glows red for an instant.

Zot!

A beam of concentrated mana fires from the Emperor of Providence's forehead, strikes Belial's chest, and slams her against the wall. Before Belial can retaliate, Lucifer strikes her with all four fists.

Boom-boom-boom-boom!

Like four hammers crashing against an anvil, Lucifer batters Belial hard enough to shatter the Labyrinth wall and knock her into the empty cell behind her. The two demonesses crash onto the floor, but Belial retaliates by shoving Lucifer back with all her strength.

Belial's power, shockingly, exceeds Lucifer's by several orders of magnitude.

Lucifer flies backward, caught off-guard by Belial's strength. She crashes into and drags across the ceiling, eventually arriving in the corridor outside where she falls down and slams into the floor.

"Unf!"

Lucifer gasps in pain, but quickly jumps back to her feet at the same time as Belial.

"Hahaha... you're as strong as ever..." Lucifer growls. "But I can't detect even a little magic from you. It seems in this battle I hold the advantage."

Lucifer smiles menacingly, while Belial doesn't.

"If you won't give me the Wordsmith willingly, I'll just have to *take* him from you." Belial says.

Lucifer spreads out her arms and chuckles.

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't care. If you want something from me... you're free to try and take it. You don't have Satan here to protect you anymore. I *made sure* of that."

Belial's eyes snap open.

"LUCIFERRR!!"

Author Note: We have finally reached Birdie/Birdy, an important character in the Cryoverse! I had some great artwork made for her years ago, and you can find out all about it by visiting this Patreon post!

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/29070168>

Part 311: Passionate Providence

Belial dives toward Lucifer. She hits the ground with a roll and props herself up on her palms, then uses her legs to deliver multiple kicks at unexpected angles. The Emperor of Providence gets forced onto the backfoot by her attacker's superior leg-strength, making her use both of her upper arms for defense while her lower arms try to counter.

Within seconds, the two demonesses exchange a flurry of blows.

Belial shotgun-kicks Lucifer, blasting the three-eyed Emperor into the cell's rear and knocking the wind out of her. She spins on her palm and whirlwind-kicks Lucifer to the left, sending her foe hurtling sideways, where she crashes through the wall into an adjacent cell.

"Aargh! You hussy!" Lucifer screams.

"YOU KILLED MY HUSBAND!" Belial roars, as she pushes off the ground, spins in the air, and lands back on her feet. The moment Belial's toes touch the ground, she pushes off and lunges at Lucifer again, switching to punches in order to uppercut and side-swipe the two-headed Emperor.

All the while, as Lucifer gains more and more control of her son's body, Gressil becomes quieter than ever, seemingly receding into himself and falling asleep.

Lucifer's third eye easily tracks Belial's high-speed movements, but the clumsiness of Gressil's body slows her reaction speed down. Several times, Lucifer eats a punch or a kick she might have evaded millennia ago, when she was in her own body. She retaliates with multiple mana-blasts from her third eye, yet even the ones that hit barely slow Belial down, so terrifying is the Emperor of Passion's wrath.

* * *

While the two Emperors fight, the Wordsmith and his allies observe the fight, momentarily unsure of what to do. It doesn't take long before Jason makes a decision.

"Everyone! Fan out and continue searching for Hope! Scour every cell! Move in groups of two! If Gressil, or Lucifer, or whoever-the-fuck is in control of his body are being distracted by Sam, now is our chance! We have to find Hope!"

Amelia turns to Jason. "What about Belial's fight? Can't we help her?"

The Wordsmith shakes his head. "I don't have my Wordsmithing, and none of us are capable of fighting an Emperor. It's better if we use this chance to finish searching for Hope!"

Without any other options, the others simply nod.

"Alright," Chadwick says. "You heard the Hero! Fan out and stay in groups of two! Mark down the cells of any other civilians, but focus on finding Hope! We don't know how long Belial can hold out against Gressil!"

Jason and Amelia stick together. They start to run down one of the other corridors, but a single trooper steps in front of them, wearing a unique exosuit.

"Commander. With all due respect, I might be able to help the succubus."

Jason pauses. He does a quick once-over of the man before him, the only soldier wearing a Rhino-type T-REX, Lieutenant Samuel.

"You can?"

Samuel nods. "My suit is designed for combating demon elites. I doubt I'll land any killing blows, but my Rhino can take one hell of a beating."

"Beelzebub nearly killed you, and he was only a Duke," Jason interjects. "You don't stand a chance against Gressil."

"Not alone." Samuel replies. "But if I'm only providing physical support, I can do more good than by joining the search."

Jason nods. "Alright, so be it. Stay safe then, Samuel. So far, we have zero casualties on this excursion. Don't be the one who changes that!"

Samuel smiles under his helmet.

"Don't worry, sir. I won't."

Without any fanfare, Samuel charges past his commanding officers to join Belial's fight, leaving Jason and Amelia behind.

Amelia shoots a glance at Samuel's departing figure.

"Are you really going to let that guy...?"

"Hope is our top priority," Jason answers. "Samuel knows what he's doing. Let the man do what he does best."

He and Amelia join the search. Together, they begin rapidly scouring every last cell in the unsearched containment blocks, kicking open doors and rescuing any still-living prisoners who they find in decent condition.

Meanwhile, Samuel stomps toward Belial and Lucifer, wincing as the shockwaves of their fight pound through the hallways, passing right through his exosuit to hammer his internal organs.

"Guh! Damn, these demons are too fucking strong... how's a normal human ever supposed to compete? That Hero had better come up with a solution in the future, or we're all fucked."

As he approaches the sounds of battle, Belial suddenly crashes into the corridor, having been blasted backward by one of Lucifer's eye-beams. The Emperor of Providence leaps out of the cell with both her fists raised and swings them down at her hated enemy.

Seeing his first chance come so quickly, Samuel doesn't hesitate. He activates a thruster module on his spine and races to intercept Lucifer, giving her only a second to react. Unable to stop her momentum in midair, Lucifer merely shoots a glance at the weak little human rushing toward her.

"Some maggot, come to die?!"

BOOM!

Samuel's spiked shoulder stabs into Gressil's body and knocks Lucifer aside, making her punches strike the wall uselessly. Before Samuel can detach, Lucifer casually swings a fist at the exosuit embedded in her left ribcage, and the impact sends Samuel flying!

His durable Rhino exosuit, the strongest of all T-REX models, rocks violently as a single attack from the Demon Emperor of Providence flings him into a wall, where he grinds along it for nearly a hundred meters, losing fifteen percent of his suit's nanite integrity. Samuel bounces off the wall after grinding on it for three seconds, and crashes to the floor.

"Ugh!"

Completely shattering the human's worst fears, his suit barely manages to hold up from just one of Lucifer's attacks. Samuel spends a full five seconds regaining his bearings before pulling himself to his feet. In that time, Lucifer and Belial re-engage in battle, paying his presence little mind.

Mother of god, Samuel thinks, as he presses his gauntlet against his torso and props himself up against the wall. Just one punch! I feel like if I took another direct hit like that, I'd be a goner! How in the goddamn shit are humans supposed to compete against Emperors? I might as well be a toddler trying to wrestle an alligator!

Any thoughts Samuel had of joining forces with Belial to hammer on Lucifer disappear. Instead, he completely shifts his perspective, watching their rampaging fight from afar while his suit repairs its exterior.

There's no way I can engage the prison-warden directly. Lucifer is too strong. Instead, I should simply try to provide auxiliary support. Harassment. I need to slow her down and become a pesky gnat.

"Centurion. Reconfigure exosuit to long-ranged artillery warfare doctrine."

"ORDERS CONFIRMED, PILOT SAMUEL-DRAGO. RECONFIGURATION SEQUENCE WILL REQUIRE THIRTY SECONDS TO COMPLETE. WARNING! EMPEROR-LEVEL COMBAT DETECTED IN THE VICINITY. SEEK SHELTER DURING RHINO-TYPE EXOSUIT'S TRANSFORMATION PROCESS. PILOT WILL BE VULNERABLE TO ATTACK OTHERWISE."

Samuel nods. "Noted."

* * *

Twenty minutes pass. Jason and the others receive a notification from Corporal Hurent.

"I've found Hope! Oh, heavens, he's in bad shape!"

Immediately, every soldier converges on her position.

Jason and Amelia arrive down one of Faith's End's many hallways at the same time as Chadwick and the others. They find Corporal Hurent standing alongside the Demon Lord of Gnats, Kiari. The sight of Hope in the Corporal's arms first makes them exhale in relief, only to immediately follow up with gasps of horror.

"Oh, devils!" Amelia cries. "He's in worse condition than I thought!"

As she approaches, Corporal Hurent gently lays Hope down on the hallway floor, while a pair of Clinicians swiftly approach and inject Hope with nanite-based healing solutions.

"Hope is in shock," Hurent says. "We found him in this room here, and he was... he was like this when we got here. His limbs are... they're in a bucket off to the side. I-I don't want to talk about it."

The corners of Jason's mouth curl into a snarl. "Gressil. That bastard! How could he do this? This goes beyond the realm of mere torture... this is absolute sadism!"

Hope's body, covered in cuts, burns, and gashes, appears to be only in a bit better of a state than the angel girl's. Given his human biology, he can't possibly regenerate or withstand the abuse an angel can, and so, his condition ends up much more life-threatening than hers.

Jason shoots a glance at the others. "How many teleportation modules do we have left?"

"Just thirty." Chadwick answers.

"That will have to do. I have to return to the Core along with Hope. Now that Samantha is tied up with Lucifer, she can't heal him, but I can. I can't help her fight a Demon Emperor, not with this mana-suppression field still active, so I won't accomplish anything by staying here."

"I'll return with you." Amelia says, her eyes fixated on Hope's body. "I only came here for him, anyway."

After hearing Amelia's confirmation, Jason turns his attention to the others.

"Everyone, we don't have much time to spare. I've determined that the mana suppression field we've been under is emanating from Gressil himself. His body seems to be outputting the field in a huge radius. This means magical abilities won't be any use against him. Additionally, he himself can still use his own magic inside of the field, which gives him a tremendous advantage against us. Knowing this, I think Belial will eventually lose without all of your help."

Jason turns to the lone Demon Lord in the group.

"Kiari. I have a job for you. I'm going to return to Tarus II to heal Hope. While I'm there, I'll use the Cube to manufacture enough teleportation beacons to send every soldier home, including Belial. I want you to stand outside Gressil's mana suppression radius and wait for my delivery. When the time is right, I'll send you a crate full of teleportation

transponders, and you'll have to run back into Faith's End to deliver them to the soldiers. Got it?"

The Lord of Gnats quickly nods, even while her heart flutters anxiously. "A-alright! I'll do my best!"

"The rest of you," Jason continues, "will follow Chadwick's lead. Beat the shit out of Lucifer, Gressil, or whoever-the-fuck-else he turns into. If the situation turns dicey, get out of there. Don't risk a direct confrontation with Gressil. If Lucifer somehow defeats Belial, none of you will stand a chance! Just run for your lives and send a distress call. I... I'll figure something out!"

"Yes, sir!" The entire group shouts in unison.

After confirming a few more things, Jason turns his attention to his limbless clone, whose eyes flutter open and shut as waves of pain course through his body.

"This is my fault, too..." Jason grimaces.

A minute later, Jason, Amelia, and Hope all vanish from the spot, returning to the Core.

The remaining human leaders affix teleportation transponders to their suits, but they don't look pleased about doing so.

"As a man, as a soldier, and as your commander, if I have to activate this beacon and leave the rest of you to die, I'll never forgive myself," Chadwick says. "So, don't you dare let Gressil win! Let's teach that maiming, mutilating, malicious-minded monster not to mess with humanity ever again! Let's save Belial and get the hell out of here!"

"Yes, commander!" Comes the unified response.

* * *

Belial's fist thumps the side of Lucifer's head, sending her spinning head over heels. Lucifer plows against the wall and grimaces, glaring daggers at the former Second Emperor.

"One good hit, and you won't be getting back up, Bitch-lial! You can't heal yourself while fighting me!"

A small bit of blood drips from Belial's lips, but otherwise, she appears to be in far better condition than Lucifer.

"I guess I'll just have to not get hit, then"

Lucifer jumps to her feet, then belly-flops to the floor, momentarily confusing Belial. The Emperor of Providence skitters toward the succubus using all six of her limbs, similar to a spider. This sudden boost of speed catches Belial off-guard as Lucifer pounces at her from below, headbutting Belial's stomach and sending her crashing into the wall.

"Oof!"

Belial crashes into the corridor, and Lucifer jumps at her, her eye turning red as she prepares to fire a mana-burst at the succubus.

All of a sudden, from more than three hundred meters away, a pair of high caliber bullets fire from the shadows and tear into Lucifer's ribs, deeply embedding in her flesh and spraying blood behind her.

"Aaargh!"

Lucifer stumbles to the side, completely misses Belial, and shoots a dirty glare toward the 'insignificant' human from earlier. Samuel's Rhino-suit appears completely different, with a pair of high-impact cannons resting atop his shoulders, each one capable of firing one tank-buster round every two seconds.

His boots appear much wider as well, digging into the Labyrinth floor to hold him steady and reduce his recoil. His frontal armor, doubly-reinforced, unfortunately leaves his back exposed, but protects him from attacks coming from the only direction that currently matters.

"Eat shit, you psychopathic demon bitch!" Samuel shouts, before firing another two rounds.

Thoom-thoom!

The human releases another pair of rounds at Lucifer. She doesn't dodge in time, allowing them to rip through her stomach and out of her back.

"Aargh! Wretched little human! This queen generously spared your life, but since you're so desperate to die, let me send you on your way!"

Her eye glows, and a moment later, she fires a laser of mana directly at Samuel!

Zot!

Samuel's exosuit instantly triangulates her attack direction. Before she fires, it conjures a crystallized set of nanites at the impact location, hardening them just in the nick of time.

Even so, the power of a Demon Emperor stands many echelons above a mere exosuit. Lucifer's mana blast strikes Samuel with enough power to tear his boots from the ground and send him flying backward! The human screams as he loses control and hurtles hundreds of meters away from Belial and Lucifer, eventually crashing and grinding against the floor, where he comes to a stop and flops backward, falling unconscious.

Lucifer shoots the pathetic human one last sneer before lowering her eyes to the deep bullet holes in her flesh.

"Urgh! That filthy mongrel! He actually wounded me!"

Belial jumps to her feet. She shoots a sympathetic glance at Samuel's fallen form, but quickly returns her attention to Lucifer.

"That injury sure looks painful. Want me to kiss it and make it all better?"

"Oh, I'll give you something to *kiss*!" Lucifer yells.

Lucifer's eyes flash with color once again. This time, however, she doesn't charge up a mana-blast.

"Hehehe! Let's see how you handle a thousand years of pain!"

Belial swings her fist at Lucifer, but her opponent ducks the attack, lowers her head, and flicks her third eye to look directly at Belial's face.

Suffer the agony of my Demonic Trance, Belial!

Lucifer fires an attack aimed not at Belial's body, but her soul!

A moment later, the corridor falls silent, as Belial and Lucifer become locked in a battle on the plane of souls.

Belial's vision flickers. The world around her transforms into absolute blackness, while Gressil's hideous figure rapidly shifts and mutates into a much more familiar, feminine form.

Lucifer, now in her 'original body,' faces down Belial, who suddenly finds herself chained spread-eagle to a demonstone table covered in blood. No matter how she

struggles, she fails to break the chains, even with her ordinarily unsurpassable demonic strength.

Belial sucks in a breath. "This... this is your Demonic Trance! It's only an illusion!"

Lucifer chuckles quietly. "Hehehe. Is it...? Are you so certain of that, Satan's Whore? This is no illusion! My Demonic Trance takes you to another plane of existence, one where I rule with absolute power! Here, I will make you suffer the pain of a thousand deaths!"

Belial writhes against the chains, but for some reason, they only become tighter and pull even more painfully on her body, slowly dislocating her joints as they rip her apart.

"Eeyah! It hurts! It hurts!"

Lucifer's nails grow several inches long. While Belial screams in pain, the Emperor of Providence plunges her nails into the succubus's chest and drags them downward, ripping her skin open to reveal Belial's heart, liver, and lungs.

Lucifer reaches into Belial's body. She tears out Belial's heart and laughs wickedly, reveling in the succubi's tortured screams.

"Hahahaha!! Oh, how I've always wanted to do this to you! That damned Satan kept getting in my way, but now he's nowhere to be seen! Say, Belial, would you like to see *it*? Would you like to see how I finally put that undying bastard into the dirt for good?! It was actually an accident, if you can believe it, but what a fortunate turn of events it was!"

Tears stream down Belial's face. "Murderer! I'll kill you!"

"You can try!" Lucifer cackles. She waves her hand, causing the blackened void to shift and change to one of a serene field of flowers, where a short Demon Emperor stands with a black-haired woman before him.

"Look carefully!" Lucifer laughs. "This was the moment where the Black Witch finally ended Satan's reign... for all eternity!"

Part 312: Buddha's Failure

Beneath the surface of the Earth, a man in an exosuit calmly walks past the badly beaten figures of two dozen demon grunts, yet another pair of Demon Lords, and three orcs. His faceless figure causes shivers to run down their backs as they replay the moment the seemingly inferior human struck them down and beat the tar out of them without breaking a sweat.

This human, the reincarnation of Buddha, pauses after walking past the pair of Demon Lords. He turns his head slightly to look down at them, while they scurry backward and press themselves against the wall.

"S-stay back, you! When our boss gets here, you'll regret crossing us, fleshbag!"

The human nods. "Your boss. Orias, yes? He is the one who I am looking for. Tell me where I can find him."

The human's calm, ancient voice momentarily befuddles the two Lords. The younger of the two clears his throat and points toward one of eight tunnel openings in an adjacent chamber.

"Y-you want to meet Orias? Do you have a death wish, man? He'll destroy you!"

"Oh, I very much doubt that," Buddha says as he walks toward the tunnel the Lord pointed out. "But he is welcome to try. I am no stranger to death."

A few moments later, he disappears down the tunnel, leaving his victims behind.

The Demon Lord who spoke wipes his hair back. "I don't know why that guy didn't kill us, but if he'd made a move, we would have surely died! He didn't have a single opening! It was as if I were trying to fight the person who invented the art of combat himself!"

* * *

Buddha trounces dozens more demons. Before long, word of his arrival and disruption spreads throughout the entirety of the tunnels beneath the Earth's surface.

As he steps into another giant, open chamber, the man pauses. He turns on his heel to face a Demon Baron standing off to the sidelines, awaiting his arrival.

"I hear you have been looking for me," Orias, Baron of the Stars, says. He holds an amber colored jewel in his hand, ready to crush and activate it at a moment's notice. "I don't know who you are or why you've come, but if you do not wish to die, human, you would do well to explain yourself."

The exosuit-wearing human stands silently for a few moments. Then, his helmet melts away, revealing his face.

Orias frowns.

"I don't know who I was expecting, but I haven't the faintest clue who you are. Do you have some grievances you wish to pursue against me, mortal? Given that you have only knocked down my subordinates, yet have not killed any of them, I am far from eager to take your life."

The human smiles.

"Orias. You have not changed since we last spoke. That is unfortunate. I had hoped you would undergo a great evolution, all those years ago. Sadly, too many worldly attachments continue to cloud your mind."

The Baron of the Stars eyes the human with suspicion.

"You speak as if we are old friends, yet still, I cannot recall having ever seen your face. Who are you, human?"

"I have many identities." The man answers. "I have lived many lives, each of which added to my 'accumulation.' Each one gave me new insights. In some, I was a man. In others, a woman. Some granted me the life of a wealthy noblesse, while others forced me on the path of poverty. Each one taught me something new, but not one have I regretted living."

The human flicks his eyes around the large underground chamber, its utterly barren appearance having been dug out by goblins for the sake of spreading out dozens of tunnels in every other possible direction.

"You search for something which you cannot find, Orias. It does not exist at any place in the universe, but within your heart. Why, then, have you failed to find that which clings to your breast?"

Orias's eyes flicker with recognition. Slowly, deliberately, he reaches into the folds of his robe and pulls out the Mirror of Samsara.

"M... Master?"

"Yes, Orias. It is I." Buddha replies. "I would ask how you have fared, but it is apparent at a glance that you have lived a shallow and stagnant life."

The Baron of the Stars loses some of the strength in his legs. He falls to his knees, then crawls across the floor, dragging himself to Buddha's feet.

"That light! It was... it was you?! It left this artifact, and, and then-"

"My reincarnation occurred. That is in the past." Buddha states. "Now please. Do not grovel at my feet. I am no God. I am not your Creator. I am merely a man."

Orias's heart flips in his chest as waves of emotions swirl within his being. He shakily rises to his feet, finding it difficult to look into Buddha's eyes.

"I... I don't understand. You died, all of those years ago. Why have you appeared now, inside this foreign body? How are you alive?"

Buddha clicks his tongue.

"Tsk, ts. Orias, my child. You are still but a boy at heart. You cling to the past in order to explain the future. There is no past, nor is there a future. The only thing of which you can be certain is the 'Now.' I am here. Ask me the questions which most insidiously rot your mind."

Orias nods. After several long seconds, he regains his bearings.

"I... I have always wanted to know the truth, Master Buddha," Orias says. "I want to know what it was that you showed me. For a moment, I thought I glimpsed the face of my Creator. I understood my insignificant existence when compared to the scope of the universe. But now, all these years later... I do not understand my purpose. I have made no advancements in my rank. I have remained stuck at the position of a Baron."

Buddha lifts his chin. He purses his lips, and nods.

"Imps. Grunts. Lords. Baron. Dukes. Emperors. You are a demon, born into demon society. You live under demonic rules, and live to serve demons of a higher status. Even so, having glimpsed the truth of Reality, you have felt for far too long that these... mundanities... hold no inherent meaning. How curious, then, that you have not cast aside your attachments to reach a higher state of being."

Buddha shakes his head.

"...I expected more from you. I imagined that within a hundred years, you would reach Enlightenment and become the ideal successor for my power. Now, I have no others to whom I can entrust it."

"Your... power?" Orias asks. "What power? What do you mean?"

Buddha turns to the right, away from the Baron before him.

"There it is. You are still so attached to the world that you cannot conceive of a different way. Your mind still hangs onto such concepts as 'power' and 'authority.' The mere mention of my abilities causes a spike in your greed."

Orias shakes his head. "No, no, don't be silly, master! I do not covet anything of yours! I-I was only curious! I just don't know what you're talking about! Everything you say is so... cryptic."

"You do not understand what I am saying?" Buddha asks. "Or you do not *want* to understand? Which is it, I wonder?"

Orias takes a step back and rubs his head.

"I am... confused."

"Then I shall spell it out for you." Buddha says.

The reincarnated Hero holds out his hand. As if having activated a powerful magnet, the Mirror of Samsara yanks from Orias's grasp to fly into Buddha's. Orias doesn't resist the pull, though he does appear surprised that Buddha is even capable of performing such a feat.

"Master? Do you still possess your heroic abilities?"

Buddha calmly looks at the reflective surface of the Mirror.

"No. I lost them many reincarnations ago. Each reincarnation has successively weakened my control of Karma. Now, it no longer remains in my hands at all."

Orias's eyebrows sink a little.

"That's too bad."

"Haha..." Buddha chuckles, shooting a knowing glance at the Baron of the Stars. "Is it? I am still me, with or without my powers. I do not covet the power of Karma. It was a tool I used to advance the Creator's Will. Karma is not something I owned, nor something I ever wished to own. It simply... *Was*."

Orias remains silent as his teacher gently drops to the ground and crosses his legs.

Buddha gestures to the barren dirt in front of himself.

"Come. Sit."

Orias follows the command. He also sits cross-legged, staring at the ancient Hero with a look of curiosity.

"Do you know what the Creator hates more than anything?" Buddha asks.

Orias shakes his head. "I do not, master. Violence?"

"Indeed, violence goes against His way," Buddha answers. "But violence is sometimes a necessity. It is not the thing that He hates most. Instead, the source of all evil... is Greed."

Orias nods along to Buddha's words. "Greed, you say?"

"That's right. All evil can be traced back to a seed of greed, covetousness, and desire. Every agony under the eye of Creation comes from the influence of Greed. It is the reason why you have made no advancements in your journey."

Buddha holds up the Mirror of Samsara. He turns its reflective face toward Orias, allowing the Baron of the Stars to look at his own reflection.

Suddenly, a bright light erupts from its front, covering Orias from head to toe. The Baron winces and looks away. A moment later, the brilliance fades back to nothing.

Buddha sets the Mirror of Samsara on the ground with its reflective surface facing up. It projects a spiritual orb into the air, one that resembles a golden ball filled with countless blackened worms crawling beneath its surface, like hungry maggots slowly chewing through its interior.

"This is the 'you' that I see." Buddha explains. "This is your very being, your Karmic Ego. You do not realize this, Orias, but it appears exactly the same as when I first laid eyes on you."

Orias cocks his head slightly.

"This golden... thing. It represents 'me'?"

"Every living entity has one," Buddha continues. "Every demon, every human, every ant, gnat, and bird. Few have a Karmic Interior that is purely black with filth, and almost none have a pure and untouched one. Not even me."

Buddha holds the mirror up to his face. It flashes a divine light upon him, and he sets it back down. Once again, another golden orb appears, one which is far more brilliant and lustrous than Orias's. Even so, a couple of small, blackened worms crawl around on the surface, as if looking for an opening from which they can invade.

"What do these 'worms' represent?" Orias asks.

"Attachments." Buddha answers. "Attachments are a form of greed. They come from one's own possessive nature."

"But I thought you didn't have any attachments?" Orias points out.

"For the longest time, I didn't." Buddha says, his voice going quiet. "But everyone has a weakness, a gap in their armor. In my life as the great and Heroic 'Buddha,' I had none. I lived as an ascetic. I did exactly as the Creator asked. I never once strayed from the path of Karma."

He pauses for a moment before continuing.

"And then, one day, I died. I reincarnated into a new body. I assumed the life of a young boy named Ishmael. I suddenly experienced an emotion I never once felt in the entirety of my previous existence, and it shook me to my core."

"What did you experience?" Orias asks.

"Love. The purest form of earthly attachments. From that moment on, my connection to Karma began to fade, and it never returned."

Orias cocks his head. A look of absolute confusion crosses his face.

"I really don't understand. You say attachments represent Greed. But how is Greed connected to Love? Lust, I could understand. But Love should be the least greedy emotion one can experience."

Buddha shakes his head. "That is what many believe, but they are ignorant. There are many forms of love. Some people experience the bliss of unconditional love. That is to say, they seemingly hold no selfish feelings toward the person they love and will never envy them, nor do anything to harm them. In the eyes of outsiders, there can be no greater love. And yet, it is this perception, in and of itself, that gives rise to the greatest greed imaginable."

Buddha lifts his head to gaze vacantly at the ceiling.

"I loved Tamael with all my heart. As an agent of the Creator, I thought myself immune to the effects of attachments. Yet, when I revived in the body of a boy stricken with sickness, suffering in poverty, and doomed to suffer a life of pain, I felt a vague sense of dismay at my circumstances. In the moments where my chest ached so badly that I wished for death, I began to resent my Creator."

Buddha continues. "I asked myself many painful questions. Why did I, someone who served as the Creator's agent, have to suffer after my reincarnation? Did my meritorious deeds not afford me the right to a modest life? Why would He punish me by making me suffer under such terrible circumstances? How could He test me, when I had already long since proven my worthiness?"

"In that moment," Buddha concludes, "I experienced my first sensation of Greed."

"But your questions were valid," Orias interjects. "It doesn't make sense for Him to punish you. If what you said was true, then you served Him well! What sort of loving Creator would hurt you in such a way?"

Buddha shakes his head. "I know now the folly of my thoughts. You would do well not to echo them, Orias. No, my Greed was unwarranted. I did not realize it at the time, but what my Creator did for me was truly the most loving thing he could have done. In response, I spat in his face and began to think wicked and vile thoughts."

The human's eyes mist over, and a faint smile crosses his face for the first time since his arrival.

"There I was, a sickly young boy, writhing on a cot, with nobody to care for me. That was when I met the first and only woman I ever loved. Tamael was only a few years older than myself, physically speaking. I was ten, and she, twelve. My mental age, of course, was far greater, but that did not matter to me at the time."

"Tamael found me by coincidence. The door to my room had no covering. She was one of the few village healers assigned to care for the sick. She treated me as well as the other cripples, and we occasionally struck up conversations, talking about the nature of life. I found her to be intelligent and wise beyond her years. Still young and immature compared to myself, but someone who had endured a painful childhood and come out stronger."

"In that moment," Buddha continues, "I thought I had realized my first error. I assumed the Creator was punishing me. But in fact, what he gave me was a divine reward."

He allowed me to broaden my horizons and see the beauty of life. I swore that if I survived my sickness, I would do everything in my power to protect Tamael, and to give her a life filled with happiness."

Orias smiles. "Love doesn't sound so bad."

"Have you ever experienced it, Orias?" Buddha asks, his tone suddenly turning sharp.

"N-no," Orias says. "I haven't."

"Then you know not of what you speak. Indeed, I spent the next thirty years with Tamael. We wedded each other on my twentieth birthday. We made love, but later found she was incapable of bearing children. Even so, I did not mind. I had her all to myself, and I gave her a life of happiness."

Buddha's tone slowly changes as he speaks. Darkness covers his eyes.

"I did not realize what that love had cost me. My 'selflessness,' and my pursuit of her happiness shackled me in ways both innumerable and indescribable. I did not realize how badly I had wounded myself until that fateful day came... that day when Tamael wandered from my sight, tripped, and fell from a cliff's summit."

Buddha's chin trembles.

"She fell."

He lowers his head. His eyes moisten.

"She fell... so very, very far. I screamed. I cried. In the instant she tripped, I felt my entire world shatter."

Orias stares at the hollow expression on his master's face. He says nothing.

"I climbed down the cliff. I raced to my wife's side. I found her head split open, and her lifeless eyes gazing into the sky. Why did she have to die such a terrible death? Why did I not get even the chance to say goodbye?"

Tears glide down Buddha's face.

"I hated Him. I resented Him. The Creator... he made me suffer bodily agony, heart-tearing agony, and even the agony of a shattered soul. In the years after Tamael's death, I lost more and more of my connection to Karma. I became irrational. I engaged in casual fights. I took terrible risks, ones which inevitably resulted in my death. When I reincarnated, I still felt lost and enraged."

"Ten times..." Buddha mutters. "Ten times, I reincarnated. Through the eras, I never once forgot the loss of my wife. Eventually, though, the pain of losing her began to fade. In its place, I questioned everything I had ever believed. I questioned why I lived the way I did, and why I made the choices I did. And do you know what I found, Orias?"

Buddha looks at his pupil and sighs.

"I found that all of it was my fault. I made the decisions which caused my pain. I cast aside the wisdom my Creator gave me to pursue selfish, Earthly attachments. My Greed was my undoing, and that is why I lost my connection to Karma."

Orias raises an eyebrow. "That was not what I expected you to say. Haven't you heard the adage, 'better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all?' I fail to see how your love for Tamael was greedy, in any way."

"I was possessive." Buddha states. "What 'love' I felt for her was nothing more than a desire to make her 'mine.' I wanted to experience a lifetime of happiness with her in tow. What I believed to be my attempts at making her happy were just as much about making myself happy. In that way, my love for her was filled with Greed from the start. That is the insidious nature of the Creator's most hated attribute."

"But you contradict yourself," Orias points out. "If love is insidious and greedy, then by that definition, so too is the Creator. You stated before that what He did for you was in itself an act of love. Does that not mean that he is equally greedy?"

Buddha shakes his head.

"No. The love of a parent is boundless. True love, without any greed, comes in the form of opportunities. The Creator gave me a chance to make a choice. He reincarnated me into the body of Ishmael, not to punish me, but to expand my horizons. Were I a worthier person, I would have spent that lifetime taking in the suffering I endured to temper my soul. I would not have wed Tamael, but instead, would have educated and uplifted her, allowing her to make her own decisions."

Several seconds pass. Buddha's eyes become downcast.

"In fact, I took advantage of Tamael. When she was young and emotionally naïve, I used my superior life experience to manipulate her into loving me. Later, when we grew older and she began to match my emotional capacity, it was too late for her to leave me. She had already grown dependent on me, and I, on her. We both formed greedy

attachments to one another, with me being the greatest beneficiary. While others spoke of my selfless love for her, and how I would do anything to make her smile, in fact, she never had much of a choice in the matter. I used her to make myself feel good, and ultimately blamed the Creator for her death."

"Because of Tamael," Buddha concludes, "I lost sight of reality. People die. It is the natural order. Some die horrifically, and others die peacefully, but in the end, all creatures in existence eventually perish. Rather than treasuring the memories I made with Tamael, I spent the next several lifetimes wallowing in anger, anger which was caused by my greedy possessiveness. It is for this reason, Orias, that I speak to you now as a changed man."

He gestures to the golden orb floating in midair, the one with only a few black maggots crawling on its surface.

"Once upon a time, my Karmic Ego was pure and untainted. Then, it became as black as the night. Now, no matter how I try, I will never rid myself of the attachments I once held. My Ego has slowly cleansed itself over time, but it can never regain its former purity. I can never again possess control over Karma, but instead, must pass it on to a worthy successor."

"Me?" Orias asks. "But if yours cannot be cleansed, then surely, mine cannot, either."

Siddhartha Gautama, the Great Buddha, falls utterly silent. For more than a minute, he gazes into Orias's eyes.

He touches the Mirror of Samsara, revealing Orias's sullen Ego once again. Its many maggots, infested deep into the core of his Ego, appear far more vile and sinister than those that barely linger on Buddha's surface.

However, Buddha's gaze softens.

"Unlike me, you have no truly deep-seated attachments. Yes, the Greed you possess has corrupted much of yourself, but in relatively small amounts, spread over a great deal of time. You have taken care to not let it fester within you and wildly corrupt your thinking."

"I don't understand." Orias says. "My Ego is far filthier than yours. If you cast away the last lingering attachments you have to Tamael..."

"I will not." Buddha flatly refuses. "My Greed can never leave me. While it may appear small and harmless, it is, in actuality, a symbiotic parasite that allows me to keep on living. My wife perished before the angels created the Lazarus Tower. As such, I never had the opportunity to see her again. So long as this desire of mine isn't reconciled and given closure, I will never abandon it. It is not a matter of whether or not I can, but simply a fact that I am unwilling."

"But... you can never reconcile your loss." Orias says. "I know you still love her, but why not let go? Practice what you preach."

"I refuse. Orias, do not try to change my ways. I can never again touch upon the Creator's glory. I have sinned too much. While you may have doubts, I believe that in due time, you can become an entity capable of touching His greatness. All you must do is cast aside these minor, frivolous things holding you back. In that way, you will surpass me and become able to wield the power of Karma."

Orias quietly gazes at his master for a minute.

"...But what if I do not want the power of Karma? What if I am fine with the way I am?"

Buddha smiles.

"If that is the case, then you will *absolutely* become worthy of wielding it."

Part 313: Satan's Fall

Belial struggles against the dreamlike restraints binding her to a table. Despite her deity-like strength and ability to shatter demonstone with her bare hands, once trapped inside of Lucifer's Demonic Trance, no amount of physical power will avail her.

The slab holding Belial prisoner levitates vertically, allowing her to watch as a giant, open field materializes before her. The flowers and grass have almost a dream-like quality to them, making Belial's soul feel more and more tired as the minutes tick by.

Lucifer stands at Belial's side. She waves her hand casually, summoning a phantom image of Satan the Devil, as well as a familiar black-haired woman, the former Black Witch, Amelia Greyheart.

Amelia's appearance, that of a 30-something woman with luscious red lips, pitch-black hair that stretches past her hips, and a skirt/blouse combination best described as 'Gothic Lolita,' stands arrogantly before the Devil, a frown on her face.

"Satan the Devil." Amelia states, her tone neither warm nor cold. "Why have you come here? We don't have any business with each other."

Despite being much shorter than the Black Witch, Satan still puffs out his chest, acting as if he is the bigger man.

"That's where you're wrong, woman. Listen up. A little mouse told me that you have a friend in your head. Leviathan. I want to speak to him."

Amelia's eyes immediately narrow to slits.

"Who told you that? I have kept Levvy's presence a secret for ages. Nobody should know."

"So you admit it's true," Satan says, not deigning to answer her question. "Cut the crap. I don't like hitting broads. Bring out that dragon, 'cause I need to talk to him."

"Levvy doesn't want to speak to you." Amelia says. She crosses her arms and tilts her body a few degrees backward, looking down on the Devil as if he were an annoying gnat. "You two long ago concluded your business. After everything he has given you, including the power to finally exterminate the angels, you should be bowing at my feet and pledging

to serve him for all eternity. But judging by your tone, you've come in search of even more handouts. Truly, you are a reprehensible little wretch."

Satan clenches his jaw. "Shut your mouth, bitch. I'm not here looking for a handout. I'm here to finally get the PAYMENT I earned! Now you tell that dragon to get out here, before I rearrange your face!"

Amelia's expression shifts to a light smirk. "You think you have the ability, little Devil? Levvy gave you your power. I can take it away. You are nothing before-"

She pauses mid-sentence, then turns her gaze away. After looking vacantly into the distance, Amelia crinkles her nose.

"...Count your blessings. Levvy says he'll talk to you. Don't piss him off, or you'll piss *me* off."

The Black Witch's gaze turns hollow. Her pupils expand to fill her eyes, and a trickle of darkness draconic energy begins to fall from her body and poison the surrounding vegetation.

"Satan." Amelia says again, her voice noticeably deeper. **"I do not wish to be disturbed. Leave now, and I will forgive your unkind words against the woman I love."**

"Leviathan," Satan says, taking a step forward. "Finally, you came out. Listen here, pal. We had a deal! I've fulfilled my end of the bargain. Now, it's your turn."

Leviathan frowns. **"I know not of what you speak."**

"Don't play stupid with me! There's no way some ancient dragon would forget so easily!" Satan exclaims. "You told me that if I killed all the angels, you would bring my girl back. Well, I've got part of Nerissa's soul inside me, all these millennia later. I have her body. And now, the angels are dead! So I want you to bring her back, just like you said you would!"

Leviathan slowly blinks.

"Ah. I see. Indeed, I had forgotten my casual offering. Truth be told, I never thought you had it in you. Killing all of the angels was a remarkable feat. You have much to be proud of."

"I don't want your compliments," Satan says. "I want you to do what you promised. So, do we still have a deal?"

Several seconds of silence follow.

Leviathan looks away, toward the pale blue sky of an unknown world. Not Earth, but some other planet, connected through a warp-gate to the Labyrinth's central nexus.

"Mmm. At the time I stated those words, I was a different person. I was still hollow, empty, and bitter, much like yourself. But... after spending five thousand years with my little lady... I no longer hold the same banal hatred I once did. Whether the angels lived or died, I long ago stopped caring. Their deaths only brought a small sense of closure to the loss of my mother, my brothers, and my sisters."

Leviathan shakes Amelia's head.

"I am sorry, Satan. I know it pains you to hear this, but I cannot give up my soul to bring back the woman you love. Now that I have my little lady, I would never do anything which would leave her alone in this world. The two of us have each other, and that is all. Bringing back your beloved Nerissa would cost me my life, and that is a price I am unwilling to pay."

Satan's pupils shrink to pinpricks.

"*What?* I spent... I spent thousands of years organizing, fighting, and crushing the humans and angels, all for the sake of finally bringing Nerissa back! Bub, you're a goddamned liar! You promised me you'd bring her back! You made a **contract** with me!"

Leviathan's expression turns sharp. **"I did no such thing. I merely said that I would *consider* bringing her back. After all this time, I have done so, and judged her life unworthy of mine. You have neither the right nor the might to force my actions, and so, I have no reason to entertain your requests any longer."**

Satan's smoldering rage grows hotter by the second. He motions with his hand, causing a flash of light to materialize in front of him.

"Hades! Talk some sense into this overgrown mutt!"

Archangel Samael, now a faithful servant of the Devil, congeals into a spiritual body vaguely resembling his original self, albeit much more transparent and ghostly than any flesh body would appear. He levitates between Leviathan and Satan, acting as an arbiter.

"Leviathan." Hades says. "It is good to speak to thee once more. I thought thou hadst died."

"Hmph. There are few things in this universe capable of slaying the Last Dragon," Leviathan says. **"Are you going to negotiate on that red rat's behalf?"**

Hades shoots a glance back at Satan's angry face, then returns his gaze to Amelia's.

"Nay. I respect thee too much, brother. Restoring my memories was a boon I cannot ever forget. This dispute between the Devil and thee is not one in which I will interfere."

"Hades!" Satan snaps. "What are you doing? You know how much this means to me! Do you think I only killed the angels just for revenge? I repeated my true motive constantly, at least a thousand times!"

"Thy request would cost my brother his life," Hades says. "He is the last dragon. His life is incalculably more valuable than that of thy fallen mate. I refuse to press him for assistance on thy behalf."

Satan balls his hands into fists.

"It's not fair... it's not fair! If you weren't willing to make the deal, you never should have made that promise! I hate people who break their contracts, Leviathan!"

"Satan," Hades says. "Calm down. I know this news hurts, but thy mate-"

Before the fallen Archangel can finish his sentence, Satan motions with his hand to desummon him. Storms of rage burn in his eyes as he looks at Amelia with blood-curdling hatred.

"Nobody cheats Satan the Devil! All contract terms are FINAL!"

Leviathan's frown becomes ugly.

"Do not test my patience, Satan. I have gone easy on you in the past, but if you make a move on my little lady, this dragon will retaliate without holding back."

"Oh, I'll make a move, *bub*." Satan spits. "I'll make you regret ever going back on your word!"

* * *

A massive battle follows. Satan the Devil launches an onslaught against the Black Witch, Amelia Greyheart. Despite the dragon's power flowing through her body, and

despite the thousands of years she has spent adapting to Leviathan's power, the Black Witch only manages to output a fraction of his ultimate power. In the end, she is merely a human trying to manipulate the power of an ancient deity.

Satan, possessing tens of thousands, perhaps even millions of human, angel, and demon souls, 'cheats' by expending them like candy to boost his own strength. He flings meteors, fireballs, and other elemental attacks with impunity, raining down Hellfire on the Black Witch.

Slowly but surely, Satan gains an absolute advantage over Amelia.

"I warned you!" The Devil roars. "Nobody double-crosses me!"

Amelia summons a darkness shield to protect herself.

"What do you hope to accomplish, Devil? Do you think you can force Levvy to revive your woman?! He'll never bow to a red rat like you!"

"If he won't give his life freely," Satan exclaims, as he burns ten thousand souls at once to summon a mountain-crushing ball of fire, "Then that dragon can BURN for all eternity! And you can go with him!"

"Satan! No!" Amelia screams.

Her cries go unheard. Satan releases the fireball, its scorching heat eradicating all plant-life for tens of miles in every direction. Amelia doesn't even manage to utter one last cry of agony before the fireball explodes against her shield, killing her instantly and reducing her corpse to ash.

Not only does the explosion kill Amelia, but it also kills the Devil, too. However, sixty seconds later, Satan reforms thanks to his undying demonic powers. He revives on the spot, finding himself standing alone on that scorched world.

"...Absolute bastard." Satan growls.

The Devil's heart sinks. He gazes into the distance wistfully, recalling all those years he slaved for the sake of eradicating angelkind. Even now, while his species rejoices at finally killing their most hated enemies, all he feels is emptiness.

"I promised Lilia I'd bring her sister back... so many times. Sorry, babe. I let you down."

The pot-bellied Devil turns to walk away.

However, in that obliterated wasteland, a heavy mana pressure emerges. The power of a dragon manifests from seemingly nowhere, causing the Devil to whirl around in surprise.

"What? Leviathan? You're still alive?!"

The ancient dragon's soul materializes as a ominous black orb. It slowly congeals and reforms, changing from an utterly nebulous shape into the apparition of Leviathan's former self.

The black dragon opens his eyes. His expression turns solemn as he looks down at the tiny, shivering demon before him.

"Satan. Long has it been since I felt such a sense of unfathomable loss. To have angered me this badly, it would be insufficient to call you a demon with a death wish."

Leviathan's eyes shift from Satan to a faint layer of ash spread over one particular bit of scorched dirt.

"My little lady. She was the only woman I loved. She was everything to me. How ironic that a man who should understand the pain of loss would unleash that same agony upon me. You are even more wretched and vile than I ever imagined."

Satan sucks in a breath. "Why didn't you die?!"

Leviathan ignores his question. **"I have many regrets, small one. I regret not standing up to the angels. I regret only spending few thousand fleeting years with my little lady. But most of all... I regret not killing *you*."**

The First Emperor screams in rage. His voice contains more than a hint of fear as he lobbs lightning bolts, holy energy orbs, and even more fireballs at the dragon, burning thousands of souls to empower himself.

These attacks, previously capable of turning the Black Witch to ash, merely splash against the dragon's rapidly reforming body. They don't injure him in the slightest.

By the time Leviathan fully rematerializes, his sickening magical power has already began to suppress the Devil's mana, drastically weakening Satan's every attack.

Leviathan blinks slowly. **"Perish for a while, demon."**

With a casual wave of his claw, the last dragon brings an ungodly rain of darkness energy down, smiting the Devil where he stands. Satan's body splatters into a pile of plasma-like goo, giving Leviathan sixty seconds of silence to ruminate on what has happened.

"My little lady..." He murmurs to the scattered ashes at his feet. **"Since the moment we first met, I have always loved you. If only we could have spent the rest of eternity together... I would have liked that. Once I am gone, I hope that you will eventually forget about me and find another who brings you happiness. I do not wish for you to eternally grieve, as I would in your place. You deserve better than that."**

The dark dragon, an entity who has lived for countless eons, lifts his head to roar in anguish at the sky. Tears stream from his eyes as he concentrates all of his life-force into his soul.

Above him, a tear appears in space. For a brief moment, a brilliant light shines down upon the scorched world. Each radiant ray revitalizes the land, rapidly regrowing all the dead flowers and grass, returning it to its former beauty.

At the same time, a tremendous tugging sensation begins to pull on Leviathan's soul. Terrible agony wracks his very being, but he resists it and continues to roar at the void.

"NO. YOU WILL NOT TAKE MY SOUL! NOT UNTIL... YOU GIVE ME... MY LITTLE LADY BACK! AAAAH!!"

This realm, one which shines with the Creator's former glory, is none other than the Great Beyond, a place of unfathomable concentrated power. It grabs onto the last dragon's soul and pulls with a power beyond what any deity can resist, but Leviathan still stubbornly digs his claws into the ground while sweeping his spiritual senses across the Great Beyond's interior.

"GIVE HER TO ME. MY LITTLE LADY IS NOT YOURS TO TAKE!"

Satan resurrects, only to find himself standing in the middle of a hurricane. Invisible and immaterial threads of magical energy grab onto the Devil's body and yank him upward, but he manipulates Hades' Vectors to latch onto a nearby tree. Its corporeal and non-sentient form resist the pull of the Great Beyond, allowing Satan to anchor himself to reality itself.

"Spawn of a broodmother!" Satan curses. "What in the Seven Hells is going on?!"

Nobody answers Satan. He tries to summon a portal using one of the many Warper souls he owns, but the portal instantly destabilizes, preventing him from escaping.

At the same time, Leviathan locks onto one specific soul out of the trillions drifting in the Great Beyond. He reaches out with his senses and reels it in. The closer it draws to him, the mightier the pressure on his own soul becomes.

Less than a minute later, the ancient dragon begins to feel fatigued like never before in all his life. A deep desire to sleep wafts over his senses, causing his eyes to lazily blink.

"No... no... not yet... I must first... reform... her vessel..."

Using the last bit of his strength, Leviathan recreates Amelia's human body. However, he changes its internal structure, optimizing it for his leftover draconic power. The moment he finishes, Leviathan tears Amelia's soul out of the Great Beyond, places it inside her body, and attaches it securely with his last vestiges of strength.

Finally, his eyes close for the last time.

"I will... always... love you... my little..."

The dragon's body slumps forward. It falls lifelessly to the dirt, while a soul-orb as big as a firetruck leaps from its confines and rushes toward the crack in the sky.

Seconds later, the rift to the Great Beyond collapses, sealing itself shut forever more.

Silence falls across the planet.

Satan shakily releases his grip on the tree, the one which saved his soul from being devoured by the Great Beyond. His knees clack together as he tries to stand, but the sheer tearing sensations which ravaged his soul require a moderate amount of time for him to recover.

As the Devil stabilizes his breathing, Amelia opens her eyes.

She abruptly sits up, a look of surprise on her face.

"I'm... I'm alive? But how?"

The Black Witch blinks several times. She turns her head to the right, and then to the left.

Her vision locks onto Leviathan's corpse, the body of the dragon she loves more than anyone else in the universe.

"Levvy? Levvy?!"

Amelia jumps to her feet. She runs toward Leviathan's body and tries to wrap her arms around his snout.

"Speak to me! Levvy!! What's wrong?! Are you sleeping? What's going..."

As she touches the last dragon's body, a faint soul imprint activates in her mind. Leviathan's last words repeat to her.

"My little lady..."

"Since the moment we first met, I have always loved you."

"If only we could have spent the rest of eternity together... I would have liked that."

"Once I am gone, I hope that you will eventually forget about me and find another who brings you happiness."

"I do not wish for you to eternally grieve, as I would in your place."

"You deserve better than that."

Amelia's chest burns. Her throat locks up, while countless emotions cascade within her body.

"No... no, it can't be true... he can't be..."

While Satan recovers strength in his legs, Amelia loses strength in hers. She collapses to her knees and breaks down sobbing, while the Devil stands up, breathing normally once again.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" Satan mutters. "Now you're the same as me. If I can't get my lover back, then you can't get yours back, either. That's what I call fairness."

The Devil conjures another massive fire orb. He gazes at the broken woman with one last look of pity before burning a thousand souls.

"No hard feelings, Leviathan. You signed a contract with the Devil... and one way or another, I always get my payback. Uuuuuhh!!!"

Satan hurls the fiery orb at Amelia's back, intending to smite her where she stands. The destructive ball of energy crashes against her body and explodes, blasting a small amount of nuclear energy in every direction.

Satan averts his eyes for a moment, shielding them from the white-hot light. Once it dims, he opens them again, only to nearly jump out of his skin!

The Black Witch, who he so easily dispatched earlier, now stands less than a foot away from him, a murderous look of rage in her eyes.

"You took Levvy from me." Amelia growls. **"Suffer the consequences."**

Before Satan can react, Amelia's hand snaps at his neck with a viper-like motion. She grabs the Devil by his throat and hoists him into the air, forcing Satan to attack her with everything he has. He unleashes the might of his Vectors, pummeling and bashing Amelia with all of his ethereal limbs.

However, those pitiful attacks merely glance off her skin, as if having struck the hardest set of dragonscale armor in the universe. She doesn't even blink as the water droplet-like blows rain on her.

Snap.

Amelia twists her wrist and shatters Satan's neck, killing him instantly. As the light fades from Satan's eyes, so too does the light from hers. Amelia's pupils turn pitch-black. She conjures the might of a dragon to engulf Satan's soul, forcibly placing the cruelest and most vicious slave contract on him that one could possibly imagine.

"Only once have I ever used this power..." Amelia hisses. "On that bastard, Arthur. I didn't have the power to take his soul at the time, but I do, now. And all it cost me was the life of my best friend in the whole universe. I will not kill you, DEVIL. I will make you suffer for all eternity as my undying SLAVE."

Despite suffering a sixty-second death, Satan's body still spasms, and his mouth lets out an animalistic scream of pain as Amelia sends a surge of draconic energy into his very soul. She continues torturing him for hours, all while staring the Devil dead in the eyes.

"From this day forward... all demons will be my **ENEMIES!**"

Lucifer turns to Belial, a smirk formed at the corner of her mouth. She enjoys the delicious look of pain on Belial's face while she watches her husband suffer the agony of a thousand deaths at Amelia's hands.

"Do you finally understand, whore?" Lucifer asks. "I led Satan to the Black Witch. I learned of Leviathan's existence through a slip-up she made, and I decided to pit the Devil against the former dragon. My third eye can pierce all illusions. I even managed to save that delicious moment for you! Ah, if only I had been able to show it to you sooner. But, who knows? Perhaps all these years of never knowing the answer have only made the truth even more torturous for you!"

Belial chokes back a sob. "You... you led Satan to his death... just like Ose said... but why, Lucifer? WHY?! Satan gave you control of the Hell of Blood! Even after all the resentments you both accrued, he never slighted you!"

"But he DID!" Lucifer shrieks. She walks over and presses her four-titted chest against Belial's, making sure to loom right in the succubus's face. "I should have been the one to lead demonkind! Satan stole that title from me! After that little shit disappeared for thousands of years, it was ME who saved our people from the clutches of despair! Satan never had the right to call himself our First Emperor!"

"You have always been a jealous bastard!" Belial cries. "Satan led our people out of Heaven! He brought us to the dragon, and he returned to destroy the angels during the War in Heaven! Ultimately, he led our people to total victory over our oppressors! How could you ever think he was unworthy?!"

Lucifer pulls away. She snorts contemptuously.

"All he ever had was a bit of good luck. He was lucky to receive the powers he did, while I achieved just as many feats as him with lesser strength! Truly, I am and always was the superior Emperor!"

Belial lowers her head. A look of deep sorrow washes over her expression. She even stops trying to fight against her restraints.

"You're so... empty. You are a hollow woman. An empty shell. You have never experienced the beauty of love. You only ever take, take, take from the people around you. You're a parasite, Lucifer. That is why your own son turned against you. All those years ago, nobody knew how or why you suddenly disappeared... but now I do. Gressil killed you because you only ever treated him as a tool. Ose, your favorite little girl, never loved you either. You were only a tool for her usage, just as she was for you."

Lucifer curls her upper lip, exposing her knife-like teeth. "Watch your mouth, Belial. My little girl means more to me than you could ever understand! Even after my

ungrateful son turned on me, my daughter has become a demoness far beyond the likes of you!"

Belial frowns. She stares at Lucifer for a moment, before shaking her head.

"You don't know, do you?"

"I don't know *what?*" Lucifer asks, leering toward Belial with a look of pure smugness.

"Ose died." Belial says. "And Bael is the one who killed her. Your daughter fell to a mere *Duke*."

"What?!" Lucifer asks, recoiling slightly. "You lie! There's no way that limp-dicked Duke of Pain could accomplish such a feat! My daughter is invincible!"

Belial's lips curve into a wry smile. "You don't have to believe my words, Lucifer. Look for yourself. I watched her die with my own eyes."

Lucifer's third eye flashes. She plays through Belial's memories in a flash, reading her mind as easily as if it were an open book.

"No, no, no!! It's not possible!" Lucifer shrieks. "Ose is mommy's little girl! She's perfect! PERFECT! Not a useless cavorting slut like you! I trained her every day! I molded her into a killing machine, just like me!"

"Hahaha... well, you didn't do a good enough job." Belial whispers. "In the end, you lost to Satan, and Ose lost to me. Like mother, like daughter. Both useless."

"AAAAHHH!!!"

Lucifer grabs the side of her head and yanks at her hair. Pure rage clouds every inch of her vision, making her overlook the fact that Ose would most likely revive as one of Mephisto's pawns.

Not that such a thought would help her. For Lucifer's precious baby girl to fall in battle is a blow that utterly crushes her sense of superiority. Lucifer staggers backward, fighting off the waves of hatred that wash over her mind as she replays every moment of her life, all the 'wasted' time she spent with Ose, while her precious little girl only ended up losing in the end.

"IT'S NOT FAIR!!" Lucifer screams. "She was supposed to be PERFECT!! Perfect-perfect-perfect!!!"

The illusory world momentarily destabilizes. With Lucifer's mind suffering continuous self-inflicted wounds, the seemingly unbreakable aspects of her Demonic Trance begin to fall apart, giving Belial a chance to escape.

The Second Emperor, while not particularly versed in soul manipulation, conjures what mental strength she has left to tear out of the bindings that once held her in place. She breaks away from the demonstone table, raises her fist, and storms directly at the Emperor of Providence.

"Hey, Lucy! This is for Satan! Eat shit and DIE!"

Part 314: End of Faith

General Chadwick and Corporal Hurent rush down the prison's corridors, turning left and right, going up several flights of stairs while five thousand exosuit-wearing troopers follow them.

"Contact lost with Lieutenant Samuel!" Hurent says. She checks her heads-up display and grimaces. "His life signs are erratic. He must have taken one hell of a hit!"

The distant sounds of thunder, caused by Belial and Lucifer's battle, suddenly goes quiet. Corporal Hurent's heart leaps into her throat as she imagines the worst.

"Sounds like someone won." Chadwick growls. "Let's hope it was our girl and not the other one!"

Directly behind the two humans, a minotaur wearing enchanted golden armor follows them, his greataxe held at the ready. Yamir, the head chef for Jason and Phoebe Hiro, readies himself for battle while shooting glances at both of the humans before him.

"You said that Lieutenant Samuel was injured?"

Chadwick nods. "According to his T-REX's sensors, the battle hasn't moved any closer to him, but his suit integrity has fallen below fifty percent."

"When we arrive, I will hold the line." Yamir says. "The rest of you should take Samuel and Belial, and flee. I will hold Gressil back."

"Don't be ridiculous," Chadwick snaps, shooting a quick glance behind himself while he runs. "If something happens to you, who will feed humanity's Hero and greatest inventor? You just make sure to keep up with the rest of us."

Yamir nods. "I will do as you command."

Two minutes later, the human army rounds the final corner. They screech to a halt upon arriving at Samuel's unconscious figure, but their eyes flick several hundred meters ahead, where, in the darkness, they observe Belial and Gressil in some sort of strange standoff. Gressil's second head gazes at her, its third eye faintly glowing red in the darkness. The two Emperors stare at each other silently, without moving, as if having some sort of unseen battle of the eyes.

One of the troopers raises his gun, but Chadwick pulls it back down. "Wait! We can't shoot Gressil, not with Belial between us and him. We might hit her in the crossfire."

The trooper frowns. "What are they doing, commander? It looks like they're just... staring at each other."

"How in the damnation should I know?" Chadwick sputters. "You know demons! There's probably some crazy magic bullshit going on. Let's not interfere unless it looks like Belial needs our help."

Hurent drops to one knee. She motions to a pair of Clinicians, then gestures toward Samuel's motionless body. "Fix this fellow up, then get him warped back to the Core!"

"Yes, Corporal!"

After confirming Samuel hasn't suffered any grievous injuries, the human army teleports him back to the Core, then returns to full alert, keeping all of their eyes locked on the Emperor of Chaos.

After five minutes, Chadwick begins to grind his teeth.

"What in the god-damn are those two *doing*? Are they trying to intimidate each other? I've never seen anything like it."

Corporal Hurent raises a sniper rifle and takes aim at Gressil's head. "General. I'm fully confident I can land a hit on the prison warden without hitting Belial. Permission to take the shot?"

"You might be confident, but I'm not..." Chadwick mutters. "If we hit Belial, she won't be able to use her healing magic to patch herself up. You know how important she is to Phoebe."

Hurent keeps the barrel of her rifle trained on Gressil's head. "Mmm. Alright. I'll wait for movement, then. In the meantime-"

"AAAAAAHHH!!!"

Gressil's second head suddenly screams with enough rage to scare the piss out of every human present. Corporal Hurent involuntarily flinches and squeezes the trigger, releasing a gauss round that rockets down the corridor at the speed of sound. Due to her fright, she screws up her aim, and the bullet whizzes harmlessly past Gressil's head, sending a sonic boom pulsing down the hallway with a loud *crack*!

"Hurent!" Chadwick shouts.

"Sorry! That scream scared the crap out of me!" Hurent apologizes.

At the same time, all hell breaks loose. Belial's fist snaps forward and blasts Lucifer's head, sending the Emperor of Chaos flying backward. An instant after her punch connects, Belial kicks off the floor and dashes after her opponent, opting to send a punch downward into Gressil's abdomen.

THUMP!!

Belial punches the Emperor of Chaos with all her strength, shattering over a dozen bones in his chest and battering him into the floor. Half a second later, she unloads another violent flurry of punches at the entombed prison warden, each blow crashing against his body to inflict terrible amounts of pain.

Boom-boom-boom!

Belial punches, kicks, and batters Gressil and Lucifer with the fury of an enraged widow. Each strike carries the full hatred she's accumulated over many eons, including all of the blame she once placed on herself for Satan's death.

"IT WAS YOU WHO KILLED HIM!" Belial roars. "I'LL RIP YOU TO FUCKING SHREDS, LUCIFER!!"

Unable to access her transformation magic, Belial can't change her fingers into claws to more easily slice into Gressil's abdomen, but she still manages to forcibly impale her fingers into his flesh and rip out huge chunks.

"Aaargh!" Lucifer screams. "Get off me, whore!"

The Emperor of Providence charges up an attack from her third eye, but the moment it fires, Belial shifts her entire body weight to the side, dodges the blast, and follows up with a vicious punch right to Lucifer's face.

THUMP!

Lucifer's vision goes blurry. For a brief moment, she slips unconscious.

In that instant, Gressil's eyes open to glare at Belial.

"Enough of this."

Before Belial can stop him, Gressil flicks a finger. His body disappears, teleporting from right underneath her feet.

The Emperor of Chaos reappears fifty meters away, the bloody wounds and gouged-out eyes on his chest making him appear three times more hideous than usual. He leans against the wall and coughs up huge wads of blood, glaring daggers at Belial.

"Ignorant female. If you wish to make mincemeat out of me, you'll have to do better than that. I am not nearly as fragile as *that woman*."

As always, Gressil never directly mentions his mother's name, opting to refer to her in the third person.

Belial lunges at him. "Do you only know how to run, Gressil?! Fight me, if you dare!"

The instant before Belial's punch connects with Gressil's chest, a flicker of movement appears beside her. Gressil materializes with his fist raised.

THUMP!

He blasts the side of Belial's head with a right hook, sending her hurtling to the side.

The moment the human troops see Belial's fortunes reverse, they take aim at Gressil and open fire.

A hailstorm of bullets rips down the corridor, catching Gressil off-guard. The prison-warden growls angrily as two dozen tank-piercing rounds tear into and out of his body, dealing brutal amounts of damage. He flickers out of reality again, but this time, doesn't reappear.

"You have done well this time, humans." Gressil says, his eerily calm voice floating through the Labyrinth's stale air. **"But now, you have truly angered me. I will leave you with a parting gift."**

Belial recovers from Gressil's unexpected punch. She climbs to her feet and shakes off the mild concussion, then glances around to look for him.

"Where did Gressil go?" Belial asks.

"I... I don't know. He might still be here," Chadwick says. "Or... he might have left?"

The humans swivel on their feet, cautiously checking every adjacent cell, the ceiling, and every corner, just in case Gressil might be lurking nearby. However, nobody finds anything.

Suddenly, Yamir stands up a little straighter, then sniffs the air.

The minotaur's expression turns ugly. He turns to look in Belial's direction, but his eyes gaze well past her, into the furthest reaches of Faith's End.

"Everyone! Enemies are on the way... they're... Hellhounds... and something else! I do not recognize their smell!"

Belial turns around. Her demonic vision allows her to see through even the blackest of nights, so she easily manages to pick out a flood of approaching creatures skittering on the walls, ceiling, and floors.

Her heart leaps into her throat.

"It's the Grez! Gressil is sending his minions to take us out! Everyone, run for the exit, hurry!"

The Grez, each one a fearful monster with the same strength as a typical Demon Baron, race toward the humans at alarming speeds, screeching and chittering in some bug-like language, while a massive force of several hundred Hellhounds joins them.

The lead Hellhound, a truly monstrous female with fifty eyes on her head and claws capable of ripping through titanium, barrels ahead of the pack and roars at Belial.

"BETRAYERRR!"

Belial doesn't recognize the Hellhound, but she easily picks up on the distinct hatred in its voice. Despite possessing more than enough strength to take the huge dire wolf down, Belial doesn't dare to face it down along with so many other monsters in unison. She turns tail and flees, while the Labyrinth begins to shake under the stampede.

"Head for the exits!" Belial repeats. She continues to run, finding that her magical energy hasn't returned yet. "Gressil must be somewhere nearby! Don't let down your guard!"

What follows is a terrifying chase that leaves sweat pouring down the backs of the humans, Belial, and the lone minotaur, Yamir.

Yamir and Belial take up the rear. Whenever the flood of monsters gets too close, Belial punches the walls to collapse the Labyrinth behind her, but this makeshift barricade of earthen debris only slows the Grez down for a few moments before they burst through, screeching all the while.

Up ahead, one of the human commandos screams in fright. A pair of Grez appears from a corridor in front of him and barrels directly into the wall of exosuit-wearing

soldiers without fear. Before anyone can react, the two Grez impale and eviscerate half a dozen men and woman, killing them on the spot. By the time other soldiers turn their guns on the ambushers, the Grez manage to kill another dozen humans.

"Backup! We need backup!" Chadwick shouts.

Belial stays in the back, but Yamir releases a roar and leaps over the heads of the humans in the tightly packed corridor. Using the magic inside his ancestral armor, he runs sideways along the wall, raises his greataxe, and dives down onto one of the Grez.

The minotaur's blade chops into a weak point in the Grez's armor, drawing a small amount of blood. However, it instantly spins around and lunges at him, stabbing its two forward-facing mandibles against Yamir's armor.

Corporal Hurent takes aim with her sniper rifle. In the blink of an eye, her suit assists her aim to point directly at the bloodied wound Yamir left. She squeezes the trigger, and a powerful gauss round fires into the Grez's neck.

The monster doesn't even get to utter one last cry of pain. Its spine ends up severed, and its final attack merely crumples against Yamir's armor.

Chadwick rallies his men. He spreads them around the second remaining Grez, pinning it down and preventing anyone else from taking it on alone. He coordinates with Yamir and Hurent to kill the second one, but with its dying breath, it fires both of its mandibles from its body, impaling two of the Clinicians. They both perish instantly, with not even their exosuits managing to protect them.

Chadwick spares only a single glance for the fallen. His commander module transmits data to his HUD, allowing him to see that in just the last five minutes, twenty soldiers have died.

"Keep moving!" Chadwick barks. "You, grab Private Jacob's body! And you, grab Private Leera! Let's move! Don't you dare leave your comrades for these bastards to eat! They deserve honorable deaths!"

The group's forward momentum resumes, but having wasted so much time killing the two Grez, the humans become acutely aware that their enemies have likely split up and circled around to encircle them.

"Two Grez shit all over us..." Chadwick mutters, keeping his voice low so as not to demoralize his subordinates. "But if ten, twenty, or even more show up... I can't see us

making it out of here alive."

As they flee, the humans' exosuits detect noises up ahead. They slow to a stop, and Chadwick grimaces.

"Fuck."

A T-shaped junction splits off to the right and left, and from both directions, the sounds of screeching and howling come barreling toward the humans.

In an instant, Chadwick's life flashes before his eyes.

He remembers the time he spent with his wife and child... before the Great War. He served under a Norwegian King named Haakon and fought honorably under his command... until the Sphinx, Bahamut, ensnared him with her Riddle Magic and stole him away.

Chadwick grits his teeth. He stands up a little straighter as a surge of pride rushes through his veins.

"Look sharp, men! These monsters have us surrounded! Our goal is no longer to escape, but to attack in all directions! Cut Gressil's rats down, and give no quarter!"

Behind the company, Belial lashes out against the lead Hellhound, a truly massive wolf standing twelve feet tall and twenty feet long. The savage monster towers over her, oppressing her with its sheer size.

"You attacked my mother!" The Hellhound roars. "I am Maelgamish, Lucifer's mightiest beast! Remember my name when I send you to the Great Beyond!"

The Hellhound swings her claws at Belial. The succubus dives to the side, narrowly evading the attack and causing Maelgamish's talons to rake the walls. Each claw leaves a six-inch gash in the Labyrinth's earthen surface.

Again and again, Maelgamish slashes and bites at Belial, while the smaller Hellhounds and several dozen Grez surround her and cut her off from the human army. To Belial's alarm, the Hellhound leader possesses not only a remarkable amount of cunning, but superior tactical control of the Grez. She lines them up to deliberately blockade Belial from easily rushing to her friends' aid, while taking her sweet time pinning the former Second Emperor down.

Several mutated Hellhounds vomit balls of acid, fire, and poison at Belial. One particularly acrid poison-ball explodes into fumes beside her, gagging Belial and forcing

her to retreat into a nearby cell. This makeshift chokepoint doesn't protect her for long, as Maelgamish tears the door out and flings it away before snapping her jaws into the room to try and bite Belial in half.

"Come here, woman!" Maelgamish howls. "I want to taste your flesh!"

The distant sounds of human screams causes Belial's heart to skip a beat. She pounces at the cell walls and smashes her fist into them. She breaks through, only to find seven Grez waiting for her in the adjacent cell.

"Shit!"

Belial curses audibly as the seven monsters pounce on her and begin ripping their claws into her flesh. Belial screams and fights back, but each claw tears her clothes and skin, spraying blood in every direction.

In a fit of rage, Belial begins swinging her fists wildly. Her fortunes reverse as she smashes right through the incredible dermal armor protecting the Grez. She crushes them with ease, splatters their brains, and tears them apart. However, in the ten seconds it takes her to kill Gressil's hellspawn, a sense of danger prickles at the back of her neck. She spins around just in time to see Maelgamish's claw rushing at her back.

Slash!

"Aaaeeii!"

Belial screams as the Hellhounds paw rips off her left arm, tears across her ribs and waist, and sends her flying backward. She slams against the wall and momentarily loses consciousness. When she blinks her eyes open again, her heart jolts in fright, as the black-maned Hellhound pounces at her, its jaws open wide.

"No!"

The instant before Maelgamish can end Belial's life, a figure flickers in front of her, nearly moving faster than her eyes can follow.

Thunk.

Jason Hiro reaches out his palm and casually grabs Maelgamish by her nose. He halts the seemingly unstoppable Hellhound in her tracks, making her jerk to a violent halt as if having slammed against a steel wall.

For a brief moment, invisible question marks pop up over the Hellhound's head.

Then, the Hero balls up his right fist, rears it back, and socks the giant dire wolf right in her nose!

THUMP!

Like a wave crashing against a sand-castle, the Hero's punch blasts the Hellhound backward. Maelgamish flies fifty feet away, crashing into the opposite wall of the previous cell. The massive mutt jumps to her feet purely due to adrenaline, then staggers weakly and flops to the floor.

"Aaoo..."

Belial's heart pounds like a drum, blocking out even the pain wracking her body.

"Jason... Jason... oh, thank god... you... you saved me..."

She struggles to speak to the man before her, while he continues to keep his back to her. After a moment, he turns around, but his appearance makes Belial blink twice.

"...Eh?"

Something about the Hero's face doesn't quite seem right. As if his appearance were recreated by somebody with only ninety percent of the Creator's original capability. Rather than looking like Jason, this fellow looks more like a sloppy-copy of the Hero.

"Jason?" Belial asks, not sure who the hell she's even looking at. "Is... is that you?"

'Jason' says nothing. He simply reaches toward Belial, grabs her right arm, and pulls her to her feet. For a brief moment, Belial almost feels afraid of this strange, alien-like Jason, until she remembers a specific *something*.

"That's right! I have seen you before! Aren't you that weird copy-Jason he put outside the Core? That thing he made to protect humanity? There are two of you, right?"

The copy-Jason still remains silent, as if incapable of speaking. He half-drags Belial outside, where she realizes the sounds of distant screams have all but stopped. When Belial and the copy-Jason arrive outside, she blinks in surprise, finding all of the Grez and Hellhounds either dead or long-gone, having fled for their lives. A second copy-Jason stands guard beside the humans, mutely assessing their injuries without taking any action to help them.

Belial sighs in relief.

"So it is them... but... why don't they speak?"

When she rejoins the humans, Belial finds that, to her dismay, almost a thousand more soldiers have died, while a further five hundred have suffered terrible injuries. In the few short minutes Maelgamish pinned her down inside that cell, the Grez surrounded the army and cut through them without hesitation.

Chadwick leans against a wall and coughs. He lowers his helmet, revealing exhausted eyes and a bloodied nose.

"Fuck. I thought we were goners. Lucky for us, the Hero sent these... *things* here. I still don't even know what they are."

Belial leans heavily against the copy-Jason who saved her. She sighs and closes her eyes.

"Me neither. But at least they saved us... most of us."

"If only they had made it here sooner..." Corporal Hurent mutters. "We lost too many good men and women."

"Help me tend to the wounded," Chadwick says. "We lost almost all of our Clinicians. The rest are short-handed. I swear those Grez must have targeted them. They seemed much smarter than the last time we fought..."

Belial frowns. "They *were* smarter. Hold on, just one moment."

The succubus pulls away from her copy-Jason and steps back into the cell she just left. When she looks inside, her expression turns ugly.

The Hellhound leader, Maelgamish, is nowhere in sight.

"...Lucifer." Belial hisses. "Damn you. I should have killed that mutt when I had the chance."

She returns to the wounded soldiers and sits down, allowing the few remaining Clinicians to patch her up.

An hour later, the human army picks up their dead and carts them out of Faith's End.

This time, Gressil's minions *don't* pursue them.

Part 315: Rescue Success

Tarus II, at the western side of the Fortress of Retribution, in the Hospital Division.

Thousands of wounded soldiers lay in makeshift hospital beds assembled not through Jason Hiro's Wordsmithing, but through his wife's molecular assemblers. After returning from Faith's End with the angel, Phoebe Hiro quickly got to work with her assemblers, building simple but comfortable and sterile hospital beds.

Once Jason returned, he assisted her by wielding Camael's Cube to conjure a massive square hospital structure with separated rooms for all the potential patients. Now, Belial and the other injured troopers lay on their beds, either groaning in pain or simply flinching silently while sparks of agony flicker through their nervous systems.

Jason steps into Belial's room, alone, and closes the door. He shoots a sympathetic glance at her missing right arm and grimaces.

"Damn. What the hell happened after I left? I thought we might lose a few people, but more than a thousand men and women ended up dying. Phoebe's barely holding it together."

The Wordsmith sets a chair beside Belial's bed, takes a seat, and leans over her missing arm. After concentrating his mind for a moment, he utters a Word of Power. **"Regenerate."**

Belial's eyes loll back into her head for several seconds as a fresh new arm regrows from her mutilated stump. The pain of regrowing a new arm mixes with the tingling sensations of ten thousand spiders crawling inside her blood vessels.

Once the succubi's arm fully regenerates, she coughs weakly and sags back against the pillow.

"Ugh... it was Lucifer. She turned out to be... stronger than I expected. She used one of her signature abilities on me, something called the Demonic-"

"Demonic Trance," Jason interrupts. "I'm familiar with it."

Belial blinks in confusion. "You are? But how?"

"Solomon's visions. He showed me all sorts of stuff from the Ancient Era," Jason says. "What happened after that?"

Belial nods, then explains to Jason all the happenings after he left. The more she talks, the more thoughtful and contemplative he becomes.

After Belial finishes, the Wordsmith looks away. He gazes at the empty wall and rubs his chin, falling deep into thought.

"Interesting." Jason mutters. "I greatly underestimated Gressil's abilities."

"What do you mean?" Belial asks. "I fought Lucifer, not Gressil."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." Jason says, turning his attention back to the former Second Emperor. "Gressil does indeed possess illusion abilities, though to what extent, I can't be certain. My mind-wife wasn't able to watch what happened as that strange anti-energy aura put her and Gabriel into some sort of induced coma, but she and I started talking after I returned. I'm now eighty percent certain that Gressil is somehow nullifying magic in a vast radius around himself. More importantly, he, Lucifer, and whoever else might be in his body are immune to this nullification effect."

Belial frowns. "Are you kidding me? Faith's End is massive, Jason. My magic went inert from the moment we entered its corridors until the moment we left. I've heard of area-type abilities, but that huge of a radius is unthinkable!"

"The facts tell the truth," Jason says. "Of course, Gressil himself might not be the one outputting the nullification. Don't forget, Ose is his sister. Maybe she made him a device that nullifies magic. Or, hell, maybe there's some special power binding Faith's End to which he's become immune. That's why I'm only eighty percent certain. It might be that some part of Faith's End itself nullifies mana, but Gressil has adapted to its effect over time."

Belial shifts uncomfortably. "I really hope you're wrong, Jason. If Gressil can nullify magic in a massive radius around himself, he's your worst enemy. The moment he gets near you, you won't be able to Wordsmith. Not only that, but he's terrifyingly strong, too. I would absolutely wallop him in a fist-fight, sure, and it wouldn't even be close... but if I have no abilities at my disposal, while he can teleport around and take me by surprise, I won't stand much of a chance."

Jason flicks his eyes around the hospital room.

"Illusion powers are stronger than I thought. You can deceive a person's senses, hide your position, and strike from the shadows. When coupled with temporal abilities,

particularly teleportation, they become downright frightening. Gressil isn't just a demon, he's like some sort of sick, sadistic horror monster. The moment you detect his presence, you're already too late, and you can't escape."

Jason pauses for a moment, then nods, as if hearing someone else speak. "That's a good point. Phoebe says- hold on, one second. **Projection. Projection.**"

The Wordsmith utters two Words of Power, causing his mind-wife and Gabriel to materialize as ghostly figures on his right and left. The Archangel of Power finds his head sticking through the roof, given his immense height. He opts to sit on the floor, bringing his head to the same height as Jason's.

"As I was saying," Spirit-Phoebe explains, "It's not all dire. Technology still works against Gressil. You said some of our troopers managed to shoot him. Therefore, we can probably prepare countermeasures for if we have to fight him again. Maybe we can even detect him in advance."

"That's going to be difficult," Belial says. "I can't detect Gressil's aura at all. Not only does that anti-magic field dampen magical powers, but it also dampens my demonic senses. It makes Gressil invisible to me. You shouldn't be shocked if he can also evade other forms of detection."

Spirit Phoebe sits on the bed beside Belial. She lightly touches the succubus's regrown arm, but her finger passes through Belial's skin.

"I'll figure something out," Phoebe says. "Never underestimate the power of human technology."

"I'm sure you will," Belial says, flashing Phoebe a charming smile.

After discussing Gressil a bit more, Belial changes the topic.

"Jason, what exactly *are* those strange clones of yours? Can they Wordsmith, too?"

The Hero shakes his head. "No. They're not actually clones of me in any way, shape, or form. They're more like... chimeras. Or constructs. I guess you could call them Black Hole Constructs."

Belial stares at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I used an idea Spirit-Phoebe gave me to make them," Jason explains. "They are not truly biological beings. Rather, they started out as self-forming black holes that tore apart a bunch of monsters in the Core. After absorbing all their flesh and DNA, I changed the

'Singularities' to assume a human form, and ended up making them look like me out of convenience. They aren't Wordsmiths, nor are they human, demon, or even monster. They're just... *things*."

"Jason gave them a minor form of sentience," Spirit-Phoebe adds. "They will follow basic orders, but they don't need to eat, sleep, or do anything else. Their bodies are insanely durable, potentially at the level of your average Demon Duke, but they can't go much further beyond that. They're useful bodyguards for the Core."

"Wow..." Belial mutters. "Would have been nice to have them when the Core was first attacked. Can you make more?"

Jason nods slowly. "I can. But... their creation process is a bit gruesome. They need a lot of... living flesh."

"So?" Belial scoffs. "Just Wordsmith some flesh, then."

Jason shakes his head. "It will lead to inferior constructs. Based on the mathematical diagrams Phoebe showed me, entities which have existed and formed a soul naturally have more potent 'life energy' than things I summon with my Wordsmithing. Technically, this includes Hope."

Belial scrunches up her face. "Wait, are you saying Hope isn't a living, breathing person like you?"

"No, not quite." Jason continues. "I don't fully understand the details... but at the moment of Hope's creation, he was simply an exact copy of me. The longer he continued to live, the more life energy he gained until he became fully sentient. If I wanted to Wordsmith creatures, monsters, demons, or whatever else into existence, only to consume them for the sake of these Black Hole Constructs... I'd have to let them live normal lives for a few years. I'd still end up killing sentient creatures, in the end."

Belial gazes at the Hero for a moment before averting her eyes.

"Well. I guess it's better this way."

"What do you mean?" Jason asks.

"I thought you'd completely lost all your morals after Daisy's death... but deep down, you still don't love killing."

At the mention of his daughter's name, Jason's eye twitches, but he doesn't otherwise display any outward emotion.

"Of course I don't. I don't enjoy any of *this*. I have only decided to do what I absolutely must. If that means exterminating ninety percent of the demons, then so be it. That doesn't mean I want to create an army of chimera-monsters."

Gabriel glances to his side at the Hero, then looks away, remaining silent.

"So. How is Hope?" Belial asks, changing the topic once again. "Have you... healed him?"

"I have." Jason answers. "But he fell into a temporary coma. According to Doctor Fathy, he's suffered violent trauma to his whole body, but especially his mind. It might be a day or two before he awakens. Amelia is with him now."

"And what about that angel we rescued from Faith's End?" Belial asks. "How is she?"

"Well, she's awake, which is probably better than Hope's condition," Jason replies. "But she won't say a word to anyone. Phoebe's with her, now, trying to offer her some comfort."

Belial nods. She shoots a suspicious glance at Gabriel.

"You there, Archangel. This angel we've rescued. Do you know her?"

Gabriel's eyes meet Belial's.

"At the height of angelic power, the number of Lazarites in Heaven numbered more than two hundred million. I barely knew a fraction of them."

"Right." Belial says. "But what about this girl, specifically? It seems odd that Gressil would simply have some random girl locked away so tightly in his prison cell. Why her? Her identity must be somewhat important."

"No Lazarite ever stood above the lowliest pureblood," Gabriel says. "Be they resurrected kings, senators, politicians, or popes. The mightiest Lazarite was little more than a disposable soldier compared to the precious few purebloods left after the War in Heaven."

Belial's gaze hardens. "That's strange. I asked if you knew her, twice, yet both times, you dodged the question. Come now, Archangel, it's a simple yes or no answer. Do you know the woman or *not*?"

Jason and Spirit-Phoebe both shoot Gabriel looks of surprise. The Archangel's expression remains aloof, but his eyes imperceptibly flick away, avoiding Belial's gaze.

"I cannot say."

Before Belial can speak, Phoebe pipes up. "So you *do* know? Who is she, then? Why are you so tight-lipped?"

Gabriel shakes his head.

"'Tis not my place to say. That sister... has suffered immeasurably. Verily, she hath earned the right to a lifetime of peace. Please do not aggrieve her. She is a good woman."

"What's her name?" Jason asks.

"If thou wisheth to know, thou must asketh her thyself." Gabriel says.

No matter how much the other three push or prod Gabriel, he doesn't budge. He remains tight-lipped, making them wonder just who, exactly, the mutilated girl they found in Faith's End might be.

For a brief moment, Jason considers using his Wordsmithing to look into Gabriel's memories. The Archangel of Power turns his head to look at the Wordsmith right as those thoughts cross Jason's mind.

"Hero. Thou claimeth thyself to be a righteous man. Dost thou thinketh me a servant of evil? If I choose not to speak of my sister's identity, then forcibly taking that information from me would violate every principle of goodness. Why should a woman who has suffered so much be forced to take up an identity she may not want any longer? Has she not suffered enough?"

Jason's eye twitches. He looks away from Gabriel and nods.

"Alright. Have it your way, then. If the girl tells us who she is, then that will mean we've earned her trust. And if not, then that's fine too. She *is* the last living angel, after all."

Gabriel faintly nods. "Mm."

After a few more minutes of chatting, Belial swings her legs out of bed and stands up.

"Alright. Enough talking. I want to see how Hope and the angel girl are doing, not to mention all the injured soldiers. Don't tell me you came here to chat with me while they suffered out there?"

"I figured you could take a little pain," Jason says. "So I came here to heal you afterward. Everyone else is already good to go."

Belial wrinkles her nose, then lightly socks Jason's arm.

"Leaving me for last? *Dick*."

Jason chuckles. "I'm glad you came out alright, Belial. If I hadn't sent my constructs..."

Belial's expression softens.

"Lucifer's hellhound would have killed me. Thanks, Jason. For a moment, when you suddenly appeared in front of me, I even felt the same way I used to around Satan."

"What? You wanna gimme a big kiss?" Jason asks.

"Well, I *am* a succubus. But we'll see. I still like Phoebe more than you!"

Jason glances at Spirit-Phoebe. She smirks triumphantly, as if having won some unspoken competition.

"Fair enough," Jason says. "I like her more, too."

"Everyone does!" Belial laughs.

Deep inside a hidden alcove nestled within Faith's End.

"Worthless brat!" Lucifer shrieks.

The Emperor of Providence swings her fist into Gressil's face, knocking both of them off their feet. The Emperor of Chaos whimpers in pain as he tries to protect his head with his two right arms, but Lucifer's two left arms yank his aside and smack him around while she lets loose her anger.

"You let my baby girl die!!" Lucifer screams. "My pretty little Ose! Your perfect sister, far superior to the likes of you! You worthless shit! How dare you fail as her brother?!"

Gressil whimpers. "Mother, please, she's not dead! She's... she's been resurrected in Bael's body!"

"WHAT?!" Lucifer roars. "That fat-ass blob of idiot-soup? Are you trying to piss me off even more? How could my precious little girl deserve to wallow in that lard-tub's nasty, fat, disgusting body?! She deserves better!!"

Gressil winces. "I... I know you are angry, mother, but it's not all bad. Bael's body is invincible. Ose still possesses all her latent powers, so she's actually stronger-"

"No excuses!" Lucifer roars, slapping Gressil's face once again. "Her body is no longer perfect, and that's that! My poor sweet baby is trapped in an ugly, flabby, sack of shit, and there's nothing I can do to help her! Oh, such sadness! Such woe!"

Lucifer continues to scream and rant for a while, before turning her attention back to Gressil.

"This is all your fault! How could you let Ose die?! I ought to kill you right here and now, brat!"

"Mother... you must try to calm down..." Gressil whispers. "Y-you're a Demon Emperor, so surely, you should think of your dignity-"

WHAM!

Lucifer blasts Gressil in the face, making both of them stumble against a wall.

"No more excuses from you!" Lucifer shrieks. "I can't stand the sound of your grating voice! You're like a stupid puppy that won't stop barking! Not a cute one, like my Hellhounds, but an ugly, dumb, shitty little Chihuahua!"

As Lucifer screams at Gressil, a faint look of rage spreads across his face. The entire right side of his body shakes and trembles as he struggles against an ancient fear and hatred boiling within his stomach.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" Lucifer continues. "That's what you are! An insignificant little moron who only plays with his stupid butterflies! You're no demon, you're a chicken wearing a demon's skin! A disgrace!"

The more she rants, the more Gressil's rage boils.

In an instant, his eyes snap open.

The Emperor of Chaos lunges at his mother and grabs her by the neck. He smashes her head against the wall with one hand, then uses his other as a bludgeon to repeatedly beat and batter her face, over and over.

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUP!!!"

Gressil roars in a voice filled with unending malice and hatred. He completely overtakes Lucifer in that moment, beating her so badly that some of her teeth fly out. His mother lifts her arms to try and fight back, but they fail to respond, overpowered by the energy flowing through Gressil's side of their body.

Again and again, Gressil rattles and shakes the Labyrinth with his punches, pulverizing her head as if it were nothing more than a punching bag made of feathers. He beats Lucifer so badly that, within just a couple of minutes, her head becomes a misshapen lump of flesh and bone, unrecognizable to anyone who knew its previous appearance.

"YOU NEVER LOVED ME!" Gressil screams. "I DESERVED HAPPINESS TOO, YOU WICKED WITCH! I AM NOT INFERIOR! YOU ARE! THAT'S WHY I KILLED YOU! I'LL KILL YOU AGAIN! I'LL RIP YOU TO PIECES!!"

Finally, with one last, violent spurt of rage, Gressil jams his fingers into Lucifer's neck. He impales her throat with all his strength, grabs onto her spinal cord, and squeezes, shattering it to powder.

An instant later, Gressil yanks his hand back, tears her head off his shoulders, and hurls it against the far wall.

"AHHHH!!"

Gressil bellows at her severed head, lifts his foot, and stomps down.

Splat.

He crushes Lucifer's head without a shred of mercy, ending her existence right then and there.

Several long seconds after, Gressil's blood-tinted vision loses some of its redness. He pants heavily, gasping for breath while gazing at the mashed-up remains of his mother's head.

Finally he sags back against the wall and sinks to the floor, ignoring the blood pouring from her severed neck.

He says nothing.

His countenance becomes despondent.

Silently, he stares ahead, while a wave of exhaustion overtakes him.

"I always hated you. I still do. Why... why can I never rid myself of you... why did the Creator put me into your claws... why did he meld us together? Did I do something reprehensible to deserve this fate?"

As Gressil speaks, the bloody stump beside his head begins to shift and morph. Slowly but surely, a new head regrows from the missing one's place. Lucifer's face takes shape as she regenerates in full, returning to her former appearance.

However, she does not scream or rant. Instead, her head lolls forward, and she falls asleep, leaving Gressil with that same silence, the only time he can ever feel at peace.

The Emperor of Chaos shivers. A tear streaks down his face as he rocks back and forth.

"I just want to get rid of her. I hate her. I can't stand her... yet nothing I do works. I'm trapped."

His pupils dilate.

"You lied to me. You said if I did as you said, I could get rid of her. But it didn't work. It made us... *one*. Why did you lie to me? Why did you whisper those false words in my ear? Were you only using me, from the very beginning?"

Gressil's teeth chatter. He numbly gazes at the bloody puddle on the ground, feeling a deep sense of emptiness in his heart.

"Don't even speak to me. You lie. You *always* lie. You can't see the future at all. You just like torturing me. Well, I've had enough of you. I only care about *me*, now. I want to watch everyone *else* suffer. I want them all to experience Chaos. That's what the world deserves... after what it did to me."

The prison warden's eyes harden.

"That's what they *all* deserve."

Part 316: The Glyphmancer's Game

Hell Harbor, at the epicenter of a scorched battlefield.

Emperor Yumagi, the Glyphmancer, levitates off the ground. He slowly floats up into the sky, facing across from Archangel Uriel and her two construct-brothers. Multiple beads of light shine on his forehead, each one telling the tale of a pre-activated Tarot Card augmenting his abilities... or perhaps waiting to be cast.

"My, my, my..." Yumagi says, as he sweeps his eyes around the ravaged world. "Look at all the damage you've done in just twenty short minutes. You angels are all so uncivilized."

Uriel points one of her light-spears at Yumagi. "Are any others of thy kind coming? I have been hoping to see more bloodskin Emperors, yet they continue to hide behind trees or lurk in the shadows. And now, one imbecile actually dares to face three Archangels alone. I know not whether thou art bold, arrogant or foolhardy, but I suspect a combination of all three."

Yumagi gently runs his fingers through his pretty white hair. "To defeat a few half-dead Archangels, I alone am enough. Of course, three against one is hardly a fair battle, so why don't we start by laying a few ground rules, hm?"

Suddenly, he pulls his hand away from his hair and flicks his fingers, causing a Platinum-colored Tarot Card to appear in his grasp. This movement, as if he had pulled it from his ear, gives the technique a street magician feeling, catching Uriel and her brothers off-guard.

"Pharaoh's Insight, **Evoke!**"

A flash of light ignites on Yumagi's forehead. His jewelry trembles for a moment before a sphere of golden light explodes from his body and rockets outward in a huge radius, traveling all directions at once. In the blink of an eye, it covers several miles of Hell Harbor's surface, causing every demon, angel, vampire, and monster within its radius to flinch reflexively.

Once the light fades away, Uriel frowns. She looks left and right, yet notices no obvious changes. "What...?"

Michael appears just as confused, but Raphael doesn't. The Archangel of Wisdom's expression becomes ugly.

"Soul shackles! That demon placed some sort of restriction on our souls!"

Yumagi smiles. "Indeed, I did. I don't like an unfair battle, you see, so I've placed some limitations on our battle. Don't worry, unlike you unruly *pigeons*, this Emperor is an impartial demon who only fights fairly."

Uriel gnashes her teeth. "A lie if I've ever heard one! Ahhh!"

She rockets toward Yumagi and stabs her lances at his chest, but surprisingly, Yumagi doesn't move at all. He merely looks away and winces, tensing his body up as those holy energy-laden spears impale his stomach and tear through his back.

"Aaargh!"

Yumagi falls away from the spears and plummets toward the ground, where he hits it with a *bang!* The other Emperors gasp in horror as Uriel raises her spears once again.

"That stupid imbecile!" Emperor Fae yells. "What is Yumagi doing, playing games with an Archangel? She'll rip him apart!"

Uriel lifts her spears above her head and prepares to charge at Yumagi again, but unexpectedly, her body remains rooted in place. She continues to hold her spears high, but for some reason, no matter how hard she tries, she fails to move.

"Nnn! What in Heaven's name?! Brother! I can't move! Something's wrong!"

Yumagi, laying on the ground, stands up and clutches the bloody wound on his stomach.

"Cough... cough... yes, that's right, Archangel. You didn't let me speak the rules first, so now you've trapped yourself until I make my move. Tsk, tsk. You truly are a moronic blowhard."

After shooting Uriel a sly grin, Yumagi touches one of the glowing red dots on his forehead.

"You attacked me, and I didn't defend. I activate my trap card, Bedeviled Naga!"

A blur of blackened, shadowy demonic power engulfs Yumagi. Instantly, his grievous wounds heal, restoring him back to pristine condition. At the same time, one of the glowing dots on his forehead fades away, leaving him with a dozen others.

Uriel fights with all her strength, but her body doesn't move an inch. No matter how hard she tries, she fails to lower her arms and remains stuck with her spear held high.

"What devilry is this?" Uriel asks, clearly shocked by whatever hex Yumagi has cast upon her. "It cannot hold me forever, bloodskin! My Archangel soul is far stronger than thine!"

Yumagi chuckles. He levitates into the air once more, taking up a position some fifty feet in front of Uriel.

"Hehehe. Yes, indeed, your soul is quite powerful. But the Pharaoh's Insight does not care about one's mind, body, or soul. It balances the scales so that everyone has the opportunity to properly show their skills."

Slowly, leisurely, Yumagi flicks his fingers again, causing another card to appear in his grasp. He momentarily frowns, then tosses it away, causing it to explode into particles of red light. After that, he resumes speaking.

"If you weren't a complete idiot, you might have waited for your brother to investigate the restrictions on your Soul Shackles. Ah, but I shall magnanimously explain the rules for you now, even after you so rudely attacked me like the dumb brute you are."

He continues. "The rules are simple, really. Once someone makes a move, they cannot make another until everyone else in the battle has made their move. We take turns, you see? It's so much better than some speedster beating the devil out of someone and them being unable to fight back. It puts us all on a nice, fair, level playing field. Now that you have performed your first attack, Uriel, your brothers may make their moves. As for me, my turn has not yet ended, for I merely activated a pre-planned effect which took place before the restriction went up."

Uriel's scowl deepens. "We must... take turns?! What sort of absurd nonsense is this, bloodskin? I need not abide by any rules thou hath placed upon me!"

"Oh, but you *do*," Yumagi says, as a sinister grin crosses his face. "These restrictions will remain until one of us defeats the other. And of course, if I defeat you, I will destroy your body, and those of your brothers. If you defeat me, you may destroy my body, as well. A fair trade, if I don't say so myself."

"Demons know nothing of fairness," Uriel snaps. "All of thy people art liars, deceivers, and jackals."

Yumagi's grin fades away, and in its place, a placid look of disgust replaces it.

"Coming from the likes of an Archangel, that is an insult I cannot tolerate."

The Glyphmancer shoots a look toward Michael and Raphael.

"Come then, you two; It's your turn to act. But be careful, for you only get one chance to end this Emperor's life."

"One chance, *indeed*," Michael snarls. The Archangel of Courage raises his sword and flaps his wings.

"Wait!" Raphael says. "Brother, thou-"

Raphael fails to stop Michael's momentum. The Archangel of Courage dives toward Yumagi with his sword held at the ready. In the blink of an eye, he slashes horizontally, and his blade finds its mark, instantly beheading the Glyphmancer!

"Damned bloodskin!" Michael roars. "Thy games mean nothing to me!"

He slows to a stop and spins to face his opponent once again. However, just before Michael can raise his weapon, his body freezes mid-movement, and he becomes bound by the same restriction holding Uriel in place.

In that moment, Yumagi's head falls from his shoulders, but one of the lights on his forehead dims, and a wave of shadow travels from his body to grab his head, place it back atop his shoulders, and instantly heal the wound.

The Glyphmancer swallows heavily. He rubs his fingers across the place where Michael slashed and shoots Michael a wry grin.

"Impressive speed, Archangel," Yumagi says. "But speed alone will never defeat me. Since you separated my head from my shoulders, Shadow Bind put it back in its rightful place. You activated yet another of my trap cards."

Michael frowns deeply. "Twice, thou hath lost thy life, but the number of lights on thy forehead hath also dimmed. I need only slay thy frail body eleven times more to end thy existence!"

"Perhaps." Yumagi replies, his tone mysterious.

Raphael motions with his hands. An instant later, he casts a wide-area illusion spell, one which teleports Uriel and Michael away from their current positions. At the same time, twenty-five copies of Uriel, of Michael, and of Raphael appear all across the

battlefield. Uriel's copies remain frozen in place with her weapon held overhead, while Michael's stand at the ready, with his sword half-held in an attacking stance.

The Archangel of Wisdom, on the other hand, levitates in place, each of his twenty-five copies merely crossing their arms to look down upon the Glyphmancer.

"Thy abilities are quite curious," Raphael says, all of his clones speaking in unison. "But this old man has observed many strange and frightening powers in his life. My vision remains just as acute today as ten and twenty eons ago, demon. Thy Soul Shackles are far from invincible, especially as they bind thee to the same limitations as we."

A flicker of doubt crosses Yumagi's face. He glances at each of Raphael's clones, trying to pinpoint which one is the real Archangel. In the end, he fails, making his eyes twitch.

"Clever, Archangel of Wisdom. But now that the three of you have made your moves, I can make mine."

"Oh?" Uriel says. "Twice, thou didn't activate an ability to heal thy slain self, yet still, thou claimeth thou hath a turn to take?"

"Funny you ask," Yumagi says, his smile returning in full force. "Any cards I played before the Pharaoh's Insight activated haven't been bound by the restrictions. Of course, if you had prepared any abilities before, then you would be able to activate them out of turn, too. That's why my rules are fair."

"A game where one side knows the rules in advance well before the other players, and who is able to make preparations before them, is no fair game at all," Raphael chides. "But worry not. This old man is well known for his magnanimity. He knows the young and stupid must sometimes cheat if they wish to beat their grandfather in a 'friendly' game."

"I do not cheat!" Yumagi shouts, momentarily losing his cool. "The rules are fair! They bind me, and they bind you!"

All of Raphael's clones avert their eyes.

"So thou claimeth."

"Bastardly Archangel! I have given you the courtesy of explaining the rules!" Yumagi shouts, all but blowing his top. "From here on out, I won't give you that luxury! Let's see if you can figure out the rules on your own!"

Yumagi flicks his fingers, causing a platinum-colored card to appear in his grasp. Fervent greed clouds his expression. He holds the card up high and laughs uproariously. "You don't like playing games, Archangels? Well, too bad! I make the rules here, and you have to follow them! Ramses' Staff, **Evoke!**"

Uriel and Michael tense up, awaiting some stupendous super-attack to fall upon them. Instead, a wave of blood-red magic travels out of Yumagi's body and flies toward the other Demon Emperors below him. All at once, their fatigue vanishes, along with any lingering weaknesses plaguing them. They blink in surprise, momentarily stunned.

"Hey! Yumagi! What did you do to us?" Wolfram asks.

"Is it not obvious?" Yumagi asks, as he winks at his comrades. "My game is fair, and the rules are set. All of you are a part of the rules, too. Naturally, to keep things fair, you may attack whomever you wish. There are no 'teams' in this game."

Emperor Serena, levitating a sizable distance from the battlefield, blinks her sightless eyes. "Yumagi! Are you stating that every person here also gets a turn?"

"Of course!" Yumagi answers. "And as you can see, I have not stacked the deck in anyone's favor. You may all attack whomever you wish. Naturally, I advise that you strike the Archangels down before pursuing any... *personal* vendettas."

Michael scoffs. "Hah! More rules that favor thee! Truly, bloodskins are all cheaters and villains!"

"I do not cheat," Yumagi repeats, once again taking great offense to that accusation. "I merely set the rules beforehand. Now then, everyone, join me in attacking whomever you desire."

Wolfram crosses his arms. "I thought you said 'you alone' were enough?"

"Oh, I am." Yumagi answers. "I have balanced the scales all by myself, have I not? Before I showed up, the lot of you were, how shall I say it? *Getting your asses kicked*. You can thank me later."

Emperor Lupus snorts. "He's not wrong."

Shortly after, the remaining Demon Emperors take up offensive stances. Lupus and Wolfram stick together, as do Yadrat and Fae. Serena remains in the distance, unable to offer much offensive support. In total, six Emperors face off against the three Archangels.

The Emperors communicate with each other telepathically. They keep their plans to themselves, debating how exactly they should finish off their most hated enemies.

[Once we slay Uriel, the other two will disperse.] Yadrat says. [But killing her won't be easy. There are too many of Raphael's illusory clones present. It will take us each one attack to whittle the clones down.]

[We could use a wide-area attack,] Fae says. [I'm sure Auger has something perfect for us. If nothing else, I could grab one of the useless bystanders, and...]

She falls silent, allowing her implication to hang, unspoken.

[Let's not go that far, Emperor of Terror,] Lupus says. [All three Angels are currently frozen. They cannot make any moves, but undoubtedly, they've started preparing their own plans to deal with us. I suspect Raphael's clones will make for difficult opponents.]

[We aren't the only ones in this battle,] Wolfram says, casting a glance to the south. [We should drag Guura and Melody over here. Those lazy bums are sitting and eating food while we fight the Archangels!]

[Don't bother,] Lupus says to her fellow werewolf. [The Hell of Isolation hates getting involved in anything like this. Considering what happened to Emperor Shax, you can hardly blame them.]

[I'll blame them all I damn well want!] Wolfram shouts telepathically. [They're so stuck in the past-]

"Your time is almost up!" Yumagi says to the other Emperors. "If you don't make your moves in the next minute, the next round of actions will start!"

"What?!" Fae shouts. "What do you mean? Why would our turn suddenly end?"

"Oh, goodness, it must have slipped my mind," Yumagi says, while fanning out and examining his finely curated nails. "You see, there is a five minute time limit for every round. So, if nobody makes a move in those five minutes, they forfeit their turn and the next round will begin."

"Must have *slipped your mind*?! You stupid jackass!" Fae roars. "Spell out the devil-damned rules next time before leaving us grasping at straws! Shit, everyone, just attack! Beat the crap out of the clones before our turns end!"

All at once, pandemonium ensues as the other five Emperors race into the fray. Yadrat conjures a ball of temporal energy that he throws into a dense cluster of six

Archangel copies. It tears open a rift in space, eviscerating their bodies, but the different versions of Raphael, Uriel, and Michael prove to be only illusory copies.

At the same time, Wolfram slashes his claws with reckless abandon. He releases shockwaves of demonic power that tear through the air and strike three more copies, causing them to burst into particles of light before his body freezes up and his turn concludes.

Lupus, as a defensive-oriented fighter, doesn't possess any wide-area abilities. She only ends up tearing through one of the illusions, but to her shock, she crashes into a physical body, making her cry out in surprise.

"Michael! I found Michael! He's right here!"

With only Fae and Serena not having taken their turns, the Emperor of Terror scowls angrily.

"Shit!" Fae curses. "I have to attack Michael, but my powers are no good against powerful opponents! I massacre hordes of weaklings; that's what I'm good at!"

After a brief moment, Fae closes her eyes and sends a petition to her leader, Emperor Auger.

[Hey! Auger! I know you're watching this battle! Give me an ability I can use! I'm useless out here!]

The Emperor of Distribution's response comes back swiftly.

[Your opponents are powerful. I will acquiesce. I have selected nine potential powers that will assist you. Choose two, as per what your body can handle.]

He transmits a series of images, thoughts, and concepts to Fae, making a vicious grin cross her face.

[Oooh! Those two! They're perfect! But give me that other one, also. Just take away my 'bomb' power for now. It's useless here!]

[I give and I take.] Auger replies, his voice the epitome of calm. [Show these lesser Hells the might of the Fourth Hell.]

[Oh, I'll 'punish' these Archangels,] Fae says, as demonic power leaves her body, followed by three surges of new power. [I'll punish them until they beg for MERCY!]

Their discussion happens in the blink of an eye. The moment Auger distributes three new powers to his minion, Fae opens her eyes, revealing her glowing red irises. She motions with her hands, causing bones to burst out of her skin and grow rapidly, hardening into formidable bone armor. A long spike sticks out of her right wrist, resembling a makeshift shank.

At the same time, a hurricane of wind summons behind Fae. She fires it forward and rides it like a surfer, rushing toward Michael's exposed body with her wrist pulled back.

"Hey, Archangel! Piss off and die, will ya?!"

Unable to move, Michael can only close his eyes as the Emperor of Terror flies at him. An instant later, she rams the bone-shank into his heart, instantly destroying his construct body and causing all of his illusions to disperse, leaving behind three or four dozen copies of Raphael and Uriel.

After impaling the Archangel of Courage, Fae forcibly grinds to a halt, restricted by the Soul Shackles placed upon her.

"I got one of the bastards! You bums can thank me later, bahahaha!"

Several of Raphael's clones shoot disinterested glances at Michael's destroyed body as it fades away. Given Uriel can simply resummon him, his 'death' is only transient, but even so, it still represents a significant loss to Uriel's fighting power.

My illusions were intended to confuse the demons and make them waste their turn, Raphael thinks. But through a stroke of luck, they succeeded in taking out my brother's construct. Uriel will need to spend a turn resummoning him. That means in this next round, only Michael and I will be able to attack.

The Archangel of Wisdom rapidly plays out dozens of possible attacking and defensive strategies in his head. He takes special note of the abilities Fae unleashed, frowning deeply.

Emperor Auger. That child did not exist during the Energy Wars. If he did, he was not an Emperor at the time. I am unfamiliar with his abilities, but Fae's powers do not seem to follow the common demonic power types. I have never known a demon to be capable of manipulating bone and wind... so how could'st she obtain these two foreign powers? Auger must be responsible, in some way...

While Fae celebrates her first blood, Emperor Serena continues to stay out of the battle. Her powers, like Fae's, make her fare poorly against powerful individuals, such as the Archangels. Unlike Fae, however, she does not have Emperor Auger to swap out powers as required.

Fae and Yadrat will be the key players in defeating the Archangels, Serena thinks. The werewolves may prove useful, but their contributions in this fight should end up inferior to Fae, Yadrat, and especially Yumagi.

She stares blankly into space, but her spiritual perception sweeps across Yumagi's body as he remains frozen in place.

I have only spoken to Yumagi once, many eras ago, during the Energy Wars. He is a complete recluse, and I cannot imagine him stepping out of the shadows to join us for demonkind's sake. From what I have gathered, he is a selfish bastard even compared to the many selfish bastards among the other Hidden Emperors. He must have come here for some other reason, but as for why, I cannot tell.

As the last seconds count down, Yumagi begins to move again. He offers a cold smile to everyone present.

"The first round has ended. Now, the second may begin. But be careful! Those who take their turn first may make an initial gain, but they will also be sitting ducks for their opponents to counter-attack!"

Wolfram, originally intending to charge forward and attack, pauses to shoot a suspicious glance at Yumagi.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Yumagi counters. "If you attack, your body becomes frozen. It may be better for your opponent to attack first. Ah, but there is that pesky five minute round limit... you can't wait too long, lest you waste your turn! And I won't be telling you when the round timers run out after this, because that simply wouldn't be any fun!"

"Whose side are you on?!" Wolfram roars. "We're all demons here! We're your allies!"

"In this game, there *are* no allies," Yumagi says, while glancing at Wolfram from the corner of his eye. "There are only enemies and *future* enemies. Really... do you trust that the demons to your right and left won't take a chance to attack you when your guard is lowered? The angels may fight together as one, but we have never been more divided."

"Knock it off with the riddles!" Wolfram retorts. "I came here to fight, not faff about with the likes of you! One way or another, I'm killing me an Archangel today! Bahaha!"

While the two of them talk, Uriel motions with her hands. She re-summons Michael's construct, along with her orb and cube constructs. Despite summoning three at once, this only counts as a single action, freezing her in place.

Similarly, Raphael motions with his hands to conjure yet another twenty-five copies of Michael's newly summoned figure, along with replacements for the losses his copies and Uriel's both suffered. Once again, seventy-five Archangels hover in the sky, all of them appearing to be the genuine articles.

In unison, all twenty-five of Michael's copies swoop toward the Demon Emperors, including Yumagi, the werewolves, Fae, and Yardrat.

Instinctively, they all raise their fists to meet the incoming threats, all except for Yumagi, who remains motionless.

"Only one of them is the real Michael!" Lupus shouts. "The others are fakes!"

Her words cause an unanswered question to spring into the minds of the other Emperors.

Sure, but WHICH one is the real one?!

In unison, 'Michael' delivers twenty-five slashes at every Emperor on the scene, excluding Selena, who continues to sit out the battle. His many copies phase harmlessly through the bodies of the Emperors, all except for Yardrat, who cries out in pain.

"Aaaargh!"

Despite successfully protecting his neck, Yardrat fails to shield the rest of his body. A violent sword-slash cuts across his chest, spraying blood and entrails out in a violent spurt. He instantly stumbles forward and freezes, while his bodily fluids continue to drain.

"Huh-help! Aaugh! The Archangel- he got me!"

The other Emperors try to move, but they also find themselves frozen!

"What the-?!" Wolfram shouts. "I didn't even do anything! How can my turn be over?! This makes no sense!"

Yumagi chuckles. "All of you defended yourselves. Doing so is considered using up your turn. I must have forgotten to mention that part! Oopsie~!"

"You devil-damned prick!" Fae screams. "Yardrat's gonna bleed out and die! Do something!"

The Glyphmancer rolls his eyes. "Oh, if you insist, I suppose I can use up my turn to save Auger's precious number two. By the way, Raphael. That was an excellent feint your brother used. Could you have possibly seen through the rules of my little game before these addlebrained Emperors did?"

The Archangel of Wisdom's twenty-five copies all smile in unison.

"As this old one said before... he has seen many strange and terrifying powers. Thine are not as unique as thou thinketh."

Yumagi nods.

"So it would seem. It's so much more fun playing games with a smart person. There just aren't enough of them around to give me a challenge."

The Glyphmancer lightly shrugs, then flicks his fingers, causing a bronze card to appear in his grasp.

"Oooh, tough luck, Yardy-boy. This won't heal you all that much, but it should staunch the bleeding a bit. Next time, try not to spill your guts. Golden Fire Rhino, **Imbue!**"

The card explodes into particles of light, and a miniature, blood-colored rhinoceros wreathed in flame rushes toward Yardrat. The Emperor of the Void flinches in alarm, but cannot move to avoid the incoming attack.

"Yumagi! How dare you attack-!"

Before Yardrat can finish his sentence, the rhino leaps onto his chest and transforms into a fiery tattoo. Yardrat closes his eyes and screeches in pain, while his open wounds rapidly burn closed, preventing further blood-loss. The sheer agony of having his chest forcibly burned nearly makes him pass out, but he manages to remain conscious through his force of will.

"No need to thank me," Yumagi says. "But I just saved your life. Did you really think I'd be such a bastard that I would attack a 'future enemy' while he was defenseless? That wouldn't be very *fair* of me now, would it? Hahaha!"

Yardrat grits his teeth. His body trembles from the pain as he forces a pained smile.

"Y-yes. Thank... you... for your... help... Yumagi..."

"You are most certainly welcome!" Yumagi says. "Ah, but now that we've all made our moves, the round won't end until the five minutes are up. It seems *someone* is choosing to sit idly on the sidelines!"

The Glyphmancer casts a casual glance back at Emperor Serena. She simply crosses her arms and continues to levitate, making no move to attack.

"I am useless in this sort of battle," Serena says, her soft voice gracefully touching the ears of those present. "Unless one of you wants to experience the realm beyond Demon Emperor for a half-hour or so, before dying a death most unbearable, I will continue to remain a spectator."

Nobody volunteers to accept her offer, so she falls silent.

Two minutes later, Yumagi smiles.

"Alright, round three can begin! I hope you've all been paying attention, because now, you should understand the majority of the rules for this engagement. No more complaining from this point onward!"

Wolfram glowers at Yumagi.

"Tsk. When this is over, you and I should have a little 'chat' about your so-called 'fairness,' Glyphmancer."

Yumagi flips his hair.

"You may do as you please, Wolfy-Boy."

"...Don't call me that."

Part 317: Body Snatcher

Round Three of the Glyphmancer's game continues. All of the demons tense up, yet the Archangels and their illusions appear oddly calm, as if the whole battle is proceeding according to some pre-established plan.

Once they regain their ability to move, Raphael's seventy-five illusory copies of himself, his brother, and his sister, begin to shift around in random patterns. With so many illusions present, none of the Emperors can keep their eyes on more than a few without losing track of the others.

"This game of thine is quite entertaining," Raphael says, speaking through the mouths of his twenty-five illusory copies. "But, it occurs to this old man that there may in fact be a few... loopholes, in the rules. A few... *accidental* oversights. Ah, but a fair and balanced referee would not stoop so low as to prey on this weak and feeble grandfather, would he?"

"Weak and feeble, my furry ass..." Wolfram growls.

Yumagi lifts his chin slightly. "The fact that you seem to be able to see these 'loopholes' makes my fairness more than apparent. But by all means, if you have any qualms with the rules, speak your mind."

Raphael's eyes flick from left to right.

"Suppose someone were to enter this battle after thou hath cast thy original spell. Would they not be subject to the same rules as the rest of us?"

"Looking to call in reinforcements?" Yumagi asks. "I'll bet your Wordsmith friend could easily undo your soul shackles. But if he did, he would undo them on all of us. In any case, if someone were to enter this game late, they would also become subjected to my rules. What I cast was not a single-use spell, but an active power which continuously radiates around the entire battlefield. But I don't see why you would ask, seeing as you already know the answer."

"No, no, I was not thinking of requesting aid from any comrades of mine," Raphael says. "Rather, I am curious as to how many more prestigious Emperors, such as thyself, might eventually join the game. 'Tis unfair for my sister to bully so few of thy people when her power is so much mightier than thine."

Emperor Lupus scowls at the Archangel. "And just who do you think you're calling weak, Archangel? You've yet to singe my fur, let alone bruise my skin. As bad as you have it now, just wait until Emperor Kristoff gets here. You killed his wife. I can't wait to watch him rip your head off."

A few seconds of silence follow. Yumagi's expression flickers a few times as he detects the faint sensation of mana-based telepathy transmitting between the Archangels.

"In this round," Raphael says, "my siblings will graciously give thy people the first attack. Since we hold the advantage, it would be unbecoming of us to mercilessly strike at the five of thee with all of our illusory bodies. Someone else might... *lose their head*."

"Hah!" Wolfram laughs. "The advantage? Not even close! Your fighting forces are nothing but a bunch of paper tigers! There's only three of you to five of us! Your illusions are a clever trick, but they won't stop us from crushing you!"

Moving by instinct, Wolfram suddenly rushes toward the moving array of illusory images. He presses both of his claws against his chest, conjuring a wellspring of magical power. Moments later, the werewolf releases a mighty howl and swings his claws rapidly, like a hurricane, firing off two dozen beams of demonic energy, all of them ripping across space toward the illusory Archangel images.

True to his name, the Emperor of Rending rends space with his attacks, bending light itself with what can only be described as gravitic-based attacks. His seemingly simple claws tear apart more than thirty of the Archangels, but even so, they merely fade away, revealing none of their true bodies.

Wolfram slows to a stop and frowns.

"Hmph! I may not have hit one of your true bodies, but I certainly cleared away a few pesky weeds!"

Yardrat shoots a glance at Fae.

"You go next. Wide-area. Give me something to hit."

As two Emperors from the same Hell, the two of them know each other quite well. Fae is not Yardrat's direct subordinate, nor even an indirect one, but rather, something of a relative equal. Even so, she nods at him, trusting in his judgment.

"Fine! I love trying out new powers, anyway! There's nothing more fun!"

Fae's body, now covered in hardened bone-armor, ranks among the tankiest figures on the demon's side of the battlefield, perhaps only inferior to Emperor Lupus. Instead of conjuring a wall of wind, she reaches inside herself to grab hold of the third power Auger gave her, one she hasn't used yet.

Twelve marble-sized beads of demonic energy travel out of her body and materialize in reality. The blackened orbs pulse with redness while revolving around Fae for a few seconds, picking up speed over time.

Once they reach a critical mass of speed, Fae sends a palm-strike flying at the Archangels, causing all of the orbs to fire toward different points in their formation.

Raphael's eyes flick toward the orbs. In the time it takes them to race toward the forty or so remaining Archangel copies, the old man motions with his hands, conjuring a half dozen micro-portals to intercept some of the beads. Those same portals re-open next to the Demon Emperors, making Fae's evil grin instantly turn to fright.

"Shit!"

Six beads fly into and out of the portals, arriving right in the middle of the collected demons. The other six continue toward the Archangels.

In unison, all twelve of them detonate.

BOOOOOM!

Massive explosions of condensed demonic energy blast the areas, catching not only the Archangels' illusory selves in their blast radiuses, but Fae, Lupus, and Yardrat too!

"Aaaargh!"

Lupus howls in pain as the unexpected friendly fire and massive blast radius takes her completely by surprise. Even with her ridiculously tough body, she still takes a hell of a beating and goes flying until she smashes into the dirt and grinds for a quarter of a mile along the ground.

Fae, likewise, ends up getting blasted by her own attack. She rockets to the left and spins helplessly, unable to control her body or even stall her momentum after using up her turn. She ends up smashing into a hill some distance away, landing face-first and shattering several of her teeth. Her body becomes entombed by rubble, hiding her from the view of the other combatants.

As for Yardrat, he ends up forced to defend himself by conjuring a spatial barrier. He deflects the worst of the damage and suffers only minor burns, but still ends up wasting his turn on defense.

When the smoke clears, Wolfram and Yumagi glance at the Archangels. To neither of their surprise, a little over a dozen illusory clones remain, with the majority of them being Uriel and Michael's copies. Only two remain for Raphael.

"Are you kidding me?!" Wolfram howls. "Fae, you dumb bitch! You didn't even hit any of their real bodies! You ended up blasting yourself and Lupus instead! Who taught you how to aim?!"

Fae, stuck and unable to move from her makeshift tomb, merely croaks out, "Oh, shut your trap. Raphael screwed with my aim! That old bat is trickier than he looks!"

Raphael's two copies chuckle. "Hoho. This kindly grandfather knows a few tricks, yes. But compared to the young and spry opponents he faces, he is still only a beginner at these mentally taxing games."

Lupus pulls herself back together. Having forced herself not to defend, she didn't end up wasting her turn, but still ended up taking a direct hit from Fae's redirected mana bombs.

"Lucifer's Tits! Ahh, that burns good, that burns *real* good. Fae, once we kill these fucking pigeons, I'm gonna have a few words to say to you..."

She levitates back to the other Emperors, grimacing at the blown-apart battleground, now brutally scarred by Fae's bombs.

With only Lupus and Yumagi not having taken their turns, they decide not to make any immediate moves.

Instead, Lupus communicates with her teammates.

[What should I do? I can probably take out that troublesome old man this turn, but right now, Michael and Uriel are the bigger threats! Raphael only has two copies left, but if I can beat the crap out of Uriel, I'll cause some lasting damage for the rest of the fight. I'm not worried about Michael beheading me, but I am worried he might hit one of you. We can't underestimate the Archangel of Courage, not even in a construct's body!]

Yardrat keeps both his eyes locked on Michael's illusory images as they float around in the air.

[If you kill Michael or Raphael, nothing will change. Uriel will simply resummon them during the next round, and possibly even this one. On the other hand, making her waste a turn on resummoning isn't the worst thing we could do. Uriel's powers almost certainly eclipse her brothers-]

Suddenly, one of Michael's illusory images launches forward, flying right toward Wolfram!

"Shit!" Wolfram yells. "Guys! GUYS!"

For a brief moment, Lupus's heart skips a beat. In that fraction of a second, she weighs what she should do, making her mind race.

That might only be one of Michael's illusions! It probably won't hurt Wolfram... but what if it's the real Michael? Wolfram can't defend himself! He'll die for sure! My Hell has already lost Fenrir, we can't risk losing a second Emperor!

Not only is Wolfram one of the prized and powerful Emperors ruling the Hell of Blood, but he is also Lupus's chosen mate. This fact colors her judgment, forcing her hand.

"Filthy Archangel! I will not let your ploy play out the way you intend! Raaahh!"

She rushes toward Wolfram and intercepts him before Michael can arrive. As soon as Michael draws within striking distance, he slashes his blade, but it passes harmlessly through Lupus's scales. His illusory body fades away, making her scowl.

"Bastard! I knew it was a feint! I knew it!"

Lupus becomes frozen in front of Wolfram, unable to move again to protect him. As she glares daggers at the hated Archangels, Raphael merely chuckles.

"Hoho! What a lucky woman! Had that been my brother's real body, he probably could have hurt thee quite badly! How fortunate that his kind and caring older brother told him to simply give thee a little scare! Oh, playing pranks on the young is such fun!"

While Raphael taunts the two werewolves, Emperor Serena creases her brow.

It seems that each illusory copy can move independently. That means, in effect, the Archangels can afford to launch seventy-five fake attacks at our people. If any of us defend ourselves, we lose our turn. If we don't, we risk losing our heads. Raphael's powers completely upend the balance of power in this battle. No wonder he appears so confident.

Yumagi, the last Emperor with a turn remaining, merely chuckles.

"You are doing quite well, Archangels. I expected you to trounce my brothers and sisters, but not this badly. Would you be so kind as to not make them lose all their face? We do have reputations to uphold, after all."

All of Michael's copies turn to look at Yumagi. "Neither my sister nor I have taken our turns yet. What shall thou do to stop us, I wonder? In one move, I can end the lives of any Emperor here. They will be powerless to resist me."

"So true!" Yumagi answers, smiling even wider than before. "And what a tragedy the loss of any fellow Emperor would be. Ah, I speak with all of them so often! We are all such good friends. Oh, come to think of it, none of them have spoken to me in eons. Huh! I guess we aren't that close after all. Feel free to kill whomever you like."

His words send chills down the backs of all four frozen Emperors. Yardrat, standing perfectly still and unable to move, barely manages to catch a glimpse of Yumagi from the corner of his eye.

"What are you saying? Are you going to let one of us die?!"

Yumagi waves his hand casually. "No, no, do not be silly, Yardy-boy. Your words imply I have some ability to protect you, but have you forgotten? Our opponents are the frightening and all-powerful Archangels, monsters from the Primordial Era! I am just one weak Emperor, certainly not their match. How can I, with my one remaining turn, protect you from two attacks? I'm not a miracle worker!"

Yumagi pauses. He glances at Yardrat, and his tone turns cold.

"Besides. The leader of my Hell, Gorn, perished while in your presence. Why did you not save him? Are the lot of you incompetent? Or did you, perhaps, intentionally allow him to die along with Fenrir? Perhaps you even enjoyed seeing him fall out of the running for the leader of the Seven Hells? Compared to all of you combined, my powers are certainly inferior. If you could not stop the Archangels, how could I?"

"Is that what this is all about?" Yardrat asks. "You think we're to blame for Gorn's death?! How about this; your Emperor was supposed to be the second strongest of all the Hidden Emperors! He should have been able to protect himself!"

From the pile of rubble to the west, Fae shouts, "Yeah! What Yardrat said!"

Yumagi continues to stare icily at Yardrat for several long seconds. Suddenly, he rears his head back and laughs.

"Hahaha! I'm just kidding, Yardy-boy! It's only a joke! I'm not one to hold grudges! Truth be told, I barely even spoke to Gorn, so it's not like we were best buddies or anything. Anyway, I won't let you die here, so don't you worry your little tushie."

Michael's apparitions all unsheathe their blades in unison. "Dost thou thinketh thyself capable of stopping my attack? Better bloodskins have tried. They all failed."

"Not true!" Yumagi chirps. "I seem to recall that the Duke of Reptiles, Agares, got a good *chomp* on you, back during the Ancient Era. Heard it cost you an arm and a leg to get it fixed! Well, just an arm, and you didn't *really* get it fixed, but you know what I mean, Mikey-Bird!"

Michael glowers at Yumagi, then sends a telepathic request to Raphael.

[Brother. Please let me strike down the talkative one. My patience wears thin.]

[Keep still, Michael,] Raphael transmits, his expression the epitome of calmness. [This game is only a prelude. Soon, we will lay waste to these demons. Engaging in a small bit of tomfoolery will cost us nothing, but may in fact cause other Emperors to draw near, thinking us weak lambs ripe for the slaughter. We must project insecurity and weakness. Only then will our bloodbath reap the greatest rewards.]

[Stick to the plan.] Uriel transmits. [Trust in our brother. In matters of strategy and battle, Raphael is all but unrivaled. He knows well the best way to deal with these bloodskins.]

The Archangel of Retribution's cold, blood-soaked eyes gaze hatefully at Yumagi and the other Emperors.

"I have waited eons to exact my vengeance," Uriel says. "The fact that I can do so while standing side by side with my brothers will only make the taste of victory that much sweeter."

"You seem quite confident in your chances of winning today," Yumagi says. "But... it would be such a shame if all your plans came to nothing. Oh! Would you look at that? We have a new player ready to join the battle."

Yumagi turns his head slightly. He glances behind himself where, with a loud BANG, an explosion of blood violently detonates in the air. In that split-second explosion, a

demon dressed in a well-tailored white suit flies out of the explosion's confines and slows to a stop beside Lupus and Wolfram.

This demon, a male with pale grey skin, short-cropped black hair, and heavy mascara on his eyes, appears to be a fellow as cold and dead on the inside as on the outside. His expressionless eyes lower to the werewolves at his feet, both of whom reflexively lower their eyes.

"E-Emperor Kristoff," Lupus says, her voice shaking. "You've finally made it. R-regarding your wife-"

"I am aware of her fate." Kristoff, the Emperor of Thirst, says. "You are not to blame."

Despite his assurances, Lupus still sweats uncontrollably. She steals glances at the demon before her, but fails to maintain an evenly locked gaze with him, so inferior does she feel.

"Archangel R-Raphael..." She croaks. "He is the one who slew your mate."

Kristoff nods. He turns his head toward Raphael's two hazy apparitions.

"My wife's soul did not enter the River Styx. Somehow, the Archangel of Wisdom erased her very existence from our universe. I never even had a chance to say goodbye."

Kristoff's delicately manicured fingernails, his white-tipped hair follicles, and his white-colored suit exude the grace and majesty of a trueblooded vampire. He levitates upward, reaching the same level as all three Archangels.

"You three. You have committed a sin worthy of a thousand deaths."

Raphael, Michael, and Uriel remain unmoved.

"And what would that be?" Uriel asks. "Killing thy accursed mate? Hmph. We have done the universe a great service by erasing her existence. Soon, thou shalt join her in the Great Beyond."

Kristoff turns his gaze toward one of Uriel's apparitions. For some reason, he places a special amount of attention on it, as if seeing something none of the other Emperors could, even if they tried.

"Your sin was taking something which belonged to me. Fenrir was my woman. You will not enjoy a quick death."

Without warning, Kristoff lunges forward, launching himself at that specific apparition. Uriel instantly summons a wall of holy energy, blocking the vampire from attacking her. However, Kristoff conjures a revolving blood barrier to surround his entire body. The huge spherical shield rapidly cycles around him, and at the same time, a pair of giant troll-sized blood-claws materialize behind his back. One of the claws launches toward Uriel's barrier and crashes against it with thunderous force, making the Archangel's entire body shudder.

A moment later, Uriel's hastily summoned holy barrier breaks, and Kristoff reaches her with his other giant blood-claw.

RIP!

The Emperor of Thirst rakes his bloody talons across Uriel's armor, making her cry out in pain. He tears away the majority of demonstone protecting her chest, and shreds the soft skin and bone beneath. Uriel goes flying and crashes into the ground.

At the same time as Kristoff's turn ends, Yumagi makes his move. He vanishes from his position and appears a hundred feet above Uriel with a gold-colored Tarot Card.

"Matured Drake, **Evoke!**"

The ethereal head of a golden dragon materializes above Yumagi. Its size, comparable to a sports stadium, dwarfs the spectators, making all of them feel tiny and insignificant.

Raphael's heart skips a beat.

"Michael!"

With a single word, Raphael commands his brother to act. As the summoned dragon inhales to summon the power of a storm, Michael and his seven copies rush toward Yumagi with his sword held at the ready.

The Glyphmancer sighs.

"Alright, if you want to protect your precious sister so badly, you can take her beating instead."

The Glyphmancer swivels to face the incoming threats. Without any fanfare, he locks his eyes onto one of them in particular and changes his Matured Drake's aim.

"Groooooar!"

The dragon releases the power held in its throat. A storm of fire and lightning blasts out of its mouth and rushes toward Michael, targeting his one real body among the few remaining illusions. The last thing Michael sees before his construct gets shredded at the atomic level is a void of red and yellow light.

Kathoom!

The Archangel of Courage evaporates into particles of light. He and his illusions completely disappear from reality, leaving behind only Raphael, his one illusion, and Uriel's beaten, smoking body in the crater below.

Twenty seconds of silence follow.

After gazing at Michael's last known position for half a minute, Yumagi raises his eyes to look at the Archangel of Wisdom.

"You must be wondering how Kristoff and I knew which bodies were the real ones."

Raphael shakes his head.

"'Tis a simple matter to deduce. Kristoff is a vampire; the strongest from his Hell. His affinity to blood made him more than capable of sniffing out my sister's fleshly body. As for thee, thou surely knewest where our true bodies stood from the very beginning."

"You knew that *I* knew, and yet you took no steps to protect yourselves?" Yumagi asks. "You Archangels are all so arrogant, it baffles this humble Emperor's mind."

"Not arrogant." Raphael gently corrects. "Confident. It seems Kristoff is the last demon who will dare to show his face here. The rest have all hidden in the shadows like the rats they are. Shall we begin the fourth round?"

Yumagi looks to the south, where Serena continues to levitate. As the only Emperor present who hails from his Hell, the two of them share the mildest of affinities.

Even so, she remains motionless, not deigning to enter the battle.

"Twenty more seconds," Yumagi says. "Then the next round will begin."

While Raphael, Yumagi, and Kristoff remain motionless during their forced standoff, Yadrat looks away from them. Unable to move his head, he can only flick his eyes and demonic senses across the battlefield.

[Fae. When this next round starts, I will require your assistance. If we work with Kristoff, we can surely land a killing blow on Uriel.]

Several seconds pass.

Fae doesn't reply.

Momentarily confused, Yardrat turns his eyes as far to the left as he possibly can. He sweeps his demonic mana across the hill where she landed, but fails to detect her presence.

[Fae? Fae! Are you there? Did you pass out? What's going on?]

Still, the Emperor of Terror does not answer.

No matter how many times Yardrat tries to telepathically contact his fellow Emperor, she doesn't respond.

When round four begins, Yardrat immediately charges over to the hill where she fell. He yanks aside the collapsed boulders and other debris that should have buried her, yet upon clearing out her makeshift tomb, he becomes stricken with shock.

She's gone! What the hell?! Where did Fae go? Could she have left even though her turn was up? Impossible! But she isn't here!

A deep, unsettled feeling builds up in Yardrat's stomach. He swivels his head from left to right as a realization hits him like a freight train.

Fae was frozen, locked in place by Yumagi's Soul Shackles. She couldn't fight back if anyone attacked her. She would have been completely helpless, unable to resist. And... now that I think about it...

Yardrat's vision turns blood red. A wave of rage strikes him, making him gnash his teeth.

There was one other Emperor here... someone who hasn't yet showed his face since the Archangels arrived. That... that BASTARD!!

No matter how he searches the area with his senses, Yumagi fails to find Fae, leading him to only one conclusion.

Yama! You spawn of a broodmother! How dare you prey on a fellow Emperor while we battle the Archangels?! I'll rip you apart, you lecherous, raping, FIEND!!

* * *

Elsewhere, in a dark underground location secluded from the battlefield.

Emperor Yama caresses the face and body of his latest victim, her unconscious form struggling to fight back. Tendrils of dark energy stretch from his fingertips to lance into her brain, making Emperor Fae shudder violently.

"Hehehe. What a fun game Yumagi has devised. We have much to gain, and so many delicious females to take when their defenses are lowest. While the other fools battle their hated enemies, we shall strike from the shadows, taking those we find most suitable for our harem! Kekeke..."

Yama caresses Fae's soft and delicate face. A blackened tongue snakes out of his mouth as he licks his lips and forces it into her ear, wriggling it around to lick the juiciest parts of her brain. He reaches into her mouth and plays with her tongue, enjoying the slippery sensation as it crosses his smoky-black fingertips.

"Mmm. This is only the foreplay, lovely one. You are *barely* suitable for our tastes. We would have much preferred the busty and delicious Fenrir to the likes of you, but at least you possess ample power to augment our strengths. It has been many eons since we nabbed a juicy little Emperor all by her lonesome, hehehe..."

Yama continues to toy with his helpless victim, slowly but surely infecting her with his corrosive shadows. By the time he finishes, she will become one of his loyal servants, willing to do anything to satisfy him.

"That Yumagi... he certainly knows how to throw a *party*." Yama chuckles.

Part 318: A Little Lost Whisper

"Zzz... Zzz... Zzz..."

Bael peacefully slumbers, ignoring all the hullabaloo happening in the world around him. Sometimes, his foot reflexively kicks, in the same way a puppy's might as he imagines himself running free in a field.

"Hehe... kitty... pet kitty... pet bunny... hehe..."

Something tickles the Duke of Pain's ear. He leans his head to the side to try and itch the tickled part, but it only continues to tickle more.

"Hehe... stop it, mommy... don't make me stop pettin' da snakey... hehe..."

Progressively, that ticklish sensation grows more annoying.

Suddenly, Bael's eyes bolt open. He quickly sits up and scowls.

"Devil-dammit! Grr! What the heck is crawlin' around in my- aargh?!"

Bael howls in surprise when he sees a huge shadow floating before him in the darkness of an underground cavern. The Duke of Pain reflexively tries to slap the thing away, but his arms don't move the way they should, making him awkwardly shoulder-thrust before nearly falling forward.

"Huh? Huh?? Man, what the heck is goin' on here?! Yama! Why are you creepin' on a fella while he's sleeping? And where are we, anyway?!"

Yama, the Emperor of Shadows, lingers in the air a short distance from Bael, eying him up and down with annoyance.

"Tsk. Your soul is oddly stubborn. We have tried desperately to corrupt you, yet it is as if we have been pushing against an unbreakable wall. Not even an Emperor's soul should be this strong. Just what sort of demon are you?"

Bael blinks a few times.

"Corrupt me? Man, what the bloody hell is goin' on here? And why can't I move m'dang arms- ayo! Why am I tied up? Is this some kind of sick joke? And where are my clothes?!"

The Duke of Pain finds his arms tied behind his back, bound by some sort of shadowy enchantment. His new body, Ose's former one, also no longer bears any clothes, exposing his unmentionables for the world to see. Rather than feel embarrassed, Bael merely feels confused.

However, even the turtle-brained Duke manages to whirr up his neurons to form a possibility.

"...Wait a minute. Hold on a sec! You creep! Were you tryin'a turn me into one of your shadow-bitches? Dude! That's disgusting! Besides, I'm a guy! You only like women, you ding-dang creep!"

Yama's lurid gaze once again flashes across Bael's body, but this time, with a whole new intention.

"Kukuku... Bael, you are so ignorant. This Emperor does not care about some strange mental discrepancy. He only cares about the juicy parts on the outside, and your fleshly-vessel is more than adequate for our tastes. Long have we lusted for the taste of Ose's untouched figure. Whether it is your soul or hers inside, we do not discriminate..."

While Yama talks, Bael flicks his eyes around the room. He becomes even more shocked when he sees several unconscious demon women in a corner, all of them attended by Yama's Shades, who continuously pump shadow-energy into the minds of those who cannot fight back.

"Emperor Fae? Duke Hestia? And hey, ain't that little Mara, the Baron of Games? Man, you sick fuck! I knew you were bad, but this is a whole new level!"

Bael becomes angrier and angrier by the second. He whips his head back to scowl daggers at Yama, but the Shadow Emperor remains unmoved.

"Your anger makes us feel many things," Yama says. "But mostly, it fills us with lust. We like it when women fight back. There is no greater form of pleasure than dominating a helpless woman who cannot resist our advances! Kukuku!"

"Oh yeah?" Bael says. "You like hurting people weaker than you? Well, I don't. But tell ya what, pal. You've gone far enough this time. You're really *pissing me off*... and there's only one way *that* ends."

Beal leans forward in his chair. Yama tightens the shadows binding his arms, but still, Bael possesses the same physical strength as Ose once did. His eyes become filled with

rage as he calls upon the power that has rested within himself for nearly his entire existence.

"Grr! GRR! ME... me smash! Me... me beat you! Me... me..."

Bael continues trying to call upon that power. However, to his surprise, no matter how angry he gets, he fails to summon it to reality.

The power of the Balrog, a biological weapon that has caused even the mightiest Demon Emperors to tread lightly around him, does not manifest in his body.

Bael breathes heavily, shock and confusion on his face. "...Huh? It... it ain't coming out? The hell is goin' on?"

Yama continues to hover triumphantly before Bael, still unmoved by his displays of anger. While Bael slowly begins to realize just how many of his former abilities he has lost, Yama lunges out a hand to grab the Duke by his neck. He slams Bael back into the chair and looms over him, physically taking up more space as he expands his presence.

"We have craved that body for ages, Duke of Pain. Whether you reside in it, or Ose, we do not care. You have failed to comprehend the losses of your powers. You are not smart enough to wield Ose's lightning abilities, but neither do you possess your once-formidable physical power. With the First Hell in shambles, we can finally sneak about and steal all of the women we have wanted for ourselves. Diablo cannot stop us. You cannot stop us, and neither can Ose. The other Hidden Emperors remain oblivious to our intentions, as they have become locked in battle with the Archangels outside. They will not stop us in time... not before we quadruple the power of our Hell to overtake *all* the others."

"You nasty fuckin' prick!" Bael shouts. "You... I shoulda killed ya when I had the chance! Everyone knows what a sick bastard you are!"

"Yes, they do," Yama acknowledges. "Ah, but greed and shortsightedness are the enemies of all those other Emperors. They will only care about our movements if we threaten their grip on power. That is why we have waited so long for the perfect opportunity. And now, it has arrived!"

Yama smiles evilly, though that moment of happiness only lingers for a moment before turning to annoyance.

"But... tsk. Your soul seems to be practically incorruptible. How can we transform you into the pleasure-servant your body was always meant to be? Such a perfect figure,

wasted on an ice queen who never used it to service the pleasure of males like us. Ose always was a greedy wench. Perhaps we don't need to corrupt you after all. An unwilling participant is more of a challenge, anyway."

As Yama's tone turns ominous, he pauses to flick his gaze nearby.

"Silent. Come here."

He gestures to one of his Shades, an amorphous blob of shadow that meekly flies to his side and levitates in the air, not saying a word.

"Hehehe. Silent, you are our secret weapon. We intend to violate Ose's body many times, so you will help us by pinning it in place. It's okay if the Duke of Pain struggles a little. That will only add to our 'fun.'"

"What the fuck?!" Bael roars. "The hell you will! You stupid, tiny-pricked bug! I'm still the Duke of Pain! When the other demons find out what you've done to me, they'll rip you apart!"

"Will they? Perhaps." Yama says. "Ah, but that depends on whether or not they uncover your plight. After all, perhaps a stray attack from the Archangel erased your existence? And really, our methods are hard to uncover. Nobody ever found out about the first Emperor we made our whore... hehehe."

Bael blinks. "What? The first Emperor? You're saying one of your Shades is an Emperor?! I ain't heard nothin' about that!"

"Of *course* you haven't," Yama taunts. "Ah, our machinations lay undetected, for we are a master of deception. Look, Bael. Does this Shade not seem a little bit... *familiar*?"

Bael's gaze drops to the small floating blob of shadow beside Yama.

"Huh? Familiar? She's just a blob of shadow. I... I can't see shit."

"Mmm. Hehehehe! Perhaps this will jog your memory..." Yama says, his words drifting into the wind.

The Emperor of Shadows grabs onto the floating ball of shadow. She doesn't resist, allowing him to do whatever he pleases to her. Yama gropes and strokes the Shade, manipulating her figure until she once again assumes a demonic form, one with large horns, a surprisingly small body, and pure black skin.

Bael blinks twice. He stares at what looks like a little girl for several seconds, trying to recognize her. However, despite possessing a demon-shaped body, her appearance is far too alien compared to any demons Bael has ever seen, making him struggle to put the pieces together.

"This is 'Silent.'" Yama explains. "She was a lost little girl, all alone, crying in a corner, after the fleshbags took her brother from her. She couldn't protect herself from us when we caught her unawares. It was a simple matter, our first Emperor taken from behind. Kukuku! She cried many times during the conversion process. She begged us to stop, but we eventually made her into our loyal toy... just as we always do."

Bael's pupils constrict and enlarge several times as he listens. In the back of his mind, a thought far too horrifying begins to emerge.

"No... no way... that's not possible..."

"Ohoho... perhaps you do have some critical thinking capacity," Yama mocks. "Yes, indeed, this is the very same demoness you once thought missing. I believe you used to play in a band with her, didn't you, Duke of Pain? Her and her brother both..."

A tear slides down Bael's cheek. His jaw trembles as he gazes at a friend long-thought dead, but who instead suffered a horrific fate for over a hundred thousand years.

"Murmur... Murmur! Murmur, it's me, Bael! Oh, devils! DEVILS!! How could you do that to a little girl, Yama?! You monster! You horrible stinkin' monster!!"

"Women are our toys," Yama says. "That is all they are. Females have but one reason to exist, and that is to pleasure this Emperor in his eternal harem. What better fate could become of them? They know only happiness. They fulfill the one thing the Creator made them for."

Bael roars. He struggles against the bindings holding him in place. He kicks his feet at Yama, but this only causes the Shadow Emperor to admire his 'juicy' legs.

"Your body is so... delectable, Bael. We really would prefer corrupting you, but it seems doing so is impossible. Ah, well. We already have a second Emperor in our grasp. Soon, we will obtain Serena for ourselves, as well as any other whores fit for our needs."

He gestures with a finger toward the Duke of Pain. "Go on, Silent. Hold the Duke down and spread his legs. We have waited long enough."

The Shade meekly flies over to Bael's side and nods. She says nothing, and instead returns to her amorphous, shadow-blob-like form. A wave of telekinetic energy shatters Bael's demonstone chair and smashes him against the ground, pinning him in place and nearly breaking his arms in the process.

"Aaargh! Ah, fuck! Fuck-fuck-fuck! Murmur, girl! Stop! Don't let this creep control you! Fight back, dammit!"

"She has long ago lost any form of resistance," Yama laughs. "All of our sluts have. They do what they must at our behest. Not only so, but they even enjoy following our orders. They fight for our attention, hoping we will lavish them with the affection their bodies crave."

Yama drops to the floor and skitters over Bael.

"But you see, Bael, that is the truth of the matter. Females are innately whores and sluts. They are inferior creatures who must repress their feminine urges. All our power does is liberate those feelings and make them excited to serve us. You and the other demons always call us a monster, but aren't we actually quite pleasant and nice? We handle all the mundane matters, and in return, women become our servants. There is no greater calling in life for a female's body than to pleasure this Emperor."

Bael narrows his eyes.

"Is that what you tell yourself? I know a thing or two about women, pal! Lemme tell you, that ain't the truth! You're just making up lies to sound all smart! But the truth is, you're a tiny-dicked loser any woman would hate if they looked at ya! You only get your way by... by forcin' yourself on them! You keep talkin' about women 'liking' what you do... bullshit! You're just twisting their minds! You're nothing but a rapist! A loser rapist!"

"Tsk... a loser? I think not." Yama chuckles. "Losers lose. We win. That much is evidenced by the fact that we now have two more Emperor whores in our grasp. You can deny reality if you like, Bael, but we..."

Yama pauses mid-sentence.

Slowly, the Emperor of Shadows lifts his head to look across the room at a hazy figure materializing in the darkness.

"...What..."

Confused, Bael also tilts his head back, scraping his scalp on the floor. To his surprise, he finds a demon standing some distance away, a male with frazzled white hair, a leather jacket, and torn-up jeans.

The demon's existence appears shaky, as if he doesn't fully exist. However, Yama and Bael both immediately recognize him.

"S-Shax?!" Yama gasps. "Impossible! The Emperor of Resonance... he perished eons ago! What is this hallucination? This is a trick!"

Shax lifts his head. The normally lighthearted fellow's eyes burn with a smoldering rage.

"So. Yama. It was you... it was you who took my sister. You worked with Lucifer to draw me away, then you snatched my little sis while the humans gutted me."

Yama slowly levitates into the air, scrutinizing Shax's ghost-like body with curiosity, rather than fear.

"An errant soul? Kukuku... big words for the illusion of a once-mighty Emperor. We always did lust for your sister's body... and we got what we wanted. What can a single errant soul possibly do here? Go back to the Great Beyond."

Shax gnashes his teeth. A vicious expression unlike any ever seen in his life melts onto his face.

"No... I don't think I will, you black-hearted bastard. I think I'm gonna remind you... why *nobody* fucked with the Hell of Isolation when I was around."

Emperor Shax kicks his foot against the dirt, rockets forward, and sends a spin-kick flying at Yama. The Emperor of Shadows stands his ground, conjuring a wall of shadows to shield himself. Darkness lances fly out and stab at the ghostly Emperor, but instead of impaling him, they pass harmlessly through his body.

"Kukuku! As expected! You're only an illus-"

Yama's words get cut off when Shax's flying kick smashes into his shadow-body, releasing a sound-shockwave that blasts Yama backward and sends him screaming into a wall. He explodes into smoke, and after a moment, his figure reforms automatically.

"What?! Your body is real?!" Yama exclaims.

Shax continues running toward Yama.

"Oh, I'm real. I'm *really* gonna kick your ass!"

Yama starts to raise his hands to cast a spell. However, to his alarm, he remembers an important fact.

The soul shackles! No!

Yama's body becomes locked in place, unable to move. However, for some reason, despite launching previous attacks, Shax's body doesn't! He continues racing toward Yama, making the Shadow Emperor flinch in fear.

"Nooo!"

Shax punches and kicks the air like a machine-gun. Each attack launches a soundwave at Yama, battering the Emperor of Shadows against the wall and knocking him around like a pinball. Yama screams and howls in pain, but Shax doesn't relent. He continues kicking every flavor of shit out of the Shadow Emperor, glaring hatefully at the monster who enslaved his sister.

"You're garbage, Yama! You don't even deserve to go in the trash!"

Shax pummels the Shadow Emperor into the dirt, then fires off a couple dozen more shockwaves for good measure, leaving Yama to lay motionless, groaning in pain.

"You... you cheater... how... how can you move?! The soul shackles..."

"It doesn't feel good to have someone pin you down while you can't fight back, does it, bro?" Shax scoffs. "I've barely even started. We let you get away with too much for too long."

Shax flickers away from Yama to arrive beside Emperor Fae, Duke Hestia, and Baron Mara, as well as a dozen other demonesses currently pinned by Yama's Shades. With a casual wave of his hand, Shax kills all of the Shades, finally freeing them from their eternal servitude, but also releasing Yama's future victims from their entrapment.

After their bindings shatter, all the women sink into the chairs and hazily blink their eyes open. Clouds of dark energy linger in their gazes, the results of Yama's partial corruption. Emperor Fae appears the least affected. She quickly stands up, only for her knees to wobble awkwardly. She catches herself and shoots a hateful glance at Yama, lying on the ground some distance away.

"YOU!"

Mara, the Baron of Games, also awakens. Unlike Fae, however, her mental state appears far less intact. She drowsily opens her eyes, then rolls to the side and falls off the chair where she was restrained, slapping against the floor.

"Nnn..."

Duke Hestia, a demoness from the Hell of Blood, regains consciousness as well. She helps Mara to her feet, leaving the fight between Emperors to Shax and Fae.

At the same time, the bindings holding Bael finally break apart. The Duke of Pain clambers to his feet and takes up a defensive stance.

"I don't get what the heck is goin' on, but this seems great. Let's kick Yama's ass!"

Shax turns to Fae. "Yama tried to make you into one of his pets. I have freed you."

"Thanks!" Fae says. "I'm gonna rip that bastard a new- wait... hold the hell up! Are you... Shax?!"

"I am." Shax replies.

"And just how in the Seven Hells are you alive?! Everyone knows you died!" Fae exclaims. "And your body is kinda ghost-like. Are you a ghost?!"

For once, Shax appears stumped.

"I don't know what I am. All I know is, I awoke here after learning of my sister's fate."

He gestures toward a motionless Shade standing in a corner of the underground chamber. 'Silent,' also known as Murmur, hovers by herself, away from all the fighting. Having left Bael when Yama fought Shax, she says nothing, only opting to remain isolated from the others.

Fae gapes at the Shade. "Wait... your sister? So... Yama corrupted Emperor Murmur?!"

"Devil-damned right he did," Bael says. "I can't believe this sick fuck. We're gonna have to beat him so badly even the ancient Emperors feel sorry for him."

Within moments, Bael, Fae, and Shax advance on Yama's frozen form. The Emperor of Shadows struggles to break free of Yumagi's soul shackles, but so long as he stands within the Archangel's battle radius, he cannot break free.

Yama glowers at Murmur's solitary figure. "Aaargh! Silent! Get over here and protect your master! All the rest of you whores too, we need protection!"

Instantly, Murmur and a thousand other Shades materialize around Yama, forming a shield of shadows to protect him. Murmur's addition to the living barrier forces Shax to pause. He gazes at all the identical shadow-women, not sure which Shade is his sister.

Bael also slows to a halt. "You chicken-shit! Hiding behind a bunch of girls! Man, what a loser punk you are, Yama!"

However, Fae doesn't slow down at all. She gurgles cruelly in her throat, the sound a mixture of a laugh and a rare-filled roar. "KUHUUH... I'm going to enjoy killing this rapist, once and for all!"

Fae summons bone armor to envelop her body. At the same time, she materializes four beads of demonic energy, then rears back to hurl the balls of destructive mana at Yama.

"Wait!" Bael shouts. "Shax's sister is-"

"I couldn't give less of a damn!" Fae laughs. "That shadow-bitch is long gone! Eat shit and die, Yama!!"

She hurls the explosive orbs at Yama. They rocket through the air, destabilizing once they leave her grasp to transform into terrifyingly powerful mana bombs.

Shax's pupils shrink to pinpricks. "No!"

The Emperor of Resonance rushes forward, swings his palm in an upward arc, and fires a shockwave below the path of the mana bombs. He knocks them off their trajectory and flings them straight upward, where they crash into the ceiling.

BOOOOOM!!

An Emperor-level blast detonates in the confined chamber, sending Fae, Shax, and Bael flying backward. At the same time, the cavern's roof explodes into the sky, firing thousands of tons of rock and dirt into the upper atmosphere, where it will eventually come falling back down over the next hour or two.

Every participant in the underground battle finds themselves frozen in place, all except for Shax, who has shown himself to be somehow immune to Yumagi's soul shackles. Buried under a few tons of rubble, Shax easily casts it away and stands up, wincing as his soul-body destabilizes somewhat. His existence becomes more immaterial.

In the moments before his body breaks apart and he disappears, the Emperor of Resonance casts one last look at Bael, Fae, and the other demons he helped save.

"Save... Murmur... Bael..." Shax groans.

He falls to his knees. Bael opens his eyes just in time to see Shax's body start to evaporate.

"What? Shax! SHAX!"

Shax lifts his head. As his vision wavers, he casts one last regretful glance at Hell Harbor's sky above.

And in that moment, his soul becomes frozen with fear.

In the sky above, a horrible monster, something too terrifying to imagine, hovers above Hell Harbor's landmass. Its distinctive holy energy signature marks it as an enemy that will inspire the most primal of fears in any creature unfortunate enough to gaze upon it.

Shax's body fades away, but one last thought lingers in his mind.

Is... that... monster... an... Archangel...?

Part 319: Crow's Sacrifice

With Kristoff's ability to see Uriel's true body, and with Yumagi's power to see through Raphael's illusions, the Archangels' previous ploys at deception no longer have any chance at succeeding. However, the wily Archangel of Wisdom stays one step ahead of his demonic adversaries by switching up his tactics.

Over the next ten rounds, Michael and Uriel launch brutal attacks on the Emperors, forcing them backward. While Michael's construct body cannot give him the same strength and speed as he possessed in his original body, his peerless swordplay still exceeds anything the demons can unleash. Several times, he launches suicidal attacks on Wolfram, Kristoff, or Yardrat, all of which result in his body's destruction, but which also allow his blade to bite into their flesh and badly wound them.

These pyrrhic attacks pale in comparison to Uriel's renewed style of warfare in which she launches singular heavy and brutal attacks, relying on her eldest brother to teleport her away from the battlefield to safety. Multiple times, she succeeds in breaking the limbs of her demonic foes while receiving equally painful beatdowns, only to teleport away and return to the battlefield in the next round.

Yardrat keeps quiet about Fae's disappearance. During 'downtime rounds' when the angels aren't present, he surreptitiously sweeps the area for Yama's presence, yet finds nothing. He consults with Auger, but not even his revered leader manages to detect his subordinate's location.

[If Yama has captured Fae, then he must have also cut off her connection with me,] Auger transmits. [I cannot take back the three powers I gave her, nor can I detect her presence. Those were some of our Hell's strongest abilities. We must not allow them to fall into the Shadow Emperor's clutches. If he successfully corrupts Fae into joining his harem, he might permanently retain access to her powers.]

Yardrat frowns. [Might?]

[I have never lost contact with one of my Chosen.] Auger states. [The fact Yama can hide Fae's existence from me implies that his corruption infects her very soul. If so, he may be capable of breaking my Pacts.]

Yardrat gazes at the sky, waiting for the Archangels to reappear.

[We cannot let this information get out. If the other Emperors learn that Yama can subvert your Pacts, he will become a strategically important ally for undermining your rule.]

[Indeed. That is why you are my second in command, Yardrat. You are not foolhardy like Fae, nor are you an uncontrollable maniac like Glinch. Stay safe, and do not allow the Archangels to gang up on you. You are alone on that battlefield, for now.]

Yardrat shoots momentary glances of suspicion at Yumagi, Kristoff, and the other Emperors.

[Noted.]

He closes the mental communication line with his Hell's leader, and momentarily feels his back become slick with sweat.

With Fae out of commission, he has become the only Emperor present without any allies capable of backing him up. Even the supposedly lonely Yama at least has an army of Shades and Shadow-Walkers who can protect him.

Perhaps I should call for a few Dukes to join me... though that may result in my position appearing much weaker than the other Emperors, Yardrat thinks.

Not long after, Raphael, Michael, and Uriel fly out of a portal, followed by Uriel's cube and artillery orb.

"All healed up?" Yumagi asks. "This game of hide and seek is growing quite-"

Before he can finish his sentence, Uriel suddenly lunges forward, rushing toward Emperor Kristoff and the two werewolves. She summons a dozen fireballs over her head, then launches them at the three Emperors from the Hell of Blood.

"You bitch!" Wolfram snaps.

Lupus takes up the frontline, protecting her fellow Emperors with her incredibly tanky body. As the fireballs explode against her, Uriel summons one last bead of light, a seemingly small and insignificant bolt of holy energy with a mind of its own. This micro-construct flies toward Lupus, spins around her, and rushes directly for Wolfram's head!

"Oh, no you don't!" Wolfram says. He swipes at the bead of light, but it dodges away at the last second, making him waste his turn!

At the same time, it flies directly for Kristoff, who doesn't resist, realizing the orb must be similar to the same tricks the Archangels always use to make him waste his turn.

However, the instant before the orb of light reaches Kristoff, a flash of fear rumbles his stomach. His body jolts in horror when the bolt of light transforms into Michael's construct. The Archangel of Courage swaps positions with the orb, then swings his sword at Kristoff's neck.

Lupus's turn, over.

Wolfram's turn, over.

Only Kristoff can protect himself!

He hurriedly raises his arms, crying out in pain as the Archangel's sword severs both his hands before Michael's turn ends.

The three Emperors and Michael's construct-body freeze in place, all standing oddly close to one another.

"My hands! You wretch!" Kristoff roars, losing his cool in a way he hasn't before. "This... this won't stop me! I can repair this damage... with ease! All you've done is piss me off!"

Michael smiles.

"Nay. I have accomplished more than that."

As he speaks, Uriel's cube begins revolving. It conjures a gravitic singularity into a spot directly in the center of the four combatants, yanking their bodies together. While not possessing nearly enough power to crush their bones to pulp, it still bends and twists their limbs awkwardly, making both werewolves and their vampire Emperor grunt in pain.

"Y-you!" Wolfram stutters.

At the same time, the artillery orb also spins up, cycling its rings to rapidly empower itself. It summons a hundred small fireballs and fires them at Michael and his three demon opponents, none of whom can move. While the fireballs may only possess the power of a Demon Lord, en-masse, they can still cause the demons significant harm if they all land!

"Y-Yumagi! Yardrat! Help us!" Lupus shouts. "These fireballs won't hurt me, but Wolfram, a-and Kristoff...!"

In the seconds before the fireballs impact, Yumagi continues to levitate motionlessly, not deigning to intervene.

"Tsk. How unfortunate you lot are. Those fireballs won't kill you, so, good luck!"

Yardrat, however, motions with his hands to summon temporal magic around the Hell of Blood's members. When the fireballs hit, he teleports them to Uriel's body, a short distance away, intending to deal her at least some measure of damage.

Instead, Raphael uses up his turn by teleporting Uriel away, as well as himself. They once again vanish from Hell Harbor's surface, making the hundred fireballs fly into the distance and explode uselessly on the ground.

Once the turn ends, Wolfram crushes Michael's construct body, and the demons breathe a sigh of relief.

"Thank you for the assistance, Yardrat," Kristoff says. "But Yumagi... tsk tsk. Such poor taste."

"You didn't lift a finger to help us!" Lupus roars. "How dare you! We may not be best friends, but we are all on the same side in this battle!"

"I have saved several of your lives, several times," Yumagi says. "Or have you forgotten? If I choose not to protect you from some weak little puffs of flame, then obviously, I have a good reason. Saving my turn to deal with Raphael's shenanigans was the right move, in my mind."

"You always have an excuse..." Wolfram hisses. "But frankly, I'm getting tired of hearing them!"

Emperor Kristoff glances at his hands laying on the ground. Thanks to Michael's clean severing, they remain intact and useable. He nods at Lupus. "Help me regenerate these."

"Sure thing," She says, glaring daggers at Yumagi.

She places Kristoff's hands back on his stumps, and he activates a magical sigil inside his chest, causing blood to flow from his stumps, latch onto his wrists, and graft the two together.

Within seconds, Kristoff perfectly heals his severed hands, regaining their full functionality.

"I did not expect that those two inferior constructs would prove so troublesome..." Kristoff says. "Perhaps it is time we stop playing with our food. Serena! Call forth Emperor Crow. Also, call out Ashura. We will need all the help we can get. And Yardrat, where has Fae run off to? Get her back here, along with Glinch. I don't care if he's a rabid dog, we need every Emperor we can muster."

Serena shifts uncomfortably. "Emperor Crow... I might be able to call her to our position. But Ashura? I do not control him. Only Gorn could issue him commands without fear of reprisal. The Orcs... dislike demonic authority."

Yardrat lifts his chin. "Fae suffered worse injuries than expected and had to leave the battle. As for Glinch, don't even *pretend* any of us has a say in his actions. Auger already requested his assistance. Glinch refused. If you want to try and drag him here, be my guest."

"So, only Crow will come?" Kristoff asks. "What of Ose? I heard she was revived. Don't tell me she has chosen to sit this one out?"

"Ose and Bael... switched bodies." Yardrat explains. "Not intentionally. Mephisto screwed up."

"So Ose is stuck in the body of a Duke? Then where is Bael?" Kristoff asks.

Yardrat rubs his forehead. "Bael's an idiot. He can't use Ose's powers."

"Fantastic! Well, let's get Crow here, then. One more Emperor is better than none. As long as we can kill Uriel, this will all be worth the trouble..."

The Emperors fall silent. They continue waiting for the round to end, and eventually it does.

Surprisingly, three rounds pass, but the Archangels don't show themselves.

Wolfram crosses his arms. He sniffs the air, then lowers his head.

"Strange. The Archangels haven't returned. Have they broken free of the soul shackles?"

Yumagi shakes his head. "That would be impossible. If the Archangels succeed in breaking their soul shackles, all of us will be immediately released. The power of the shackles merely grow according to the united power of all participants. Even if they flee to another world, they will remain trapped in the five-minute-round cycles until I release the restriction."

"I've tried following their previous portal remnants," Yardrat says. "All I can say is that they must have returned to the Labyrinth. The Labyrinth does not rest within the physical realm, but an alternate dimension. Traveling to and from it makes teleportation much more difficult to trace."

"If the Emperor with the highest affinity for temporal manipulation says so, then it must be true." Yumagi says with a smile.

Many minutes pass. A full hour.

Several rounds come and go, but the angels don't reappear. Eventually, Emperor Serena turns to the west, making the other Emperors follow her gaze.

"Crow has arrived." She says.

Across the horizon, a giant bird with blue feathers streaks across the sky, moving at speeds exceeding Mach 2. Emperor Crow, a mutated demon of mixed origins similar to the werewolves and vampires, roars across the sky and dives to the ground, crashing into the dirt with a massive *BANG!*

The blue-feathered demoness immediately stands up, her bird-like body giving her a creepy and ominous aura. A black hood covers her head, making her glowing red eyes stand out from the darkness hiding her face.

"My rituals... you have interrupted them..." Crow says, her beak making *tapping* sounds as she speaks.

Her voice, surprisingly deep, gives her an air of masculinity exceeding even Bael's legendary status. She cracks her neck, causing a couple of loose feathers to fall out. They slap against the dirt with heavy *thuds*.

"We wouldn't call you here if it wasn't for a good reason," Yardrat says. "The Archangels-"

"I know of the events that have transpired..." Crow hisses. "Does this queen need to rescue the rest of you whenever a big, scary enemy shows his face? Just like during the Energy Wars... I must always show up to play janitor..."

Crow shoots a deathly glare at Yardrat, making him stiffen. He instinctively senses the overwhelming mana within her body, reaching a level even he never thought imaginable.

"Have... have you... broken through?"

Yardrat's question, the same one every other Emperor shares, rings in their ears. They all stare at Crow with a mixture of fear and respect. As a champion of the Energy Wars, she holds more accolades under her belt than almost anyone else, barring Kristoff himself.

"Kss... I have not..." Crow mutters. "The barrier... reaching beyond the rank of Emperor... it is too difficult... I have poured all of my efforts into breaking through... but every ritual has failed..."

"Gorn has tried, too," Serena says. "He failed. But at least he created many 'faces,' so his time was not spent uselessly."

Crow turns her head 180 degrees, rotating it on her shoulders like an owl to look back at Serena.

"...But this Emperor's time *was*?"

"That isn't what I meant." Serena says. "Breaking past the barrier of Emperor is simply too difficult. At the very least, I am sure you have devised new rituals over time."

"Kss. Indeed, I have..." Crow answers. "Yumagi... why does my soul feel stifled... what magic have you cast upon this region...?"

Crow asks several questions, and the other Emperors answer, informing her of the specifics regarding Yumagi's Soul Shackles.

At some point, she nods. "I see... so it is like that... very interesting... the power to bind the mighty Archangels... to bind your fellow Emperors... you are a credit to our Hell..."

"With Gorn fallen, I am sure you will act as a fine leader in his stead," Yumagi says, tilting his head deferentially. "Ruling the Hell of Calamity holds no meaning for me. You will make better use of its resources. As for myself, I will continue to stay as the head of the Tarot Sect."

Crow sniffs the air. Her beak momentarily protrudes from under her hood before ducking back inside.

"Kss... they are coming..."

Hardly have the words left her mouth before a portal opens up in the sky. Once again, Raphael, Uriel, and Michael all fly through, followed by the orb and cube constructs.

"One more Demon Emperor has appeared," Raphael says. "Art any more to follow?"

"Not that we can tell," Yardrat answers. "Why? You sure seem hellbent on having as many demon leaders here as possible. Do you really think you can catch us offguard with yet another trick? Your power is feeble, old man."

Crow gazes at the Archangels. She narrows her eyes and nods along to Yardrat's words.

"Archangel Raphael... kukuku... where is Camael? I would like to see the woman whose life I personally ended..."

Raphael's pleasant smile evaporates. "Oh? So t'was thee who slew Camael. I will be glad to deliver justice to her killer on this very day. Art any of thee responsible for the deaths of other Archangels? I still know not the identity of Gabriel's murderer."

"Tough luck," Kristoff comments. "Diablo killed Gabriel, and Satan killed you. Neither of them are here."

"Nay... but Diablo still rests in the realm of the living..." Raphael murmurs. "He will receive his just desserts, once I uncover his location. 'Tis unfortunate that none of thee knoweth his location, or I would merrily extract it from thy cold, lifeless hands."

"You keep threatening us," Yardrat says, "But I don't understand where your confidence comes from. Are you working with the Wordsmith? Are you going to call down the power of Excalibur to smite us? Because last I checked, you lot can't wield Excalibur. Only a chosen few can, and Camael isn't here."

"The Wordsmith. Excalibur. Nay. My brothers and I do not need anyone else's assistance," Uriel says, her tone increasingly deepening. "We alone are enough. We have always been enough. Were it not for my brother's pained heart during the Energy Wars, he might have smote thy entire species where it stood. Sadly, we did not have the power this body gives us... but now we do."

Uriel straightens her back. She levitates higher into the sky, making all the Emperors frown. Even Yumagi appears a little concerned by her oddly brave words.

"Brothers. Join me. Let us use that forbidden power. The time is nigh."

Michael nods. "I concur."

Raphael does, too. "Indeed."

All at once, the bodies of Michael and Raphael's constructs shatter, bursting into fragments of light. Uriel's body shines bright like the sun, illuminating the night-time

covering Hell Harbor's surface.

Many of the demons avert their eyes, startled by the sudden outpouring of light.

"What's going on?" Yardrat asks. "Is it that same attack from earlier? The one Uriel nearly smote all of us with?"

"No!" Serena exclaims. "This is something else! It's... it's... soul resonance! All three of their souls are shining brilliantly!"

"What do you mean?" Lupus asks. "Explain!"

Uriel levitates higher and higher into the sky, casting a brilliant aura of holy light that shines upon even the distant reaches of Hell Harbor. Tens of miles away, countless demon Dukes, Barons, and Lords turn their heads in shock to the painful light beating upon their bodies.

"It's the Emperors! They're fighting Uriel! I told you I sensed holy magic from that direction!"

"What a fearsome aura! I didn't know Uriel was this dangerous. Has she obtained even more of Barbatos's power?"

"Aaargh! The light burns! I have to get inside! Move out of my way!"

Demons and monsters alike panic as the holy energy radiating from Uriel's soul burns their skin. The tougher Barons and Dukes endure it fairly easily, as do the Hidden Emperors, but none of them miss the discomfort it brings them.

Back at the shattered battleground, Uriel's body becomes brighter and brighter still, as if she has summoned the power of Heaven itself into her form. Her figure becomes progressively more illusory, causing her physical details to become harder and harder to make out.

Yumagi growls. "I don't know what the Archangels are doing, but I will not let them continue! Thunder Giant, **EVOKE!**"

The Glyphmancer activates a Platinum Aspect, the mightiest type of card in his possession. He holds the card high, allowing a tremendous fist of thunder-energy to blast out of it and rocket into the skies! The evoked fist races toward Uriel at blinding speeds, but just before it hits, a shield of hardened holy energy materializes in front of it!

BOOOOM!!

The explosion's shockwave reverses back down to the planet's surface, smashing all of the Emperors into the dirt except for Lupus and Crow. Yumagi himself ends up flattened into the soil like a pancake, along with Yardrat, Kristoff, and even Serena. The ordinarily graceful Emperor of Soul Whispers only gets a moment to cry out in surprise before the shockwave hits her like a tsunami and flings her into the planet's soil.

Emperors Lupus and Crow, by virtue of their powerful bodies, barely manage to remain standing. Lupus maintains her balance, but Crow's legs tremble under the weight of the reversed blast-wave.

"Kss... Uriel blocked... Yumagi's attack... so easily..." Crow growls. "Must transmit... a message... to my followers..."

She closes her eyes and concentrates. Using her demonic telepathy, she contacts a group of demons on a distant world, thousands of lightyears away.

These demons, consisting of Grunts, Lords, Barons, and Dukes, bow their heads as Crow's voice enters their minds.

[Begin... the ritual.. of Apocalypse...]

One Duke in particular, Crow's highest subordinate, spreads her arms in a welcoming gesture.

[Duke Raven has heard your command. We will begin at once, my liege.]

Raven, like every other demon under Crow's employ, sports a bird-like body with colorful feathers. Hers, however, are pure black. Feathers cover not only her chest, her back, and legs, but her arms and face as well.

Duke Raven flaps her arms and rockets upward, reaching the top of a huge ceremonial altar, one carved in the image of their sect's Emperor.

"Emperor Crow has given her command." Duke Raven proclaims. "Let us begin the Ritual of Apocalypse!"

"The Ritual of Apocalypse!" Cry her fellow Dukes.

"The Ritual of Apocalypse!" Exclaim the lower ranking demons.

On this world, a planet covered in rocks and granite outcroppings, ten moons circle around its equator. Watery oceans are nowhere to be found, but lava sprays from

countless active volcanos to heat up the world past comfortable limits. Temples erected all over its surface glow with green light as Raven's command reaches their controllers.

At once, Raven's subordinates drag out one thousand virgin men and women. They bind their bodies together in pairs and sprinkle purple dust on them, causing their libidos to circulate beyond their control.

"Fornication and blood! Lust and despair! Bring forth the shadows of my prayer!" Exclaims Duke Raven.

The lower-ranks echo her chants. They encircle the men and women bound together, forced to copulate. As their passions reach a peak, the demons move in unison, bring down five hundred ritual daggers to bear on the men. They sever the back of every man's neck, instantly ceasing their movements and causing blood to spray from their spines.

Before their female partners can cry out in shock, the demons move again, plunging daggers into their brains. They rip the women's heads open like burst grapefruits, spilling their brains and blood across the massive marble platform. Demonic sigils, activated by blood, glow with eerie-red light.

"This sacrifice empowers our god!" Duke Raven proclaims. "To her, we give our servitude! All hail Emperor Crow, the future leader of the Seven Hells!"

* * *

Back on Hell Harbor, Crow and the other Emperors watch Uriel's transformation with varying degrees of worry and alarm. Only the Emperor of Sacrifice herself remains relatively unworried while her followers pour a massive amount of sacrificial energy into her body.

"UWAAAH!!" Crow roars, as her body begins to increase in size. At the same time as Uriel's body transforms into something new and unknown, so too does Crow's.

The Emperor of Sacrifice gains a monstrous boost in strength. Her appearance shifts from a simple bird-like visage to one resembling a giant, feathered crocodile, complete with flesh-ripping teeth and claws capable of tearing through even the hardest armor.

"Archangels! Waiting for my arrival was the most foolish thing you could have ever done!" Crow roars, as Uriel's body becomes nothing more than a ball of light. "Now, you will face the wrath of Camael's killer!"

At that moment, a pulse of angelic energy bursts out of Uriel's body. It rushes in all directions, blowing the clouds out of the sky, flattening several nearby mountains, and even pushing Crow's body against the dirt. She easily holds her ground, but a flash of surprise appears on her face that anything could make her take a step back.

Uriel's body rapidly reforms. However, instead of the bipedal figure of Barbatos, the appearance she assumes becomes something far more alien... and terrifying.

"You wish to face us, tiny demon?" Uriel asks. **"We laugh at thy insignificance."**

The light in the sky fades away. Finally, all of the Emperors raise their heads to get a clear view of Uriel's transformed body.

What they see chills them to their core.

"You... what the hell are you?!" Yumagi asks, his voice catching in his throat. "What in the Seven goddamned Hells ARE you?!"

"A true monster..." Yardrat says, his voice a whisper.

"Spawn of Satan himself..." Lupus hisses. "That... that **thing!** How can it be the Archangel?!"

No longer demon nor Archangel, Uriel instead resembles a blood-red orb surrounded by a thousand screaming, crying, wailing faces. Tears of blood drip from their eyes. Their mouths hang open, caught in an eternal cry of pain and suffering. Living tendrils of blood drift in the air, each one worming around like vipers, ready to pounce.

The eldritch monstrosity hangs in the sky like the arbiter of several doomsdays, soon to rend all life to its atoms.

"We are the Cherubiim." Uriel states. **"We are the instrument of thy demise."**

"We thank thee for coming to thy future graveyard. Now, we can avenge our family... with no regrets."

Part 320: Cherubiim's Judgment

[Recommended Listening](#)

Three Archangels, united.

Not in tens of eons has the universe witnessed such a terrifying sight. Once the supreme entities of life itself, the creators of reality, and the flesh-forgers of countless sentient sub-species, the Archangels were once revered and feared by all life underneath them. Even their own creations, the monstrous entities known as dragons, only dared to fight them out of necessity, not desire.

But time passed. Tens of millions of years. The universe forgot the horrors the pureblooded Archangels could unleash. When three Archangels united their souls, the result was not merely a threefold increase in power, but a might so horrifying that it could bring entire star systems to ruin. It was once a power so terrifying that the mere mention of it would quell any rebellious thoughts from those forced to face it.

Cherubiim, Seraphiim, and Ophaniim. The three unified powers capable of tackling any foe with ease. Despite the bitter odds faced when battling Jörmungandr, the Archangels ultimately prevailed, and this was all thanks to the powers of the Cherubiim and Seraphiim.

Now, on the world known as Hell Harbor, that long-forgotten ancient deity, known to none still living, once again bares its teeth. The Cherubiim, once an amalgamation of Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel's powers, takes on a different appearance as Uriel changes position with Gabriel, swapping in for him to complete the trifecta of souls necessary to unlock the Cherubiim's power.

Every demon on Hell Harbor loses the strength in their legs. Every human, monster, and other living entity feels a chill wash through their bones. The weakest minded perish instantly from the sheer pressure pushing on their souls, never to rise again. Others permanently lose the ability to walk, speak, or even think.

The Hidden Emperors, once so cocky and confident of their chances at winning, crumple into paper tigers as this awe-inspiring and pants-shitting soul pressure strikes them.

Yumagi's cocky smile vanishes, replaced instead with a look of dread. His teeth chatter, and his knees clack together. He falls to the ground and struggles to stand up, but the sheer amount of holy energy and soul pressure slamming against his very being holds back ninety percent of his power, making him feel as if he has stepped foot on a world with one hundred times its former gravity.

Emperors Serena, Yardrat, and Kristoff all likewise lose their ability to fly. They crumple into quivering masses, too terrified to look directly at the Cherubiim's body. Its thousand faces revolve around its light-core interior, all of them crying and wailing as if trapped in the pain of infinite unending deaths. Some of the faces beg for mercy. Others simply babble nonsense, having long ago lost their ability to reason. Each once belonged to a mighty angel, Titan, or dragon soul, but all of them fell to the legendary Cherubiim. None survived to tell the tale.

Of the demons present, only the two werewolves and Emperor Crow manage to remain standing, but the blood in their bodies thins dramatically, making them feel as frail as elderly humans.

"You... you... what in the Seven Hells... are you?!" Crow shrieks. "You're an abomination!"

"We are the Cherubiim. Thou art all errant children who hath fallen to sin. We regret creating thee. And so, we will exterminate all who call themselves demons in thy stead. Rejoice, for thou shalt never again foist thy acts of terror upon this galaxy."

"You... you think you can exterminate us?!" Emperor Lupus roars. "I'll drown in the River Styx before I ever accept such a fate! Ahhhh!!"

She coils strength into her legs and launches straight upward, racing toward the Cherubiim above. Lupus sucks in a deep breath, summoning demonic power into her throat. In the second before she impacts the Cherubiim with her reinforced body, she vomits a bolt of blackened demonic lightning at the abomination.

Before it can impact the Cherubiim, one of the thousand faces detaches from the unified Archangels, intercepts Lupus's attack, and opens its mouth.

Gulp!

The face stained with blood swallows her demonic energy greedily, causing the Cherubiim's power to rise, ever so imperceptibly. Before Lupus can react, another face detaches, flies toward her, and instantly transforms into the soul-body of a small dragon.

"SKREOW!"

The ghostly dragon smashes its claws against Lupus's body and batters her violently, sending her flying toward the planet's surface. She smashes into the dirt and embeds a quarter of a mile deep, breaking tens of bones in her body and otherwise crumpling her formidable defenses in an instant. At the same time, her 'turn' ends, leaving her to lay motionless, suffering that agony until the start of the next round.

"There is no point in fighting." The Cherubiim states. **"None have faced this transformation since the Primordial Era. None can counter it. This form means absolute power. All of thou art inferior. Perish."**

At once, every face revolving around the Cherubiim detaches. They fly into the upper atmosphere, then rocket downward, vomiting beams of holy energy, each as powerful as one of Gabriel's mightiest blasts used during the War in Heaven.

Despair crosses the faces of every demon. Yumagi shakily activates a Golden Aspect, evoking it for maximum power.

"N-Nimrod's Fortification! **I-Imbue!**"

A transparent tower made of golden energy materializes over top of and around Yumagi, Yardrat, and Serena. It rapidly coalesces into something harder than spiritual energy, capable of repelling some of the strongest attacks Yumagi has ever imagined.

But even so, his knees never stop banging together as he barely holds his wits intact.

Frightening! Too frightening! What in the hell have these Archangels done? Where did they obtain such a horrifying transformation?! Never in my greatest estimates did I imagine they would possess an ability of this level! If they had such a power, why didn't they use it during the Energy Wars?!

Emperor Serena grits her teeth. Lacking any versatile powers capable of turning the battle on her own, she can only augment other demons, making her almost useless in battles such as these. She dives toward Yardrat and motions with her hands, touching upon the fabric of his soul.

Yardrat stiffens. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Don't resist!" Serena yells.

An instant later, some of Yadrat's innate magical abilities change, making his skin and bones as hard as iron. However, his magical power drops significantly, lowering his offensive potential. He instantly realizes what Serena has done.

She adjusted my power balance, making my body more resilient to damage!

Just seconds after, the one-thousand beams of holy energy crash into Hell Harbor's surface.

The light of creation shines, bombarding the eyes of all those present.

Emperor Yumagi's Tower of Babel, a defensive construct capable of resisting most attacks, crumbles to nothingness. Several beams of holy energy continue racing past its collapsed defenses, where they blast all the Demon Emperors with holy power equivalent to nuclear bombs.

Boom.

A cataclysmic series of explosions detonate, turning the night side of Hell Harbor as bright as the midday sun. Waves of leftover power blast into the distant reaches of space, setting off countless alarms on numerous observation platforms.

Moments later, the fallout dies down, revealing the beaten and battered figures of all the Demon Emperors.

Emperor Yumagi, missing several limbs, lays motionlessly in a scorched pile of charred rock and rubble. The land around him, turned to glass by the Cherubiim's attack, glimmers like piles of shiny diamonds.

Yadrat's defensively-upgraded body lays in a heap. He coughs weakly, many of his internal organs ruptured from the Cherubiim's attack.

Lupus exhales one last time before departing from the world of the living. Her soul leaves her body, only to end up trapped in the River Styx. At the same time, Mephisto slithers out of the ground and quietly takes her remains for his own purposes, chuckling cruelly to himself.

Emperors Kristoff, Wolfram, and Crow all lay near each other. The Emperor of Thirst regenerates himself with a blood ritual, while Crow appears relatively uninjured. With a body empowered by her ritualist followers, she survives the Cherubiim's bombardment with minimal injuries.

As for Emperor Wolfram, both of his arms and one of his legs no longer appear on his figure. The last leg barely clings to his abdomen, leaving him a pitiful sight.

Finally, Emperor Serena, of all people, appears less injured than Yardrat. She manages to stand up, her body somewhat intact. Belatedly, she realizes Yumagi put the majority of his power into protecting his fellow Emperor over Yardrat.

The Cherubiim's thousand faces fall from the upper atmosphere to reattach to its main body. After exhausting their power, they require a short period to recharge.

"Demon Emperors. One of thou hath departed this realm. Soon, the rest will follow. Have thee any last words to say to thy father in Heaven?"

Despair engulfs the minds of all the Emperors. For the first time in all their existences, they realize that there exists a power in the universe capable of suppressing them in their entirety.

Yumagi gurgles weakly.

"You... can still... move...? But... my Soul Shackles..."

"Foolish demon. Dids't thou thinketh thy feeble shackles could constrain the Archangel of Wisdom? We played along with thy game because it suited our fancy. Now that we have ascended to the ranks of a primordial entity, nothing thou unleash will be capable of snaring our souls. Thou art far too weak to pose us a threat."

Every Emperor lays motionless, unable to move. With Yumagi's soul shackles binding them but not the Archangel, they haven't the slightest ability to resist, leaving them wide open for annihilation.

"Hah... haha... an excellent... play..." Yumagi coughs. "Very good... very good... I concede. I admit... defeat. You are... too much... for this Glyphmancer... to handle..."

Yumagi's eyes wearily blink shut. The demonic power in his body slowly becomes inert as he loses his grasp on reality.

However, just before his eyes can shut for the final time, one of the beads of light on his forehead activates!

"No! I will not die here!"

Yumagi's eyes widen. A flash of golden energy bursts out of his being and envelops all of the demons present.

"Temporal Cricket, **Evoke!**"

Instantly, the power of time manipulation wraps around every demon, restoring their bodies to how they were just five minutes before. Every injury they suffered and every last drop of damage disappears, making them once again relatively healthy and in good spirits.

At the same time, another bead of light disappears from Yumagi's forehead.

"Since this game no longer matters, I dispel it! Pharaoh's Insight, **Revoke!**"

The Soul Shackles binding Yumagi and all the other Emperors shatter, allowing them to once again move freely. The moment they regain their faculties, they all jump to their feet.

Kristoff glances around the battlefield. "Yumagi. Where is Lupus?"

"Dead." Yumagi answers. "Temporal Cricket can rewind time, but it cannot bring back the fallen. I only have five copies of it, and I've just evoked two. The other three lay with my initiates."

"No!" Wolfram roars. "My wife! MY WIFE! DEAD! Raphaeel!!"

"Impressive resilience," The Cherubiim says. **"All of thou art like cockroaches. But thy survival matters not. Death comes to all who face the Cherubiim."**

Once again, the Cherubiim gathers power into its body, amassing its energy to launch another deadly attack.

While it powers up, Wolfram snaps his head toward Serena. He presses his feet against the ground and launches toward her, startling the Emperor of Soul Whispers.

"Wolfram! Don't you dare!" Yumagi yells.

However, instead of attacking Serena, Wolfram screeches to a halt in front of her and grabs her shoulders.

"Serena! POWER ME UP! I will kill this Cheru-bastard, even if it costs me my life!!"

Momentarily taken aback, Serena gapes at him. "Y-you... you want me to...?"

"Yes!" Wolfram shouts.

"I... I can empower you," Serena says. "But not even Mephisto will be able to-"

"I don't CARE! The Archangels killed my wife!" Wolfram roars. "Do it!"

Serena's heart skips a beat. She flicks her sightless eyes toward the Cherubiim, watching as it rapidly refills the energy of its thousand 'faces', then turns her attention back to Wolfram.

"...I have never empowered a Demon Emperor before. Theoretically, it will elevate your power one full rank. Lords become Barons, Barons become Dukes, and Dukes become Emperors... but if there really is a barrier, you may not touch upon the rank above Emperor. You might lose your life in vain!"

"I will do anything for revenge!" Wolfram screams. "Just DO IT!!"

"Very well! Wolfram, serve demonkind with your mind, body, and soul! We will never forget your sacrifice!"

Not wasting a moment longer, Serena presses her palm against Wolfram's chest. Her power, the ability to augment other demons and change their attributes, flows into Wolfram's soul, uplifting him, restoring every last bit of his vitality and energizing him with a forbidden power no known demon in existence has ever achieved.

Within seconds, Wolfram's might rises through the ranks of the Emperors, putting him above Kristoff, Yumagi, and even Crow.

A feral blood-light emanates from Wolfram's eyes. He lifts his head and cries out in ecstasy as the power flowing through his body reaches a plateau he never thought possible.

"Yes! This is it! MY POWER! It is reaching... the APEX!"

Hell Harbor begins to tremble. The entire planet experiences earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and spontaneous hurricanes.

The Cherubiim watches from above. It examines Wolfram with more than a hint of curiosity.

"How frightening. So this is what the demons might ultimately become. How good it is, then, that we shall exterminate them on this very day."

Blood drips from Serena's eyes. She pours every last drop into Wolfram's body, wincing as a crystallized barrier starts to engulf his soul.

"It's... it's too heavy! I cannot break through! There really is a barrier limiting demons from breaking past Emperor! It's... impene...trable!"

"No!" Wolfram roars. "It is not! I will break through! I cannot fail! My life for my wife! Hellfire and fury upon our angel oppressors! I will slay the Archangels at all costs!"

Wolfram's body increases in size. He rises to eight feet tall, then ten, twelve...

Serena steps away from him, her energy exhausted. She falls to the ground, gasping for breath.

"I can't... I couldn't... cough, cough..."

Suddenly, an explosion occurs within Wolfram's soul. A shockwave of soul pressure bursts out, causing every spectator to momentarily faint! Only the Cherubiim remains awake to witness his evolution.

When Emperor Crow opens her eyes, she audibly gasps. Her former power, once thought to be the apex of demon might, pales in comparison to Wolfram's.

"It's... like... the Archdemon! Such power! This is the level beyond Emperor? He's like... a Demon... Deity!"

Wolfram towers over the other Emperors. He lifts his head to the heavens and roars, splitting the sky and causing even the Void itself to tremble.

On a distant observation platform, countless alarms blare. Senior Obersservor Kol, the same Changeling who witnessed Jason Hiro's space-flight, frantically activates several comm relay switches.

"This one has a major incident to report! Holy Energy detected on the planet of Hell Harbor! Extreme levels of mana fluctuation! We request immediate assistance! Class One Emergency! Alert the Founders! Assemble battle flotillas!"

The Changeling's warning goes out to all local platforms, causing a major shift in the local fleet presences. Dozens of minor vessels immediately beam into the Hell Harbor system, locking onto the distant fluctuations while their captains and admirals corroborate Observer Kol's testimony.

"Our firepower is insufficient! Archangel readings detected! Source: Unknown! These readings do not correlate with any of the seven known Archangel signatures. Suppression Force required!"

On Hell Harbor's surface, Wolfram expands his claws, whirls around to face the Cherubiim, and laughs uproariously.

"Archangel bastards! I've broken through the barrier! I now possess the might to stand against you! I will crush you and show you why DEMONS reign supreme!"

"And..." He continues, lowering his voice to a growling threat. "...I will make you *pay* for killing my wife."

The Cherubiim's one-thousand faces glow with power as they detach from its central body.

"Try as thou might, thou *lacketh* the qualifications."

Part 321: Demon Deity's Wrath

Recommended Listening

Wolfram, no longer a Demon Emperor, but a Demon Deity towering above all other members of his species, stands fifty meters tall. Blackened energy swirls around his body, gathering into his claws and chest to empower every inch of his frame.

His enemy, the Cherubiim, evaluates him with the insight of a fellow predator. As a primordial entity, one that has faced countless fearsome, god-level foes, the Cherubiim does not consider its opponent nearly as threatening as the ancient dragons, nor the Titans, either.

However, the Cherubiim also understands a fundamental truth, one that will greatly affect the outcome of the battle.

United, we are stronger than any living being under the heavens. However, we are no longer the unstoppable primordial of ancient lore. We have lost too much soul energy over the eons. The body we rely on, that of a mere Demon Duke, does not possess the foundation necessary for us to maintain the Cherubiim's maximum output.

We must finish this fight quickly. If we move too slowly, our revenge will fail here, today.

And so, without delay, the Demon Deity of Space Shattering initiates battle against his Cherubiim enemy with a violent roar, one that momentarily rips a hole in Hell Harbor's atmosphere. The rage in his scream causes countless weak-minded entities elsewhere on the planet to black out, with some perishing due to their innate fragility, as well as the wounds they suffered during the Cherubiim's ascension.

Wolfram leaps at the Cherubiim. He conjures the power to shatter space inside his claws, then brings the hammer down, blasting the Cherubiim backward.

With one blow after another, Wolfram goes berserk, relishing and reveling in the power granted to him by Serena's magic. As the first known demon to ever step beyond the limits of Demon Emperor, he obtains a power that would cause any of the ancient Emperors to weep tears of envious blood. He bashes the Archangels, strikes them, and fires orbs of condensed space-shattering mana to knock them backward.

At the same time, the Cherubiim does not take its beating passively. It wields Uriel's powers with uncanny precision, summoning mighty barriers tens of times stronger than any she has ever made, deftly blocking or deflecting Wolfram's savage melee attacks.

Bang! Bang!

Boom! Boom!

Hell Harbor shudders. It tremors, and its continents tremble.

Each blow swung by Wolfram or fired by the Archangel makes the weaker Emperors grab their hearts and wince in pain.

Before, the Archangel's suppression made every one of its attacks ten times deadlier. In contrast, Wolfram's ascension creates an aura of demon-friendly energy, one that empowers his fellow Emperors. Nevertheless, the other Emperors still lack the strength necessary to fully resist the levels of power being slung between their ally and their enemy.

Crow lifts her head. She puffs out her feathered chest and *ca-caws* at the others, rousing their spirits.

"Come! We cannot allow Wolfram to fight the Archangels alone! We must assist him with all our strength if we are to slay our hated enemies, once and for all!"

As the mightiest Emperor on scene, she quickly takes charge, rallying the others to join the battle.

Of all the Hidden Emperors who showed up on Hell Harbor to attend the meeting, or its after-effects, only Yumagi, Kristoff, Crow, Yardrat, and Serena remain actively in the battle.

Yardrat glances at Serena, noting her severely drained and weakened state.

"Go and fetch the Emperors from the Hell of Isolation. It's time those three helped us out! We will need every bit of firepower to crush these Archangels!"

Serena nods her head. "There is not much else I can do to help. I am sorry. This is the limit of my abilities."

"No need to apologize." Yumagi replies. "With Wolfram here, we will definitely kill the Cherubiim, no matter the cost! The situation would have been unwinnable without you. Now, go!"

He and the other Emperors run toward the battle between gods, while Serena leaves to seek out the assistance of Melody, Guura, and perhaps even their sister, Viola.

* * *

Wolfram's fist smashes through one of the Cherubiim's barriers. He finally lands a decisive blow, smiting the Cherubiim's core and launching it backward, where it crashes into the dirt. However, this single punch does not even remotely appear to faze the primordial entity, as it immediately rights itself and regenerates its light-core.

"Thou art mighty, Wolfram. Thy power, formidable. But thy life is a pitiable flame, soon to burn its little remaining fuel. Thou shalt fall before this god."

A phantasmal figure materializes around the Cherubiim. Three arms made of holy energy sprout from its right, and three from its left. Three heads appear on its top, the spitting images of Raphael, Michael, and Uriel. Each head looks in different directions and locks onto different approaching targets as they observe the Emperors rapidly encroaching on their battle.

"Come. We welcome the chance to kill thee here, rather than hunt the lot of thee down like dogs."

The one thousand faces from before fire powerful beams in hundreds of directions. Some of them fly toward Yardrat, while others blast Emperors Crow, Yumagi, or Kristoff.

They split apart and use their own methods to block or dodge.

Yardrat teleports around, narrowly evading the Cherubiim's blasts, even though the mere after-effects burn his skin and make him grit his teeth in pain.

Yumagi imbues his body with shadowy-powers, increasing his speed dramatically and allowing him to slip into tight, dark spaces. The planet's soil protects him from many attacks that would otherwise kill him, granting him extra seconds of life.

Kristoff summons walls of human blood to block the Cherubiim's attacks. Due to its non-demonic nature, it does not suffer the same fatal weakness to holy energy, letting him divert the worst effects away from himself.

As for Emperor Crow, she merely snorts, claps her hands, and hardens her feathers. Several bombardments of holy energy strike her directly, but she relies on Wolfram's aura of empowerment to strengthen herself and regenerate from her most painful injuries.

Once the Cherubiim exhausts its thousand faces, the demons launch their own assault.

Yumagi evokes two Golden aspects, firing planet-crushing fireballs and lightning orbs at the Cherubiim.

Kristoff dives beneath the Cherubiim and rakes it from below, summoning huge blood-claws to tear at its seemingly fragile underside.

Emperor Crow leaps at the Cherubiim's back, attacking from the rear while Wolfram attacks from the front.

As for Yardrat, he offers support from the sides, teleporting attacks through the Cherubiim's defenses whenever it raises holy energy barriers to protect itself.

The Cherubiim endures their multi-pronged onslaught without complaint. Uriel's head flicks around, anticipating attacks with more ease than ever in her life. She conjures dozens of holy barriers, protecting the Cherubiim's core with the same simplicity as if she had done so a thousand times before.

Raphael counters Yardrat's spatial manipulation. He also teleports the Cherubiim's body from side to side, making its figure much harder to land solid hits on.

And Michael plays the role of vanguard. He swings any arms equipped with swords or spears at unthinkable speeds, returning three attacks for every one that Wolfram lands.

Boom! Boom! Boom-boom-boom!

Each landed attack, each deflected blow, and even the near-hits that end up whiffing into the distance, also end up shattering parts of Hell Harbor's surface. Some attacks fly hundreds of miles before crashing into population centers, wiping out hundreds of thousands of lives. Others sail into Hell Harbor's many oceans, killing the creatures which lurk beneath the seas and terrorizing the life-forms which usually keep to themselves.

As the battle progresses, Raphael's head chuckles. **"Dost thou thinketh this pitiable display... is enough?"**

Michael's head whirls toward one of Wolfram's incoming attacks. The Cherubiim's body blurs as it rushes toward the Demon Deity, startling him when it teleports behind him, spins around, and lands two brutal sword-slashes on his back.

"Aaargh!"

Wolfram cries out in pain, but his hastily thrown punch continues flying at Emperor Crow, caught offguard by the Cherubiim's sudden positional change.

"No!"

Crow can only let cry a single word before Wolfram's fist smashes into her body and sends her hurtling backward. She crashes into the plains and rips up a canyon miles deep, eventually coming to a stop thirty miles away.

Wolfram and the others reorient themselves. Thanks to his empowered defenses, the Deity of Space-Shattering doesn't suffer too badly from the Cherubiim's attacks, but he does grit his teeth as lingering waves of holy magic emanate from the wounds.

"You'll die here, today!" Wolfram roars. "You can't live any longer!"

"Ah, but we can..." Raphael says with a smile. **"Already, thy power has plateaued. How much longer cans't thou holdeth on, we wonder?"**

Wolfram checks his body internally. To his surprise, he finds that the Cherubiim's observation isn't quite as accurate as it thinks.

Hmm? My power! It's still increasing? I see! Serena's ability will cause me to continuously gain energy until my body has more than it can handle... at which point, I will surely self-immolate! But in the meantime, I'll only become stronger and stronger! If that's the case, then I can still crush the Archangels!

He laughs. "Bahaha! You think I've *plateaued*, eh?! Let's see if you're right!"

Wolfram summons another burst of energy, causing Raphael's smile to vanish. The Archangel of Wisdom regards him with more caution. He quickly re-evaluates his previous statement to come to the same conclusion as Wolfram.

Perhaps 'tis not Wolfram who will run out of power first, but the three of us.

While Emperor Crow pulls herself together, two more Emperors arrive on the field.

Guura and Melody, not even remotely eager to join in, offer pained sighs when they see the Cherubiim's power up close.

"Aw, man! What a freaking pain!" Guura complains. "We could die, you know?!"

"I'm not afraid of death!" Melody proclaims. "I'm only afraid this won't be one hell of a party!"

Emperor Serena, aided by Emperor Auger, takes her leave after summoning the Hell of Isolation's Emperors. She brings Dorma with her, leaving the cataclysmic battle to those more suited for it while also hoping to obtain Viola's support.

Melody stands atop a nearby mountain, one made of debris from the Archangel's attacks that very hour. She summons a flute into her hands and begins to play a high-tempo song which travels across miles of distance to attack the Cherubim!

Raphael immediately senses the new source of conflict. A vague sense of disorientation seizes his mind, as well as the other two Archangels. However, to his surprise, he fails to pinpoint Melody's exact location.

A soul attack! Someone is attempting to destabilize us from afar. Leave them to me, my brother and sister. I shalt counter this skullduggery with my methods.

At the same time, Guura stands on a different mountain-top. She begins to dance around, clap her hands, and sing a cheerful song. Just like Melody, her attack moves swiftly but invisibly across Hell Harbor's surface, also targeting the Archangel's souls.

While neither of them individually can cause much harm to the Cherubim, together, their soul-attacks resonate, causing not only confusion and disorientation, but a deep and distinct sensation of loss in all three Archangel's souls.

As the Cherubim battles Wolfram and the other demons, faint memories bubble up in its mind.

Raphael recalls the images of his fallen sisters, Muriel and Cassiel. He remembers their sweet and innocent faces, and how they used to avoid the power-games of the other angels.

He recalls the day when they perished at Michael's hands, and how devastated he felt having to give that order, all in order to ensure his brother Samael could not lead an insurrection against the Cherubs and Seraphs.

He remembers the Ancient Era, when so many angels fell to the demons during Valac's many attacks, the War in Heaven, and even the years afterward, before the Lazarus Tower came into being.

He wistfully remembers the final day of angelkind's existence, when the demons and Volgrim launched a combined attack on Heaven, ultimately slaying him, his brothers, and all of his sisters.

Similar visions play out in Uriel's mind, as well as Michael's.

Their combat performance sharply falls. Several attacks they would have easily blocked before land on their core, causing them slight damage.

Not only do feelings of regret and confusion appear in their minds, but feelings of love and melancholy.

Melody's songs play on their heartstrings, making them think of all the pain and loss they've suffered. Nostalgia strikes them, distracting them with thoughts of the 'good old times,' when all the angels lived 'in harmony.'

But Guura's songs play on their current lives, and how little they 'really' want to kill their demonic opponents.

What if they simply gave up and ended the conflict?

What if they apologized for all the horrors they previously wrought, perhaps even realizing that all along, the angels were the villains, and their opponents were merely their unfortunate victims?

As these conflicting thoughts strike them, Raphael's eyes flash with light.

"No. This is a DECEPTION!"

All at once, the Archangel of Wisdom follows the trail of soul-energy latching onto him. He whirls his head around and moves his lips in a mystical pattern after locking onto Melody's position.

"Aaaaahhh!!"

Melody screams as a violent wave of anguish, pain, and sorrow blasts her mind. For a brief moment, she senses the loss of trillions of angels as if they were her own blood. She staggers backward and falls from the mountaintop, twisting, tumbling, and crashing into the plains below.

"Eeyyahh!"

Guura also cries out as different emotions, those of rage, hatred, and overwhelming bloodlust strike her, making her hate her fellow demons as much as if they had personally murdered every person she ever loved. She, too, plummets down, landing in the valley below, just the same as her sister.

Both Emperors from the Hell of Isolation struggle with soul-pain so debilitating that they lose their ability to think rationally. Visions coming from Raphael's own memories, as well as those of his brother and sister, rock their minds and make them feel mental torture worse than any hellish prison could ever unleash.

With their soul suppression lifted, the Cherubiim resumes its former prowess.

Emperor Crow rejoins the battle, but she finds that after having suffered such a brutal attack, she cannot hit as hard as before, nor can she take the hits, either.

Wolfram coils strength into his legs. He leaps skyward, then falls toward the Cherubiim while lifting his palms overhead, exposing his claws.

"This! Is! For my wife!!"

Wolfram rakes the air beneath himself as he falls, sending hundreds of space-rending slashes toward the Archangels.

The Cherubiim summons dozens of holy barriers, but Wolfram's combined attack tears them apart and rips into the Cherubiim's core, making it shudder violently. For a brief moment, the Cherubiim becomes paralyzed with pain, losing its ability to move.

"Chance!" Yadrat shouts.

The other Emperors echo his sentiments.

Yumagi evokes a Platinum Aspect, summoning a fist of enchanted demonstone to crash into the Archangel's exposed body.

Crow charges at the Cherubiim at Mach Two, hardening her body as best as possible before slamming into the Archangels and bouncing off their core, yet still delivering a brutal blow.

Kristoff conjures ten blood-lances, each taller and longer than his entire body. He fires them at the Archangels like javelin missiles, spearing their core until the Cherubiim's latent power dissolves the blood.

Yadrat enhances the trajectory and speed of the launched attacks, using his temporal magic to boost their power, but otherwise doesn't send any attacks of his own. As a support specialist, he doesn't do well when actually fighting.

While all the Emperors launch their attacks, the Cherubiim shudders and rocks, suffering severe damage for the first time since the battle started.

At the same time as every other Emperor lands their attacks, Wolfram falls from above and lifts his fists overhead.

"Archangels! DIE!"

Just before the Demon Deity of Space-Shattering lands his coup d'état, Raphael's eyes glow with divine light.

"No."

Temporal magic bursts into existence around the Cherubiim. All one thousand of its faces complete their recharging cycle, detach from the main body, and spread apart, sending beams of light between each other.

A barrier of super-hardened holy energy wraps around the Cherubiim, covering it from every angle of attack. Wolfram crashes against the barrier like a mosquito on a windshield, comically splaying out his limbs in an awkward stance as his prepared strike ends abruptly.

"Oof!"

The Cherubiim raises a fist and launches it upward, passing through the hardened barrier to blast Wolfram's face and send him spinning backward. The empowered werewolf cries out in pain as he backflips through the air uncontrollably before eventually crashing into Hell Harbor's surface. He faceplants into the dirt and grinds to a halt, falling silent for several long seconds as his vision spins.

"This charade has gone on for long enough." The Cherubiim says, all three heads speaking in unison. **"It is time to draw this conflict to a close."**

The one thousand tear-stained faces detach from the Cherubiim. Phantasmal bodies sprout from each face, mimicking their appearances from before the Cherubiim reaped their souls.

Angels, Titans, and dragons alike. All of them materialize, forming a massive army of empowered, primordial beings. The blood drains from every Emperor's face when they sense the combined pressure of one thousand battle-hardened monsters from the Primordial Era, each one fully capable of flattening a planet on their own.

"Seven Hells..." Crow gasps. "No... no! How can one being possess this much power?!"

"We can't possibly defeat such a creature!" Kristoff exclaims. "What is this farce? The Cherubiim alone is stronger than any Demon Emperor, but with this army...!!"

Yardrat shudders violently. He loses more than a bit of his backbone, turns tail, and flees.

"I no longer wish to participate in this game! You lot can die, for all I care!"

He yanks open a portal to the Labyrinth and departs the battlefield, leaving the other Emperors behind.

"Yardrat!" Yumagi exclaims. "You coward!"

His curse goes unanswered. Whether Yardrat does or doesn't hear him, he still leaves, giving no more shits about whatever happens to Hell Harbor.

"That yellow-bellied spawn of a broodmother!" Crow yells. "Auger's number two, indeed! What a worthless pile of shit!"

The Cherubiim watches Yardrat's departure with a sense of amusement.

"That foolish brat." The Cherubiim muses out loud. **"Does he not realize? He has just revealed the temporal coordinates of his homeworld to us. After we slay the demons here, we will pursue him to eliminate his lair. There is no escape. Our wrath... is inevitable!"**

The Cherubiim extends its six arms outward, as if embracing the beauty of creation. At its command, an army of Angels, Titans, and dragons race in all directions to ravage the lands. Some pounce at the nearby Emperors, while others fly toward the distant demon colonies, raining holy light and divine bombardments on those unfortunate enough to end up in their path.

Every Emperor turns tail and flees. No longer can their pathetic and measly levels of strength avail them. They use all of their methods to evade the terrifying long-dead abominations biting at their heels, but compared to the powers of revived Primordial entities, not a single one of their attributes can match up.

Crow puts on a valiant fight. She alone possess the strength to trade blows with one or two of the Cherubiim's phantasmal slaves, but none of the other Emperors even come close. She flies away at her fastest speed, occasionally pausing to claw or bat away the attacks that come worryingly close.

Meanwhile, Wolfram pulls himself back together just in time to see a huge dragon descend upon him. More than ten times his size, this ancient monster roars, its volume an ear-splitting level that flattens the land where he stands. He leaps at the creature and

claws at its throat, but the dragon smoothly slides around his attack like a slippery eel, slithers behind him, and bashes his back with its tail.

Thump!

The dragon slams Wolfram against the soil, knocking the wind out of him. To his horror, he finds that its physical strength greatly exceeds the Cherubiim's, making the Cherubiim appear as weak as a mouse by comparison.

Indeed, as he fights for his life against this one, singular foe, the Cherubiim draws near, eying him with a look of pity.

"How unfortunate. The so-called 'Demon Deity' is naught but a speck of dust before the Mother of all Dragons. Jörmungandr was once our greatest foe, but we devoured her soul and turned her into our puppet. With her power, we eventually brought an end to not only the Dragon Wars, but the Titan Wars, as well. Compared to this singular Mother, thou art... wholly lacking."

Wolfram desperately fights back. Again and again, Jörmungandr bashes him from side to side like a kitten playing with a ball of yarn. Wolfram grows more exhausted as his life force finally reaches his limit.

"Hah... haha... fine! You want to kill this deity?! Then with my last breath, I'll condemn you and ALL your minions to the River Styx!"

Wolfram gathers every last bit of power he has left into his chest. He charges up a mana bomb directly inside himself, one that will result in an explosion one hundred times worse than any nuclear weapon ever launched in human history. So formidable is this last burst of power, that it even makes Raphael's head narrow his eyes.

"How frightening, but thou shalt fail to release this deadly blast. Thou art already too late."

Just as Wolfram starts the final incantation to self-destruct his body, the Cherubiim rushes toward him and lunges the tips of its fingers at the back of his head.

SKRIIIIK!

Raphael's fingers pass through Wolfram's body and grab directly onto his soul. In Wolfram's last moments alive, all he sees is a giant mouth converging on his vision before swallowing him whole.

The Cherubiim tears out the Demon Deity's soul and consumes it, instantly obtaining a massive burst of magical power. Wolfram's last hurrah, his self-destruction that may have wounded or even killed the Cherubiim, instead revitalizes it with a massive burst of new power, prolonging its existence and allowing it to reach new heights.

Wolfram's body crumbles to dust as it loses the last bit of energy that once supported it. It falls to the dirt and turns to rotted bones before ultimately dissolving entirely, leaving nothing behind for even Mephisto to steal.

"For this meager amount of mana to empower us so, we have truly fallen off in strength over the eons..." Raphael muses. **"But in the end, a Primordial Entity is still-"**

From the skies above, a storm of heavy weaponry rains upon Hell Harbor's surface, interrupting Raphael's speech.

Thousands of missiles, railgun shots, heavy artillery, plasma ordinance, and thunderous bombs fall from a fleet of Volgrim warships, smashing into the Cherubiim, Jörmungandr, and all its other spectral summons.

Many of them perish, their ghostly bodies evaporating into nothingness.

Others suffer major and minor wounds before going on the defensive.

As for the Cherubiim and its mightiest summon, they merely gaze skyward while conjuring godlike barriers of holy energy to defend themselves.

Not one drop of ordinance even so much as scratches them. Thousands of explosions shatter Hell Harbor's delicate ecological balance, rendering much of its surface inhospitable to life for the next thousand years, but none of these attacks cause any harm to the Cherubiim or its loyal pet.

The three Archangels gaze at their unexpected attackers, before slightly cocking their heads.

"Oh...? Our second most hated enemies, here to serve themselves up on a platter. It seems the Volgrim are not aware of the horrors they are about to experience. Let us... *educate* them."

A moment later, the Cherubiim launches skyward, rocketing toward the Void. Jörmungandr follows in their wake.

The Volgrim armada, a fleet of eight thousand elite warships, hangs above, while millions of Psions watch as the enemy approaches.

[This is Confessor Vulpanix speaking,] The lead Psion telepathically states, her cold eyes following a massive energy signature as it flies straight at her ship. [Kill the Archangel. At *all* costs.]

Part 322: Confessor's Plight

The Cherubiim rockets from Hell Harbor's atmosphere into space, flanked by Jörmungandr and hundreds of its other summons. It leaves behind a few dozen primordial lifeforms to harass and ultimately kill the Demon Emperors, but compared to the massive Volgrim armada, the demons no longer pose the Archangels much threat.

Despite thousands of kilometers separating the Volgrim fleet from Hell Harbor's atmosphere, the Cherubiim advances upon them at an alarming speed. Within seconds, its hundreds of summons crash into the fleet, ripping their mighty ships to fragments. Of the eight thousand vessels present, more than four hundred come under immediate attack, unable to back off compared to the Cherubiim's summons' superior acceleration and maneuverability.

Primordial Angels, Titans, and Dragons treat the Volgrim ships like Christmas presents, tearing them open to expose their insides to the vacuum of the Void. The Psions on board the nearest vessels fight back, ignoring the dangers of space thanks to their durable bodies deliberately designed and modified to unleash hell in even the deadliest environments. However, their fellow Technopath and Changeling Volgrim don't possess the same physical attributes. With almost none of them adapted to the harshness of space, they perish to suffocation at alarming speeds, assuming the primordial beings assaulting their ships don't kill them first.

The Cherubiim does not engage directly in the slaughter, but instead continuously conjures shields of divine energy to protect its summons and itself from the Volgrim's counter-fire. The Technopaths in charge of the fleet unload their ordinance as quickly as possible, shelling the phantasmal monsters battering their forward-vessels with reckless abandon.

"Gunners! Aim for the Titan-Class lifeform attacking our portside nacelle! Missiles, lock onto the Winged-Monster raking our engines! Shields, rotate frequencies!"

"Watch your crossfire! Send out the Psions!"

"We may die here, but we will still honor the Founders!"

Twenty ships explode into flames within the first thirty seconds of combat. So violent is the Cherubiim's initial attack that many Changeling Observers have to scramble to

rectify the data.

"Confusion! Our scans only indicated the presence of a single Archangel lifeform! Where did these hundreds of others come from?"

"Unclear. Transmit additional data back to Volgarius. Request additional assistance from the Founders."

"Response negative. The Founders have already given this fleet seven percent of the Volgrim Empire's elites. We cannot afford to divert additional combat vessels away from Plaguetouched territories! We must defeat the Archangel and its supporting lifeforms on our own."

As the battle quickly heats up, the Volgrim attempt to encircle and hem in the Cherubiim's allies, but Jörmungandr alone proves to be a terrifying foe far beyond their initial estimates. The Mother of all Dragons opens her mouth to scream soundlessly into the void, firing off an attack that strikes the souls of every Volgrim present.

The Psions, possessing no souls, barely notice a tingle in the air around themselves. However, the Technopaths and Changelings are not so fortunate. Countless low-ranking crew perish instantly as Jörmungandr's attack obliterates their souls and leaves them laying on the floor as lifeless husks.

While the weakest Volgrim bodies begin to cool, the slightly stronger-willed Volgrim barely survive, but experience agony as their souls suffer terrible tearing and leaking of their soul energy. Thousands of crew fall comatose, never to wake again. Even the crew who remain standing still experience nausea, disorientation, and imbalance in their movements. The Technopath gunners, elites though they be, miss many shots they ordinarily wouldn't, simply because their vision wavers too much for their augments to compensate.

Aboard the Volgrim flagship, the VLL Planet-Crusher, a ship spanning five kilometers in length, one and a half kilometers tall, and three kilometers wide, Confessor Vulpanix immediately notices the drop in her fellow Volgrim's fighting capabilities. Several deckhands collapse to the floor around her, while even the strongest-willed Technopaths and Changelings slump forward in their chairs and breathe raggedly, having experienced a soul-attack the likes of which no Volgrim has endured since the Energy Wars.

[This is the Confessor speaking!] Vulpanix mentally transmits in a wide-area telepathic message to her fellow Psions. [The Archangel has attacked the souls of our

brethren! Do not allow these inferior mud-dwellers to sully the name of our great Founders! Exit your ships, enter the void, and slaughter them all! Kill every last Archangel and any of their allies you see!]

[Yes, Confessor!]

[For the glory of the Founders!]

Rather than exiting through their ships' airlocks, the thousands of Psions present teleport directly into the void, some using the power of Spatial Psionics, while other use Temporal Psionics. Any Psion lacking these critical abilities hitch rides with their more capable comrades, eventually forming a wall of deceptively tiny specks compared to the massive primordial lifeforms ravaging the fleet.

Confessor Vulpanix leads the charge. She rips a gash in the Void and steps through it, arriving mere meters to the left of the roaring Jörmungandr.

The dragon senses her presence. It turns toward her, only for an invisible weapon weighing hundreds of tons to slam into its head, knocking it aside. Jörmungandr reels from the hit for only a moment before shaking its head and snapping at the newfound threat.

[You are nothing before the might of this Confessor.] Vulpanix sneers.

Her six insect-like eyes lock onto the dragon as it spews a gout of solar flame at her, the heat of which would easily melt a starship to slag.

However, Vulpanix shimmers out of reality, vanishing before the terrifying attack can strike her. She reappears above Jörmungandr's head with her palm aimed down, conjures a micro-singularity by condensing the space below herself into a black hole, and fires it downwards.

THUMP!

The singularity tears through Jörmungandr's head, exploding the dragon's spectral form into particles of light. Satisfied at her conquest, Vulpanix turns to look at the Cherubiim, only to flinch when the headless dragon pounces at her from below and rakes its claws toward her back.

[An undying monster?] Vulpanix wonders.

Jörmungandr's claws impact a barrier surrounding Vulpanix's body. Were they on a world with an atmosphere, the shockwave from that hit would have leveled skyscrapers

and flattened mountains, but in space, no noticeable aftereffects occur, keeping the collateral damage to a minimum.

Vulpanix flickers in and out of reality once more, tearing apart the void with the same ease one might rip a wet piece of paper in half. Her body flickers several times as she appears to copy herself, appearing in five separate positions around Jörmungandr at once.

As a master of not only Temporal Manipulation, but Spatial Manipulation as well, the Confessor has evolved her abilities over tens of millennia while battling Volgrimkind's enemies. She breaks down reality itself, temporarily breaking once-thought-immutable laws of physics to create momentary paradoxes.

Each of Vulpanix's copies summons different attacks, all empowered through her innate psionic energy. One hurls an explosive spear of lightning at the headless dragon, while another freezes the space around Jörmungandr, preventing her from moving. Another redirects nearby ordinance fired by her capital ship, shells and missiles that missed their initial targets, to fly at the dragon.

All together, the dragon becomes frozen for five long seconds, unable to protect itself. These deadly planet-busting psionic attacks crash against the Mother of all Dragons, blowing apart even more of her body and turning her into a floating blob of phantasmal energy.

Seconds later, the paradoxes Vulpanix summoned subvert themselves, returning her to reality as just one version of herself.

The shattered and broken body of Jörmungandr wriggles weirdly, making Vulpanix pause for a few seconds to evaluate its threat level. Eventually, it fully breaks apart, leaving the hovering face of a dragon mask in the air, one which rapidly zips away and flies back to the Cherubiim several kilometers in the distance.

The Confessor evaluates the battle she just fought, sizing up the abilities of her enemies, paying careful attention to how badly they are destroying her fleet.

This Archangel is not like the ones we faced before. Its appearance is wildly different. Might it be a previously hidden one, or perhaps a mutated variant? Its power surely eclipses the strength of the four known Archangels, Raphael, Gabriel, Camael, and Uzziel. As for the two historical Archangels, Uriel and Michael, we possess little information on their battle capabilities; only hearsay given to us by the demons.

Despite Vulpanix's supreme authority among the attacking forces, she has never fought the Archangels, as she was not alive during the Energy Wars. Her experiences come only from the post-collapse of humanity, when she stepped out of her mutation chamber a thousand years after the wars ended. Every bit of experience she possesses comes from historical archives and detailed documents, some of which she only had time to skim before arriving at Hell Harbor.

This lack of insight makes her pause as she carefully considers whether or not she should call for backup from Volgarius.

No! I alone am enough! I must prove myself if I hope to obtain a worthy new title! How will anyone regard my role as Confessor with respect if I immediately demand backup from the High Psions? They have Plaguetouched worlds to contain! I will destroy the Archangel lifeform myself and earn the title of Divinator!

She roars back into action, noting the mask's trajectory as it attaches to the Archangel and begins to slowly glow with power.

[Archangel! Your opponent is me! I will crush you and this insurrection, here and now!]

Vulpanix sends out a taunting mental barb at her opponent, transmitting a series of images of her past glory. Scenes of carnage, including her single-handed suppression of a plaguetouched world, give her a sense of pride while hopefully demoralizing the Archangel she intends to slay.

However, unknown to Vulpanix, when Raphael, Michael, and Uriel all receive her mental transmission, their reaction differs greatly from her expectations. The images momentarily startle Raphael as he quickly examines the meaning behind their contents.

A Plague? What is this lifeform the Volgrim art so hellbent on annihilating? It appears to be something of a ravaging attacker from a distant galaxy. Verily, I hath never seen anything like it in all my years.

Unwittingly, Vulpanix gives her enemies a crucial piece of intel they didn't have before. Rather than demoralizing them, the information only serves to increase their curiosity, particularly Raphael's.

The Cherubiim and Confessor meet each other in battle. Despite towering over Vulpanix and standing more than fifty times her height, the Cherubiim does not act with

outright impunity, as Raphael knows well the power even a single high-ranking Psion can unleash.

Beware, brother and sister. We do not know what branches of psionics this Psion specializes in, but the fact she dares to challenge us directly, even after ripping apart our mightiest summon, indicates she will not be a simple foe. Continue spreading out our summons to attack her fleet; we shall kill her ourselves, god-willing.

The Archangel fires a dozen deadly blasts of holy energy at Vulpanix, but her body flickers from side to side, evading the attacks as she steps in and out of reality. By adjusting the flow of causality, she affects her dimensional position with extreme accuracy, making her movements faster than teleportation or even the concept of 'lightspeed' itself.

Uriel summons more than one hundred swords made from holy energy. She launches them at Vulpanix, slashing her from every direction. However, Vulpanix activates a temporal barrier around herself, causing the weapons to slow down to just 5% of their original speed when they draw within a few meters of the Confessor's body.

With the Archangel's attacks momentarily slowed to a snail's pace, Vulpanix easily dodges them, levitating through the Void with the ease of a fish in water. She slips through small gaps in the weapons' flight trajectories, steps through tears in space, and draws within striking distance of the Cherubiim!

All at once, the oh-so-close image of the Cherubiim distorts, startling Vulpanix. She finds herself submerged in an illusory realm, one that mirrors her earlier act of duplication by causing the Cherubiim to distort and separate into a dozen separate beings.

[I know not thy identity,] Raphael says, transmitting his voice telepathically to his opponent. **[But coming to this battleground was a foolish decision, and the last mistake thou shalt ever make.]**

From out of nowhere, something unfathomably heavy crashes into Vulpanix's back, making her shudder in pain and flinging her off-course. She spins and falls through space, only for the Cherubiim's fist to magically materialize directly in her path.

THUMP!!

The Cherubiim socks the Confessor, *hard*. The amalgamated Archangels blast her backward, instantly reversing her momentum and sending her rocketing back toward her fleet. Just as the Cherubiim prepares for a third strike, this time consisting of two spears wielded by Uriel and two swords wielded by Michael, Vulpanix spreads out her arms and halts her movement. She vanishes from sight, stepping through a fold in space to arrive right beside the Cherubiim's core.

BOOM!!

A pulse of raw telekinetic energy smashes into the Cherubiim, causing all of its constructs to visibly flicker and weaken for a moment before they regain their spirits and continue attacking.

This slight deviation does not escape Vulpanix's notice.

The Archangel appears to have its life directly linked with the other creatures attacking my fleet. If I destroy its main body, the others will collapse.

Her cold, predatory gaze fixates on the Cherubiim's core. She rears back to attack again, but the Cherubiim vanishes, melting back into its illusions once more.

At the same time, Jörmungandr's face detaches from the Cherubiim's main body, fully recharged. She regrows her main body and roars, sending another soul-crushing shockwave outward to assault the Volgim fleet. Several alarms beep in Vulpanix's integrated transmitters, but she ignores them, knowing her fleet is taking a beating.

Minutes pass.

Vulpanix battles with Jörmungandr and the Cherubiim both. At one point, a squadron of other Psions show up, delivering terrible news.

[Confessor! Half the fleet has fallen! Our analysts have determined that only by killing the Archangel's main body will we be able to slay its sub-units!]

[I have comprehended the same facts.] Vulpanix coolly replies. [Assist me! Perform an Energy Transference Formation! I will finish the Archangel myself!]

[Yes, Confessor!]

The five Psion disciples, Vulpanix's personal entourage, work together to summon a massive empowered barrier around themselves. While their master battles Jörmungandr, they manipulate their energy into a psionic 'totem' of sorts, one shaped in Vulpanix's image.

[Confessor! The formation is complete!]

Vulpanix flicks her gaze toward the shimmering psionic image of herself, hidden within her fellow Psions' impenetrable shield.

[Excellent work! Now, I shall-]

Before Vulpanix can finish her statement, a cold dread crawls up her back. She only gets an instant to sense a shift in the space around her before the Cherubiim rushes toward her five disciples.

[No!]

Confessor Vulpanix steps through space in an attempt to intercept the Cherubiim, thinking it must intend to attack her disciples. Instead, the Cherubiim changes its body's composition, allowing it to summon a massive ethereal arm made of pure soul energy. It grabs at the barrier enveloping her students, but instead of attacking the barrier, the Cherubiim's limb phases right through!

Raphael, ever the clever Archangel, detects the massive amount of psionic energy Vulpanix's disciples have created and greedily grins.

The youth are truly too foolish!

Vulpanix's disciples launch frenzied attacks on the soul-arm reaching into their cage, but their psionic power passes through it harmlessly. Without a moment's hesitation, Raphael snatches the concentrated energy and absorbs it directly into his soul, causing a massive amount of energy to well up within himself.

Comparable to devouring Wolfram's soul, the amassed psionic energy offers the Cherubiim a huge burst of power right when the battle has hit its most critical stage. Before Vulpanix can stop him, Raphael and his siblings devour the energy and ascend to a new level of power, outputting even greater soul pressure than before!

[Thieving mud-dwellers!] Vulpanix roars. [That energy was MINE!]

Enraged like never before, she launches a brutal series of psionic bombardments on the Cherubiim, but Uriel's barriers easily block and deflect the attacks, becoming even more resilient than ever.

Michael's sword dances around like lightning, knocking aside massive fireballs, bolts of psionic lightning, and even another micro-singularity.

All her attacks fail to cause the Cherubiim any discomfort. Despite being a high-ranking Psion, she is not an Elder, she is not the Executor, and neither is she the Second Founder.

Compared to the legendary Psion warriors of yore, those who shattered the heavens and split the galaxy, Vulpanix's power pales when placed alongside the Cherubiim's.

She fights relentlessly, joining forces with her students. Together, the six of them output tremendous psionic firepower against the Cherubiim and its summons, but as the Volgrim fleet falls to pieces, so too do Confessor Vulpanix's chances of defeating her adversary.

Weariness and exhaustion beat her back. The more psionic energy she outputs, the lower her reserves fall, until she can no longer fight at a level that threatens the Cherubiim.

[Gah!! Pull back! Retreat!] Vulpanix roars. [Save what we can of the fleet! We never should have come here!]

The Cherubiim prepares to land a fatal blow, but Vulpanix warps herself and her students away just in the nick of time. She arrives at the rear of the fleet, where the horde of primordial lifeforms have nearly overrun her capitol ship. Despite lacking the power to kill Jörmungandr a second time, or the Cherubiim, she still manages to tear apart the weaker Angels, Titans, and Dragons threatening her flagship.

[Retreat!] Vulpanix repeats to the nearby ships. [Escape while we still have ships worth saving! Maximum warp!]

Minutes later, less than five hundred functioning ships manage to turn around and warp out of the system, while the rest can only cry out and wail at their awful luck. The Cherubiim's forces continue ravaging the remaining ships until they've been completely dismantled, left as nothing more than giant scraps of metal to rain down upon Hell Harbor's surface.

Raphael sweeps his gaze around the battlefield.

Excellent work. We have crushed the Volgrim armada. Now, let us return to finish off the last demon stragglers.

He and his forces drop back down to Hell Harbor's surface, sending a fresh burst of fear through the struggling Demon Emperors' souls.

Without Wolfram, the demons find themselves completely suppressed by fewer than two dozen of the Cherubiim's primordial constructs. Dukes from the Hidden Hells show up to try and reinforce their Emperors, but even with thirty fresh fighters, they can only manage to hide inside a force-field made of human blood.

Yumagi, Kristoff, and Crow stand together with twenty Dukes from each of their Hells. Several Angels, Titans, and Dragons whale on the blood-barrier protecting them, while Kristoff and several vampires from his Hell holds their arms overhead, pouring as much power into it as they can.

When they sense the return of the Cherubiim and the departure of the Volgrim, a sense of total despair swallows the demons. They finally realize that their day of reckoning has come.

Yumagi grits his teeth. "I hate to say it, but we don't have a chance! I can try to evoke my last two remaining Platinum Aspects, but if a High Psion cannot defeat the Cherubiim, I doubt my cards will succeed either!"

Crow suffers from multiple debilitating wounds. No longer does she possess a left arm, having had it ripped off by a dragon before Kristoff managed to rescue her.

"I cannot believe the angels possessed such power, yet never used it. How can we be so unfortunate? I assumed they were little more than paper tigers, but they were actually dragons in sheep's clothing!"

As the Cherubiim descends, a twisted grin spreads across Michael's face.

"Ah... now those are the sorts of expressions I enjoy seeing on bloodskin faces. Thy despair finally gives me a faint bit of comfort in my undead form. After we smite the last few remaining Demon Emperors, the rest of thy people shalt fall like wheat to the chaff. None can stop the Cherubiim."

At that moment, the ground explodes like a bomb! Thousands of tons of dirt and rocks shoot into the upper atmosphere, some of the debris even bouncing off the Cherubiim's reinforced body.

The three Archangels turn their gaze toward the newcomers, only to see Bael, Fae, and a few other demons crawling out of a hole in the ground. All of them freeze in place and gaze at the Cherubiim like deer caught in the headlights.

Bael's jaw drops visibly. "What the heck?! That's the biggest chicken I've ever seen!"

"Is that the Archangels?!" Fae asks. "Spawn of a Broodmother! What the fuck happened while we were out? Did they eat a bunch of steroids?!"

Despite the unexpected appearance of two Demon Emperors, the Archangels appear less than impressed. Raphael gazes condescendingly at Fae, but pauses for a moment to examine Bael warily.

"Emperor Ose. It seems thou hath survived thy death and become an undead puppet..." Raphael says. **"Of all the demons here, thou art the one that might be able to cause us some slight harm. Sadly, thou art outnumbered in every sense of the word. Thou art truly... inferior."**

Bael stares vacantly at the Cherubiim for a moment before blinking his eyes.

"...Huh? Wait, me? No, no, no, pal. You've got it all wrong. I'm not-"

"Thou art not going to live a moment longer," Raphael interrupts, before aiming his palm at Bael and charging a massive blast of holy energy. **"Tis best if we smite thee here before thou can becometh a thorn in our side."**

"No, no, no smiting, please! My heart can't take it!" Bael yelps. "C-can't we just talk this out, bub? AW SHIT!"

His words don't make Raphael pause for even a moment. The Archangel of Wisdom releases his charged blast, firing a deadly stream of holy energy toward Bael that will surely vaporize him and the other Demons around him.

"Watch out!" Emperor Fae yells. She summons bone armor onto her body, then coils strength into her legs in order to jump into the path of the oncoming beam, hopefully saving the lives of the other demons.

Before Fae can intercept the attack, Hell Harbor's continent rumbles.

A massive blackened hand bursts out of the dirt directly in the path of the Archangel's attack!

Raphael's holy energy crashes against the hand and explodes, yet the monstrous limb barely takes any damage at all.

The Cherubiim stares at the unexpected defense in surprise.

What new manner of devilry is this? The Archangels wonder.

Moments later, a second hand bursts out of the ground, followed by a head. A gigantic undead Brute, more than three hundred meters tall, emerges from the planet's depths and roars at the top of its lungs, drawing the attention of everyone present.

At the same time, several undead Demon Emperors bubble up from the ground, including Emperor Fenrir, Emperor Gorn, and Emperor Zamiel.

Emperor Fenrir's eyes glow with a dull light. After her original soul was obliterated by Raphael's soul-crushing attack, her body remained without a host. Now, Emperor Lupus, lacking a body of her own, slips inside to try and clumsily take control of Fenrir's power. While somewhat incompatible with Fenrir's original abilities, Lupus still possesses the soul and body foundation of a true Emperor, making her the ideal 'fit.'

Finally, a low, cackling laughter spreads throughout the air.

"HEH... HEH... HEH... HEH!"

Mephisto emerges from the planet's underbelly. He levitates into the sky, shocking the other Emperors with his newly reinforced mana signature.

"That bastard..." Fae hisses. "While we were fighting for our lives, Mephisto stole souls from the River Styx! He became an Emperor without our permission!"

Bael breathes a sigh of relief. "Eh, whatever! At least we've got a chance, now."

Mephisto, now the Emperor of Legions, cackles cruelly while facing the Cherubiim.

"What luck I have for you to deliver me sssuch fine sssoulsss and bodiesss to empower myssself! I thought my luck had run out, but it sseemsss I have reaped quite the bounty today! Kekeke!!"

Kristoff's eyes fixate on his wife's body. He immediately realizes the soul possessing it is not hers, making his heart ache.

"Mephisto! You body-stealing thief!"

The Emperor of Legions turns to look at Kristoff, laughing all the while. "Kekeke! I have come to sssave you! Don't everyone thank me at oncce! Now, behold the power of a necromancccer Emperor! Not sssince Valac'sss era hasss a mighty demon like myssself roamed the cosssmosss!"

Unlike the Brutes Mephisto made when he was a Duke, his newest champion possesses truly extraordinary defenses, high resistance to holy energy, and a body capable

of unleashing death upon those unlucky enough to face it. The Brute roars at the Cherubiim, taunting them and daring them to attack.

"Hmph. A few more Emperors, thou sayeth? Verily, we art quaking in our boots. Come, then, Mephisto. Deliver thyself to us on a platter. We shalt offer thee one chance to save thyself. But know this; thou cannot defeat the Cherubiim. Thou art *far* from worthy."

Mephisto's cackling ceases as a smoldering fury erupts in his eyes.

"Oh? You claim that we lack the qualificationsss?! We ssshall sssee about that, Archangelsss! Brute, ATTACK!"

Part 323: Emperor Mephisto

With Mephisto's arrival, demonkind's inevitable defeat suddenly reverses, sparking a glimmer of hope in the eyes of every Emperor present. Crow, having lost one of her arms, Yumagi, having long since stopped treating the battle as a game, and Kristoff, having reluctantly accepted his imminent death, all stare in shock at the newcomers.

Mephisto's gigantic Brute roars at the Cherubiim before charging toward it with stiff, jerky motions. As an amalgamation of thousands of lesser human, demon, and monster bodies and souls, the mashed-together undead goliath lacks any sort of concentrated brain matter, but it makes up for the deficit with a body sturdy enough to even withstand the Cherubiim's holy magic.

Michael's head gazes at the incoming attacker with a hint of scorn. **"How pathetic. One last hurrah for the bloodskins. I will end this."**

All six of the Cherubiim's arms lift into the air and summon building-sized greatswords in their palms. The Cherubiim and its primordial monsters charge into the incoming Brute and engage it in yet another planet-shattering battle, one that sends frightening shockwaves in all directions, constantly battering the Hidden Emperors as they try to withstand the storm.

Not content to merely sit back and watch, Fae joins the fray, flying into the sky to hurl explosive mana-bombs at any primordial summon that gets in her way. At the same time, Mephisto's revived Emperor minions follow along to his tune, running along the ground or flying into the air to assist the Brute as it dull-headedly hammers against the Archangel's defenses.

"Kekeke!" Mephisto cackles. "Behold! The rissse of the next great Necromancer! The future Firssst Emperor of the Ssseven Hellsss!"

Mephisto does not join in on the battle. He hangs back, which only makes sense, given his poor fighting abilities. Unlike the ancient Emperor, Valac, who possessed a soul-reaping scythe and a surprisingly powerful body, Mephisto's talents lay in the finer aspects of the necromantic arts.

Michael's six swords spin like buzzsaws, whirling around the Cherubiim's body at five times the speed of sound. Unlike a physical body, with its limited joint movements, the

Cherubiim's 'core' and its summoned limbs act as almost disconnected weapons, able to move freely around the Cherubiim's 'main body' as they please. Without the tendons, bones, and other intricacies of a fleshly body to slow him down, Michael's blindingly fast attacking and reaction speed completely dwarfs that of his opponents.

The Brute tanks all of Michael's attacks directly, making no movement to avoid them. Despite the incredible sharpness of Michael's phantasmal blades, his swords don't manage to cut deeply into Mephisto's summon's flesh, but instead glance off its chest, neck, and head, sometimes chipping away boulder-sized flakes of hardened skin.

This beast is quite sturdy... Raphael comments internally, as he keeps an eye on the battlefield, allowing Michael to focus on the Brute. While Michael controls the Cherubiim's six limbs, his brother and sister each take direct control of half their summoned monsters, sending them to attack and blast back the demons wherever possible.

Before long, Mephisto's triumphant appearance loses some of its spark. He stops laughing to gaze coldly at the scenes taking place.

"Kss... the Cherubiim cannot ssslay my Brute, but neither can my Brute land a killing blow... how troublesssome..."

Emperor Yumagi takes to the air. Having spent a few minutes catching his breath, he heals his worst injuries and hovers into the sky while withdrawing a few cards from the Spiritual Deck attached to his soul.

"I apologize, everyone. I did not take this battle seriously, before. Now, we have paid a heavy price. We will have to work together to launch one last-ditch attack on the Cherubiim if we hope to survive this day with our lives intact."

Crow nods. She breathes heavily while sending a mental transmission back to the demons on her homeworld.

"...I will begin a Ritual of Healing. It will take me a few minutes, but I should be able to regrow my arm and patch up some of my worst wounds. Until I take a trip to the Blood Pits, I'll be hurting quite badly for the foreseeable future. Ca-caw!"

Kristoff groans. "I've broken a few bones. My powers can't heal them... only skin and organ-injuries. I've probably lost half of my strength... but I will try to help."

He shoots a nasty glance at Mephisto.

"But do not think for a *moment* that I am doing this for *you*, body-stealer. If we survive today, you will pay for stealing my wife away from me!"

Mephisto shoots a casual, utterly dismissive glance at Kristoff. Having reached the rank of Emperor, his arrogance reaches new heights, making him no longer fear the mightiest Demon Emperors as he previously did.

"Kukuku... I am putting her body to good use, Kristoff. Perhaps you should thank me for saving you."

Kristoff doesn't reply. He looks away from Mephisto, mostly to cool his boiling blood pressure.

...Fenrir, dearest. We had so many plans together. We were going to rule the Seven Hells, with me as your number one. What can I do, now? I detest politics. You, Lupus, and Wolfram have all fallen. I am the Hell of Blood's last living Emperor...

As Kristoff and Crow take time to patch themselves up, the Cherubim continues its brutal onslaught. Michael's swords prove less and less effective against the Brute, to the point where Raphael makes a startling observation.

Brother, beware! This undead behemoth is not so simple! Nay, 'tis learning to adapt to thy attacks. Already, its skin has grown substantially more resilient to slicing and slashing attacks. Switch thy swords out for hammers!

Michael grimaces. His fighting style, heavily reliant on rapid attacks with light weaponry, does not allow him to nearly as effectively wield such clumsy and oafish weapons as clubs and hammers.

If my swords are not up to the task, then sister, thou shouldst take over. Thou art a generalist when it comes to weaponry. In the way of the blade, thy skills cannot match up to mine, but with other weapons, thou art far and away my superior.

Uriel nods. *So be it.*

While the demons manage to work together to kill off a few dozen of the Cherubim's unstoppable army, they fail to notice the rapid switching of its six swords to two spiked clubs, two pointed hammers, and two warhammers.

The instant Uriel takes over the Cherubim's main body, she drastically changes up its fighting style, using Holy Barriers to cut off the Brute's movements, tripping it with

awkwardly placed barriers by its feet, and hampering its movements so she can land clean blows.

The Brute swings its fists and roars, but Uriel bats them aside and drives her weapons into its head and chest, fracturing its bones and continuously shaking the planet.

During a brief reprieve after knocking the Brute backward, Uriel gathers her strength into the Cherubiim's arms. Her eyes glow with power as she raises all six of her weapons overhead, aiming to smash its skull into bloody pulp.

At that moment, a Demon Emperor's voice rings out.

"Sneaky Sea Salamander, **Evoke!**"

Emperor Yumagi evokes one of his Golden Aspects. A beam of light rockets out of the card held in his hand, expands in size, and envelops the Brute. Just as Uriel swings her weapons at its head, the Brute teleports from its location and arrives directly behind her.

Uriel's attack misses the mark and instead crashes into the continent, sending earthquakes deep into the crust, where they will become tsunamis on Hell Harbor's opposite side later that day.

At the same time, the Brute spins around and swings its fists at the Cherubiim's exposed flank.

Boom! BOOM!

Two powerful strikes finally land on an unprotected area, causing all three Archangels to cry out in pain. Their primordial phantasms flicker and fall silent for a few seconds before resuming their previous actions.

By the time the Brute has launched its second attack, Uriel has already caught up to its new position and resumed her stalwart defense.

She shoots a hateful glance at Emperor Yumagi.

"BLOODSKIN BASTARD."

Yumagi shudders as the bone-drenching coldness of the Cherubiim's full attention focuses on him. Uriel takes command of Jörmungandr and fifty other Primordial beasts. She sends them rocketing toward Yumagi, hemming him in from all directions.

For the first time since Mephisto's arrival, the Glyphmancer finds himself in dire straits. He hurriedly evokes two Silver Aspects and one Bronze, but the dragons and

Titans blast him with terrifying attacks far beyond his level of a mere Demon Emperor.

"Damn! Someone help me!" Yumagi calls out. "These phantoms-!"

Before he can finish his sentence, a blast of holy energy fires at his back, released from one of the Cherubiim's palms.

Yumagi turns to look at it, but after evoking a card just seconds earlier, he has no defensive options left.

"Oh."

BOOM!!

The holy energy irradiates his entire body, frying him at the molecular level. Several of Yumagi's hidden trap cards start to activate, only for all of them to shatter and burst into pieces, offering him no protection due to the overwhelming gap between him and his opponent's power.

Moments later, the Glyphmancer lets out only one last silent scream before his body evaporates, leaving behind nothing but ash scattered in the wind.

The other Emperors gasp in horror. Even Fae, who had no love for Yumagi, shudders when she sees the formidable Demon Emperor, someone who previously toyed with the three Archangels in their base forms, shatter into particles of cosmic dust.

Mephisto growls.

"U-Uriel! You bassstardly wench! You left behind neither a body, nor a sssoul! How am I sssuppossed to reussse that Yumagi if you've utterly annihilated hisss exissstence?!"

The Cherubiim ignores him. With Yumagi gone, the morale of demonkind's elites falls even further, making their situation feel truly hopeless.

Even Bael, ever the wisecracker, can only huddle in a hole and pray none of the scary dragons and Titans notice him.

"Shit, shit, shit! I can't believe it! They done offed, uh... that guy! Whoever he was! Wait, didn't his cards remind me of somethin'?"

Bael's eyes slowly lower to the other demons beside him, chief among them Mara, the Baron of Games.

Bael stares at Mara for a few seconds while his brain struggles to fire more than three barely functioning neurons. Eventually he shakes his head.

"Uh, nope. Doesn't ring a bell. Oh well!"

While Bael returns his attention to the battle, Crow and Kristoff finish their patchwork healing sessions. Crow flexes a newly regrown arm, one that cost her the lives of more than five thousand virgin male and female humans from her homeworld.

"We have to help out Mephisto. So long as his Brute still stands-"

Hardly has Crow gotten the words out of her mouth before Mephisto's Brute suddenly roars in pain. She turns to look at it, just in time to see its back explode into a tidal-wave of meat as one of Uriel's battering-clubs pounds against its chest.

"Hahaha!" Uriel laughs. **"This is the mightiest mutt the demons can unleash? How pitiful! Brothers, rejoice, for our victory is at hand!!"**

Clouds form in the sky above as the Cherubim's power surges violently. Uriel lunges all six of her arms at the monster, grabs its limbs and forces them apart, then stabs two of her hands into the hole in its chest.

Seconds later, the Brute roars in pain, while a terrible *ripping* sound causes everyone within ten miles of the titanic battle to grit their teeth. Uriel tears the Brute in half, then flings the two sides of its body to the Cherubim's right and left.

Thoom! Thoom!

The Brute's severed halves crash against the planet's surface, making the nearby landscape rumble.

After she kills the Brute, Uriel laughs uproariously. **"Oh, what great fun! Long have I awaited a chance to exact my revenge, but never did I think it could taste so delectable!"**

All of the Emperors turn pale with fright. Mephisto's Brute was their one chance at killing the Cherubim, but despite weakening the Cherubim's oppressive aura a little bit, even if all the Emperors united their power, they still wouldn't have a chance at killing it.

Crow, once ready to charge into battle, instead sinks to the ground.

"We're... doomed... we can't win."

In all her years, never has Crow felt so utterly helpless. Even if the Hidden Emperors were to gather all the demons from all the Hells, the best she and the other Emperors could do is stymie the Cherubim's movements for a few minutes at best.

Even then, it would destroy their tens of millennia of accumulation. All their legacies, built up with the understanding of galactic power levels formed by the battles they've fought since well before the Energy Wars, mean nothing compared to the power of the primordial Cherubiim before them.

Mephisto visibly falters. He slowly levitates backward while forcing his undead Emperor slaves to go on the defense, not wanting to risk their existences.

"Kss... impossssible! My Brute wasss... it wasss sssuppossed to be unkillable! It ssshould have been ass durable ass the Archdemon! How could you defeat it sso easssily?!"

The Cherubiim slowly marches toward him, proud expressions of conquerors on all the Archangel's faces.

"As sturdy as the Archdemon? Foolish bastard." Raphael says mockingly. **"The Archdemon's power came not from its body's defensive properties, but from its regeneration factor. That lumbering behemoth of thine was slow, weak, and utterly incapable of threatening Our existence. 'Tis no wonder thou hath once again failed to slay us Archangels, three."**

The Cherubiim's power surges, forcing all of the Emperors to kneel. Without Wolfram around to counterbalance its unchecked aura, the Emperors truly begin to feel as small as ants and as weak as brittle glass.

"Whether on thy feet or thy knees," The Cherubiim counters, **"thou shalt all die a final death, right here and right now."**

The Cherubiim raises one of its hands. It conjures a ball of supercharged holy energy that begins to spiral in its palm like the center of a galaxy.

A powerful vacuuming sensation grabs at the souls and bodies of every spectator present. As the Cherubiim's orb spins faster and faster, not only does that suction effect increase, but so does the orb's size and cosmic might.

"In truth, had we wished, we could have destroyed this planet from the start," The Cherubiim calmly states. **"But when faced with our most hated enemies, the ones who brought our species to ruin... forgive us if we felt a need to indulge in our baser desires. The terror on thy faces have truly lifted the hearts of our fallen brothers and sisters."**

The Cherubiim slowly levitates into the air, but even as it pulls away from the Emperors, its soul-suppressing aura only grows stronger. It rises higher and higher, lifting up toward the roiling clouds in the sky.

"The Creator giveth, and the Creator taketh away," The Cherubiim says. **"And much like our Father, so too shalt we giveth and taketh as we please."**

Emperor Crow's heart palpitates in her chest. She struggles to lift a finger, but the sensation of her soul trying to tear from her body leaves her ten times more exhausted than before. Likewise, the other Emperors suffer similar troubles, with none of them able to move an inch.

"We're doomed... doomed..." Fae coughs. "And all... because... Yumagi couldn't just... finish his stupid fucking game!"

Foop.

A faint whooshing of air displaces an area not far from Fae. Reflexively, she and the other Emperors flick their heads toward a portal formed in the center of all their positions.

From the portal, a voice speaks.

"Well, what are you waiting for? An invitation?! Hurry up and get inside before it's too late!"

Emperor Yardrat, having fled earlier, opens a gateway for the other Emperors to escape!

The Cherubiim flicks its eyes toward the portal.

"Dost thou thinketh I shalt stand idly and let my prey escape? Nay."

Using one of its other five free hands, the Cherubiim points at the portal and activates Raphael's temporal abilities.

However, during that moment of distraction, a figure flickers into the sky above the Cherubiim, moving at the speed of light.

This figure, tiny compared to the Cherubiim's oversized body, and a blur of motion too fast for anyone but Michael to observe, assumes a humanoid shape.

Michael's eyes flick toward the newcomer.

"Broth-"

Michael doesn't get to speak even a single word before that figure instantly accelerates to the speed of light once more, but this time, its trajectory aims directly at the Cherubiim's body.

BOOOOOM!!

A planet-shaking shockwave explodes with violent power, smashing the Cherubiim out of the sky. In less than a second, it plummets to the ground and slams into the tectonic plates, sending tens of earthquakes in all directions. Every Emperor gets flung into the air and crashes back to the dirt, only to repeat this motion several times as the planet's soil practically liquefies.

Five full minutes later, the Cherubiim's body flickers. It jumps to its feet, badly injured, while staring in shock at the levitating figure that nearly killed it in one blow.

"No! Impossible! Bael, the Duke of Pain?!"

The three Archangels gaze in stupefied horror as a seemingly insignificant Duke hovers in the sky above them, levitating through the use of some unknown and previously unseen elemental ability.

While the Cherubiim struggles to reconcile the appearance of 'Bael' with his inexplicable powers, 'Bael' cracks a huge grin and laughs wildly.

"Me? *Bael*? HAHAAHAHA! I think not, Raphael, Uriel, and Michael! No, I'm MUCH scarier than that fat oaf ever was! I am Ose, the mightiest demon to ever exist! I am perfection, superiority, and the embodiment of demonic excellence all in one! I am your worst nightmare!"

Ose clutches Bael's treasured weapon, 'Big Bonk', in her hands. She spins Mjolnir around in its flail-form, casually wielding the ten-ton weapon as if it were a child's toy.

"Ose?" Raphael repeats. **"How can that be? We saw Ose already. She is right there!"**

The Archangel of Wisdom points at Bael, who merely scratches his chin awkwardly.

"Uhh... yeah, you kinda never let me get a word in, so... that one's on you, pal."

Ose, likewise, laughs even harder. "Hahahaha! Did you really think you could just teleport me to the other side of the planet and take care of me later? Think again! I returned here not even five seconds after you sent me away! I just decided to sit on the

sidelines and see how powerful my 'fellow Emperors' were, but what a pathetic lot they turned out to be!"

Ose casts a disparaging gaze at Emperors Crow, Kristoff, and all the others before returning her attention to the Cherubiim.

"Hear me well, Archangels..."

She continues.

"During the Energy Wars, I alone brought humanity to its knees, despite being a mere Baron."

"When Uriel attacked Hell Harbor, I alone defeated her, despite being a lone Emperor."

"And now, I alone will crush this so-called 'Cherubiim,' despite having fallen to the rank of Duke."

She concludes her speech with one final declaration while spinning Mjolnir over her head like a windmill.

"I am Ose! I am perfection! And most importantly, I am the one who will CRUSH YOU without any **MERCY!!**"

Part 324: Planetary Cataclysm

Ose cackles maniacally while spinning the ball-and-chain Mjolnir around herself. Unlike Bael, who only ever used Camael's personal weapon as a simple smashing device, Ose wields it with a level of adeptness he could never achieve. She uses her new body's strength and her soul's speed to spin the flail around herself more than fifty times per second. Mjolnir spins so rapidly that it becomes a blur of movement on both her right and left, almost like a wildly oversized nunchaku.

While she might only wield the power of a Duke's body, which also constrains the power of her soul and magic to a Duke's level, that does not limit Ose in the way it would most other demons. Bael's body alone, an invincible war machine that no Demon Emperor would ever want to fight, becomes even more frightening when combined with Ose's lightning powers.

"All of you, stay out of my way!" Ose roars. "This Cherubiim is MINE!"

An instant later, Ose vanishes as she activates her signature Lightning Dash, moving herself in a straight line at the speed of light.

Only Michael, the Archangel with the fastest eyes, possesses the ability to barely follow her movements. He immediately seizes control of the Cherubiim's body, while his brother and sister resume controlling the primordial phantasms.

A battle of epic scale bursts into existence.

While the other Emperors stand and stare in dumbfounded silence, Ose runs laps around the battlefield. Her body appears here and there, flickering in and out of reality with such speed and short intervals that by the time any spectator manages to observe her in one position, she's already vanished and reappeared in three other places.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!!

Mjolnir rips apart dozens of primordial entities with singular blows. Much like when Ose used her Lightspeed Punch to instantly defeat Monster King Kar, she uses the strength in her newly acquired body and her superior speed to accelerate Mjolnir's attack speed, and therefore its first-strike power, to absurd levels.

A ten ton object, when accelerated to nearly the speed of light, becomes a railgun of unfathomable power.

In one second, Jörmungandr's spiritual body detonates like a bomb, along with a dozen other primordial lifeforms. Two seconds later, another fifteen of the Cherubiim's seemingly unstoppable juggernauts perish as well, dying off at alarming rates.

Thankfully, with the other Emperors hesitant to join the battle, both out of a need to preserve their own lives, as well as due to Ose's proclamation, the Cherubiim manages to devote its sole attention to battling Ose.

Michael's six arms once again wield swords. While wildly inferior to the power of Mjolnir, the spectral weapons do afford him a minor degree of protection. In between attacking the Cherubiim's summoned allies, Ose also revolves around the Cherubiim at dizzying speeds, flinging Big Bonk at the Archangels' flanks and forcing Michael to deflect her divine weapon to the best of his ability.

Ting-ting-ting!

Michael's blades break one after the other, forcing him to re-summon them while still frantically fighting Ose off with all his might.

Ose's body spirals around the Cherubiim, leaving dozens of afterimages. She not only runs circles on the ground, but in the air and over the Cherubiim's head as well, all while kicking, punching, and smiting the primordial Archangels with Camael's artifact hammer.

"Having fun?" Ose laughs, her voice coming from a thousand different positions around the Cherubiim at the same time. "I certainly am! I've never enjoyed such unfathomable power! Even while only a mere Duke, my powers are stronger than any Emperor, or even the so-called Demon Deity! I am the mightiest demon in existence!"

While Ose taunts her opponents, she also whittles down their allied summons, breaking their spectral bodies and returning them to the same unbreakable ghostly masks as before.

However, unbeknownst to her, this also reduces the cognitive load on Raphael and Uriel's minds. Once the number of Primordial phantasms drops below 500, Raphael sends his sister a telepathic message.

Sister. Take control of all the remaining summons. Verily, I shalt assist Michael directly.

Uriel offers no protest. *Do as thou must, Raphael. Teach the fallen sinner Ose the meaning of an Archangel's power.*

Aye.

Ose continues striking the Cherubiim hundreds of times per minute, shattering the landscape and turning Hell Harbor's surface to rubble. Then, from out of nowhere, a blinding pain strikes her soul, causing her to lose focus, trip over her own feet, and go hurtling off into the distance.

BOOM!

Ose flies into a mountain at a speed exceeding Mach Ten, blasting tens of thousands of tons of rock and dirt into the horizon and up into space, where over the next several hours they will rain down upon the continents, reaping untold numbers of demonic lives.

"Aaaargh!"

Ose screams in pain as Raphael unleashes torture on her soul, ravaging her so badly that she becomes a convulsing husk of a demon, laying in her makeshift mountain burial site while experiencing endless agonies the world can only imagine.

With Ose temporarily incapacitated, Michael's stress levels plummet. The Cherubiim's body visibly sags as Michael feels a mountain fall from his shoulders. All three Archangels collapse into the dirt as their unified body experiences terrible exhaustion.

Ugh... brother... I strained my Omni-Perception to its limits. Frankly... I cannot maintain it for much longer. My soul is too weak... if only I still had a body.

Raphael mentally nods. *I have struck Emperor Ose with a Soul Debilitation attack. Since her defenses weren't up, it dealt her severe damage... but it will not kill her. She will return soon. Before then, we must come to a decision.*

Michael and Uriel both become more alert.

A decision regarding what? Uriel asks.

*What **price** are we willing to pay to ensure more dead Emperors?* Raphael asks, coyly glancing at the demons a few miles in the distance.

Surprisingly, neither Uriel nor Michael jump at the opportunity.

We can always return to fight another day. Uriel answers. *If we die here, our revenge shalt almost certainly go unfinished.*

The Wordsmith will be able to assist us, next time. Michael adds. *We decided to attack today because of the element of surprise. We have already slain several Emperors. I do not believe continuing to fight while our Cherubiim powers are nearly exhausted is a wise idea.*

Raphael frowns. However, despite his desire to continue killing his hated enemies, he realizes Michael has exhausted his soul, and Uriel will soon follow.

Ose has become an anomaly among the demons. Raphael states. *She might be a braggart, but she has reason to boast. We must continue testing the limits of her strength. Right now, we lack precious insight into her full capabilities. I doubt she's unleashed even a fraction of her power upon us. If she attacks humanity, the worst may come to pass!*

Uriel and Michael's emotions both turn sour at the thought of fighting any longer. In less than five minutes, Ose has beaten them a hundred times worse than all the other fights up to this point combined.

...If we must, then so be it. Uriel thinks. *Michael cannot fight Ose any longer. Raphael, continue to attack her soul. Slow Ose's speed down and force her to unleash her trump cards. I shalt fight defensively, acting only to sap her strength.*

The Archangels discuss their strategy in only a few seconds, the speed of thought allowing them to communicate far more effectively than through any spoken word. Once they finish strategizing, Raphael turns his head toward Ose's makeshift tomb.

She has awakened.

Ose explodes out of the mountain, a look of pure rage on her face.

"Raphael!! Hahaha, I should have KNOWN you'd try a soul attack, you rancid old wastrel! But you won't catch me off-guard so easily again!"

"We acknowledge that thou art a deadly foe." Raphael says. **"But no matter how mighty thy powers, dost thou thinketh thyself capable of defeating ancient monsters from the primordial era? We have a million times thy battle experience. I have conquered Titan Kings so frightening thy soul would evaporate were they to breathe upon thee. If we fail to slay thee, it will only be due to our decline of power over the eons, not because thou hath become some unstoppable demigod."**

"Were those your final words?" Ose hisses. "How SAD! I hoped you'd have something better than excuses to give me, but it seems you already know DEATH is upon you!"

Ose accelerates toward the Cherubiim, but at that moment, all of the phantasmal bodies of the primordial monsters fade away. The last remaining five hundred vanish and revert to their base 'mask' forms, then jump back to the Cherubiim and latch onto its core.

An instant later, they detach, spread apart, and glow with power. They conjure a massive barrier of holy energy that engulfs the Cherubiim, protecting it from all directions. This barrier resonates with all three Archangels' souls, becoming a barrier so powerful that when Ose crashes against it, not even Mjolnir manages to scratch its surface. Hundreds of hexagonal shapes interlock together, strengthening the barrier well beyond anything the current universe has seen in hundreds of thousands of years.

Ding-ding-ding!

Ose races around the barrier once again. She smashes Mjolnir against it repeatedly, only to find that each time she does, the kinetic energy of her strikes magically transfers across the whole barrier, wildly diluting her maximum possible damage.

A minute later, after unleashing more than one thousand strikes with her flail, Ose pauses to stare at the barrier with dismay.

"Oh? What's this? You can't beat me, so you've opted to hide inside your barrier like a little turtle?! You're pathetic!"

Her words don't anger the Archangels. Instead, Raphael's head slowly shakes as he offers her a kindly, reprimanding smile.

"Silly child. Dost thou truly thinketh the Archangel of Wisdom a fool? This barrier is currently a necessity while we recharge our power. Once we have finished, we will emerge stronger than ever. Ah, and should I mention one other thing? We are currently amassing enough primordial energy to obliterate this entire world. The elites of thy species shalt fall here, today. The Wordsmith shalt eliminate the remainder."

Ose's greedy smile falters. She stares at the Cherubiim with a look of disbelief.

"You're recharging your batteries? Bullshit. Don't lie to me! You're on your last legs! I'll bet you haven't much time left in that superform!"

"So confident, thou art." Raphael blandly remarks. **"Consider this my form of recognition for thy moderate talents. Thou shalt certainly survive our last attack... but what of the other Emperors, hmm? The Legions of Hell won't inspire much terror if thou art the only Emperor left alive... heh heh heh..."**

To emphasize his words, Raphael lifts a palm to show a slowly growing orb of energy spiraling and amassing power.

"We never did get to unleash the Primordial Sphere of Holy Devastation. T'would be a waste to... leave it be."

The other Emperors still bold enough to watch the Cherubiim's battle turn pale with fright. They scurry toward the portal left by Yardrat, one that has remained open for him to observe the battle, and begin piling through.

"Aw, HELL no! No way am I stickin' around here!" Bael yells.

"I'd rather not die unless necessary." Crow comments.

"My Hell has already lost three Emperors. Let's not make myself the fourth," Kristoff adds.

Mephisto and his summons take their leave, as do all the other Emperors, Dukes, and Barons present. Mara even manages to grab Emperors Guura and Melody and drag them through the portal before Yardrat seals it shut.

With all the other Emperors gone, Ose appears a bit more mollified.

"Hehe... so this is your plan, Raphael? You know damn well you can't kill me in Bael's body. Even if you blow up this entire world, the Volgrim Warpgate is made from Living Moldanium. I can still travel to it and leave. You won't even be able to scratch it. What's your real goal? Are you just trying to piss me off?"

"Thou mayeth care little about the other demons, but no Empire can stand if it loses its soldiers." Raphael says, as the orb grows bigger in his palm. **"Think too of the symbolism of my actions. Art thou such a dullard, Ose? If I destroy Hell Harbor... what will demonkind think of thy rule? Will they respect and fear thy eminence? Or will they look at thee as the disgrace who allowed the obliteration of their capitol world? I cannot say for certain what will be the case, but I do know... the results shalt certainly prove *interesting*."**

The more Raphael talks, the darker Ose's expression turns. She curls her lips into a snarl as her body begins to tremble with hatred.

"...Fine. You want to piss me off, old man? You think you can handle my full power? Let's test that hypothesis. I'll show you what I can *really* do when I take off the kid gloves."

Ose closes her eyes. Her body begins to shift and morph and blood-red demonic light coalesces within her chest.

"Grr... GRR! GRAAAH! ME CRUSH! ME SMASH!"

Ose's figure balloons into a familiar specter of death, that of the Balrog. Once Bael's mightiest transformation, a weapon that could cow any Emperor into silence with the mere mention of it, it now belongs to Ose as her personal plaything.

Her arms and legs double in thickness. Her horns bend forward and enlarge, and her head turns into a hideous, flame-spewing weapon of mass destruction.

"SMASH! **SMAAAASH!!**"

Ose screams to the heavens, turning the Archangel's expressions ugly when they confirm she does, indeed, possess all of Bael's signature abilities in addition to her own.

"How fearsome. Luckily, in that form, thou art truly a simpleton imbecile. This old man played thee for-"

Before Raphael can finish his sentence, the Balrog snaps her head in his direction and smiles. "GRAAH! ME SMASH! ME... me... hahaha. Who are you calling an imbecile, Raphael? Did you truly think I lost my mind when I mutated? No. I have full control of the Balrog. And that's not *all*, either."

Ose stretches to her full height of nearly 20 feet tall. Despite looming over other demons, she still appears utterly insignificant before the mighty Cherubiim.

Thunder crackles around her figure. Ose inhales deeply and performs a series of complicated hand gestures, the awkwardness of her huge Balrog claws posing no barrier to her abilities. Half a minute later, she conjures a second layer of power onto her body, startling Uriel.

That form! Brother! Ose has somehow called down her Aspect of the Thunder God to empower the Balrog!

Lightning crackles off Ose's body, lashing out at the wasteland around her with angry intent. She revels in this world-shaking power and laughs.

"Hahaha! As strong as I am now, Raphael, how frightened must you be when you realize I still only possess the power of a Duke? Can you imagine this fearsome might if I possessed the baseline power of an Emperor? Worry not. After I crush you, I will take all the souls necessary for my ascension from the River Styx. I will complete my evolution into a monster capable of singlehandedly killing the old angel civilization. Were you to put me as I am now back in the Ancient Era, the War of Heaven would have ended in less than an hour."

Raphael gazes at the thunder-attuned Balrog with a deep sense of unease. No longer do any smart quips come to mind as he truly comprehends the power his opponent possesses.

Ose is only a Duke. Already, she possesses a 'low Primordial' level of power. How terrifying. I thought the primordial energy had vanished from this universe, but it seems our enemy hath uncovered a method to mimic the old powers.

Ose cracks her neck, then begins spinning Mjolnir around her body at hurricane-level speeds.

Swish-swish-swish!

As the weapon accelerates, Ose leaps skyward, using her lightning power to fly into the upper atmosphere without using the Balrog's wings.

"Raphael! When you greet your brothers and sisters in the afterlife, TELL THEM WHO SENT YOU!"

A sense of fatal danger swallows the Archangel's minds.

Raphael swallows heavily, despite his phantasmal body's lack of a true digestive system.

"Oh, no."

From the sky above, a bolt of lightning formed from pure rage and demonic power descends like the Hammer of God.

Ose hurtles herself and Mjolnir downward at relativistic speeds. She rams into the primordial barrier protecting the Archangels, shatters it, and continues crashing into the Cherubiim's main body.

An atomic blast wave explodes from the impact point, leveling whatever mountains might have survived all the earlier bombardments, or whichever ones may have been created by rubble falling from the atmosphere.

Her impact sends a tsunami of rock and dirt in all directions for hundreds of miles, a tsunami that ultimately will kill off millions of demons and rock the entire world of Hell Harbor, scarring it beyond belief for millennia to come.

Ose smashes into the Archangels, driving every last bit of her power into the impact to ensure their swift and immediate death.

The aftershocks of her attack not only blow away all the clouds on the horizon, but also get picked up on every Volgrim listening post in the system. Multiple Class III emergency signals and energy detonation warnings travel as far as Volgarius, where the Founders will certainly hear of the battle and its aftereffects directly.

Moments later, as the shockwave continues to radiate outward, the Balrog bursts out of the impact zone and sweeps her eyes around, looking for the Cherubiim.

A minute passes. A second minute. A third.

Ose tears apart the debris, but no matter where she looks, she fails to find her prey.

The Balrog roars with rage. "Raphael!! Where are you?! Where are you hiding?! Show yourself!"

Still, nobody answers her call. As she tries to figure out if her opponent has disappeared or if she obliterated the Cherubiim's entire existence, a portal opens up not far away, and Yardrat steps through.

"The Archangel fled." Yardrat says. "Raphael tricked you."

Ose whirls to face him. "What? NO! That's not possible! I crushed him into dust! How could he have escaped?!"

Yardrat remains unmoved, despite her intimidating presence and the lightning-element Balrog power she wields.

"Isn't it obvious? Raphael swapped out the Cherubiim's body with an illusion shortly before impact. He teleported himself and the others somewhere safe. But... I doubt they will return."

Ose breathes heavily. She gasps for breath, so overpowering is her rage. Despite her claims to the contrary, she doesn't possess full control of the Balrog, and its predatory instincts muddle her mind.

"He... he tricked me?! No, that can't be! You're lying!"

Yardrat starts to say something, but pauses. He and Ose both lift their heads skyward, where a tiny speck levitates downward from the void.

Confessor Vulpanix, having witnessed the entire battle psionically, crosses her arms behind her back and drops down into Hell Harbor's upper atmosphere.

[The Archangels escaped.] She says plainly, her usual anger nowhere to be seen. [Ose. You have much to explain about what has transpired here, today. No longer is this a simple incident of negligence. You did not inform the Overlords of these Archangels' existences. The appearance of a Founder-Class Threat has changed the balance of power.]

Ose inhales and exhales fire and lightning through her nostrils.

"*Confessor Vulpanix.* You picked a BAD time to show up. I might have feared you before, but NO longer! Don't you start demanding anything from me, or I'll rip you and all your little friends to SHREDS!"

Vulpanix cocks her head slightly. Her six eyes narrow as she examines Ose's monstrous figure.

[That would be inadvisable. Perhaps you no longer have any reason to fear me... but what of the Five Executors? Or perhaps even... Founder Dosena herself? I trust you will cool that attitude of yours.]

Ose's rage deflates like a balloon. For once, even the Balrog's overpowering instincts don't manage to strangle the chill that descends down her spine.

She grits her teeth and lowers her voice.

"...Yes. Perhaps I do owe you an... explanation."

[Good. Then get on with it.]

Part 325: The Mightiest Demon

Confessor Vulpanix surveys Hell Harbor's devastated landscape. Using her psionic powers, she conducts a sweep of the entire planet several times, examining every nook and cranny without moving a muscle.

The results prove dismal.

[Duke Ose. Emperor Ose. Whatever your title is... you have utterly failed at your job. You were tasked with maintaining the order of the Demonic Territories. Instead, lawlessness has run rampant. For several orbital cycles, I have received scattered reports of minor insurrections among the human populace, ultimately resulting in a total shutdown of the Labyrinth Core for an extended period of time. These results are... unacceptable.]

While Vulpanix telepathically transmits her words in a wide radius, Emperor Yardrat stares at her in stunned silence. Along with the other Hidden Emperors, he has long lost his memories of the Volgrim, only knowing of them as the almighty 'Overlords.' However, seeing one in the flesh, along with Ose's out of character deference, he quickly understands that the alien in the sky is not a simple figure, but a messenger for a truly fearsome enemy he cannot hope to overcome.

Vulpanix continues. [Now I understand what I have been missing. Tell me, Ose... when were you planning to inform the Founders of the Archangels' appearance? Why did you not explain the energy signature we detected flying through this star system just a few rotational cycles previously?]

Ose raises her head and frowns.

"I beg your pardon? You detected an energy signature in this system?"

Vulpanix maintains a neutral expression, but secretly, she evaluates Ose's body language to try and figure out if the Duke-Emperor anomaly is lying to her.

[Correct. A Heroic-energy signature was detected flying at sub-light speeds through the Hell Harbor system. The local observational outpost requested assistance. Sangin Kordonis arrived, along with eight rapid-response teams. They confronted the anomalous life-form, but it summarily attacked and defeated them. Surprisingly, the life-form did

not take any lives. It only subverted control of their ships and sent them back to Volgarius. Compared with the overwhelmingly violent actions of these Archangels... its motivations appear completely different. Would you not agree?]

Ose starts to speak, but Vulpanix continues.

[Additionally. I was dispatched to investigate Marie Becker's laboratory to retrieve our inspection teams. While I was there, I encountered a free-floating soul-type life-form. I attempted to capture it, but it broke free of my grasp and escaped. Tell me, Ose. Do you know how difficult it is for an errant soul to escape a Confessor's psionic shackles?]

Ose purses her lips. "Nearly impossible."

[Correct. I have done some investigating, of late. There are a surprising number of anomalies occurring recently, and all of them happened under your watch. Would you care to explain yourself, or shall I condemn this world to Total Rendition?]

Ose's eyes flicker. "You wouldn't dare."

[Would I not? Our people signed a treaty. There were agreements put in place. You have failed to uphold your end of the treaty. As part of the penalty clause, I may decide to invoke my authority to declare a Total Rendition of this planetary mass. Explain your failures to me. Make me comprehend the pieces I have failed to understand. Only then may I offer a certain measure of leniency.]

Several seconds pass.

Ose's eyes flicker several times as she wrestles with the secrets she has been keeping from the Volgrim.

Her struggles to capture and obtain total control of the Wordsmith.

Her vision of uniting demonkind under her rule and ultimately rising up to cast their shackles away and overturn the power of the Volgrim.

However...

When faced with the might and authority of a Confessor, as well as the implications of her backers, the Founders themselves, even Ose can only bow her head.

She swallows a breath and bites her tongue.

"...Six years ago. A Hero emerged among the humans. His name is Jason. His unique power is called 'Wordsmithing.'"

Ose speaks haltingly, the pain of having to tell the truth biting into her psyche. Despite this, she maintains not only her Balrog Form, but also her Aspect of the Thunder God. She does this not just to resist Vulpanix's psionic pressure, but also to send a clear message regarding her newfound powers.

Half an hour passes as Ose slowly explains the events of the past several years, taking care not to go into certain details regarding her grand plans. However, her lack of explanation does not hinder Vulpanix from quietly theorizing and hypothesizing on these matters.

[Foolish mud-dweller.] Vulpanix says, her words filled with scorn. [Do not think you can deceive this Confessor. I am well-trained in the mental arts. I sense your burning ambition, though you try to hide it. You did not inform us of the Wordsmith because you desired his power for yourself. Your greed nearly cost your species and mine the entire War!]

Vulpanix snorts. She completely ignores Yardrat's insignificant presence, given his pathetic level of power and authority.

[Diablo is comatose. You are still the leader of the Seven Hells. Nevertheless, this implicit betrayal of your *superiors* cannot pass without punishment. If I am to allow you to maintain your authority, you will have to pay a steep price.]

Ose balls her hands into fists. "You think you have the right? I told you everything! How dare you act as if-"

[SILENCE!] Vulpanix roars. Her psionic voice flattens the land around Ose, crushing Yardrat into the dirt and forcing him to bow. However, it does not even make Ose flinch. [You have forgotten to fear your betters, mud-dweller! You have cast your eyes aside, thinking yourself better than the Founders! UNFORGIVEABLE! You primitives are NOTHING compared to the might of the Volgrim! You exist because we ALLOW you to exist! Of the two million habitable planets in the Milky Way, this one is little more than a scorched speck unworthy of notice, and its decay is all your fault! I will be doing the galaxy a favor by condemning it to Total Rendition!]

The more Vulpanix speaks, the angrier Ose becomes. She squeezes Mjolnir's handle and begins to tremble, fighting to hold back the Balrog's primal hunger for blood.

"Do... not... make me... ANGRY! Watch what you say next, *Confessor*! If you think you can do as you please, you don't know who you're messing with! I am OSE! I am the

mightiest demon in existence! I am the future of my people, and I will NOT allow you to speak down to me any longer!"

Ose begins to levitate into the air, using her lightning affinity to shift her polaric nature. Mjolnir's chain becomes taut as it hangs in her grasp, eventually lifting off the dirt.

[Insolence!] Vulpanix exclaims. [Whether or not you can defeat me, that is irrelevant! If you dare to fight back, I will call down the Founders! They will rain devastation upon demonkind, wiping out your useless lives with nary a care!]

"Perhaps they will!" Ose retorts. "But I do not believe... they will be able to defeat ME!"

Her aura surges. Ose begins rapidly revolving Mjolnir around herself, preparing to lunge at the Confessor.

Vulpanix's blood chills as she realizes Ose might, in fact, attack her.

In truth, I could not defeat that 'Cherubiim' monstrosity, yet Ose handily crushed it. If we come to blows, I will lose without fail. However! I must not allow a mud-dweller to stand up to me! It will sully the name of the great Volgrim Empire!

Vulpanix summons psionic power into her chest, then conjures a temporal barrier around her body.

[I am a seventh-ranked Psion, an elite among elites. I may not be an eighth-rank or a Founder, but my name alone would cow anyone in their right mind to submission. Do you really wish to test my patience, primitive being?]

Yardrat climbs to his feet. He watches in fascinated horror as Ose dares to levitate closer and closer to Vulpanix, goading her enemy into making the first move.

"Do I dare? Do YOU dare, Vulpanix? Where I stand, all I see is a Hellhound pup without any teeth! You don't appear as frightening to me as you once did... and neither do I fear your Founders. I only worry they might hurt my fellow demons! But even then... why should I care? I never liked them, anyway. Do your worst, if you dare to test me."

Several seconds of tense silence follow. Ose and Vulpanix continue circulating their energy, waiting for the other to strike.

Vulpanix nods slowly. [So be it. If you wish to condemn your species to the 'Great Beyond,' then I will guide you there myself!]

At that moment, just before either combatant can lunge toward each other, they both stop.

Strange expressions cross their faces.

Vulpanix's eyes dart from left to right. [Hmm? This feeling... the Archangels? Have they returned?]

Ose, likewise, appears equally confused. "What Archangels, are you daft? Are you trying to trick me, Confessor?"

Miles across the horizon, a tiny, insignificant-seeming speck appears. A figure cloaked in strange, otherworldly energy.

This figure takes a step forward. It travels one mile closer. Then, it takes another step, and draws yet another mile closer. As if shattering the laws of physics, it casually strolls through the air, crossing space without appearing to move quickly at all.

Yardrat is the first to detect its appearance. "W-what in the Seven Hells?! Over there, you two!"

Ose and Vulpanix both turn in unison to see the bipedal being, something so faint and illusory that it appears to not even exist at all, casually strolling toward them.

Ose shoots an icy glare at the newcomer. "Who are you?"

Confessor Vulpanix, however, freezes up. A look of shock enters her eyes.

[You. It's... it's you...]

The newcomer's body appears androgynous, lacking all biological indicators or features, making it appear little more than a blob of cloudy liquid. While it might be seen as vaguely human shaped, the two enormous horns on both sides of its head tell a different story.

Confessor Vulpanix. You are not the One I last spoke to. And Ose. Despite what the Confessor has said, you have performed moderately well in your role as... Second Emperor.

The newcomer's voice does not speak telepathically, nor audibly. Instead, it transmits into the air and their minds at the same time, mystifying Ose and Vulpanix both regarding the methods used.

Ose glances at Vulpanix. "Who is this?"

Vulpanix visibly trembles. [He... she... it... it is the... First Emperor of Demonkind.]

The newcomer slows to a stop a short distance from Ose and Vulpanix. Despite the close distance, no matter how Ose tries to focus on its presence, nothing sticks out in her mind. The so-called 'First Emperor' appears sickeningly illusory, like a memory from a fifty-year old dream that barely lingers in her mind for seconds at a time. The instant she averts her eyes, she begins to lose her memory of its appearance, making her force herself to gaze at it with rapt attention.

I am the First Emperor of Transience. My existence is temporary. My identity, unimportant. What is important is that I show up here, now.

The First Emperor slowly turns their head to look in Vulpanix's direction.

You threatened my species. You threatened my Second Emperor. That was an unwise move. I recommend that you speak to your Founders before making any... rash decisions... on their behalf.

Vulpanix shudders. A strange pressure builds up in her mind, forcing her to retreat from the First Emperor's presence.

[The... the treaty-]

The treaty is still valid. If you wish to destroy Hell Harbor, you may attempt to do so. However, you and I both know what will come next. Are you certain that you wish to condemn Volgarius to the abyss? Surely, your pettiness has not made you... stupid.

The First Emperor stares down Vulpanix with its faceless head, its lack of eyes somehow even more terrifying than if it had them at all.

"You are the First Emperor?" Ose asks. "Bullshit! Why didn't you show up earlier when the Cherubiim was attacking?! Why have you not shown yourself in thousands of years?! You're just some sort of... fake!"

Why did I not show up? Is the answer not clear? There was no need. Demonkind lives without me. If I reveal myself whenever any minor enemy appears, my abilities will become incapable of surprising my foes. You handled the Cherubiim well, Ose. I am proud of you.

"I don't want y-your congratulations!" Ose sputters. "I want an explanation! If you're really the First Emperor, prove it! I challenge you to a fight! I beat the Cherubiim without

breaking a sweat, and I can surely crush you, too!"

Vulpanix shoots a strange look at Ose. [No, Ose. Do not attempt to fight the First Emperor. There are stories of what they accomplished after the Energy Wars. You will lose.]

"Oh, I *doubt that*." Ose says. "I am the mightiest demon this galaxy has EVER seen! What First Emperor? What Founders? I don't fear any of- UHK!"

A crushing pressure suddenly presses down on Ose's existence. In the blink of an eye, she loses control and demorphs from her Balrog form, then falls from the sky. She hits the ground with a violent *boom*, then lays in the dirt, shivering and unable to move.

The First Emperor remains in the same place as before, like a statue.

Ose. Do not think that you have reached the sky above the sky. In the cosmic scale of things, you are still insignificant. But worry not. I am here. I will continue to shield demonkind from its greatest threats.

Ose lays on the ground. Her body twitches as she fights to move a muscle. No matter how she struggles, she barely manages to shift her arm a few millimeters.

What's going on?! Ose thinks, as her panic intensifies. This isn't soul pressure, not like what Raphael used! It's something else! I can barely twitch my fingers! How is Bael's body this feeble?!

The First Emperor releases their pressure, allowing Ose to breathe.

Vulpanix. You will return to Volgarius. You will speak to the Founders. You will remind them of my existence. Remember. Demonkind is under my protection. If you threaten my species again, I will not hesitate to unleash my powers a second time. Your homeworld will suffer a swift and cataclysmic end.

The First Emperor's voice softens as they slightly lean toward her.

And also remember. I know your grasp on the galaxy has weakened in recent centuries. Do not grandstand before me when you lack the power to back up your words.

Vulpanix shudders. Despite having fought and killed tens of thousands of mighty monsters and horrors in her lifetime, none of them come even close to the First Emperor's general sense of terror.

[Y-yes. Then. In that case. I will take my leave.]

Vulpanix flies into the sky and leaves without hesitation, traveling back into the Void all by herself. The previously haughty Psion no longer resembles a conqueror, but a beaten dog scampering back into the bushes.

After she leaves, the First Emperor remains. They hover in the sky, not yet leaving for some as-of-yet unknown reason.

Ose. You are right to doubt the Volgrim. They are no longer capable of shackling our species as they once did. However, do not brashly threaten or start any conflicts with them. They protect us from the greater Threat... and they are not winning that war.

Ose pulls herself off the ground. She huffs and puffs as if wildly fatigued. Whatever the First Emperor hit her with, it wiped her stamina out and made the Cherubim fight feel like an utter breeze in comparison.

"You... you're talking about... the Plague?"

I am.

Ose lifts her head to look at the Emperor of Transience above her.

"What do you know about the Plague?"

Yardrat listens intently, trying to make himself as small as possible. He does not understand what the First or Second Emperors are referring to, but something about their discussion strikes him as existentially important.

Not enough. The Plague confounds any attempts to observe it. It spreads. It attacks. It consumes. Thousands of worlds have fallen. If the Volgrim lose the war, demonkind will fall next. We cannot win against the Plague. None can. It is simply too powerful.

"Not even you can defeat it?" Ose asks.

No. My powers might appear omnipotent to the likes of you, but in the cosmic scale, they are insignificant.

The First Emperor pauses before continuing.

Only the Wordsmith might stand a chance. He is not our enemy. He is our only hope.

Ose snorts. "All the more reason to capture him."

Capture or befriend. Do as you like. I will not interfere. I am transitory. I cannot affect the balance without paying a price.

Ose frowns. "What do you mean? Who are you, really?"

The First Emperor shakes their head.

Farewell, Ose. I will leave demonkind in your capable hands. Do not fail your species.

Ose starts to speak up, to demand answers, but as she watches, the First Emperor's body slowly fades away, vanishing from existence itself.

Moments later, her thoughts become foggy. Ose dizzily shakes her head. She forces herself to remember the First Emperor's appearance, but no matter how she tries, she can only recall a vague and blurry shadow, like a memory from ancient times.

Yardrat sucks in a breath.

"Seven Hells. I really am nothing more than a speck of dust within the grand scheme of things, aren't I?"

Ose turns her head to look at him.

"You weren't supposed to learn of these things... but perhaps the old mind-wipes aren't as important as I once thought. Not anymore. Times have changed. Gather all the Emperors again. We're going to hold a second meeting."

Yardrat helplessly gestures to the destroyed world around him.

"Alright. But where?"

"I'll tell you once I've surveyed the damage," Ose answers. A strange calmness takes over her expression as she gazes at the dust-choked sky. "The First Emperor is... he's so powerful. Or she. It. I don't know what he is... but he appointed me as the leader. There must be a reason for all of this. We can't sit on our hands, anymore."

Yardrat nods.

"To that, I agree."

Part 326: The Galactic Threat

Somewhere deep within Hell, inside a forgotten alcove near the edges of the slowly-expanding labyrinthian space...

Uriel, now fully reverted back to Barbatos's body, lays inside a glowing pool of liquid mana, a pool she used several times when battling the Demon Emperors to rejuvenate and heal her body after suffering devastating injuries. This specially-created liquid mana slowly enters her body and drains away, allowing her to regenerate herself back to an optimal state.

The Archangel of Retribution lays still, gazing at the ceiling above.

"We failed." She states, her tone emotionless and dull.

"Nay, sister," Raphael says, his construct-body sitting a short distance away on a nearby rock. "We did not. We partially succeeded. We killed several Emperors. We uncovered the power of the so-called 'Demon Deity'... and now we've learned that the status of the 'First Emperor' is not as nebulous as we once thought."

Raphael holds a glowing orb in his hands, a temporal crystal capable of scrying distant locations. He replays the hazy images of a figure cloaked in shadow, an entity whose very existence threatens to erase itself from his memory whenever he looks away.

"Not only that," Raphael continues, "But we have also learned of an enemy the Volgrim are battling in secret. A 'Plague,' as it seems. What, I wonder, might this Plague be, hmm?"

Raphael reflects not only on the intelligence Confessor Vulpanix unwittingly gave to him, but the conversation he observed shortly after the three Archangel's left, between the First Emperor, Vulpanix, and Ose.

"This 'plague' does not appear to be an ordinary disease," Michael remarks. "One cannot 'fight' a disease. Rather, the term appears to be code for an enemy that has appeared in normal space. Perhaps the Volgrim refer to their enemy as a Plague in order to, how would the humans say it? *Dehumanize* their opponents."

"Nay..." Raphael murmurs. "I do not believe this to be the case. Not fully, I should clarify. This enemy is, almost certainly, a genuine plague. The First Emperor stated that

the Plague spreads and infects worlds. Such direct terms do not imply a metaphor, but an existential threat. This may explain why the Volgrim have remained quiet for so long, seemingly ignoring the happenings within the Labyrinth. They have greater concerns occupying their thoughts."

Uriel clears her throat.

"Ahem. Brother Raphael... might we leverage this knowledge to our advantage?"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," Raphael says vaguely. "We have exhausted our souls and run our wells of power bone-dry. It shalt take a significant amount of time for thy demon body to regenerate its mana and become capable of sustaining another Cherubiim transformation. Verily, our best course of action art now to speak to the Wordsmith. 'Tis time for us to entrust the future to him."

"The Wordsmith is weak." Uriel moans. "He is only a boy."

"Nay, thou hath not lived with him in as intimate a manner as Michael and I," Raphael counters. "Joan of Arc was merely a child when she began her conquests. King Arthur was still a boy when Camael granted him Excalibur. Age is not a metric one should use to judge Heroes. Jason is ready. He has finally suffered enough to evolve his thinking. He is not the same fool from a month ago."

"What he has lost and whether his mindset has changed matter little," Uriel counters, closing her eyes. "He is lazy. He always seeks out the easy solutions to complex problems. How can such an irresponsible brat save humanity? Hath thou already forgotten what happened with Dracula?"

Raphael's eyes lower. "Nay. I have not."

"Thou should do well to remember his error. Dracula single-handedly uplifted the Hell of Blood to its monstrous status. He gave the forces of Hell a handhold when before they lacked the reach necessary to extend their fangs. While he proved ultimately sympathetic to demonkind's cause and the Wordsmith does not, Jason could still unwittingly grant his enemies a boon."

Raphael frowns. He says nothing for several long moments, and his frown deepens further.

"Indeed. There was that... one matter."

"What matter?" Uriel asks, sitting up.

"The boy had a clever, but frightening idea. What if, through the use of his Wordsmithing, he could uplift demons through the ranks without consuming human souls? He envisioned a utopian system wherein humans and demons might work together to empower one another. But what if the demons were to seize this power for themselves? They would explode in growth exponentially faster. Verily, they might ascend past the heights of the so-called Demon Deity and reach limits we never thought possible!"

Michael nods. "He spoke of this plan to Emperor Ose. Our sister was not there to see the discussion, but I remember it well. Now that Ose has obtained a power rivaling the Cherubiim, she has become dramatically more frightening for her enemies to face. If we cannot defeat her, how might the Wordsmith? No doubt, she mayeth recall that discussion and plot to obtain the technology if he creates it."

Uriel grunts. "Hmm. Thou implyeth the Wordsmith art inferior to our strength, but I do not readily believe that is the case. His skills art... utilitarian. Much like Camael's. He can craft weapons and items capable of countering specific enemies. He need only sit down and ponder deeply upon his opponents' weaknesses."

"In that case," Raphael says, "we mustn't delay. The sooner we give news to the Wordsmith of our movements, the sooner he can begin preparations for Ose's counter-attack. She shalt require some time to gather her armies, locate and enumerate the fallen, and march on Tarus II."

Uriel sighs.

"'Tis unfortunate the Cherubiim could not save our people during the Energy Wars. Surely, t'would have allowed us the final push necessary to slaughter demonkind."

"Without thy demon body, the Cherubiim's ascension is impossible." Raphael laments. "Camael, Uzziel, Gabriel, and myself all lacked the soul-power and mana necessary to complete an ascension. As well, I was leery of bringing back their lost memories, especially Uzziel's. I only agreed to activate the transformation with thyself and Michael out of necessity."

Uriel and Michael both share a knowing look with one another. Having finally recalled all of their memories from before Raphael's mind-wipes, they have also remembered all of their ancient sins.

"We treated Cassiel, Muriel, and Samael terribly..." Uriel murmurs. "What I wouldn't give to apologize to my siblings."

"Verily, I am a terrible sinner." Michael adds.

A few minutes later, Uriel stands up, summons a portal, and steps through, traveling back to Tarus II.

The VLL Hatoraxia, one of the ships which faced the Wordsmith in battle just a week prior, slowly enters the atmosphere of the Volgrim capitol world, Volgarius. The ship, which belongs to Clan Oblong, sports a thick and bulky rear-mounted Bridge, with two heavy weapon mounts pointing directly forward. As a Technopath clan focused on utility over looks, their ships feature heavy weaponry and versatile engines, while also relying on efficient but ugly squarish-designs intended to maximize performance and keep costs low.

Among the hundreds of large and small Technopath clans, Clan Oblong is one of the larger ones, with roots dating back millions of orbital cycles. The many diverse Technopath clans once sparred regularly in philosophic debates regarding what types of technological designs were superior, but over the last few tens of thousands of orbital cycles, their many rivalries became dampened by the *threat* to Volgrimkind itself.

Sangin Kordonis, captain of the Hatoraxia, sits tensely in his chair. Beside him sits his First Officer, the young and inexperienced Invocator Miikil, a Fifth-Ranked Psion new to military service, but among the more talented of the Psions in Kordonis's fleet.

The two of them quietly talk while their crew travel toward the grey clouds covering Volgarius's surface.

[I believe the Founders will find our report illuminating,] Miikil says, keeping her telepathic voice low. [Whether the entity we fought was a Plague-host that somehow ingested a Heroic Artifact, or whether it was something else entirely, its ability to disable our entire fleet without killing a single soldier must mean it possesses frightening abilities.]

"We have already reported our findings to Confessor Vulpanix." Sangin Kordonis states. "Since she wishes for us to report back to Volgarius, we must do as she commands. I dare not contradict a Confessor."

[I admire Confessor Vulpanix a great deal.] Miikil transmits. [However, I must admit that I find her presence daunting. She led a hunt on the world of Filir, one I was present for. I was unable to contribute meaningfully.]

"You've seen the Confessor in person?" Kordonis asks.

[Yes. Her mastery of Spatial and Temporal Psionics is exquisite. On the other hand, I am barely even competent in Liquid and Gas Manipulation. A mere Fifth-rank Invocator.]

"Obtaining the title of Invocator in fewer than one thousand orbital cycles is nothing to be ashamed of." Kordonis states. His mouth-tendrils dribble saliva on his metal legs as he speaks. "I am only aged fourteen thousand orbital cycles, myself. My superiors describe me as 'adequately competent.' Were I to put my achievements into the Psion hierarchy, I would be only a Third-Ranked Initiate, at best. Not even fit for combat duty."

[There are many honorable non-combat roles for Psions.] Miikil states. [Before I took this post, I assisted in the collection of biological samples on hostile worlds. My passable abilities in gaseous manipulation allowed me to traverse poisoned and radioactive worlds without much trouble.]

"All Psions serve the Founders." Kordonis replies. "Even the seemingly insignificant figures, so long as they perform their duties, will receive the rites of advancement."

[The Founders are fair. The Founders are just.] Miikil says, straightening her posture. [I contemplate, and I comprehend.]

The Hatoraxia descends through Volgarius's cloud cover, eventually breaking through to reveal the breathtaking scenery of the richest and most prosperous world in all of the Milky Way.

Tens of trillions of Volgrim live on Volgarius. Its metal-paved surface sports no naturally-occurring foliage, and every last inch of the planet's landmasses have been utilized for housing to the absolute maximum possible. Huge terrariums dot the landscape, offering 'outdoor' amusement for the upper-class Volgrim to enjoy moderate and climate-controlled bursts of 'nature,' but otherwise, greenery is conspicuously absent.

Skyscrapers fill up the horizon as far as the eye can see. Not only do tens of billions of thousand-story structures dot Volgarius's surface, but the underground facilities go even deeper. More than two thirds of the Volgrim population lives underground, with only the wealthiest and most powerful elites earning the right to live topside.

Invocator Miikil sits up a little straighter as she gazes outside the windows. Unlike the higher-ranking Psions who somewhat take their privileged lives for granted, Miikil is only a fifth-ranked Psion, a grunt in the military. While possessing extraordinary abilities

compared to Psions of the first through fourth ranks, compared to those of the sixth, seventh, and higher, she is still far from worthy to live on Volgarius's surface.

[I have rarely been to the capitol world.] Miikil says. [Truly, Volgarius is a marvel of engineering.]

"Where did you live before you were assigned to my post?" Kordonis asks.

[I spent two hundred orbital cycles training my Psionics on Filir,] Miikil states. [I spent several hundred scattered across other worlds. Most recently, I oversaw Beta-level species 14478, the 'Goblins,' on their designated containment world, Golord. I was only there for seven orbital cycles before transferring to this post.]

"Military-ranking Psions are becoming scarcer and harder to find, these days." Kordonis blandly comments. "Every captain wants a handful. You might not think yourself special, but I have a feeling the Founders will start drafting Fourth-ranked Psions into the combat ranks before long. We've lost too many Invocators to the Plague."

[The War seems never-ending...] Miikil says, her telepathic voice softening with emotion. [No matter how many Plagueborne we kill, more keep appearing.]

"That is the nature of our enemy."

The two of them fall silent as the Hatoraxia nears a dedicated landing facility, one with tens of thousands of hangar bays. The large, flat building stands out from the office-like and utilitarian infrastructure around it thanks to the many ships docked on its uppermost level, waiting for a transfer to the lower levels for short and long-term storage.

As they descend, a robotic voice speaks inside the Bridge.

Starship Hatoraxia! Callsign Kord-677! You are cleared for landing. A Priority One message is waiting for Captain Kordonis. Please accept it at once.

Kordonis stiffens. "Priority One. I've never received one of those before..."

He quickly moves his tentacle-fingers to press several buttons on his command interface, the part of his Captain's Chair linked to his ship's highest functions.

Moments later, the face of a Technopath holographically materializes in the center of the bridge. Sangin Lidra, head of Clan Oblong, and one of the Technopaths responsible for the recent investigation of Marie Becker's laboratory, levitates atop a circular platform.

"Sangin Kordonis. I have received word of your recent encounter in the Hell Harbor system through Confessor Vulpanix. The significance of your discovery cannot be understated. You and your Bridge crew are required to attend a Class I meeting of the Founders. It has been seven hundred and sixteen orbital cycles since a meeting of this magnitude was last arranged. I need not explain to you the importance of what will be stated there."

Kordonis maintains an air of aloofness, but his internal organs vibrate with excitement.

"Yes. A Class I meeting. I am honored by this assignment."

"It is not often a mere captain and other low-ranking officers are allowed to attend such a prestigious meeting." Sangin Lidra says. "Due to several recent classified events, the Founders have decided to disseminate highly detailed news regarding the Plague war effort."

Lidra pauses for a moment, as if hesitating about what to say.

"...I have already scoured some of the reports. Simply put, the War is not going well. We are losing on multiple fronts. Do not expect to hear much good news during this meeting. In confidence, I must state off the record that unless one of our top-secret experiments bears fruit, Volgrimkind is likely to suffer a slow and deliberate deterioration into extinction."

Kordonis and his Bridge crew fall uncomfortably silent. Some of them shoot questioning looks at each other, while Kordonis tries to maintain an air of confidence.

"I... do not understand, Master Lidra. I have heard of a few recent setbacks, but I was not under the impression we were faring so poorly."

"We are." Lidra flatly states. "Our attempts to probe the Plague have fallen flat. Our experiments have yielded no results. Autopsies only lead to more questions. Do not miss the meeting, for your firsthand account of the encounter in Hell Harbor's space will surely prove useful. At this point, we need every scrap of intelligence we can muster."

Kordonis nods seriously. "Yes, Master Lidra. I will attend, without fail. I contemplate, and I comprehend."

She tilts her head toward him as well. "I contemplate, and I comprehend. For the Founder's glory!"

Her projection fizzles away, and in its place, a planetary map with directions to the assembly place remains.

Kordonis barely even glances at the map. His subordinates will lay out a course through Volgarius's countless spiderweb-like tubes and transfer facilities to get him across the planet to his destination. He hardly needs to lift a tentacle.

"I was unaware the War was going so badly." Kordonis says, his tone devoid of emotion. "If this meeting contains as dire of information as Master Lidra implied, then what will it mean for our species?"

Invoker Miikil blinks her six insect-like eyes. [I do not know the answer to your query. If we cannot defeat the Plague, then perhaps we can flee the galaxy?]

"Where can we run?" Kordonis counters. "Anywhere we go, the Plague might follow. Traveling between galaxies is impossible for our current level of technology... unless the Founders have kept a breakthrough under wraps."

Miikil raises her fingers in a gesture of exasperation. [It is beyond my ability to know. We must trust in the Founders. Unarin has never failed us in tens of millions of cycles. The First Founder will surely think of a solution. He always does.]

"If we lose trust in the Founders, then we will have already lost the War." Kordonis concludes.

Part 327: Hand of the Founders

Sangin Kordonis, Invocator Miikil, and the other twenty members of the Hatoraxia's Bridge crew all sit, stand, or hover inside a large 'skybus,' one of the common machines used to travel across Volgarius's surface. The rather large vehicle boasts relatively comfortable accommodations for all different types of Volgrim, particularly Technopaths.

Unlike Psions, Changelings, or the other subspecies of Volgrim, Technopaths all boast wildly varied body and augmentation types. Some walk on bionic legs, some roll on treads, and some hover through the air. The older a Technopath, the more of their body they tend to convert to machinery over the years, gladly giving up their weak biological vessels for the comfort and utility of steel.

As for Sangin Kordonis, he walks on two exo-steel legs, each one capable of not only bearing incredible loads, but also stomping inferior biological skulls into meat paste. The rest of his wrinkled and withered body, however, still appears mostly biological. As a young Technopath, only 14,000 orbital cycles of age, he has not yet made any permanent choices regarding his 'upper augmentations.'

Kordonis takes a seat beside Invocator Miikil. Both of them relax as restraining beams wrap around their chests, ensuring that if any accidents happen to their vehicle, they won't go flying around inside the cabin and suffer any injuries. The other Technopaths sport different types of bodily augments, so some of them remain standing, since they won't be able to easily accommodate sitting down.

The lightly armored skybus takes off after a few minutes and climbs to a mid-level elevation, just a mile or so above the planet's surface. This height, suitable for travel across continents, allows it to avoid the much busier low-elevation vehicles, which operate on a sub-continental and local-grid-based travel system.

Invoker Miikil gazes out the window beside herself. She watches the world below her zip past, occasionally scanning it with her psionic abilities.

[Look over there. A three-thousand-unit grid of hydroponic farms. I hear that in recent cycles, the Founders have pushed to increase the amount of nutrient production facilities on Volgarius. At present, only twenty percent of the homeworld's food supply originates

from on-planet. They recently decided to increase that number to one hundred percent, or more.]

Kordonis nods. "Naturally. If the War is going as poorly as Master Lidra hinted, it makes sense they would want to make the homeworld more self-sustaining. Relying on imports from conquered worlds is a long-term recipe for disaster."

Miikil holds a small datapad in her hands. She manipulates its functions psionically, not bothering to use her hands.

[Recreational facilities have decreased five percent in the past twelve orbital cycles. Volgarius has long since reached its 'functional capacity' for structures. The only way to build hydroponic farms capable of feeding such a vast population is by stripping away unnecessary or low-priority structures.]

Kordonis nods absentmindedly. He, too, manipulates a datapad, glancing over information Sangin Lidra transmitted to him about the upcoming meeting. As Miikil excitedly chatters about the sights of the lauded Volgrim homeworld, Kordonis instead becomes quieter and more contemplative.

To think the statistics would be this dire. Master Lidra must have a terrible weight on her servos.

* * *

The skybus races through Volgarius's lower atmosphere at speeds exceeding three thousand kilometers an hour. The world below zips past quickly, and eventually, Miikil settles down once the novelty and relatively boring appearance of the homeworld wears thin.

[I must say. The homeworld is impressive, but much of its structural design is far too utilitarian for my liking. Every square meter of land has already been used up. There is nothing to see but megascrapers and gigascrapers of uniform design.]

"That's just how the homeworld has to be." Kordonis remarks. "Volgarius is already crowded to its limits. There isn't much room left for aesthetic design when every structure must be made to use up and offer as much space as possible."

[Still. It feels as if the homeworld is... lacking something.] Miikil says, before falling silent.

The skybus drops out of low-orbit and races toward a district of gigascrapers that, for once, appear somewhat different from the world around them. Contrary to what Kordonis just said, several buildings with remarkably beautiful designs appear. Five of them gently twist as they vertically ascend, built in a pentagonal formation to resemble five giant fingers reaching out of the planet's crust. A surprising amount of greenery and parks become visible on the ground level, the foliage dramatically standing out from the mass of steel surrounding them.

All together, a massive ten-mile complex with hundreds of sub-buildings reveals itself to be the place where the five Volgrim Founders live, each of the five-fingered buildings being one of their homes, offices, and land designated for their direct subordinates.

These buildings, the Five Fingers of the Founders, hold enough luxurious housing for more than a million of their devoted elite personnel. All the buildings possess their own unique design.

The First Finger, belonging to Founder Unarin, rests at the position of the 'thumb.' Granite and obsidian decorates its outer exterior, with zero windows allowing anyone to peek in from outside. As the skybus flies toward the Five Fingers, Unarin's home structure also slightly shifts colors, using a trick of the light to turn its powerful blackened exterior into something like a soft and welcoming grey.

The Second Finger, belonging to Founder Dosena, rests at the position of the index finger. Her home structure sports dozens of bubble-like terraces, all of which have huge exobeasts sleeping inside. These creatures, captured by the Psions working under Founder Dosena, come from the countless worlds the Psions have conquered. Just a single glance at the huge predators makes Miikil shiver with excitement.

The Third Finger, belonging to Founder Treyza, rests at the position of the middle finger. Its exterior appears glassy, and even from a great distance, the skybus's passengers can see directly through the crystalline windows into the many scientific laboratories comprising the Third Finger. As a Changeling, Founder Treyza's dignified and scientific upbringing makes them a great advocate of experimentation and transparency. Thus, the Third Founder deliberately ensures anyone can view their experiments, as needed.

The Fourth Finger, belonging to Founder Cuanali, rests at the position of the ring finger. Her structure appears remarkably different from the others, in that an inordinate number of skybus parking spaces sit attached to the building's side, allowing for

Technopaths from all across Volgarius to come and go as needed. As one of the most diverse of the five primary Volgrim sub-species, Technopaths hold all manner of opinions and research priorities, making collaboration between them essential.

And finally, The Fifth Finger, belonging to Founder Cinculu, rests at the position of the 'pinky.' What surprises Miikil the most is that, unlike the structures made of steel and glass, used by the other Founders, Cinculu's home structure appears significantly smaller, and has been somehow hewed from bone, with a copious amount of foliage growing out of its many nooks and crannies. Under other circumstances, it might even appear to be an abandoned building due to all the moss and fungus present, but somehow, the greenery gives it an aesthetic touch lacking in the other four Founder structures.

Kordonis notices Miikil's surprise. "Founder Cinculu is a Dolgrimite. He detests the trappings of technology and steel, and advocates for the return of Volgrimkind to our 'roots,' whatever that means."

[The Dolgrimites are simply too backward for the modern galaxy,] Miikil says, keeping her words private between herself and her Captain. Neither of them would dare slander even the most unpopular Founder publicly, for fear of reprisal. [They refuse to advance with the times.]

"Perhaps," Kordonis says, keeping his voice low. "But they claim to have found the source of Volgrim power by reverting to their baser instincts. If you ever find yourself facing a Dolgrimite, do not consider fleeing a shameful act. It may save your life."

Miikil turns to look at Kordonis with her six insect-eyes. [Why? Are the Dolgrimites quite fearsome? Their numbers are so few; I've heard they might even go extinct someday.]

"Don't listen to that talk." Kordonis says, shaking his head. "I've met a Dolgrimite before. Say what you will about their backward beliefs... but their bodies are killing machines. A high-ranking Psion will kill a Dolgrimite ten out of ten times, but even a mid-ranking Psion will know better than to anger the Primals. I watched that one particular Dolgrimite rip through steel with her claws... she tore apart one of Master Lidra's sturdiest training drones in seconds. No low-level Psion could fight nearly as efficiently."

[Impressive. Perhaps there is more to the Dolgrimites than meets the eye.]

As the smallest sub-species of Volgrim, Dolgrimites number less than 1% of the Volgrim's total population. Not only so, but they eschew fighting in the War and keep to

themselves, avoiding politics to pursue their supposed 'Path of the Primal,' wherein they will voraciously hunt on wild planets.

The skybus drops toward the center of the Founder's Hand, where a large and often-used dome of glass sits in between their five buildings. This structure, the Founder's Eye, provides a high-uplink connection to the Volgrim Net, which allows any Founder to gain instant contact with any world or vessel in the Milky Way. Due to the thousands of years spent fighting their newest and most-feared enemies, the Founders often use the Founder's Eye to obtain status updates from their many Fleet Captains and Admirals located across the galaxy, whilst also allowing them to transmit orders to the worlds and fleets under their control.

Today, its purpose becomes a bit grander than usual, as several hundred of the absolute top-most elites of the Volgrim Empire walk, roll, or levitate inside through a door at its base. Among them are Psions, Technopaths, and Changelings alike.

However, conspicuously absent are any members of the Ascended, the species to which Founder Unarin belongs, or Dolgrimites, all of whom avoid the other species of Volgrim as a rule.

[Unfortunate.] Miikil states. [I hoped to see a Dolgrimite in person. Do you think Founder Cinculu will appear at today's meeting?]

"Unlikely," Kordonis replies. "From what I understand, he has missed ten of the last ten Grand Assemblies. He rarely shows up for any formal functions. I gather that he barely even speaks to the other Founders."

[I do not understand how a lauded Founder can retain his status while playing such an insignificant role in our society...] Miikil muses. [Why do you suppose the other Founders allow him to retain his position?]

"I haven't the faintest idea." Kordonis answers.

The skybus touches down, and all of its occupants depart. Unlike the elites traveling to the Founder's Eye who live nearby, the hodgepodge team of juniors sticks out like a sore thumb. Several elite Psions and Technopaths barely give the juniors a single glance, if that, before continuing toward the glass dome.

[I... I feel a bit nervous.] Miikil says. [Rumor has it that if a high-ranking Psion wishes, they can read your thoughts without you ever knowing.]

"The rumors are true." Kordonis says. "So lock away any further disrespectful thoughts regarding the Fifth Founder. Don't worry; we all have those thoughts, but you must not actively dwell on them while you are here. It's a good way to have your Core Body permanently disabled."

Miikil shudders. [I contemplate, and I comprehend.]

The group of juniors walks toward the Founder's Eye. As they draw closer, the hexagonal-shaped interlocking glass windows comprising the dome become more pronounced, each hexagon reflecting light slightly differently from the ones around it, making rainbow-like colors slowly play across its surface.

[How beautiful...] Miikil remarks.

"You're quite the sappy Psion." Kordonis chuckles. "Wait until you've been around for a few hundred thousand cycles. You'll become as stuffy and boring as all the others."

The two of them stop at the perimeter, where a dozen heavily armored Psions of the Seventh Rank stroll toward them and invasively scan their bodies and minds. These Psions, elite soldiers and protectorates of the Founder's Pavilion, hold extreme authority within the Golden Zone of Volgarius. Much like police officers, their role is to protect the capitol world at all costs and safeguard against internal and external strife, alike.

One of the guards speaks telepathically. [Sangin Kordonis. You have received priority seating placement. You will meet up with Sangin Lidra at seating position 114-H. You will travel directly to your seat. You will not linger excessively in the Golden Zone.]

Kordonis's expression becomes grave. "I contemplate, and I comprehend."

He and the others quickly hustle into the Founder's Eye, eventually arriving amidst a small sea of several thousand fellow Volgrim. A quick glance around the building's interior reveals a vast stadium outfitted with millions of high-quality holo-projectors, nutrient stations equipped with luxury food for the sub-species that require sustenance, and dozens of floating platforms in the center of the stadium where the absolute pinnacle of Volgrim elites sit.

Miikil's eyes widen as she spots one specific Psion levitating beside four others, two of them formed from holographic projections.

[Look, Kordonis! Exeutor Nufaris! I cannot believe he came to this meeting in person! Wasn't he stationed in the Outer Rim? I thought he was fighting the Plague?]

Kordonis snorts. "Executor Nufaris is an Eighth-Ranked master of Spatial Psionics. He can step through gaps in space more efficiently than any other Psion, aside from Founder Dosena herself. Traveling fifty thousand lightyears probably took him only a few planetary cycles, at most."

[Impressive... he is my idol. I can only hope to someday reach the same heights as him.]

"You would not be the first Psion to think such thoughts." Kordonis replies.

In addition to the hovering platforms containing high-ranked Technopaths and Changelings, the stadium possesses tens of thousands of seats along its interior walls, where the slightly lower, but still very highly-ranked elites sit, most of them consisting of holographic projections of their physical bodies.

With the War raging, the vast majority of Volgrim present are only capable of attending due to the Founder's Eye possessing galaxy-grade transmitters for contacting all these different fleets.

Kordonis nudges Miikil's side. "Over there."

He and his group walk toward a waiting hover-platform, one with a few Technopaths from Clans Oblong and Symmetra.

Sangin Lidra, head of Clan Oblong, hovers atop her circular leg-platform while gesturing to the seats in her pod.

"We are all direct witnesses who the Founders will surely interview." Lidra states. She gestures to a male Technopath seated on a spider-like platform with four spiked-legs. "Sangin Kordonis. This is Ordonis Limea, a prodigy of our clan."

Limea glances at the junior and nods. "My greetings."

Kordonis nods back. "This junior greets his senior."

"And this is Loputo Jidelor," Sangin Lidra says, gesturing to a Technopath standing on two metal-legs, similar to Kordonis himself. "He hails from Clan... Symmetra."

Kordonis nods perfunctorily, but toward the Technopath from a different clan, he does not express as much respect. "I greet the representative from Clan Symmetra."

"As do I greet you." Loputo Jidelor simply says.

Finally, Lidra gestures toward the last occupant of her pod, a weary and aged Technopath with a visibly pained expression.

"It is my honor to introduce Psymin Miralax, one of the last-living creators of the Sentinels. She will also be a key witness in today's proceedings."

Kordonis raises his eyebrows. "Psymin Miralax! My apologies, for my eyes are blind. I studied the Sentinels during my Education Cycles. Your name came up many times, due to your genius application of Living Moldanium on the Sentinels' chassis."

Psymin gives her junior a single glance before turning away. "*Greeting. Standard.*"

Nobody bothers to introduce the other members of Kordonis's Bridge crew, not even Invocator Miikil, so lowly are their positions. They merely file to the back of the hover-pod and sit down, chattering quietly to each other regarding the fantastic sights of the Founder's Eye.

As the most prestigious member of their group, Psymin Miralax sits in the frontmost seat, while everyone else sits, stands, or levitates behind her. The hover-pod raises into the air, rising to many hundreds of feet and giving its occupants an incredible view of the Founder's Eye's interior.

At a quick glance, Kordonis calculates that of the tens of thousands of Volgrim attending, more than eighty percent of them are only present digitally, through holographic projections beamed into the amphitheater's many seats. And of the entirety who came, fewer than three hundred sit in levitating pods at the center of the arena, like his group.

"Enjoy this moment," Kordonis murmurs to Miikil. "You can live for a million more cycles and never get the chance to sit in such a position of privilege again."

As one of only three junior Psions in the levitating pod, Miikil becomes more than a little choked up with embarrassment at her lowly position. Compared to some of the legendary figures in the arena, including Nufaris and the other four Executors who were able to attend, Miikil cannot help but feel as utterly insignificant to her Empire as the mud-dwellers she has always loathed.

[Our Empire is so grand...] She murmurs. [I find it hard to believe the worst could ever happen. How could such a mighty assemblage fall to a single enemy?]

"Have you ever fought a plaguehost?" Kordonis asks.

[Only in a simulation.]

"Simulations... don't convey the terror of our enemy." Kordonis murmurs. "Before I earned my Captain stripes, I once took part in a battle against a plaguetouched world. The number of... of mutants were... too terrifying to imagine. We had to condemn the whole planet to Total Rendition."

[Total Rendition.] Miikil repeats. [Such a loss. We will never be able to utilize that planet's resources for our great Empire again.]

"A loss, yes, but a necessary one." Sangin Lidra says, interrupting the conversation between her juniors. "In the beginning, we tried recapturing worlds taken by the Plague. Doing so only led to the losses of billions of Volgrim lives. Then, we had to face our own soldiers, newly empowered and possessing a base upon which they could regenerate and reproduce. Those worlds provided the Plague with enough impetus to push deeper into our galaxy. Now, we dare not venture too deep into the distant reaches of the Milky Way. They will swarm us without fear. And all it takes is one infection to topple a fleet."

Her words chill the juniors among Kordonis's group. Having grown up hearing vague stories about the Plague, they only know as much as their seniors have told them, but even the dimmest-minded Volgrim knows that their enemies are terrifying beyond belief.

Minutes pass, and eventually, an hour.

Lidra raises her head to look at the partially-transparent glass ceiling, which allows some level of natural light to filter through.

"Look. Up there."

Kordonis, Miikil, and the rest of the Volgrim gathered in the Founder's Eye glance at the ceiling in unison.

A single pod descends through a small opening in the roof. While lacking any sense of grandiosity, its occupants immediately stir the hearts of every Volgrim present!

[The Founders!] Miikil chirps.

Three Volgrim sit silently in the platform's seats. The first one is a female Ascended, one of the most numerous members of the Volgrim Empire, yet also the species which least appears in public. As per their name, this species spends their lives hooked into virtual worlds of paradise, only occasionally decoupling for important matters involving their bodies or the galaxy around them.

However, the first person present, surprisingly, is not a Founder.

"Hmm. Muuxunuu, Founder Unarin's head administrator," Lidra muses. "Founder Unarin has chosen to send her in his stead. Perhaps he will come later?"

Muuxunuu, dressed in beautiful black and golden robes, sparkles brightly as the light glints off her neon pink skin. The many tendrils coming out of her scalp fall across her front and back, giving her a dainty and princess-like appearance.

However, her muscular body, hidden beneath those same robes, sits like a weapon ready to spring upon anyone holding nefarious intentions toward her master.

Beside Muuxunuu, the Second Founder's seat sits empty, with Founder Dosena also not having shown up.

"Strange. Neither Founders Unarin nor Dosena have come." Kordonis says. "Do you think...?"

"They are undoubtedly busy," Sangin Lidra answers. "Do not question the Founders. We are not privy to their movements."

"Of course, Master Lidra. Forgive me. I contemplate, and I comprehend."

In the next two seats, two Founders do indeed sit. Founder Treyza, a genderless Changeling of the highest order, gazes toward the many peons before them without any discernable emotions. Their pressed white suit sports several medallions, all representing their innumerable scientific achievements. As an Observer of the highest order, its ability to blend into populaces of inhabited worlds makes Treyza indistinguishable from a native-born person.

And beside Treyza sits Founder Cuanali, a female Technopath with a body nearly one hundred percent comprised of robotics. Even her heavily augmented brain makes her more of a cyborg than a living, breathing entity. So powerful are the alloys comprising her shell that even a directed nuclear detonation might not kill her. The countless redundancies in her mainframe make her physically imposing bipedal body distinctly unique compared to any other Technopath in the audience.

As for the Fifth Founder's seat...

[It seems Founder Cinculu did not come after all.] Miikil states. [I wonder if he will come later, or never?]

"I expect never." Kordonis answers.

Despite only two of the five Founders showing up, the audience's expectations raise significantly, showing their respect not only to the two Founders who came, but also Muuxunuu herself, a ridiculously high-ranking Volgrim among her peers.

"Greetings." Muuxunuu states, her voice broadcasting to the arena's speakers and overpowering the whispering voices of every elite present. "I am Muuxunuu, an insignificant servant to our glorious First Founder. Currently, Founder Unarin is not able to be present at today's meeting. He and Founder Dosena are presently speaking with several high-level operatives in the Hell Harbor system regarding a certain discovery made this very cycle. They will both join us all today to discuss their findings, but first, they must collect the data as required."

Muuxunuu's voice rises and falls rhythmically, like a song made from the ocean's waves. She pronounces every word clearly, taking great care to ensure her delivery is both perfect and flawless, like her vision of her master, the First Founder.

"Founders Treyza and Cuanali will start off today's proceedings not by discussing this new and important discovery, but another separate, yet equally important matter. It has been seven hundred orbital cycles since the last Grand Assembly of the elites. In that time, our enemies, the Kolvaxians, have pushed further and further within our borders."

Miikil frowns. [Kordonis. What is a Kolvaxian?]

Before Kordonis can speak, Sangin Lidra answers. "The Kolvaxians are our enemy, the Plague. This is a relatively new term we have created to properly identify our enemies. Keep listening, and you will understand."

Muuxunuu continues. "...present, there are more than two million habitable worlds in the galaxy. However, ten thousand have fallen to the Kolvaxians. We are unable to keep up with their expansion, and we cannot commit worlds to Total Rendition quickly enough to slow them down. In this meeting, we will discuss counter-measures to the Kolvaxians, as well as how to stop their plague from overtaking our society in its entirety."

"This Grand Assembly will be the first in seventy-three thousand Orbital Cycles in which we transmit its proceedings remotely to the high and middle-tier organizations. It will not be private, like the ones before it. Our goal is to educate the entirety of our populace on the coming events that our great leader, Founder Unarin, has envisioned. His peerless wisdom will grant us a path forward, one which we must follow unerringly if we hope to survive the coming calamity."

With those words, Muuxunuu launches the Grand Assembly, beginning the proceedings with ominous news.

Few present will be able to understand the long-term effects of the meeting until many years have passed...

Author's Note: I have posted art in the past regarding the Volgrim. For posterity's sake, here are those pieces of artwork once again! I'm also including links to Patreon posts, for people who want to read more about them. Keep in mind, due to some slightly spoilery info, you'll have to be a Patron to read the posts! \$1 a month will get you access!

, and a [Patreon Post](#)!

The Ascended



, and a [Patreon Post!](#)

The Psions



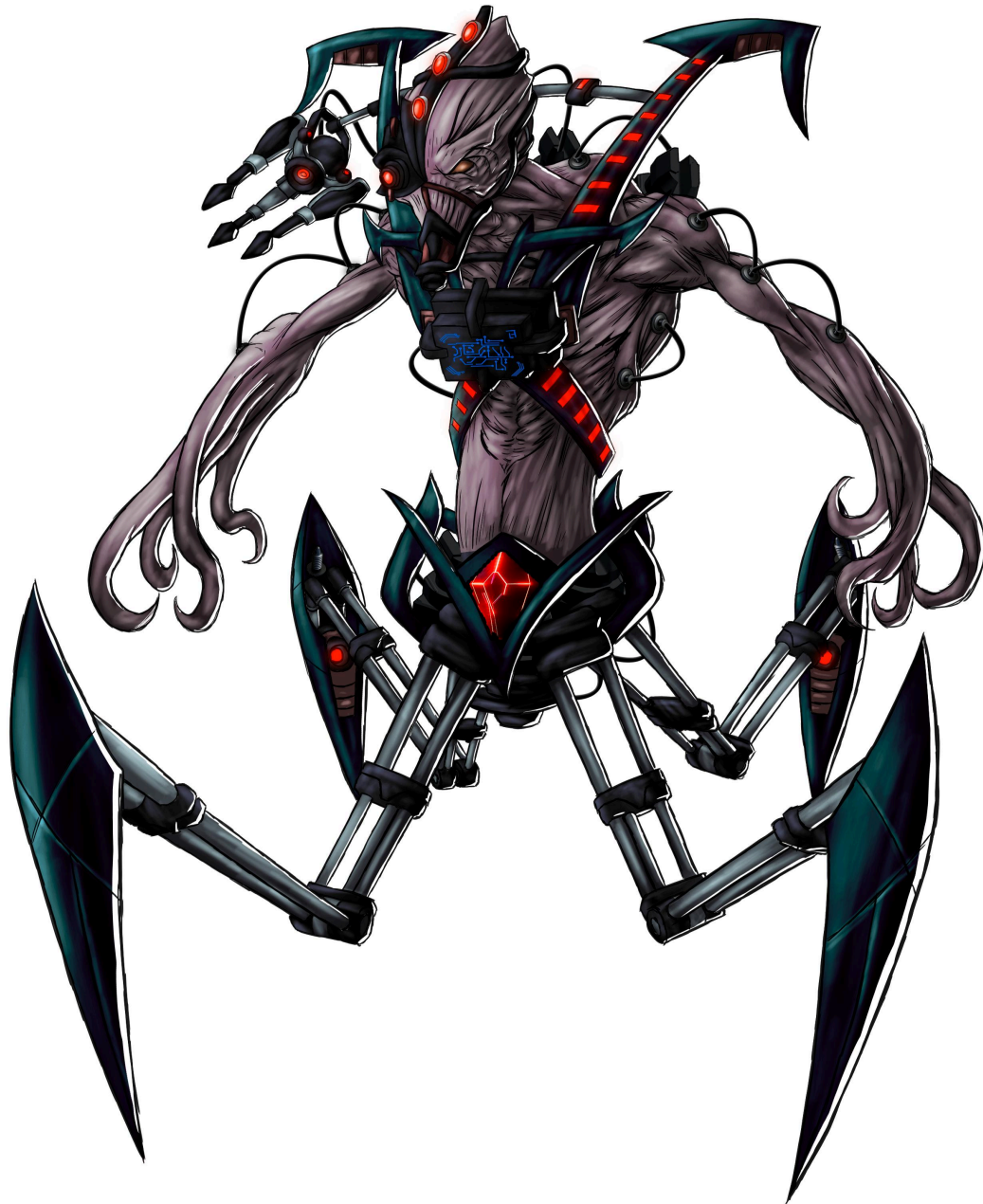
, and a [Patreon Post!](#)

The Changelings



, and a [Patreon Post!](#)

The Technopaths



, and a [Patreon Post!](#)

The Dolgrimites



Part 328: History And Future

Founder Unarin's head administrator, Muuxunuu, spreads her arms out and holds her palms face-up.

"The Kolvaxians are a threat the likes of which our people might not survive. However, if we pool our resources together and follow Founder Unarin's direction, I believe that eventually, we will purge the galaxy of their threat."

She lowers her arms and falls silent for a moment before continuing.

"In the eighty-five thousand cycles since the Kolvaxians have appeared, we have lost tens of trillions of fellow Volgrim. Thousands of worlds have fallen. Mighty warriors and elites have perished, never to return. We have increased the speed at which we replicate new Volgrim spawn, and yet, I feel that we have lost something important. Today, countless younger members of our species do not know the glory that once was our empire. They know only the creeping dread of our seemingly unstoppable enemy. Before I discuss the Kolvaxians in greater detail, let me tell you about our people and our rich, storied history."

"Our people evolved on a single backwater world." Muuxunuu states. "Grimvolas, the previous homeworld. Over the course of just one hundred thousand short cycles, we became a galaxy-faring species capable of traversing the stars. However, the Seven Great Wars nearly rendered our entire species extinct. It was only due to the guidance of a small group of rebels, those who hated the order of the Old Empire and who sought to reshape it into a unified one, that our people eventually ascended to a new plane of existence. Those rebels were our Five Great Founders."

"The Seven Great wars were, in many ways, not exceptionally different from the War we fight now. Brutal. Unending. Seemingly no chance of victory for any side. In the days before Founder Unarin's Enlightenment, when he divined the cause and effect of Order to Chaos, our brothers and sisters ripped each other apart without mercy. So brutal were our tactics that even the species we now refer to as 'mud-dwellers' would look upon us with dismay."

As Muuxunuu talks, Founders Treyza and Cuanali remain silent. However, distinct emotions appear in their eyes as they recall the Founding Eras which eventually led to

their complete and total control of Volgrimkind.

"In the First Great War," Muuxunuu says, "The five species warred among themselves. Technopaths fought Technopaths. Psions fought Psions. This was known as the War of Brothers."

"In the Second Great War, the five species began to battle one another, all while vying for territory. Exceptionally bloody conflicts broke out across hundreds of worlds. Not content with killing their own species, every Volgrim began to view the other species as even more fearsome enemies. This was known as the War of Differences."

"In the Third Great War, we began to use weapons of terrifying power. Planets fell. Territory lost its meaning. The grievances from the first two wars built up into irreconcilable differences that made extermination our primary desire. This was known as the War of Extermination."

Muuxunuu pauses. She nods slowly, seeing the looks on the many elite's faces. Those present in the Founder's Eye are not young, and many of them were born and raised during or shortly after the Seven Great Wars. However, hearing her vivid firsthand description of the past turns many of them nostalgic, making them reminisce about their species' roots.

"The Fourth Great War was a turning point. After the War of Extermination, many of us became weary of the endless battle. For seventy-five thousand cycles, we killed each other by the billions. We became bitter, thinking there would never come an end to the conflicts. Eventually, we began to fight in smaller-scale battles. Strategic ones that did not threaten our core worlds and territories. This was known as the War of Caution."

"Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, depending on how one looks at the past, the War of Caution did not last long. Unarin and the other Four Founders began to rise to prominence. As long-lived war heroes who survived all of the previous Great Wars, they were outspoken advocates for peace and unification. However, their words did not have any notable effect on the corrupt tyrants and power-mad despots of the Old Empire. As such, they began to look to permanent solutions. Thus, they founded the Five Fingers, an organization which would eventually become the Five Founders' base of power."

Muuxunuu calls up several images on her screen, images which send chills down the spines of every single ancient Volgrim watching the Grand Assembly's proceedings.

"The Fifth Great War was a turning point. With the assistance of Founder Cuanali and several other noteworthy Technopaths, including the great Psymon Miralax, seated here today, the Five Founders initiated a brazen plan to eliminate the power structure of the Old Empire. They created... the Sentinels."

Muuxunuu gestures to the holographic images of bipedal machines, each one with their own unique design, yet all possessing similar designs.

One of them is a pitch-black automaton with red accents, a blood-red iris implant, and smooth armor with few visible seams. Its 'fingers' narrow to knife-points, making it appear like a weapon capable of ripping through exosteel.

Another is a neon yellow robot with black stripes going off in different directions to break up its color palette. In addition to a standard left arm with five fingers, a built-in Lightning Gun sits embedded in its right hand, a weapon capable of overloading power sources, blasting holes in sturdy spaceship armor, and otherwise annihilating its enemies.

Muuxunuu continues. "The Sentinels were Unarin's ultimate weapon. Through the efforts of the Celestial Designers of that time, the very highest of Technopath elites, our species managed to create machines made from Living Moldanium, the sturdiest alloy in the universe. This rare material gave the Sentinels unmatched offensive and defensive power. It made them killing machines capable of stepping into any base, no matter how fortified, and eliminating all enemy assets without fail."

"Founder Unarin sent them out to kill the failed leaders of the Old Empire. Within less than a hundred cycles, he succeeded in his goal. This resulted in the Fifth Great War, the War of Suppression. Founder Unarin crushed his enemies and established a new galactic power structure, one that resulted in a brief but welcome era of peace."

As Muuxunuu finishes her sentence, Fourth Founder Cuanali stands up, drawing the attention of all the spectators. Muuxunuu falls silent and turns to look at the respected Founder, giving her the floor.

"The Sixth Great War. It was where we went wrong." Founder Cuanali says, her raspy and robotic voice transmitting to every spectator. "The Rebellion War occurred when the Sentinels we programmed began to act in odd and undesired ways. They killed civilians without cause. They incited fear and anger among the populace. This resulted in a violent revolt. Across several planets, people began to attack the Sentinels on sight. This triggered

a programming error in their core matrices. They switched to viewing all biological life as inferior. They began to exterminate us, en-masse."

The Fourth Founder shakes her head.

"The first Great Wars pitted brother against brother. The last great wars pitted Volgrim against machine. We nearly lost everything. In the Seventh Great War, the War of Unification, we finally cast aside our differences to join hands against the Sentinels. During that last war... ninety-seven percent of our populace perished. Much like the current War, we faced an enemy that we simply could not injure, wound, or slow down. It was only by uniting our greatest minds to create the Gatekeeper Protocol that we finally deactivated the Sentinels, once and for all."

A solemn aura spreads throughout the Founder's Eye. Of the few thousand Ancient Volgrim present, those who lived all those millions of years ago, they recall the faint, distant memories of long-lost friends, brothers, sisters, and comrades they will never see again.

In the small pod belonging to Sangin Lidra and Psymir Miralax, the very few young Volgrim simply stare at the images of the holographic killing machines, ancient weapons which they have only read about in history books.

Reading about our history from data files is simply not the same as hearing a survivor speak of the events firsthand... Kordonis silently ponders. *Young Volgrim like myself can only imagine the struggles the Founders had to endure to create the long-lasting Empire we have today.*

After finishing her improvised speech, Founder Cuanali sits down, returning the floor to Muuxunuu.

Unperturbed by the Founder's interruption, Muuxunuu bows her head in respect before continuing with her speech.

"The Seven Great Wars culminated in our species' last battle for survival. During those dark days, the last three percent of our people thought we might not live long enough to see the Gatekeeper's completion. Fortunately, Founder Unarin, Founder Cuanali, and all the Celestial Designers managed to complete their weapon against the Sentinels and deactivate them forever."

"Today, we face a threat just as terrifying as the Sentinels, but this time, we do not have a Gatekeeper Protocol. We do not have a solution to defeat our enemies, and our situation grows more dire by the hour. This Grand Assembly is all about combating the Kolvaxians, and what we can do to stop them. Now, let us move onto our enemies themselves. For the first time, we will distribute all the detailed knowledge we have accumulated regarding this plague-like threat. However, what knowledge we do possess is frighteningly little. The Kolvaxians are as enigmatic as they are lethal."

Muuxunuu waves her hand, causing the images of the Sentinels to vanish. The moment those horrifying, ancient machines disappear from view, every Ancient Volgrim present heaves a sigh of relief. Even the most stalwart commanders of legions don't hesitate to show some emotion regarding the monsters which nearly wiped out their species. Only the youngest Volgrim, generations removed from their predecessors, view the holograms with a distinct lack of reverence.

"Let us start with the origins of our enemies. Fifteen thousand cycles after the Energy Wars, when we defeated the small-scale resistance on Planet Earth, the first Kolvaxian showed up on an outer rim world. At the time, we believed this infectious parasite, this enhanced and seemingly mindless organism, to have been a bio-research experiment gone horribly wrong. However, none of our greatest minds could have imagined that within just ten short planetary cycles, that entire world would collapse into anarchy and disarray. Due to our delays in dealing with the first parasitic strain, it managed to spread to more than five other worlds. Had we immediately acted to kill the first plaguehosts, rather than attempt to capture and study them, we might not be in our current situation."

"Today," Muuxunuu says, changing the view to show a small-scale model of the Milky Way, "the Plague has spread to cover many of the fringe worlds in the Outer Rim. The Western, Northern, and Eastern arms of our galaxy have become safe havens for the parasites. They have yet to fully take over the Southern Arm, but we estimate that within a hundred orbital cycles, they will succeed. And that is where our worst predictions begin to take hold. They will slowly move deeper into the galaxy, infecting one world after another, until they have infected our very core."

Founder Treyza rises to their feet. Muuxunuu falls silent, allowing the most renowned scientist in the Volgrim Empire to speak its thoughts.

"This one has conferred with many distinguished minds among our people." Treyza says, spreading out its webbed-hands. Its bulbous eyes glance around the room in even, sweeping gestures, as it speaks to the many delegates present. "We no longer believe the Kolvaxians are a simple parasitic experiment. In fact, we believe they are invaders from another galaxy."

Gasps of shock go up among the Volgrim. Some of the highest minds appear unmoved, having already heard this news in private, but among the mid and lower-level elites, pure chaos erupts as several hundred rise to their feet.

"Invaders from another galaxy? Then you mean to say this is a coordinated attack?"

[Impossible! The Plague is mindless! It simply spreads its infection wantonly.]

"What galaxy do the Kolvaxians originate from? How can you be so certain?!"

Many cries of outrage mix with questions to create a cacophony of noise. Treyza remains silent for several seconds, allowing the shock to reverberate in the room. Eventually, they raise their hands to silence the crowd.

"This one will answer all of your questions. Please be seated."

With two short sentences, Treyza silences the room. All the shock and awe subsides as every Volgrim quickly re-seats themselves, remembering they are in the presence of two of their revered Founders.

Treyza clears their throat. "One fact which Miss Muuxunuu mentioned previously still rings true. We know very little about the Kolvaxians. By giving them a designation, instead of referring to them as a mere Plague, we intend to change our methods of dealing with them, moving forward. Some of you have already noted that the Plague's previously simple and mindless movements have changed during the past two thousand cycles. They have begun using Psionic powers, when they obtain a Psion's host body. During the Fall of Wellak, Executors Huron and Sartran perished in battle. Some time later, after they revived, we discovered that duplicates of their bodies had appeared in a border skirmish, and those duplicates were able to competently wield Seventh-Level Psionics. While significantly less capable than the actual Executors, these two plaguehosts became major threats to our armada."

This revelation stirs much less controversy than the previous one, given how many Volgrim present know about the loss of Planet Wellak. The appearance of plaguehost

Executors caused a major uproar in their armies only a few years earlier.

"More alarmingly," Treyza continues, "The duplicated Executors have been slain on five separate occasions, yet they keep reviving. We believe it is possible that the Kolvaxians have assimilated their genetic uniqueness. They are now able to replicate and create the powers of Executor Huron and Executor Sartran at will. This means they will continue to remain a threat, no matter how many times we slay them."

Executor Huron himself levitates next to Executor Nufaris and the other three high-ranking Psions of the eighth-level. As if to assuage the concerns of all the assembly-members, he raises his hand.

[Presently, it appears that my doppelganger can only appear in one place at a time. However, if the Kolvaxians become capable of replicating multiple copies of my body, they will be able to launch simultaneous attacks with the power of a seventh-ranked Psion. We cannot overlook this dire possibility.]

Treyza continues, once Executor Huron has finished speaking. "With regards to the Kolvaxians, the only thing that manages to slow down their spread is the Total Rendition of their worlds. Historically, we have used a mixture of Neutron Bombs and high-ranking Psionic power to condemn plaguetouched worlds to the nether. However, with the realization that the Plague can infest high-ranking Psions, we have been forced to switch to only launching Neutron Bombs from a distance. We cannot risk additional high-ranking Psions falling into the clutches of our enemies."

Cuanali stands up, chiming in with her own input. "With regards to the Neutron Bombs. Our supply is low. Our supplier, Marie Becker, cannot manufacture them quickly enough to meet demands. This has resulted in an exponential increase in Plaguetouched Worlds. We cannot destroy them faster than our enemies can infect them."

"Indeed." Treyza says, their tone grave. "We have explored many hypothetical options for combating the Kolvaxians. In secret, we have completed the work on ten capitol-class starships capable of sustaining Volgrim life among the stars. Please take a look."

Treyza motions with its hands, summoning an image of a massive, metal sphere, one that appears to be roughly a tenth the size of a small moon. Its relatively smooth surface, mixed with dozens of large hangars for fitting smaller ships, makes it look something like a mobile fortress.

"This is a special type of spaceship we have designated 'Refuge.' It possesses the theoretical maximum capacity of one million Volgrim crew and civilians. In the event the Kolvaxians overrun us, we are preparing measures to escape the Milky Way. These vessels are one of them."

After Treyza mentions the new spacecraft, one of the longer-lived Technopaths in the audience stands up on her spider-legs. Her holographic body flickers for a half-second as the projectors realign to display her full figure.

"Founder Treyza. These 'Refuge' ships appear to be based on the many deep-void exploration prototypes we were considering prior to the Energy Wars. Do they bear any relation to those vessels?"

"They do." Treyza answers. "Originally, the starships you refer to were intended to be used for exploring the Void beyond our galaxy's confines. However, these Refuge variants are intended purely for survival in the distant reaches of the Void. In the event the Kolvaxians overrun us, we five Founders have made a solemn pact. We will send off the younger generation to ten other galaxies and stay behind. If we allow our great Empire to fall, we will not deserve to count ourselves among the refugees."

Treyza's declaration causes many people, especially the younger Volgrim watching the stream remotely, to gasp in shock.

The Founders, legendary figures who brought Volgrimkind to its apex, now solemnly swear to give up their lives if their enemies overrun them.

This thought flashes through the minds of countless observers, causing the Founders' most diehard devotees to experience surges of pride and sorrow at the thought their Empire might genuinely be facing a crisis which will result in their total extermination.

"Worry not." Treyza says, as they puff their chest out with pride. "All five of us have lived long and worthy lives. If the worst should come to pass, the Executors and other leading Volgrim members will become the Founders of the next generation. We have already elected five suitable candidates to replace us."

Cuanali speaks after Treyza. "However. Our species will not necessarily fall. The Kolvaxians are strong. They are monsters that cannot be assessed by common sense. But they are not invincible. We will next discuss the measures we might take to ultimately defeat the blight ravaging our galaxy."

The two Founders turn their heads to nod at Muuxunuu before sitting down, once again returning the floor to her.

"The Volgrim have become a slow-minded species." Muuxunuu states. "Our long lives make us slow and resistant to change. We tend to think in terms of many hundreds or thousands of cycles. Sadly, the Kolvaxians are not like us. They evolve faster and faster every cycle. Their intelligence parameters improve visibly over time. This makes them a threat that will ultimately overrun us if we fail to rework all of our existing systems."

"First," She continues, "let us discuss our training programs for Psions. Unlike the other four species, Psions are our core battle strength against the Kolvaxian menace. As essential as the biological engineering services of Changelings are, and as formidable as the technological firepower of the Technopaths may prove, it is a fact that Psions hold total supremacy when battling the Kolvaxians. The ability to engage in infantry-level and void-level warfare without directly risking their bodies makes Psions our best solution to slowing down our alien adversaries."

"Unfortunately, the current training centers are slow and ineffective. Training a Psion to the fifth level will often require one thousand cycles at a minimum. We must reduce that time to one-tenth of its current value if we hope to maintain an even balance with the Kolvaxians. Any slower, and we will continue to lose territories in the Outer Rim."

Kordonis shifts in his seat, feeling a momentary flicker of pride for Invocator Miikil, one of the few Psions who reached the Fifth Rank before her thousandth year alive. She, too, beams at him excitedly.

However, among the elites present, many of them don't hold any positive thoughts regarding Muuxunuu's words.

A recently promoted eighth-ranked Psion projects his thoughts outward. [With all due respect to the great ones among us, I do not see how we can accelerate the training of young talents to the fifth level in so short a time. Not only are there more branches of psionics than ever for these fresh minds to explore, but the number of abilities they can acquire, and the practical applications they can utilize, grow every cycle.]

Several other highly-ranked Psions nod along to his words, giving his statement a high level of credibility.

[Divinator Fellrun speaks the truth. We cannot rush a Psion's education, for it will hamper their capabilities in the long run!]

[I know well the accuracy of Divinator Fellrun's words. It is impossible to offer a fully-fledged training course to our youngest minds.]

[It is as the old saying goes! A rushed Psion will never break past the Seventh Rank! They will suffer the humiliation of a plateau in their abilities!]

Muuxunuu allows the various Psion delegates to voice their complaints. After twenty time-units, she holds up her palm to silence them.

"Your objections are noted. A Psion with a rushed education will never be able to advance past the seventh rank. This will, in the long term, result in a drop in our great Empire's fighting abilities, and a shameful mark on our history. However, we need not necessarily rush anyone's development. Instead, we will focus our efforts on raising Specialist Psions who excel at only one or two types of Psionic potential. They will still possess sturdy foundations in their chosen fields, but will likely never be capable of branching out into other fields."

Some of the delegates frown, their expressions a mixture of disgust and tepid acceptance.

[Executor Nufaris! What do you think of this matter?] One of the Psions in the audience asks.

As one of the most lauded Volgrim in recent memory, Executor Nufaris holds a high position in every Volgrim's mind, not far removed from the Founders themselves. Despite being too young to have lived through the Seven Great Wars, his rapid rise to prominence and high affinity for all types of Psionic branches makes him an elite among elites.

The dark-skinned Psion slowly raises his head. His heavily built, starkly angular body gives him a dominating presence, one dwarfed only by Founders Unarin and Dosena themselves. When he speaks, the entire Empire falls silent.

[With regards to this matter. I do not like it, but I have no objections. I have fought Executor Huron's doppelganger on five separate occasions, as well as Executor Sartran. Were our enemy not so likely to overrun us, I would never agree to go along with the Founder's thoughts on this one particular issue.]

He shakes his head slowly, expressing his disapproval.

[Gaseous Manipulators. Liquid Manipulators. Primal Manipulators. Energy Manipulators. Body Manipulators. The branches of Psionics are both vast and numerous.

Each one possesses extreme levels of versatility. A single highly-specialized Liquid Manipulator of the Executor rank can even defeat me in mortal combat, if their specialty goes deep enough.]

[However, I am not pleased with the weakening and segregation of our Empire that this change will bring. While a highly specialized Liquid Manipulator of the Eighth Rank might be capable of defeating me in battle, he will never possess my versatility. He will not be able to trod through the gaps in the Void. He will not be able to withstand the power of a star. These Specialists will become capable of advancing to the Eighth Rank, but will possess no foundation in other branches of psionics. Ultimately, our people will fragment into splinter groups, with specialists of similar types sticking together to advance their own interests. What may save us from this calamity today will inevitably bring about another in our future.]

Nurafis falls silent, allowing his words to percolate in the minds of the audience.

[In the end, I will not voice any strong objection. If creating Specialists will give us a chance at defeating the Kolvaxians, or if it will at the very least slow them down long enough for the Changelings to create a bio-weapon that can exterminate them, we will be able to deal with the repercussions of today's choice, later. I would rather suffer a social calamity than an existential one.]

The other Executors nod in approval to his words, with the oldest ones shooting him glances of approval.

[Well stated, Executor Nufaris.]

[Eloquent, as always.]

Muuxunuu nods at Nufaris.

"Thank you for your input, Executor Nufaris. Naturally, the choice to shift to specializations is not one which Founder Dosenia issued lightly. We will certainly have to pay a price for this choice, but in the end, our great Founders believe that it will lead us to victory, if we obtain more time to analyze the Kolvaxian threat."

Administrator Muuxunuu straightens her posture, assuming a noble stance as she switches topics.

"Now then. We have discussed the Kolvaxian menace and one solution among many. However, it has recently come to the Founders' attention that a second enemy has

appeared in our galaxy's space. Unlike the Kolvaxians, this enemy might become a possible counter-measure to the Kolvaxians, allowing us to obtain total victory. However, Founders Unarin and Dosena have not come to this Grand Assembly yet due to the nature of this discovery. They are currently speaking with our analysts to determine what course of action we might take. For now, we will take a short recess until their arrival."

Muuxunuu sits down, leaving the Arena to fall utterly silent.

The spectators present, those not in the know, all but scratch their heads in confusion.

A new enemy? Someone who might also become a counter-measure against the Kolvaxians?

As murmurs go up among the audience-members, Sangin Kordonis glances at Invocator Miikil.

"It is time. Soon, we will likely have to deliver our testimony regarding the anomaly we observed. Are you nervous?"

[I am.] Miikil says. [But only a little. I had no idea our Founders had planned so far ahead. Not once have I heard of these 'Refuge' ships, nor any initiatives promoted toward specializing Psionics.]

"How do you feel about this Specialist Doctrine, in theory?" Kordonis asks. "Aren't you a Specialist?"

[I am not.] Miikil answers. [I possess high affinity for Gaseous and Liquid manipulation, but my capabilities in Primal Psionics are passable. Likewise, my affinity for Space and Temporal Psionics are abysmal. I possess some small degree of ability in Heat Manipulation, as well as Energy Manipulation, but my Defensive Psionics are also not particularly high. I only wished to specialize in Gaseous and Liquid Psionics when I first entered training, but my head Invocator insisted I obtain some mastery over all the basic Psionics, as well as at least dabble in Spatial and Temporal Psionics. I fear that doing so caused me to waste at least three hundred cycles of time. Perhaps, if I had only focused on my high-affinity psionics, I might even be a sixth or a seventh-rank Psion by now.]

Kordonis snorts, causing his mouth-tentacles to quiver. "A seventh-ranked Psion? In only one thousand cycles? I must express my doubt."

[You are not a Psion.] Miikil says indifferently. [You would not understand.]

"Fair enough."

The two of them continue to talk, until almost a full standard time-unit passes.

At some point, Muuxunuu stands up, silencing the room.

"The First and Second Founders have arrived." She declares.

Part 329: Fear The Wordsmith

Muuxunuu issues a declaration that silences the room.

"The First and Second Founders have arrived."

Immediately, all conversations stop. Every Volgrim present flicks their eyes or their psionic senses around, trying to be the first to catch a glimpse of the most revered Volgrim in their entire species' history.

The war hero who crushed the tyrant despots of the Old Volgrim Empire.

The genius who shut down the ancient Sentinels, saving his species from extinction.

The great leader who created the legendary tome known as Order to Chaos.

This single Volgrim, despite lacking the psionic power of the Second Founder, the scientific knowledge of the Third Founder, the technological mastery of the Fourth Founder, or the raw physical strength of the Fifth Founder, still holds more political sway and awe than all of them combined.

So influential and renowned is Founder Unarin that even those who have spoken to him regularly still feel a sense of awe and deep respect in his presence.

As the crowd searches frantically for Unarin, two figures pop into existence without fanfare, directly in the middle of the Founder's Eye. Unarin and Dosena instantly appear without making a sound, yet Dosena's incredible psionic emanations cause the others of her kind to instantly suck in their stomachs in surprise.

Founder Dosena's 'silent transference' ability! The power to step through the void without creating even a micro-tear!

Has her power grown since the last time I saw her? Is it even possible for a ninth-rank Psion to advance any further?

The First and Second Founders! I've never seen them in person before! What a great privilege! Ahh, if only I didn't have to view the Grand Assembly remotely, I could die of satisfaction right this instant!

As the crowd goes wild in their thoughts, the two newly appeared Founders levitate near the Founders' platform, not far from Muuxunuu, Treyza, and Cuanali. They don't

join the other two immediately, but instead silently remain in place, allowing the hearts of their most elite warriors, scientists, and engineers to surge with emotion.

Unarin does not levitate on his own power, but rather, Dosena uses her psionics to hold both of them aloft. The fact that Unarin is not doing the levitating himself doesn't matter to anyone, as every Volgrim knows well that Founder Unarin is the brains behind every major movement the Volgrim make, while Dosena is his right-hand woman, the brawn of their empire. She follows his orders, and so, she is his most loyal and trusted subordinate.

"Hello, my brothers and sisters." Unarin says, while slowly raising his palm. "I greet the loyal generals of my Empire. I greet the soldiers. I greet the Changelings who work tirelessly to analyze our enemies, the Psions who put their lives on the line against the alien menace, and the Technopaths who build the warships necessary to defend our borders. Every Volgrim has a place. Every Volgrim has a purpose."

Unarin turns his head slightly toward Dosena. Without saying a word, she nods, and the two of them disappear and reappear inside the Founder's Platform, with the other two Founders, Treyza and Cuanali. Muuxunuu silently steps backward, leaving the leftmost position in the pod free for Unarin to take his rightful seat.

The First Founder's dark red skin gives him an aggressive air of authority, but his calm demeanor, his soothingly deep voice, and his regal black and gold robes combine to give him an unshakable presence. Every Volgrim who gazes upon their deified leader immediately feels their worries about the War fading away, as if Unarin alone could crush the Kolvaxians with his right fist while uplifting his people with his left.

Unarin rests his left hand against his waist. He slowly motions with his right hand while he speaks, using gestures to emphasize his words.

"My people. Our enemy was once thought to be a genetic experiment gone wrong. It is only in recent cycles that we have revised our theories, and now, we must change our previous course to deal with the Kolvaxian threat. These monsters are not scientific accidents. They are biological weapons, most likely engineered by a foreign faction. Three million cycles ago, when our Empire was in its prime, we dispatched probes to all of the distant galaxies in the Local Group. Now, we believe one of those probes may have alerted an unknown enemy to our presence. These Kolvaxians were not designed to subjugate us,

but to destroy us. Whoever our enemy may be, and wherever they may lurk, we are likely to come to blows sooner rather than later."

The First Founder extends his index finger and slowly waggles it from left to right.

"We Volgrim are a prideful race. We are not like the inferior mud-dwellers of the lower planets. For every low-level conflict those savages fight among themselves, we have fought a hundred others. The civil wars of our ancient history were terrifying and world-shattering indeed, but eventually, we rose above those petty squabbles to become a unified species. The reason why we reign supreme is simple: We have had far more time to advance."

Unarin pauses.

"But..."

He slowly glances around the audience while tapping his chin.

"...What if another civilization existed which was much older and more advanced than ours? Perhaps in another galaxy? We must not discount that possibility. Life has emerged several times in our Milky Way. The odds that life has appeared in other galaxies is alarmingly high, which would mean that we may have caught the attention of a species far superior to ours. These 'Kolvaxians' could be little more than their lowest foot soldiers. And if the Kolvaxians are their weakest soldiers, what might their strongest ones look like?"

After allowing that horrifying idea to percolate in the minds of his audience, Unarin closes his eyes and shakes his head.

"Perhaps what I have just said is a possibility, but also, perhaps not. We do not know. There is no evidence directly supporting the hypothesis that the Kolvaxians are alien life. And even if there were, there is no evidence a higher entity created them. But consider, for a moment, the odds that the worst-case scenario might be true? If we grow complacent, we might view merely defeating the Kolvaxians as our ultimate victory, when in fact they could be the prelude to a greater war."

Sangin Lidra nods slowly, as do the other Volgrim in her pod. Sangin Kordonis lowers his head and momentarily falls into thought.

I had not even considered the possibility of these Kolvaxians only being the footsoldiers of a stronger alien Empire. However, if that is the case, it would explain

their high genetic assimilation, as well as their low intellect.

As if to mimic Kordonis's musings, Unarin continues along that same line of thought.

"These Kolvaxians are frighteningly efficient killing machines. Not only do their bodies completely decompose upon death, but they will also willingly self-immolate if we capture them alive. They take the bodies of our people and enhance their physiology to new heights, making all their physical parameters reach the peak. The only weakness the Kolvaxians seem to possess is a low-level intellect, almost to the point of dull-wittedness. If they arose naturally, or were perhaps an accident made by one of our scientists, how have we failed to recreate their bodily perfection in the last eighty-five thousand cycles since their appearance? Not one Changeling scientist has managed to mimic the genetic assimilation powers of a Kolvaxian."

Unarin pauses for a moment. As he does, Founder Dosena steps forward, her brilliant golden armor drawing everyone's attention.

[Only three thousand cycles ago, the Kolvaxians abruptly began to use the psionic abilities of fallen Psions. This sudden development caught our species off-guard. Did they develop this ability out of nowhere, or did they always possess it, yet held it back until our guard was lowered? If the former is true, then the Kolvaxians may be evolving new abilities over time. If the latter is true, then they are not the mindless monsters we first thought.]

"Dosena is correct." Unarin says, nodding at the Second Founder. "Right now, the psionic potential any given Kolvaxian-reanimate possesses seems to be a full tier below the original host body's capabilities. However, it may be a ruse. They might be capable of using eighth-level Psionics; a power that could defeat any of our Executors in battle if used at an inopportune moment. Even if they cannot do so now, and even if the Kolvaxians are not the sneaky but brilliant enemies we fear, they might still improve their psionic abilities over time, putting them on par with our lauded Executors! I fear that either possibility could spell our doom."

"Therefore..." Unarin says, changing his tone noticeably, "As per what my Head Administrator stated previously, I have decided to enact various changes throughout our Empire. She has already spoken regarding the expedited training of new Psion seeds into specialists, but this measure alone will hardly be enough to crush the alien threat. We once outnumbered them a trillion to one, yet we could not kill them. Today, their

numbers have started to reach parity with ours. Specialists will only slow their push into our core systems."

Unarin touches a device embedded in his wrist, a small psionic-built implant that allows him to remotely access core Founder-level knowledge restricted to his biological signature.

In the middle of the arena, ten hazy holograms of familiar-looking aliens appear, each of which makes some of the lower-ranked elites inside the Founder's Eye frown in confusion.

"The youngest among our people were not alive to witness the Energy Wars." Unarin states. "But I trust that nearly everyone here will remember that small-scale conflict which erupted over the Sol system's unique resources. We long before had recognized the presence of multiple Alpha-class species living on a single isolated world. I gave special permission to the Changeling scientists of that era to control and experiment on the populace. Many of these life-forms, such as the Angels, the Titans, and the Demons, possessed surprisingly potent abilities roughly equivalent to seventh-ranked Psions. Quite impressive, for mud-dwelling species."

"However," Unarin continues, "It was not those three Alpha-class species that rose up to dominate the world of Earth, but a seemingly insignificant Beta-class species known as Humans. These mud-dwellers possessed no latent abilities equivalent to the psionic arts. Their durability was low, and even their intellect seemed insignificant. However, all of that changed in a short three-hundred cycle timespan when their population exploded, their weaponry began to rise in complexity at an exponential rate, and their subjugation of the three Alpha-class species brought their own classification up to Alpha-level."

Sangin Kordonis listens to Founder Unarin while recalling the many lessons he learned about the planet Earth in his education courses.

Humans started off as Beta-class, but rose to Alpha-class, and soon became a genuine threat to our Empire. We eventually reclassified them in the Omega-tier, the same as ourselves. But why would Unarin bring them up now?

"At the time, we overlooked the existence of one particular type of human," Unarin says. "Due to an unknown infusion of magical power given to the humans by the Angels and Titans, a single individual human was born every generation, known as a *Hero*. These Heroes were, at first, not particularly threatening, but over time, the small gains they

made and the rapid reproduction and death cycles of their species sped up their evolution speed to one that even outpaced our own Empire. Heroes such as King Arthur, Joan of Arc, and King Solomon spread knowledge and conquest through the world of Earth, eventually dominating all the other forms of life. Before we had time to react, they became a space-faring civilization, and they discovered our presence. That was when the Energy Wars began."

"In truth, the humans were never a major threat to our Empire." Unarin says. "But, given time, I believe that if we had stayed complacent, they may have discovered fatal weaknesses in our Empire and exploited us for all we were worth."

Unarin taps his finger against his hip, pausing to add emphasis.

"After the Energy Wars, many factions called for the outright extermination of the humans. However, Founder Treyza spoke out in favor of allowing them to live, albeit as a crippled and humiliated species incapable of ever again climbing to those same heights they once did before. Treyza argued that the humans had earned their right to existence, and as the protectors of this galaxy, we owed them the dignity of existing, just the same as we have given to all the other mud-dwellers. We are not a cruel and base species, but enlightened thinkers who must protect the small and fragile ecosystems of the millions of habitable worlds within our power structure."

Founder Treyza nods along to Unarin's words, but otherwise says nothing.

Continuing his previous thoughts, Unarin adds: "Were that the only reason for allowing their continued existence, I might not have agreed to Treyza's request. Ultimately, I ruled to allow the humans to exist inside Containment Worlds, supervised by the demons, not out of the goodness of my heart, but due to pragmatism. Today, that same species which once posed a minor threat to our Empire might become a saving grace in the light of the Kolvaxians. Behold: A new Hero has arisen among the humans."

Whispers of confusion go up among the crowd. Several high-ranking Psions communicate telepathically with one another, surprised by Unarin's declaration. As they watch, Unarin waves away the images of the ten greatest Heroes from Earth's history, causing a single hazy image of a shadowy biped to hover in the air.

"This human is known as Jason Hiro. Due to time constraints, we have not yet obtained an image of the Hero's appearance, but that will change soon. Were he the same

as the other Heroes who came before him, I would not think him worth mentioning, but the abilities he possesses seem to be... quite unique."

Before continuing with that line of thought, Unarin lowers his gaze to one of the hundred pods levitating around the Founder's Pod, the very same one which Sangin Lidra, Kordonis, and the others of their group sit inside.

"Psymin Miralax." Unarin says. "I greet one of the last living ancient Celestial Designers."

The most revered person inside Kordonis's pod shakily rises to her feet. She bows slightly at the waist in Unarin's direction.

"This humble servant. Greets First Founder."

After showing the proper respect to one of Volgrimkind's most revered members, Unarin shifts his glance to another in the pod.

"Junior Fleet Captain, Sangin Kordonis. I understand that you and your crew battled an unknown life-form inside the Hell Harbor system. I have already read your report, but would you be so kind as to detail the events of that account for the many guests present?"

Kordonis quickly stands up and bows deeply at the waist. "Yes, First Founder. It is the greatest honor of my life to serve the Volgrim Empire, and yourself, specifically."

He returns to a standing position, then quickly but calmly recounts the events of that day.

"I was in the middle of a standard patrol of the Nuul system when I received an alert from the Hell Harbor system, just twenty light-years away. Senior Observer Kol, bearer of the Yellow Star Emblem, informed me of an anomalous energy signature within the system's space. He surmised at first that it may have been a stray satellite, or perhaps a meteor launched at high speeds, but its erratic movement and unique energy signature suggested otherwise. I compared the energy signature with our records and discovered that it bore a high similarity to a Heroic-Class Energy signature, with extreme levels of Holy Energy, as well."

Kordonis continues explaining the events of that day, making the listening guests lean forward with rapt attention. The more he explains, the more surprised and shocked they become.

"...at that point, the energy signature reappeared, as if stepping through a gap in the void. So abrupt was its appearance that we were momentarily caught off-guard."

"...and that is when it began disabling our ships and crew."

"...Not long after, all of our ships departed the system at maximum warp to return to Volgarius."

Kordonis concludes his story, and the audience leans back in their chairs, shooting looks of surprise at one another.

"Your firsthand account is much more detailed and vivid than the bland and cursory explanation given in your report." Unarin says. "Thank you for your testimony, Junior Captain, Sangin Kordonis. But before you return to your seat, I have a few questions."

Kordonis quickly bows his head. "I exist only to serve the Founders. Question me as you please, Revered First Founder."

"Very well." Unarin says with a nod. "In regards to this anomalous entity, what were your initial impressions of it? What did you think its origins were?"

"Initially, I believed it to be some sort of Plague- err, some sort of Kolvaxian-infested Heroic Artifact." Kordonis says. "According to the historical records, no Heroes had appeared, or perhaps even could appear after the destruction of Earth. I did not change my opinion until attending this very Grand Assembly."

"Noted." Unarin says. "And this Heroic-class anomaly, it did not kill a single crew-member among your vessels, even after you ordered your troops to attack it?"

"It did not." Kordonis replies. "This was one of the more incongruent aspects of the encounter that left me puzzled. I was uncertain as to why a Kolvaxian-infested Heroic Artifact would not kill anyone, but at the time I rationalized that perhaps the artifact had altered the Kolvaxian's biochemistry, leading it to adopt a more pacifistic mindset. Now I understand that my thoughts were shameful and uneducated. I beg forgiveness from the Grand Assembly-members."

"There is no need for you to feel shame," Unarin says, offering a faint but welcoming smile to his junior. "Were I in your position, I might have come to a similar conclusion. There was no reason to think a Hero had emerged, and a Heroic Artifact may indeed have been responsible for those readings. After all, that is how we located the lost artifact of Excalibur before adding it to our vaults."

Unarin gestures for Kordonis to sit down, and so, the junior Technopath does. Practically beaming with excitement, he struggles to maintain an emotionless front, but his very essence undergoes apotheosis as he revels in having partaken in a dialogue with the mightiest and most revered Volgrim in his entire Empire!

Meanwhile, Unarin turns his attention to Sangin Lidra.

"I have received a similar report from Confessor Vulpanix regarding two strange encounters she has experienced within the last few planetary cycles. Sangin Lidra, Head of Clan Oblong, I understand that you were there to experience one of those encounters. Please detail what you saw for the other delegates."

Lidra straightens her posture while her hover-chair rises a few inches, allowing her to metaphorically 'rise' to greet the revered First Founder.

"Founder Unarin, this humble servant did indeed observe an anomalous event during an inspection of the Neutron Bomb Facility located beneath the Earth's crust. While engaging in dialogue with Marie Becker, I noted..."

She speaks for several minutes, detailing the events which led up to the sighting of an unexpected errant soul within Marie Becker's laboratory. Sangin Lidra and the others of her team speak together to confirm their stories, but only one person present actually saw the soul, and so, Unarin turns his attention to that individual.

"Judicator Halamis," Unarin says, as his attention falls on a nearby pod filled with high-level Psions, and one eye-catching sixth-ranked Psion with a status far beneath the elites encircling him. "What did you see when the Errant Soul appeared?"

Judicator Halamis stands up, but keeps his head slightly bowed to show deference not only to Unarin, but the higher members of his Psionic clan.

[This poorly-trained junior laments his lack of ability.] Halamis says. [When the Errant Soul appeared, I was unable to sense its presence. It was only when Confessor Vulpanix identified its position with her superior aptitude that I was able to momentarily perceive its relative position. My skills are woeful and inadequate compared to hers.]

"I have spoken to Confessor Vulpanix regarding the Errant Soul," Unarin responds. "I only hoped to see if you had observed anything noteworthy. You may sit down."

[This small figure thanks the First Founder for his wisdom. I contemplate, and I comprehend.]

Judicator Halamis sits back down, and Unarin returns his attention to the other delegates.

"Confessor Vulpanix is presently unable to attend this meeting. Due to an incident which also occurred in the Hell Harbor system, perhaps related to the one recounted by Sangin Kordonis, she is staying there to investigate the area and procure any additional information which might assist our Empire. However, I did take the liberty to record a conversation between her and I. This is it."

Unarin summons a projection of himself speaking to Confessor Vulpanix, where she recounts not only the appearance of the Errant Soul she nearly captured in Marie Becker's laboratory, but also the battle which just took place between the Cherubiim and the Volgrim fleet.

Recordings of the battle play every so often, causing countless Psions and Technopaths to stare with widened eyes at the horrifyingly powerful Primordial entity which ripped apart one of their elite fleets in mere minutes.

[By the Founders! What incredible power! That creature must be a Founder-Level threat!]

[I recognize that energy. The monster is surely an angel, and one that appears to be even stronger than the Archangels we fought during the Energy Wars.]

"How could an Archangel amass such power? Is someone plotting against our Empire in secret? Could this be related to the 'Hero' Founder Unarin spoke of?"

Unarin allows the delegates to listen to his discussion between himself and Vulpanix while simultaneously playing images of the one thousand Primordial phantasms ravaging their fleet. Once she concludes with the explanation about the Cherubiim's disappearance, the recording concludes, and Unarin shuts it down.

"As you can see," Unarin says, "the Archangels have returned. We are not currently certain of their exact numbers, but we have determined the monstrous power they wielded in that battle was likely short-lived. They might be able to unleash it again, but they also might not. What is clear to me are the following facts..."

"Firstly: The anomalous Heroic Energy signature, the one which defeated our fleet but did not kill any Volgrim, is likely the Hero I spoke of earlier, Jason Hiro."

"Secondly: The Archangel which ravaged our fleet was not one singular entity, but a unique combination of three Archangels, Raphael, Michael, and Uriel. If you are unfamiliar with the latter two names, that is because we did not fight either of them during the Energy Wars. I have surmised that Raphael somehow survived the Energy Wars, despite the Demons' claims to the contrary, and then revived his brother and sister through some ancient technique, OR, the Hero brought them back with his unique ability."

"Thirdly: I have seen little evidence that the Hero and the Archangels are direct allies. The Archangels' attack was bloody and violent. By contrast, the Hero did not cause any bloodshed to our troops, even though he absolutely could have. This tells me that he is not necessarily of the same mind as them. This could be a psychological weakness we can exploit."

Unarin pauses while he turns off the images of the battle, returning the vague and amorphously masculine Hero's body back to the main holographic projector.

"Jason Hiro. I have interviewed the current leader of demonkind, Emperor Ose. I have interrogated her and determined many crucial details regarding this Hero's abilities, and the facts have raised my cautionary instincts to their highest level. He is not a Hero like the ten mightiest ones who came before him. He is a new breed, one with a power so threatening that I dare not rush to declare him our enemy."

Founder Unarin's tone becomes so grave that the other Volgrim can only swallow their objections, wondering what sort of power could cause him to speak in such dire terms.

"Jason Hiro's power is called Wordsmithing." Unarin explains. "Based on what Ose has told me, it functions like so..."

Unarin spends the next half an hour detailing several events which have occurred over the last six orbital cycles, barely a blink of an eye in their species' lifetimes. The elites gasp and growl, surprised, angered, and frightened by Unarin's recountings.

Executor Nufaris frowns. When Unarin pauses to take a breath, he interjects. [First Founder Unarin. Forgive my interruption. I must ask: Are you stating that Jason Hiro caused the immolation of a star? He forced a star to immediately enter the Supernova phase?]

"...Correct." Unarin says.

The First Founder's single-word reply causes even greater gasps of horror to spread throughout the audience.

"Marie Becker's Neutron Bombs can't even cause such a massive Void Event!" One of the Technopath leaders exclaims. "They can only destroy small and mid-sized worlds! This Hero's power exceeds common sense! We must eliminate him at once!"

[He is a threat we must not ignore!] A seventh-ranked Psion elite declares. [With just one word, he could annihilate the entire Volgarius system! We would be helpless to stop him!]

Several similar objections go up. Unarin listens patiently while the exalted leaders and elites of his Empire speak their minds.

After another thirty minutes, the crowd quiets down, waiting for Unarin to clarify their doubts.

"Every word you have said is correct." Unarin replies. "This Hero is extremely dangerous. However, I have not finished. You see... there is not only one Hero. There are *two*. The Wordsmith has cloned himself... and that clone is every bit as capable as the original body. They possess all the same abilities. They do not seem to have any major differences in what their powers can accomplish. Therefore..."

Unarin's expression turns ugly.

"...It is possible there may be even more clones we have not accounted for."

[Two Heroes? Two Wordsmiths?] Executor Huron says, disbelief in his projected voice. [Is this true?]

"Naturally." Unarin says. "As I explained, the Wordsmith can reshape reality with just his words. Cloning himself... it might be a trivial feat, or it might not. Knowing how many enemies lurk at every corner, it is possible he has prepared counter-measures in case we were to move to eliminate him. By taking direct action to kill the Wordsmith, we might paint ourselves as his enemies, and thus, cause any secret clones of his to appear from the Void itself."

"Notably," Unarin adds, "Ose did not seem to have thought of this possibility. I discerned her greedy impulse to capture and control one or both of the Wordsmiths. She foolishly made an enemy of Jason Hiro, and now, the Archangels have run rampant across her society. Half a dozen Emperors died to the Cherubiim. Did they act alone, or

were they sent by the Wordsmiths? We do not yet possess enough information to make a determination. We do not know his motives, his mindset, his allegiances, his worldview, or anything which would give us an edge in handling him. He is an enigma, one we must immediately solve."

While many of the elites glance at one another with worried eyes, Sangin Kordonis rises from his chair.

"First Founder, if I might speak, this humble junior has a thought he would like to express."

Unarin nods. "Go on."

"If we make the Hero our enemy, I cannot imagine the catastrophe which will befall us," Kordonis says. "However, based upon your observations regarding the anomalous entity I encountered, it was most likely Jason Hiro or his clone which subdued my fleet. He did not kill any of our troops, and so, I might hesitantly offer that he does not consider us his enemy; at least, not yet. Perhaps we could make an ally of this Wordsmith to battle the Kolvaxian menace?"

The First Founder offers another faint smile. "Your observational skills are excellent, Junior Sangin Kordonis. Indeed. Making an ally of the Hero might be the salvation we require to exterminate the Kolvaxian threat. However..."

Unarin sighs.

"...That was before the demons made a move on the Hero, one which potentially changed his outlook on not only the demons, but us, as well. Observe."

A projection of a Paradise-Class planet appears, one with rich and vibrant forests, crystal-clear oceans, and moderate volcanic and geological activity.

"This world is Tarus II." Unarin states. "Once I learned of the Wordsmith's existence, I dispatched a stealth fleet to observe his home system. Luckily, he has not built any advanced fleet defenses yet. Perhaps he lacks the ability, or perhaps he does not consider such a defense necessary. He may even be capable of erecting spatial defenses instantly, so formidable are his powers. Whatever the case, our infiltration vessels were able to snap these images of his homeworld."

The projection changes to show a greatly zoomed-in image of Tarus II, where thousands of pockmarks and burned forests lay in wastes. One elevated plateau especially

stands out, thanks to the huge crater in its center.

"...The foolish demons attacked Tarus II, where the humans had built their fortresses. Unable to capture either of the Wordsmiths, they detonated a thermonuclear device of unknown origin and killed millions of humans. While we might not care for the deaths of even a billion mud-dwellers, the same cannot be said for a highly empathetic being such as Jason Hiro. If we examine his behavior toward Junior Captain Kordonis's fleet, we can determine based upon the profiles of other humans that Jason Hiro would react... poorly... to the deaths of his comrades. Considering the timeline of events, I believe that the bombing of his world caused Jason Hiro to dispatch the Archangels to Hell Harbor."

"Therefore," Unarin concludes, "I am not certain whether Jason Hiro will become a great ally of ours, or an existential enemy, potentially more terrifying than the Kolvaxians themselves. This... uncertainty... has made my determining of what actions to take... difficult."

"Earlier, I stated that humanity might become our saving grace against the Kolvaxians. Without a Hero in their ranks, it is debatable whether they would ever again reach the status of an Omega-level civilization, on par with ours. With a Hero like the Wordsmith leading them, I believe their ascension will not only be swift, but certain. The question now becomes... faced with the possibility of extinction on both sides, and two enemies which might ultimately destroy us all... how should we deal with these conflicting variables?"

Unarin nods at Founder Dosena.

"Second Founder. Explain the next steps to our esteemed guests."

Founder Dosena clenches her fists. She takes a step forward, while slowly blinking her eyes.

[As you command. I follow your will, Unarin.]

Part 330: Grand Assembly's Conclusion

Founder Dosena folds her hands behind her back. She levitates a meter above the Founder's Platform and assumes a dignified pose.

[Our species faces multiple existential threats. In addition to the Kolvaxians and the Wordsmith, the First Emperor of Demonkind has also made an appearance, shortly following the conclusion of the Battle for Hell Harbor.]

Dosena pauses to allow the other Volgrim to mentally acknowledge her words before continuing.

[Our galaxy is changing. As Founder Unarin mentioned before, during the battle against the Cherubiim, the demons succeeded in momentarily breaking through the barrier of Demon Emperor. We previously believed this feat impossible, yet it seems the demons are also capable of becoming a Founder-level threat, just like the Wordsmith and the Kolvaxians. We cannot remain complacent or assume the elites of our people will save us all. There are only so many brilliant minds to go around, and far more advancements we must make if we hope to weather this storm.]

Dosena holds up her hand. An object materializes in her grasp, one she takes great care not to touch. A faint but noticeable pressure emanates from it, one which all the Psions can detect, though the other sub-species cannot.

[This is a Heroic Artifact.] Dosena states. [It is Solomon's Crown, previously thought lost during Earth's destruction. It is an artifact capable of toppling empires... and through a stroke of good fortune, it has landed in our hands.]

Solomon's Crown slowly revolves as it hovers above Dosena's palm. She gazes at it for a moment, deliberately drawing attention to its beautiful jewel-encrusted surface, before waving it away, back to an unknown location.

[Unfortunately, according to our informant, Solomon's Crown was already found by the Wordsmith. Due to unknown reasons, it has left his possession, but even so, our informant has confirmed that Jason Hiro was able to utilize its Errant Soul to bolster his mind. King Solomon was a human Hero known for transferring vast amounts of

knowledge to select humans capable of inheriting his knowledge. Many famous human inventors became known for their accomplishments, thanks to Solomon's influence. Shortly before the Energy Wars began, during the three-hundred cycle 'Ascension Period' which led to humanity's rise, Solomon was a main player in building up his entire species. The fact that the Wordsmith has obtained his favor likely means he is also a super-intelligent lifeform, one we cannot afford to underestimate.]

[How will we rise up to our modern challenges?] Dosena asks. [With as many as three Founder-level threats on the horizon, our resources have never been stretched more thinly. We have spent tens of thousands of cycles investigating Marie Becker's Neutron Bombs, yet we have been unable to replicate the method she uses to empower them to a level capable of annihilating worlds. Our best scientists can only confirm the energy she uses to make them is magical in nature. Whether she has obtained access to some hitherto unknown region of subspace with magical energy to spare, or she has created a unique conversion process, our problems remain the same. We are forced to rely on her to contain the Plague, and her output is far too insufficient to meet our needs.]

[It is time for the juniors of our civilization to rise to the occasion.] Dosena says. [The second measure we Founders have agreed to take is that we will institute a broadened reward system for any capable scientist or inventor capable of contributing to the war effort.]

Dosena waves her hand again, summoning images of the same spherical devices Jason once observed inside Marie Becker's observatory.

[Junior scientists and Technopaths, generally speaking, cannot design weapons or devices that are superior to the ones made by their betters. The youngest of our people are simply too inexperienced to make a large difference on their own. However, we hope to be proven wrong. Until the Kolvaxian threat, the Wordsmith, and the demons have been fully dealt with, the Founders are prepared to offer a tenfold increase in War Provisions to any young mind capable of advancing our technological and scientific capabilities.]

[If anyone in our Empire can replicate Marie Becker's Neutron Bombs, or if they can create devices that improve our fighting power and lethality against the Plague, not only will that person receive enhanced rewards, but so too will their teachers and those who uplifted them! This will incentivize those who are incapable of assisting our Empire themselves to look for the brilliant young minds who will!]

Visible surprise goes up in the crowd. Sangin Kordonis and his crew widen their eyes as Dosena speaks of the shocking rewards they could receive if they were to directly assist the Volgrim Empire.

A tenfold increase in War Provisions! The Founders truly are the most fair and just among our people!

He and all the other Volgrim know well how valuable War Provisions are. Unlike simple currency, a single Provision can often only be obtained by an entire group of Volgrim. When a laboratory makes an important discovery or contribution, all of the members will receive one provision, and they will have to vote on the intended use of that Provision to benefit themselves collectively. Almost never do singular individuals receive a Provision, let alone multiple of them.

[As a show of good faith,] Dosena says, [I will immediately issue rewards to those here today who have already earned these new Provision allotments. To Confessor Vulpanix, who bravely battled an unstoppable Founder-class entity and obtained extremely valuable intelligence for our Empire, we grant her... five Provisions!]

A roar goes up in the audience as several ancient Volgrim cry out in shock and delight. So generous is Dosena's first reward that many of the youngest Volgrim present, those elites who have only earned a handful of Provisions in their entire lives, turn purple with envy.

[In addition,] Dosena continues, [Were it not for the Confessor's discovery inside of Marie Becker's laboratory, we might not have become aware of the Errant Soul infiltrating her premises. We grant her one additional Provision for this discovery. Any soul capable of evading a Confessor's grasp is one we must be highly wary of.]

As the crowd continues to become more and more restless, Dosena issues additional declarations. [For their valiant fight against the Cherubiim, we are also issuing three War Provisions to every ship that escaped alive from the unified Archangels. While fleeing is dishonorable, fighting a losing battle is not. We require every possible ship to combat the Kolvaxians, and the Confessor's quick thinking saved a portion of her fleet.]

[The increased rewards do not only pertain to those who make important scientific and technological improvements to our society, nor only to those who fight valiantly, but also those who provide us actionable intelligence on our enemies, to that end, I have further rewards planned for some other noteworthy figures.]

[Sangin Kordonis. You will receive two War Provisions for your detailed analysis of the 'Heroic Anomaly' inside the Hell Harbor sector. You and your crew will receive five Provisions, as well, for their efforts against the Anomaly.]

[To the informant who delivered Solomon's Crown to the Founders, we grant them ten War Provisions. Their detailed report has yet to be fully examined, but the inside information regarding the Wordsmith and his allies will undoubtedly prove crucial in our efforts going forward.]

Dosena issues several additional provisions to various Volgrim, making their hearts surge with pride. Once she completes her declarations, the Second Founder returns to other matters.

[Next, we will discuss the Wordsmith's war capabilities. I have personally investigated the star-logs relating to the unexpected supernova event in the Polaris system which occurred six orbital cycles ago. Now that we have uncovered the truth of the matter, I reopened the data files related to that event and discovered some interesting facts the delegates here may appreciate.]

[First, the Polaris star was still billions of cycles from entering a supernova phase. Upon discovering that the Wordsmith caused its ignition, I believed that he must have inserted a tremendous amount of energy into it to overload it. However...]

Dosena turns her head to look at Founder Treyza. The Head Changeling takes a step forward and speaks.

"The Polaris star's final moments before its supernova ignition were highly irregular. Based upon measurements we took, we did not detect any spikes of extreme energy within its core. Instead, we believe the Wordsmith may have altered the star's 'causal state,' rapidly aging it several billion years and causing a supernova event in only a few micro-time units. This indicates the Wordsmith might not possess an incredible wellspring of power like the ancient Hero, King Arthur, but instead can alter the fabric of reality itself. Depending on one's viewpoint, this can be much better or much worse than a high mana potential."

[According to Emperor Ose,] Dosena says, [The Wordsmith has recently obtained a Heroic artifact of unimaginable power. Based upon her description, we originally surmised that this artifact was none other than Excalibur, but that artifact continues to remain safely under guard inside our secure vaults. Whatever artifact the Wordsmith has

come to possess, it seems to rival Excalibur's might, which does not bode well. A Hero who can rewrite reality, but who also possesses a large pool of mana, can either become a formidable ally or an unstoppable enemy.]

Treyza nods along to her words. "We have determined that our best measure to deal with the Wordsmith is by procuring as much intelligence on his movements as possible. To that end, this one will begin assembling its most capable and adept Changelings to assimilate into the culture and society of Tarus II. We will infiltrate the Wordsmith's highest echelons to learn his strengths and weaknesses. We will look into his allies, enemies, and emotional vulnerabilities."

Founder Unarin raises his hand. "Everyone. While I would much prefer to control the Wordsmith directly, I am not so certain we will be able to do so. To that end, I am also drafting up plans to ingratiate him to our cause. We will deliver the equivalent of one hundred War Provisions to his colonies, in the hopes that we will... *reach an understanding*. Unlike the foolish demons who struck at him and made him their blood-enemy, we will first seek to ameliorate the Wordsmith and ensure he thinks of us positively. If he has had contact with Marie Becker, then we may already be too late, but I would prefer any offensive actions come second to diplomatic solutions."

Several Volgrim in the audience cross their arms and scowl. The mere thought of trying to supplicate an inferior mud-dweller doesn't sit right with these haughty elites, but they know better than to question Unarin's decisions.

Unarin continues speaking.

"Now then. There is only one last thing I must bring up before we conclude the Grand Assembly's prepared points and open up the floor for questions."

Unarin pauses. His demeanor changes as he adopts a pensive expression.

"With regards to the worst-case scenario. I want to inform you all that I have begun to consider reactivating the Sentinels."

An abrupt silence swallows the arena. Ten thousand Volgrim freeze up and stare at their leader with looks of horror and fright.

[R-reactivate... the Sentinels?] One of the ancient Psions, a survivor of the Seven Great Wars, asks. [Founder Unarin. Have you lost your mind?!]

"Executor Huron." Unarin says, directing a calm gaze his way. "I have not."

[Why would you ever consider taking such a measure?!] Huron asks, panic in his telepathic voice. [Reactivating the Sentinels would-]

"It would guarantee our extinction." Unarin flatly states. "Make no mistake. I am aware of what will happen. However, in the event the Kolvaxians overrun us, I must consider every option. We defeated the Sentinels once. The Gatekeeper Protocol, or some variant of it, might be able to control them and make them serve us again. At the very least, the Sentinels might kill us all, but they might then take revenge on our behalf, albeit unwittingly, by exterminating our alien enemies. If we're going to die anyway, I would prefer a measure of mutually assured destruction."

The First Founder directs his attention away from Executor Huron to the rest of the assemblage.

"Reviving the Sentinels is not a decision I would ever make lightly. It is our final judgment upon the universe if the Kolvaxians, the Wordsmith, or any other entity threatens our rule. Additionally, you can all feel secure in one important fact."

Unarin gestures to Founder Cuanali.

"Founder Cuanali does not know the location where the Sentinels are stored, nor does any other Volgrim in existence, except for me. However, I do not possess the credentials necessary to release the Sentinels from their containment, and neither do any other Volgrim in our society. Only Cuanali can release them. In order to reactivate the Sentinels, both of us must be present and willing to work with each other. I need not remind you all of the hatred Cuanali holds for the Sentinels, after they annihilated her entire clan, her friends, and her family. More than me, and more than anyone present, no member of our people hates the Sentinels more than the Fourth Founder."

Founder Cuanali stares forward stoically. "I would not willingly release the Sentinels. I will not do so unless there is no other option. I would rather die."

"So, you see," Unarin says, "The Sentinels are our final option, one I'd rather not use... but they do exist, and they cannot be destroyed. Their Living Moldanium bodies make them all but impervious to damage. Releasing indestructible monsters on the modern galaxy would be a disaster unlike any other."

The First Founder sweeps his gaze around the room.

"We have discussed much, today. Do any of you have questions you would like to ask, while your leaders are present? Questions lead to answers, and answers breed knowledge. Nothing is more sacred to us now than ensuring we possess the foundation necessary to deal with our future dilemmas."

Several Volgrim raise their hands. Unarin gestures to a seventh-ranked Psion in one of the nearby levitating platforms.

"Creator Demila, you may speak freely."

The authoritative Psion levitates slightly into the air and nods her head at each of the four Founders.

[It is my honor to attend this assemblage, exalted Founders. I only wish to ask a question of Founder Dosena. Given the threat we face from all of these sources, is there any reason you have not joined the war against the Kolvaxians?]

Dosena crosses her arms.

[I am the last line of defense for our homeworld. As Founder Unarin and the others have made it clear, we are still not certain if the Kolvaxians are highly intelligent entities waiting for an opportunity to strike, or if they are simply a deadly strain of rapidly mutating parasites. If I were to travel to the high-threat areas of our galaxy and engage in battle, a single Kolvaxian could strike during my absence. By the time I returned, Volgarius may have already fallen.]

Creator Demila nods and returns to her seat.

Other Volgrim chime in with their own questions.

[Founder Treyza! Have we had any success in breeding bio-agents capable of killing Kolvaxians en-masse?]

"Founder Cuanali! What of the advancements in warp technology? Will we ever be able to create Warpgates big enough for ship to pass through? They would prove instrumental in rapidly fortifying the border regions under attack every day."

[Founder Unarin, have you evaluated the humans' capitol world using Order to Chaos?]

That last question hushes much of the crowd as they look to the First Founder, hoping to hear his insight.

Unarin nods slowly at the Psion who asked.

"Indeed, I have. While the world of Tarus II has been recently scarred by battle and made seemingly unrecognizable, I have made several determinations regarding humanity's military tactics, their culture, and their overall cohesion. Observe."

Unarin summons a projection of Tarus II, the very same one he showed earlier, complete with a crater in the center of its main city, and all the destruction surrounding it.

All of the delegates fall silent, waiting to hear their leader's words. As the person who once penned the fabled epic known as Order to Chaos, Founder Unarin is the most uniquely qualified being among his people to comprehend truths about their reality.

Meant to be used as a training manual for enlightened thinkers, Order to Chaos provides a unique insight into Founder Unarin's mind, providing the barest glimpse of how he can discern countless details about other civilizations purely based on how they organize their architecture.

Founder Unarin zooms in on the city from above, creating a photo-realistic map of it for all to see.

"The world of Tarus II once belonged to a Earth-borne entity known as Bahamut, the Sphinx. Through some as-of-yet unknown method, the Wordsmith took control of it from her and made the planet his base. As such, many remnants of Bahamut's previous civilization remain intact, yet we can still discern how the Wordsmith has changed its society to his preferences by comparing its current appearance to outdated planetary scans."

Unarin summons a second image of Tarus II, one that lacks the crater in the center of the Sphinx's city, as well as many fewer buildings.

"Look here, at these triangular formations," Unarin says, pointing at several dozen massive structures. "These are called 'Pyramids' by the former residents of Earth. Bahamut herself once hailed from a land known as Egypt and she favored Egyptian architecture. Even after the detonation of a thermonuclear device, the pyramids only suffered damage to their exterior, yet remained standing. The Wordsmith, after taking over the planet, did not destroy these structures. Curious, wouldn't you say? Might he possess some sort of affinity for the Pyramids? Might he also enjoy the sights of Egyptian architecture?"

Unarin pauses for half-a-beat before shaking his head.

"I think not. Here, you can see other buildings the Wordsmith left behind after taking over. Though broken and shattered by the detonation event, it is clear that they stood there not long before. The Wordsmith did not follow a cardinal rule of empire-crushing; that of destroying monuments built to and for the previous rulers. In order to solidify his reign, Jason Hiro should have destroyed all the important landmarks related to Bahamut in order to ensure her memory would quickly disappear from the minds of her subordinates. Why did he not do this?"

"My hypothesis is simple." Unarin states. "Jason Hiro... is a lazy leader."

Sangin Kordonis frowns after hearing Unarin's declaration.

Lazy? I can follow the logic, but how did the First Founder reach that conclusion so swiftly?

"My observations, as always, come from many sources," Unarin says, unhurriedly. "Not only did the Wordsmith not destroy Bahamut's previous structures, but he simply built new ones on top of the old. If you look at this cluster of buildings here, you can see that they are all ugly, squarish boxes. They are purely utilitarian and do not conform to the location's previously established design philosophy. Most likely, the Hero did not have time or did not wish to expend any extra effort to make the new structures blend in with the old. If he were an admirer of Egyptian architecture, he would have gone to greater lengths to make the new structures blend in with the old."

"Therefore," Unarin concludes, "The Wordsmith was either in a rush to construct as much housing and as many buildings as possible to support a booming population, or he is lazy, or perhaps even *both*."

Unarin shrugs.

"Of course, I am only guessing. We will know for certain if I am correct when we eventually meet and confront the Wordsmith in the near future."

The Grand Assembly's attendees rise up to give the First Founder a standing ovation. Like every time in the past that he has displayed his flawless usage of Order to Chaos, he once again dazzles them with his superior tactical insight, a gift that has won them countless wars over millions of years.

"All hail Unarin!"

[Our Founders are wise! Our Founders are just!]

"We bow to the knowledge of our great leader!"

"We contemplate, and we comprehend!"

Unarin closes his eyes and lightly tilts his head.

"I thank you all for coming. I hope this meeting has granted you all unique insights, and that you will keep in mind the changes which will soon sweep across our Empire. Until next time."

When Unarin lifts his head, he and the other three Founders vanish, pulled away in an instant by Dosena's Spatial Psionics.

Muuxunuu alone remains behind.

"To all the gathered delegates, I thank you for attending. Please enjoy four standard time-units of mingling. Speak to the others around you, and exchange insights."

Before leaving, Muuxunuu directs a glance toward one of the hundred pods surrounding hers.

"Sangin Kordonis. Founder Unarin wishes to speak to you in private. Please make time after the Grand Assembly to meet with him."

The young Technopath jolts in shock. He numbly nods his head to Muuxunuu's words, feeling a wash of warmth sweep his skin.

"Y-yes. I will! At once, Head Administrator!"

"There is no need to take immediate action. Founder Unarin will contact you within the next cycle to arrange an appropriate meeting time. Farewell."

As Kordonis blubbers out a hasty word of thanks, the Founders' Pod levitates upward, and Muuxunuu disappears into the gap in the ceiling.

Miikil claps her hands while looking at Kordonis excitedly.

[What a great honor! I wonder why the First Founder wishes to see you, specifically? You are so lucky!]

Kordonis nods giddily, his usually stoic expression melting away as he imagines talking one-on-one with the leader of all Volgrim.

But then, a cold dread settles on his shoulders.

"Say... you don't... you don't think I did anything wrong, do you?" Kordonis asks. "I'm not in... trouble... am I?"

Sangin Lidra chuckles. "If you were, he wouldn't call you in for a personal meeting. Just thank the stars and accept your good luck, *Junior* Kordonis. Not even I have been so fortunate as to receive a one-on-one meeting with the First Founder."

Kordonis settles down, mollified by his senior's words. "I see. Then, that is good."

"...That is good."

Part 331: Prodigy's Promotion

Half a day after the Grand Assembly.

Founder Unarin silently strides into his core offices, the key floors of the Founder's Thumb, one of the five towers comprising the Founder's Fingers. Not far from the topmost levels, his core offices rest on the 341st through 350th floors.

The number of personnel inside this highly restrictive zone are few and far between. Unlike the largely insular towers of the other four Founders, a variety of Volgrim subspecies work here, consisting primarily of Technopaths, Psions, and Changelings. All of them are high-level leaders of various factions in the Volgrim Empire, and possess an incredible amount of pull with their respective organizations, as they answer directly to Unarin himself.

However, among these executives are also a few of The Ascended, the same subspecies as Unarin himself. While nearly the entirety of the Ascended live inside of simulation pods spread across thousands of worlds, a few designated ones work inside the First Finger. Muuxunuu counts among them, but she is not the only one.

Unarin strides up to one of the few and far-between Ascended, a male with obsidian-black skin manipulating holograms in the air which show a battle taking place around one of the Outer Rim worlds in the 'northwest quadrant' of the Milky Way.

"Commander Randis." Unarin says. "How are things looking?"

Even as he asks, Unarin's eyes flick to the numerous highly classified readings hovering in the air, the red and blue 'blips' of ships fighting spaceborne Kolvaxians, and the casualty count slowly incrementing upward.

The other Ascended, Commander Randis, doesn't even turn to look at Unarin. "How do you think it's going, brother? We're losing. I intend to call a retreat in one point seven standard time-units."

Despite Randis's utterly casual remark, lacking any respect or discipline, Unarin does not reprimand him.

"I see. Have any high-level Psions fallen?"

"No." Randis answers. "I've been careful to keep them in the backlines. We don't want a repeat of the Goltaris Prime incident."

"Have Huron and Sartron's doppelgangers appeared at this battle?"

Randis shakes his head. "They're too busy tearing apart our flanks in the eastern galaxy."

Unarin closes his eyes for a moment, then opens them and starts to walk away. Without even saying goodbye, he turns to walk toward a stairwell leading to the next floor up.

Before he leaves, Randis calls out to him.

"Brother!"

Unarin pauses.

"Yes?"

"That was a beautiful speech you gave." Randis says, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "I nearly wept for joy. But speeches won't change our situation. If our people find out how badly we're losing, we'll have an exodus on our hands. A revolt!"

Unarin stares at Randis and nods.

"I am aware."

"So?" Randis asks. "Do you have a plan? Something viable? Actionable? Our frontline troops are exhausted. Every cycle that passes, they become more and more embittered with your leadership. All it will take is one leak and the people will know how badly we're-

"

"Enough." Unarin says, raising his hand. "You don't need to tell me. I'm working on... our options."

Randis snorts. "The Wordsmith."

"Yes. The Wordsmith. But not just him."

Unarin pauses, as if debating whether he should say anything else.

A moment passes before he wearily nods again.

"...We've had a small bit of success bio-engineering a contagion that will affect the Kolvaxians."

"You told me that already." Randis says. "That worthless contagion was utterly ineffective."

"The new strain isn't." Unarin replies. "But the problem is... it affects all biological life. It will kill the plaguetoached all the same as the uninfected. The lethality rate is extremely high, and if it reaches a civilian populace, the damage will be catastrophic."

"So, it's also useless." Randis summarizes. "In which case, let's hope that Wordsmith of yours will do something to help us. I've enjoyed ten million cycles of life. I'd like to live for another ten million, if possible."

"As would I." Unarin concludes.

* * *

The First Founder continues heading upward. He avoids taking any turbolifts to the top, and instead climbs the stairs manually. These brief respites allow him the time to think while he walks. He observes the atmosphere of each floor, noting the cold and grim expressions on the faces of the Volgrim working in his tower. Unlike the elites from the Grand Assembly, not one person working for the First Founder has any hope for victory lingering on their faces. They long ago lost their beliefs they could win the Kolvaxian War.

Eighty-five thousand cycles. Unarin thinks. *To the young, it is an eternity, but to the long-lived, it isn't even a flicker in our eyes. My age made me slow to react to the disaster when it first began. Am I falling into the same traps the rulers of the Old Empire did? Perhaps it won't be long before a rebellion comes to dethrone me, as well. Poetic justice.*

Unarin eventually reaches his main office, a floor devoid of any other life forms. Highly secretive experiments line the walls, along with weapons, data modules, and other such things that would make those with greedy minds perform double-takes if they saw them.

In addition, thousands of artifacts taken during Volgrimkind's countless millennia of existence sit on tables and shelves, all of them positioned to give the blackened obsidian walls, floor, and ceiling an artistic touch. The dim lights provide an atmosphere of contemplation for Unarin, who usually detests annoyingly bright lights that disrupt his concentration.

The First Founder walks over to a holographic interface terminal, or a HIT, for short. He stands in its center and places his palms onto two orb-shaped control modules sticking out of the floor. A rush of data feeds into his hands and travels through his body, reaching his brain in an instant. At the same time, the most advanced holographic matrix in the Volgrim Empire lights up, showing Unarin the data regarding several ongoing battles against the Kolvaxians.

"Hmm. There's a small hole in our defenses seven degrees from the northern galaxy. Right in this Theta cluster... I'd better dispatch patrol ships there, just in case."

Unarin mutters to himself many times over the next thirty minutes. He speaks out loud for no particular reason, perhaps only to hear his own voice.

As he changes some variables and alters some attack vectors, Unarin's thoughts continue to churn.

"Hmm... and it wouldn't be good if the Wordsmith..."

Unarin pauses.

"Dosena."

He speaks to the void around him. A moment later, with a silent flicker of movement, the Second Founder appears before him.

[Yes?]

Dosena's authoritative voice speaks directly into Unarin's mind. Whether she was listening to him the whole time for nefarious reasons, or whether it's simply something she always does to keep the First Founder safe, is something only the two of them know.

"I want increased security on the Terran Artifact Vault." Unarin says. "Put Confessor Vulpanix in charge, once she has finished her work in the Hell Harbor system."

[The Confessor's talents would be better put to use performing her regularly assigned duties.] Dosena says. [Why would you put her in charge of those old vaults?]

"Because they house Heroic Artifacts." Unarin says. "Now that we have Solomon's Crown, we also hold the trifacta of Camael's Legendary Artifacts. But, this worries me. What if the Wordsmith uncovers the vault's location? I don't want to take a chance he'll re-obtain the Crown, nor Excalibur, nor the Dominion Rod, to say nothing of the other artifacts."

He pauses to look directly at the six-eyed Psion.

"Confessor Vulpanix has encountered the Wordsmith once, or at least that is what I believe. It seems likely he was poking around in Marie Becker's laboratory. We can't dismiss the possibility they've met. You and I both know that as valuable of assets her Neutron Bombs are, that half-Terran cyborg is dangerous. She would like nothing more than to break free of our control."

[Ose keeps a tight leash on Marie Becker.] Dosena states. [Though, now that she has ascended to the rank of Emperor, I do not view her as a reliable asset anymore. She has begun to rebel against us in ways both large and small.]

"We have to rely on Ose." Unarin says, returning his attention to the holographic displays. "I don't have a superior operative to put in her place, and even if I did, they would be a Technopath, better served building weapons to fight the Plague."

Dosena lightly drums her fingers on her waist.

[You're more high-strung than usual.]

Unarin nods. "Naturally. You know as well as I do how poorly the War is going. Now, we have to rely on Demons and potentially the Wordsmith to fill the gaps in our abilities. I need capable hands, but even in an Empire of septillions, there are only so many worthy elites able to step up at any given moment."

The First Founder exhales in annoyance.

"Solomon's Crown. You made sure not to touch it, right?"

[Of course.] Dosena says. [His ability to download the memories of others is too troublesome to manage. Unfortunately, that Changeling who delivered the Crown *did* touch it.]

"Kotori..." Unarin murmurs. "Low-level. Insignificant. They somehow ended up in the right place at the right time. Still, that junior managed to deliver us essential information at just the right time. Its capabilities might prove useful. Send them back to Tarus II. They can continue to discreetly gather intel for us."

[The knowledge Kotori possesses of the Plague should not be anything beyond what the common folk know.] Dosena interjects. [But Unarin... don't you think we might be missing out on an opportunity?]

"To use Solomon's wisdom for our own ends?" Unarin asks, his question rhetorical. "That would be a foolish move. He is a human, with human allegiances. Any information given to us by a Terran, especially one as crafty and wise as Solomon, will be sure to lead us astray. As much as I'd love to beg him for a method to slay the Kolvaxians, the cost we'd pay would be too steep."

Dosena eyes the First Founder with a predatory gaze.

[You will not consider speaking to Solomon, yet you *would* consider waking the Sentinels?]

Unarin pauses his work. He turns to Dosena once again, easily picking up on the hostility in her gaze.

"It would be a last-ditch effort at revenge. Nothing more."

[Lie to others and lie to yourself!] Dosena says. [But do not lie to me. You have always regretted the failures of the Sentinels. You want to bring them back. You want to perfect them. But you cannot, Unarin. They were flawed from the outset.]

"Flawed. Flawed!" Unarin snarls. "No! They were perfect! It was only the brain-scans we used that were flawed. If we had created a composite of hundreds of different brains, we might-"

[We might have created an even more terrifying and unstoppable army!] Dosena interrupts. [One with higher intelligence which even the Gatekeeper Protocol could not disable. Count your blessings that we survived, Unarin. And for void's sake, stop thinking about the Sentinels! I never want to see them again!]

She cuts her words off with a snarl, making even Unarin flinch. The First Founder turns away and snorts.

"They were the perfect weapon." Unarin mutters. "Some people are blinded by their emotions."

[Some of us can see reason.] Dosena says, before making a slight motion with her hand.

The Second Founder vanishes, leaving Unarin all by himself once again.

He returns to his work, cursing under his breath as he reminisces about the 'good old days.'

Some time later, footsteps approach from behind him. Unarin doesn't turn away from his console.

"Muuxunuu. What is it?"

Unarin's Head Administrator stops some distance away and tilts her head downward.

"First Founder. That young Technopath has come as you requested. Sangin Kordonis."

The Mightiest of The Ascended pulls away from his console.

"Ah, yes. Fourth in line to lead Clan Oblong. A junior among juniors, but also a starship captain, promoted early in his years. He must have some level of competency."

"Sangin Kordonis's academy records were merely average." Muuxunuu says. "I looked up some of his academic files. He has made no noteworthy contributions to Volgrim society. Despite his position in line to lead Clan Oblong, it is extremely unlikely he will perform any administrative duties in the next five hundred thousand cycles, if left to his own devices. There are many more capable Technopaths better suited to his position."

Unarin walks toward Muuxunuu. She remains motionless as he reaches toward her and lightly touches her hair-tendrils, playing with them absentmindedly as if they were his personal toys.

"Yes, at face value, he doesn't seem all that noteworthy," Unarin says, "But I have a feeling about him. He made some... interesting statements during the Grand Assembly."

Muuxunuu's skin shifts colors from pink to red as Unarin caresses and kneads her hair-tendrils. The sensitive erogenous zones, rarely touched by any but the closest people to her, make strange feelings well up in her body.

Even so, she shows no outward display of emotions.

"He... is waiting on the 240th floor." Muuxunuu says, hesitantly.

Unarin retracts his hand, but as he does, he also strokes Muuxunuu's face.

"Has he been waiting long?"

"No. Not long." Muuxunuu answers.

Unarin lightly pinches his Head Administrator's chin before offering her a faint smile. Then, he walks past her, toward the turbolift.

"I'll expect those documents I requested yesterday to be ready and waiting for when I return," Unarin says, before the turbolift doors close shut behind him.

After Unarin leaves, Muuxunuu blinks her soft, pink eyes.

"Yes, First Founder."

* * *

The turbolift drops down nearly 100 floors, reaching the 240th floor in under a minute. Thanks to its inertial dampeners, Unarin barely even notices the change in momentum.

When it reaches the correct floor, the doors open, and Unarin steps off into one of the more 'public' areas in the First Finger, a place with perhaps a hundred high-level Volgrim strutting around somewhat pretentiously.

All eyes fall on the First Founder as he strides forward. Even while the others offer greetings to their supreme leader, Unarin's eyes fall on a very out-of-place Technopath junior, a young Volgrim who tries his best to not look too excited about personally meeting the First Founder.

When Unarin walks up, Sangin Kordonis starts to step toward him, only to pause, unsure whether he should make the first move or not.

"F-First Founder! It is my greatest honor to have a personal m-meeting with you!" Kordonis sputters.

"I imagine it is." Unarin says. "Come with me. I wish to speak to you in private."

Dozens of envious gazes fall on Kordonis's back, as even the many elites in this tower, Unarin's personal citadel, rarely get to speak to him one-on-one.

Unarin guides the junior to a small alcove office, some unused space with generic decorations. The transparent door opens and closes behind them, and a layer of interference technology activates, turning the glass pitch-black and obfuscating their conversations from any visitors who might try to listen in remotely.

A small black table sits in the room, with four chairs surrounding it. Unarin takes a seat on one side, and gestures to the chair across from himself.

"Sit."

Sangin Kordonis shivers as he sits, his mouth-tendrils nervously writhing around as he tries to calm them down.

"S-so! For what reason have I earned the, uhm, honor of coming here?" Kordonis asks.

"You said some very interesting things during the Grand Assembly." Unarin answers. "They made me take a small interest in you. Have you read Order to Chaos, by chance?"

Kordonis nods his head up and down several times excitedly.

"Oh, yes! I would be shocked if any self-respecting Volgrim hadn't! I must have read your work at least a thousand times!"

"A thousand?" Unarin asks, raising an eyebrow. "Oh. That's quite impressive for your age. What part of Order to Chaos stands out the most in your mind?"

"That is a simple question to answer!" Kordonis says. "The whole text is part of a foundation upon which one can build their own worldview, but for me, it was Chapter 17 that resonated the most with my view of the universe. When you wrote about the deterioration of civilization over time, and how bad architecture breeds bad thoughts, it made me think of so many primitive worlds who would never be able to receive the Founder's Light!"

Unarin closes his eyes.

"Ah, yes. Architecture is the means by which a conqueror can understand not only his enemies, but his own people, as well. Indeed, it was that simple insight which allowed me to ultimately overturn the Old Volgrim Empire and crush its corrupt despots. Once I understood the rot which had set into its very foundations, I became capable of attacking it at its weakest points."

Opening his eyes, Unarin taps his wrist-embedded psionic implant, causing a holographic image of a small planet to hover in the air before him.

"This world is Tarus II, where the Wordsmith lives. During the Grand Assembly, I pointed out a few minor features of its civilization that I had noticed... but I am curious as to what a young mind might observe. Here, take a look, and tell me what you see."

Unarin zooms in on the capitol city of Tarus II, and to Kordonis's surprise, the image appears much clearer than it did during the Grand Assembly.

As if having read his young guest's mind, Unarin says, "We received updated details a few standard units ago. I have updated the map accordingly."

Kordonis nods, then falls silent. He uses his ability to manipulate technology, a feat that all Technopaths share, to shift the image from a distance. He zooms in on several key

areas. He rotates the buildings to get good looks at them from multiple angles, or at least the few which survived the 'thermonuclear detonation event.'

After ten minutes of silence, Kordonis pulls back. "Forgive me, Founder Unarin, for my eyes are immature, and my knowledge flawed. I will point out anything that I can, but I hope that you will not find my meager skills too shameful."

Unarin waves his hand casually. "Nonsense. Every young mind starts somewhere. Speak."

Several expressions of guilt wash across Kordonis's face as he pauses to gather his thoughts.

"W-well... in regards to this mountain range to the west, I noticed several hidden artillery weapons which had been destroyed by the demons. Their design is crude, and their positioning awkward. I can only surmise the person who constructed them was an amateur, as their payloads would likely cause destruction to rain upon the Wordsmith's allies and enemies alike."

The First Founder nods. "A simple observation, but necessary. What do you think their positioning tells you about the one who build them?"

"Well..." Kordonis says, haltingly. "If I must be honest, I do not think the Wordsmith built them. Or rather, he did build them, but he did not decide to place them there. Someone with more knowledge of warfare did. A trusted advisor, perhaps?"

"That's right." Unarin says, offering a faint smile. "Excellent observational skills. I believe the one who placed these crude weapons put them at the most effective location. They were designed to attack only once an enemy force had wholly overrun the Warpgate's position. They were also carefully concealed to catch the demons by surprise, and judging by the marks scarring the land, they succeeded. They do not share the Wordsmith's haphazard placement, nor his lazy architectural design in the primary city-space. Someone competent placed those artillery units."

The First Founder gestures to the hologram. "Continue."

Growing a little bolder, Kordonis points to a location south of the city.

"I noticed a small but poorly concealed hole in the ground here. After giving it some thought, I've determined it did not lead to the Trifrancium Mines on this planet, but a

different location, most likely for deep storage. After giving the matter some thought, I determined it must be a prison complex."

Unarin cocks his head and shifts his expression, as if waiting for a follow-up. Kordonis, eager to please his idol, immediately continues.

"...However, unlike the artillery formations, this prison does not appear to have been built with much thought. It's too far from the city, in a position where it would be hard for the military to reinforce it if there was an escapee, at least not in a timely manner. I believe the Wordsmith decided the location, though he did not construct it himself. There are signs of Goblin activity in the area. I believe Goblins may have hewn out the underground portion of the prison without the Wordsmith's help."

"Another well-spoken observation." Unarin praises. "You're better at this than I expected, young Kordonis. I have elite generals leading my forces who have never read Order to Chaos in their lives, and I even know a few who have read it many times, yet they never seemed to grasp its fundamental truths. You would be surprised at how many Volgrim who you revere, yet who cannot grasp the concepts espoused in my tome."

Kordonis laughs. "You praise me too much, First Founder. I am only a shallow thinker, slow of mind, and dull-witted to boot. My educational scores were mediocre, and my abilities in technology have never been worth mentioning."

"Just because you are a Technopath does not mean you must become a master of technology," Unarin says. "Strategic minds can assist greatly in the War effort. Go on, tell me some more of your observations. I refuse to believe these two points are all that you've noticed."

Kordonis's skin flushes with color. "Well, truth be told, I did notice some other things, but no doubt, you've seen them well ahead of me."

"Naturally." Unarin replies. "But I am not testing myself. I am testing you to see if, perhaps, our educational institutions did not give you the credit you deserve."

Kordonis nods. "Well, in that case..."

He and Unarin spend the next five hours talking. They exchange thoughts and ideas, examine many other civilizations, and swap observations regarding the many alien cultures the Volgrim have encountered over their years.

"Marvelous. I have truly found a diamond in the rough!" Unarin says. "To think you were languishing as a mere starship captain, Sangin Kordonis. Some would say your advance has been too quick, considering your poor academic scores, but I think the Empire has wrongly held you back. I see bright stars in your future."

"No, no, you praise me too highly," Kordonis says, bowing his head. "I may have some shallow insights regarding Order to Chaos, but that hardly makes me noteworthy. No doubt, there are thousands of elites more capable than I at understanding its nuances."

"Thousands?" Unarin asks. "No. Not thousands. Perhaps not even hundreds. Dare I say, there might be only a few dozen philosophers who can understand my work's intricacies. I look long and hard for those shining jewels, but sadly, most will only be capable of parroting the basic words written on the page. They are imitators, regurgitators. Sometimes, an elite Psion or Technopath might glean some small insight and think themselves a strategic genius, but compared to you, I would barely call them a buffoon."

Unarin taps his fingers on his chair's arms.

"Kordonis. I require someone to take on a specific role, and that someone will be you. You will go to the world of Tarus II. You will represent the delegates of our peacekeepers, and will initiate contact with the Wordsmith. I will expect you to report directly to me, and to facilitate diplomatic negotiations with the Wordsmith and his people."

Kordonis's entire body turns ice-cold from shock. "M-me? Founder Unarin! This is... a great honor! I cannot believe... I am shocked you would pick me!"

"Oh, keep the humility to yourself," Unarin says, waving his hand. "Too much humility will sour other people's thoughts. You must take pride in your strengths."

"Yes, of course." Kordonis says, bowing his head. "I contemplate, and I comprehend."

"You will choose a retinue of capable assistants." Unarin says. "You will ensure they can assist you in this venture. I care not if they are friends, family, or clan-members. Just make sure they are up to the task. I will be giving you a high level of autonomy regarding the Wordsmith, with only one distinction."

The First Founder pauses to look Kordonis in the eyes.

"You must take extreme care when dealing with him. Proceed with caution. Any entity capable of accelerating a star's heat death is not one we wish to make our adversary. If,

however, the worst should happen, you must be ready to take decisive action. I do not trust the Wordsmith, because he seems to be a lazy simpleton possessing extreme levels of knowledge. Somehow, he is both a genius and a dullard. I will expect you to detail his mannerisms to me so that I might make additional considerations of his capabilities."

The young Technopath nods sagely. "Yes, Founder Unarin. I understand, and will not fail you in this pursuit."

"Good. Then you are dismissed." Unarin says. "Do not let me down, Kordonis."

Kordonis stands up, bows deeply, then strides out of the room, a visible pep in his step.

After he leaves, Unarin remains behind, staring blankly at the wall.

"The Wordsmith... who is he? A lazy imbecile who I can bend to my will, or a frighteningly intelligent enemy who I mustn't anger for any reason? Such an enigma... so many possibilities..."

Part 332: Fortified Future

Tarus II, inside the crystalline walls of the Fortress of Retribution.

Humanity continues to slowly but surely rebuild after the events of Ose's Stormbringer Attack. Of the original three million humans and the significantly smaller monster and demon populace who existed before the demons attacked, fewer than a third of the population remains alive. Among them are many injured individuals, those who have not yet received proper medical care due to a lack of healers. With Belial and Jason having left to retrieve Hope, many people have had to make do with only the bare minimum of medical care necessary to stabilize their injuries.

Beelzebub's detonation not only directly killed more than a million people, but it also spread radiation around the planet, afflicting tens of thousands of humans, monsters, and friendly demons with radiation poisoning. If left untreated for too long, their injuries would eventually become fatal.

Grumblings and bitterness begin to set into the minds of the populace. Even when Jason returns, a small portion of his people force themselves to hide their rage at his ineffective leadership. After all, were it not for his pacifistic tendencies, the demons likely would not have made such a huge push right into the heart of the human resistance, and more than two million people wouldn't have died.

One woman, suffering from radiation burns, cries into her hands. "My children died because of that Wordsmith! Now they're trapped in Mephisto's grip! I hate him, so much! I never should have left my home world!"

Her thoughts, echoed by many others, don't go unnoticed by the Wordsmith's allies. Several T-REX wearing soldiers listen silently to the complaints of their neighbors, logging them as per the Wordsmith's instructions. They collect data on the general feelings of the populace, hoping and expecting the Wordsmith will take care of their grievances sooner rather than later.

Inside a thrown-together building hastily constructed via Jason's Wordsmithing, a small contingent of humanity's higher-ups gathers to assess their gains and losses from battling Gressil.

Jason Hiro, Phoebe Hiro, Belial, Chadwick, and several other people, including Hans Wagner, all sit at a simple, rectangular table, leaning heavily on their arms and elbows.

"We lost a lot of good men and women." Chadwick says. "That incursion into Faith's End yielded us a lot of prisoners with broken minds, one Wordsmith, and an angel. The gains weren't worth the losses."

"We saved Hope." Jason says, maintaining a neutral expression. "The last thing we wanted was for the demons to control his power. As for that angel girl... I'm going to have a chat with Gabriel about her, later. The next time Uriel comes back, Raphael should provide some unique insights into how in the hell she's survived for so long. After all, angels need mana to survive, and I doubt she had any humans praying to her while she was imprisoned."

Belial glances at Jason. "I already figured out the reason why... but you're not going to like it."

After a momentary pause, she continues.

"Gressil... he forcibly injected demonic mana into the angel. She's been holding onto life because he's utterly corrupted her body. There's not much holy energy left anywhere on her. Not only does his demonic energy just barely sustain her, but it causes her immense pain, too. I can probably give her more energy to keep her alive, but I'll also end up hurting her, too."

"Maybe I can fix that..." Jason murmurs. "My Wordsmithing is probably the key. I can probably invert the nature of her internal energy. And what about Hope? We regrew his limbs, but his mind seems... broken. Whatever Gressil did to him went well beyond simple torture. He hasn't woken up from his coma since we returned."

"I can't heal a person's brain." Belial says. "So... I don't know what we'll be able to do for him."

Phoebe, sitting on Jason's right side, between him and Belial, leans her head against her husband's shoulder.

"Amelia is staying with Hope. She seems pretty close to him. Maybe she can help him... recover."

"Or *maybe* she can eat him when we're not looking." General Chadwick retorts. "Absurd. She's the Black Queen! Whatever sorcery Hope used to revive her, she's still a

monster! We cannot let her continue to live in our midst."

Seated on Jason's left-side, Phoebe's spiritual self, projected from Jason's mind realm, shakes her head.

"I don't think so. After observing her for a while, I've come to the conclusion there's something very different about this Amelia compared to the one we knew from before. Her mannerisms aren't right. She flinches at the sight of blood. She's indecisive, and easily flustered. I can only conclude Hope must have intentionally... changed her, somehow."

"Changed her?" Physical-Phoebe asks, turning to look at her spiritual clone. "In what way? Do you mean through brainwashing? Or do you mean he intentionally dialed down her bloodlust with his Wordsmithing?"

"Your guess is quite literally as good as mine!" Spirit-Phoebe answers, with a quiet laugh. "I don't know all the answers, I just know what I've observed."

Jason waves his hand. "We can deal with that angel girl, Amelia, and Hope a little later. Right now, we have more pressing concerns. We've suffered some violent upheavals recently, our people are beaten and battered, and we're far from safe if the demons attack again. I've been talking with my mind-wife for a while now, and we've come up with some ideas to bolster humanity and make it more self-sufficient in the future. I don't ever want a repeat of Stormbringer to happen again."

Hans Wagner leans forward. "Oh? What sort of ideas?"

"And what do you mean by 'self sufficient'?" Chadwick asks. "Are you planning to leave us, again?"

Jason shakes his head. "No, I'm not. But I can't discount the possibility I might have to in the future. The last time I left, I ended up retrieving an artifact of divine power comparable to Excalibur. While that will ultimately bolster my power, and therefore humanity's, it isn't a silver bullet. Humanity was practically helpless in my absence, and that's something I must remedy as quickly as possible."

The Wordsmith speaks a word of power. "**Visualize.**"

In the center of the table, a three-by-three-foot replica of Camael's Cube appears, startling the observers. Despite only being a magical projection, it projects a faint but

noticeable presence of holy energy, making Belial feel somewhat unsettled, along with a couple other demons seated nearby.

"This is Camael's Cube." Jason explains. "Or at least, that's what I call it. If she gave it some fancy name, I wouldn't know. I confirmed with the Archangels that this cube was made by Camael, and it is thus filled with ancient primordial energy. The power in this artifact is probably enough to eliminate all the Demon Emperors with ease."

Several jaws drop at Jason's last statement. Even Physical-Phoebe appears more than a little surprised by her husband's declaration.

"However," Jason continues, "Its power isn't infinite. It has lost much of its energy over the last several eons. What it possesses now is maybe one percent of its original might, and every time I tap into its power, that mana disappears forever. It's like a giant battery that is slowly losing power over time. Once it's gone, it's gone."

Physical-Phoebe nods along to his words. "If this cube is going to run out of power eventually, it seems like we should use it up while it's still available. But just using that power to kill some demons seems like a waste."

"That's exactly what you said before," Jason says with a smile. "Well, uh, not you-you, but, the other you. Spirit-Phoebe. She thinks we should use this energy to rebuild and fortify humanity's potential. I couldn't agree more."

"Vee could make powerful weapons of var!" Hans Wagner exclaims. "Or, forget zat; vee could even make artifacts of our own! Vee could create an unlimited supply of food and vater, create housing and defenses to protect ourselves... zee possibilities are endless!"

"There's more." Jason says, nodding at Hans. "The interior of Camael's Cube is huge. Vast. Bigger than you can imagine. If you took the entire surface area of Tarus II, its livable space, and spread that across the Cube's insides, you could easily fit a hundred worlds in there, enough space for trillions of humans. This little scale model doesn't nearly do it justice. It looks insanely huge from the outside, and even bigger inside."

He continues. "The Cube also does not rest within our dimension. It's protected by a folded pocket of dimensional space, making it all but impossible for any outside observers to locate. I couldn't even find it without Raphael's help. As an Archangel, he was able to sense its relative position, but I was completely clueless. Once the Cube draws near enough to a populace, they will start to feel some pressure on their souls, but it's still

incredibly difficult to burrow into its pocket dimension and attack it. Also, even if an attacker succeeds, good luck breaking into the Cube itself. Its exterior is made of some unknown, enchanted alloy."

"It sounds like the perfect location to make a fortified base." Chadwick comments. "Humanity could expand and thrive inside the Cube. The demons wouldn't be able to hurt us, and neither would the Volgrim."

"Don't be so sure of that." Belial suddenly says, quieting the room. "Underestimate the Volgrim at your own peril. You have no idea the might Spatial Psions command. I know for a fact they can tear through dimensional distortions with ease. Forget the Second Founder, even Executor Nufaris would find the Cube in seconds. The two of them are the most talented at ripping apart space, but they're not the only ones."

Jason takes her warning seriously. "Good point. I still think the Cube would provide a sturdy shield against any sort of massed-attack, but... perhaps we shouldn't rely too heavily on its interdimensional location. More importantly, let's talk about how we can use its resources wisely."

Jason speaks another word of power, expanding the illusory cube in size until it fills the entire room, allowing everyone to peer into its interior.

"This is the inside of Camael's Cube." Jason says. "As you can see... it's totally empty. The only things inside are these giant... uh... 'star-monsters'... I don't really know what they are. And also, this 'containment beacon.'"

Jason points at the image of the Container. Without mentioning the Phoenix's existence, he explains the Container's purpose, as well as Camael's purpose behind creating the Cube, originally.

"I see." Belial mutters. "That explains Leviathan's existence. He was once imprisoned inside the Cube, but he broke free. Then he went to hide under Earth, where the Archangel Samael helped obscure his potent life energy through formation magic."

"Exactly." Jason says. "The reason the Cube has been leaking energy is because this central nexus, the 'Container,' is leaking mana into the void. The Cube itself draws in ambient mana from the outer galaxy to recharge itself, but it loses more than it gains as time passes."

"Can you repair it?" Hans asks. "If vee repair it, zee Cube shall gain more and more energy as time goes on!"

"I can't." Jason says, shaking his head. "Sorry. Not even Phoebe can understand the Cube's interconnected circuits. Camael was simply on a different tier as an artifact maker compared to us lowly peons. Solomon's Crown obtained all of her memories and knowledge, but not even that gave my wife the ability to replicate her works. Still, that doesn't mean once the Cube runs out of mana, it will be useless. There is a different method we can use to change its core functionality."

After pausing for a moment to add emphasis, Jason continues.

"The Container is the central nexus; it's the key to controlling the Cube. Once the Cube runs out of energy, it will become nothing more than a weakness, or a liability. I will destroy the Container and seal the Cube's dimensional space so it can't leak mana into the void any longer. It will also lose its functionality of drawing in mana, but that won't matter, because the next step is..."

Jason pauses, closes his eyes, and concentrates.

"Disperse. Visualize."

The Cube's projection vanishes. In its place, a miniature group of ten humans appear, surrounding a massive orb glowing with mana, placed atop a fifty-foot-tall tower.

Instead of Jason, Spirit-Phoebe metaphorically steps up to the plate to explain the next bit.

"...The next step is to weaponize humanity's collective mana. The angels had a similar idea. They once collected our mana to fill their bodies with spiritual energy and sustain themselves. A fine idea, if a bit greedy, but we can do better. We can create our own self-sustaining system through humanity's unique biological parameters. Through a stroke of genius, the Archangel Uzziel made it possible for every human to collect a small amount of mana from their surroundings while they slept. If they lost it, a quick night's sleep would regenerate it back to full. This means every human is functionally a miniaturized version of Camael's Cube, waiting to be exploited for more useful purposes."

Jason smiles. "Individually, humans are pathetically weak in the magic department. However, unlike demons, who refill their lost energy over a long period of time, we can

recharge our mana back to full with one good night's sleep. That means, if we create towers capable of accumulating mana, they can store it for other purposes later on."

Belial nods thoughtfully. "If I exhaust all of my mana healing people, like I did during Stormbringer, it could take me days or even weeks to recharge my mana to full. That's one advantage humans have. Even King Arthur, when he unleashed energy blasts that could bombard civilizations back to the Stone Age, could also regenerate his spent mana in a single night. It's cheating, if you ask me."

"That's great news," Chadwick says, stroking his chin. "But in the end, I must ask, what do you plan to do with all that energy, Commander Hiro? I'm sure you have some ideas, but I'm a bit clueless on the higher uses of magical energy."

Several other humans around the table nod. However, the more magically inclined monsters, and in particular the demons, don't appear as confused.

General Yamir pounds his fist against the table. "Braahm! Incredible! So many ideas spring to my mind! We could give all humans magical medallions that channel their mana into the towers, but also that could pull mana from the towers when needed! We could turn humans into mages!"

"Too wasteful!" Another demon says. "We should use that energy to craft automated implements that use the energy efficiently! We could build magically-powered golems capable of protecting our civilization!"

Several other proposals go up around the table, but Jason raises his hand to silence the room.

"I'm already hearing some great ideas, but let's keep the noise down for a moment. Spirit-Phoebe has come up with several projects she plans to start work on immediately. These projects will require a great deal of time to iron out the intricacies, but I thought I'd start with one that will get everyone here... well, if not excited, at least a little bit relieved."

The Wordsmith pauses.

A strange look crosses over his face, before he silently shakes his head.

"Sorry. I got lost in my thoughts for a moment. **Disperse. Visualize.**"

The mana-tower disappears, and in its place, a far bigger tower, more than eight-hundred-meters tall appears, turning the ten humans at its base into tiny smudges. Magical energy courses along its base and pulses upward, eventually reaching the top,

where it releases a thin beam of light into the planet's atmosphere. This beam of energy remains continuously, slowly spreading its coverage over the entirety of the hypothetical world of Tarus II.

"This is... a modified version of something which once existed." Jason explains, his tone heavy. "It was once called a Lazarus Tower. Its purpose was to retrieve the souls of dead humans and turn them into Lazarites, like the angel girl we picked up. Sadly, not even Phoebe could replicate that function, since we don't have the original designs made by Camael. However, what it can do is something just as useful. It can hijack the functions of the original Lazarus Tower and retrieve all fallen souls, anywhere in the universe, which have not passed into the Great Beyond."

Jason summons another projection, this time of an object that makes Belial shiver with dread.

"This is Valac's Lantern." Jason says. "It once belonged to a powerful necromancer, and it forms the foundation of the Seven Hell's power. It controls the River Styx, and its current owner is the Duke of Mist, Mephisto. My plan is to use our Lazarus Tower to remotely steal all of the souls contained within Valac's Lantern... and bring them back to us."

The Wordsmith's eyes flicker with emotion.

"After that, we can rebuild the bodies of those who have fallen. Friends, family, lovers... even our children. We can give them a second lease on life."

The room becomes quiet. Everyone present looks at the Wordsmith with a mixture of pity and hope, praying he will find his daughter among those souls.

Even more of them recall their own lost friends and family, the people they would love to see most in the world.

"Will... will this tower really work?" Chadwick asks. "If it does, it will grant all of our allies a second chance at life."

"Only our human allies." Jason says. "Fallen demons and monsters won't be subject to its effect. They'll remain in Mephisto's grasp. I'm sorry, but it's the best I can do."

Chadwick sighs. "So, regarding Monster King, Kar..."

"I can't help him." Jason answers, his voice quiet.

The room's atmosphere becomes pensive. Several people hesitate, unsure of what to say, until Hans Wagner breaks the spell.

"How long vill it take before you can make zees tower?"

"A week or two." Spirit-Phoebe answers. "I'm still working out its 'spiritual structure.' Spiritual constructs operate a bit like technology, but they also have strange methods of evolving over time, like biological beings. It makes divining their exact designs practically impossible for laymen like me. I'm fairly confident I'll solve the problem eventually, though."

"I can help." Physical-Phoebe says. "We'll work together and get it done in half the time."

"Sounds like a date!" Her spiritual self laughs. "A date with myself! How very weird!"

Jason faintly smiles, their conversation momentarily taking his mind off his deceased daughter. Sadly, those thoughts return shortly after, so he forces himself to reorient his mind.

"Everyone. This Revised Lazarus Tower is to be kept strictly confidential, at least for now. I don't want the demons getting wind of my plans. In the meantime, I want you all to think about what projects we can make with our future mana reserves. All options are on the table. If it's a dumb idea, whatever. If it's a rough idea, Phoebe might be able to work with it. And if it's solid gold, you could save billions of lives. So, put on your thinking caps, ask around, and we'll meet back here in a few days to discuss our other options."

"What are you going to do in the meantime?" Chadwick asks.

Jason rests his hand on Phoebe's shoulder and gives the side of her head a kiss.

"Phoebe and I are going to have a talk with Amelia. I think it's time she gave us some answers."

Part 333: Back From the Dead

After meeting with the other heads of humanity's united militaries, Jason, Phoebe, and Belial leave their makeshift command structure, a simple square building lacking all frills, to head over to the hospice division.

They pass the giant pit left behind by Beelzebub's detonation and pause to look at it as many often do. The crater's sheer size leaves an indelible impression on any who see it, making it an iconic landmark in the city, one that inspires countless feelings of rage, bitterness, and melancholy.

"We really ought to do something about this..." Belial says. "It's become a hazardous location. Already, one old man and two children have fallen inside and gotten injured."

"Yeah. I've been thinking we should put a memorial here." Phoebe says. "Something with the names of all the people who died during the Stormbringer Attack. We should honor their memories."

Jason shakes his head. "We'll honor them more by bringing them back to life. I'm going to build the Lazarus Tower right here, once your spirit-self finishes its designs. If we fail to resurrect some people... then we'll build monuments for them afterward."

They continue walking, but keep their pace slow while sweeping their gazes over the ruined city. Already, several new buildings have been built, their shoddy construction and thrown-together nature telling the story of a populace in a hurry to erect housing as quickly as possible.

"Since the old city is gone," Phoebe says, "we should plan out the next incarnation more carefully. I've mocked up some designs for improved Building Constructors, similar to my old device, but more energy efficient with better storage capabilities. We'll be able to pre-fabricate structures from several designs. I just feel like we could stand to give the city an artistic touch."

"Art won't help us win against the demons." Jason mutters.

"No," Phoebe concedes, "but architectural design can do all sorts of other useful things. For example, in Ancient Rome, or Greece, the unique ways they constructed their buildings made them identifiable from a distance. Statues of commanding officers could

inspire morale among the soldiers, water fountains could give people serene places to cool down after long days at work, and recreational hotspots would become community gathering places. By contrast, a bunch of utilitarian, ugly, square blocs won't do anything but depress the people following us."

Jason pauses his walking. He chews on his lower lip for a few moments while considering Phoebe's words.

"Hmm. You have a point. We could all do with some mood-boosting, in general. Me and your spirit-self are going to focus on our war-time capabilities, so why don't you focus on city-building, urban planning, and fixing the people's morale? You're better at that than me, anyway. Everyone loves you."

Belial nods. "The man speaks truth!"

"I'll work on improving our T-REX's and other such things in between," Phoebe says, "but otherwise, sure. You leave the city management to me. I'll probably bring Neil's assistant, Debra, in to help with the low-hanging fruit."

Jason rests his hands on his hips. "Neil. He and Hope were close. Hope is going to be devastated when he finds out..."

"I'm not convinced Neil died." Belial says. "Maybe his body got crushed when the Core collapsed, but we didn't find a corpse, nor his T-REX. Even if he did die, he probably ended up in Mephisto's hands."

"I tried using 'Locate' to find him." Jason says. "But I couldn't pick anything up. He wasn't in Gressil's prison, so he wasn't being hidden by the Warden's... weird... anti-magic aura."

"That's not necessarily true." Phoebe says. "Remember? You said Ose hit you with a burst of strange energy that short-circuited your magical abilities. You also said the energy felt somewhat similar to Beelzebub's detonation, and to Gressil's aura. The three must be linked. Considering Ose is Gressil's sister, and she was close with Beelzebub... maybe she found some way to harness Gressil's energy."

"That makes sense." Belial interjects. "Think about it. Even if Neil died and ended up resurrected under Mephisto's control, you should be able to sense him, right? But you can't. And Ose wasn't gunning for you, she was aiming to capture Phoebe and, erm, Daisy.

But if you could just use Locate to find your wife and daughter, that plan wouldn't be of much use. Maybe she wanted-

"She wanted to capture Phoebe and Daisy, then hide them with Gressil's magic," Jason says, as his eyes flicker with realization. "Yeah. That makes sense. And she might have Neil hidden somewhere, too."

He pauses for a moment.

"...But if that's the case, how can we find him? I can't sense him. The Labyrinth is massive, not to mention all the other worlds demonkind controls. She could have hidden him anywhere, and that's assuming she did in the first place. Our technology won't be much use in locating him, since Ose would have been sure to disable his T-REX."

Belial presses a finger to her lips in thought. "Well... I could head into the Labyrinth to find him."

"Whoa, whoa," Phoebe says. "That's a no-go, Samantha. You're one of demonkind's most hated enemies. If you go in there, someone will attack you, for sure."

Belial scoffs. "Who? Ose? The Hidden Emperors? Ose is probably Mephisto's pawn, now. Resurrected under his control. The Hidden Emperors might be able to hurt, capture, or kill me, but have you forgotten?"

Belial's body suddenly shifts its appearance, morphing her into a perfect facsimile of Ose, mirroring her long white hair, her white uniform, and even her long boots.

"I can be *anyone*," Belial says, her voice sounding irritatingly like Ose's. "Most people aren't aware, but I was Satan's best espionage agent. Ose was known as 'Ghost' because she could move undetected inside human infrastructure and through their defense lines, sabotaging their technology and installing computer viruses and whatever else. She alone ended up bringing humanity to its knees in the final days of the Energy Wars."

Belial cocks her head playfully. "But little old *me*? I did all of that centuries before she was an apple in the Creator's eye. I brought down the Roman Empire, the Greeks, and all sorts of other civilizations. I didn't kill anyone, since that's not my MO, but I did all sorts of other fun things. If I don't want to be found, nobody will know who I am. Well, except for maybe Jason. His Wordsmithing would have been really annoying to deal with during the 'fun times.'"

Phoebe nods hesitantly. "Well... if you're so confident... I guess it will be alright."

"Hmm... you've reminded me of something." Jason adds. "Ose infiltrated us. She subverted our men, poisoned their thoughts, and placed traitors in our midst. She did all of that because I didn't know how souls worked, nor about her Astral Form. But that isn't the case anymore. I'll have to prepare defenses for dealing with souls."

The Wordsmith pauses for a moment, then smiles.

"Your spirit-self says she can build some passive defenses into the Lazarus Tower," Jason says to Phoebe. "But, I'm still gonna put some stronger active measures into play, once I have the time."

Phoebe nods. "Good idea. Err, I guess it's *my* idea. Does that make me a narcissist if I'm technically praising myself?"

"I ask myself things like that all the time when it comes to Hope," Jason answers. "Welcome to the world of having a clone."

Phoebe frowns at him for a moment. "It's not like I *asked* you to clone me."

"Uh, right. Sorry. Again."

The three of them continue onward until they reach the hospice area, where several hundred tents and a few small square buildings stand erected, all of them purely made for function over design.

The moment the Wordsmith arrives, a feathery Harpie walks up to him, her claws digging into the charred dirt as she struts.

"Jason, Phoebe, Belial, I'm glad you've all come," Doctor Fathy says. As the most senior medical officer in the human resistance, barring Belial herself, she holds a lot of pull with the people who she's saved over the years. "I finished the preliminary results on Hope. We've scanned him thoroughly to deduce any lingering trauma, but I found a few... anomalies. You should have a look at his results."

She hands a paper to Jason, who immediately shows it to Phoebe and Belial.

"What are we looking at?" Jason asks, not understanding the jargon on the page.

"How odd," Belial says. "Hope seems to have some sort of... infection in his body. No, not an infection. Something else?"

"They're nanites." Phoebe says. "Hope has nanites inside his bloodstream. Based on the configuration, these came from a T-REX. They've integrated themselves into his

biological structure. They're a part of him now; they're even in his brain."

"What the hell?" Jason asks. "When did that happen? Did Gressil do something to him?"

"No. The scarring tissue is several years old." Doctor Fathy says. "There's also evidence of radiation sickness, but it's long been in remission."

"Oh... this must be from when Hope and I fought Uriel..." Belial says, as she recalls the events of six years earlier. "Yes, I remember now. Beelzebub blew himself up in the Labyrinth. Then, shortly afterward, I noticed Hope's T-REX had been destroyed, but I didn't think much of it. Perhaps, at that time, the explosion embedded the nanites in his body?"

"Could that explain why he's always been sort of... hostile?" Jason asks. "Maybe the nanites are making him more aggressive?"

Belial shakes her head. "No. He's always been like this. If I had to guess, based on these readings, the nanites have wildly improved his biological resilience. It's probably why..."

She pauses, allowing her words to drop off.

"Probably why, what?" Jason asks.

"Well. Gressil tore Hope's arms and legs off." Belial says, her lip twitching in sympathy. "That would have killed anyone else, especially since he received no medical care. And you saw all those awful torture wounds. The nanites must have been healing him the whole time. He... probably wanted to die, but couldn't."

"How awful..." Phoebe whispers, as her eyes mist up. "He's you, Jason. Hope is *you*. I wouldn't- I couldn't forgive anyone who did that to you. As far as I'm concerned, Gressil did that to *my husband*."

"Is Hope still comatose?" Jason asks Doctor Fathy.

"Yes. Though, his brain has finally started to show signs of awakening. No doubt, the nanites are healing him as we speak."

"He's gonna be so fucked up." Jason mutters. "I... I don't know how to face him. He suffered unimaginable torture. Barbarity. I don't even know if I'd have been able to hold on if I were in his shoes. He's going to suffer PTSD for the rest of his life because of this."

Jason pauses.

"Unless... I erase his memory."

"Don't do that." Belial says. "Not without Hope's permission. It's not right. He's a Wordsmith. Once he recovers... he can always erase his own memory if those events are too traumatic."

Jason glances at the building up ahead, one bearing a giant red plus-sign on its door.

"That's true. I just... I feel awful for him. He's been so neglected. Treated like garbage... and it's all my fault. I was too blind to see that he was right. He was the only one acting proactively about the demons. Him and Neil had the right idea, all along. He ended up tortured because of my inaction."

"We don't know what happened." Phoebe says. "Remember, Hope left shortly before you did. We don't know how he encountered Gressil, what they said, or-"

Before Phoebe can continue, Fathy raises her right hand.

"That's... not strictly true, miss Hiro."

The group of three blinks in surprise.

"What do you mean?" Jason asks.

"Hope has nanites in his bloodstream." Fathy explains. "He... his... his short term memory. It's been integrated into Centurion's functionality. I was able to recover some... snippets. Audio. Video. I don't recommend you watch it. I don't recommend *anyone* should watch it."

Phoebe's misty eyes turn to tears as she averts her gaze. Even Belial's stomach curdles at the thought of what those recordings must contain.

Jason remains composed.

"Show me. Phoebe, Sam... you two should sit this one out."

"No. No, I'll watch." Belial says. "I've seen many horrifying things in my life. I can handle it."

Phoebe grits her teeth.

"If... if it was you who Gressil tortured... I'd want to see it. I owe Hope this much. Show me, too."

She balls her hands into fists, mentally imagining the worst possible things she can think of, even if she doesn't want to.

Doctor Fathy seriously reconsiders showing the videos to her long-time friends, only to inevitably relent in the wake of their agreement.

"Alright. Follow me."

Minutes later, the group of three sits at a small projector screen in a darkened room, while images taken from Hope's eyes play out.

Starting from not long after his capture, they watch and listen as Hope screams and begs for mercy. Gressil taunts him. He mocks him, stabs his body, and makes Hope's vision turn blurry with blood.

The Wordsmith, his wife, and the former Second Emperor all hold each other and force themselves to watch as Hope's screams gradually become less defined as the days drag, until eventually, he can only rasp out in pain before falling utterly silent.

No matter how much Gressil tortured him past that point, Hope became incapable of releasing a sound.

Phoebe sobs quietly, having long lost her ability to watch. Belial hugs her, but even she doesn't manage to stop her own tears.

"How horrible. Dreadful. Awful. That Gressil is... I should have killed him! I should have murdered him! Why was I so weak..."

Jason, however, manages to maintain an expression of solid steel. He remains seemingly unmoved, as if unable to weep for his clone's suffering.

Even so, his expression turns chilling.

"This is what demons do..." He mutters. "I've been so blind. All this time. They love pain, torture, barbarity. I've acted like such a child."

He glances at his wife and Belial, both of them sobbing uncontrollably.

This is the reaction Gressil wants. He loves to see others in pain. He relishes their suffering. He's a monster amidst monsters. I used to think most demons could become like Belial, empathetic, loving, and caring. But they can't. The whole god-damned species is irredeemable.

Even in Jason's Mind Realm, Spirit-Phoebe cries, unable to watch the video without breaking down like her physical self did.

Hearing both versions of his wife cry only steels the Wordsmith's resolve more.

These demons have to suffer. The shoe is on the other foot, now.

* * *

Some time later, after Phoebe and Belial have composed themselves, the trio leaves the projector room to head over to Hope's private dormitory. Dozens of troopers stand watch outside, wary of any intruders. Even the Wordsmith has to accept an invasive scan, just in case he might be a demon in disguise, looking to assassinate Hope.

They step into the room, where they find Hope, all of his limbs regrown and his body physically in pristine condition, laying on a hospital bed with Amelia at his side.

Amelia holds Hope's hand, maintaining contact even when Jason, Phoebe, and Belial enter the room.

She only takes one glance at the ashen-faced trio before shaking her head. "You saw the video."

"We did." Jason says.

"Hope's still comatose." Amelia says. "But I'm guessing you didn't come here for him."

Belial shakes her head. "We came here for answers. It's time you told us the truth, Amelia. How did Hope resurrect you?"

"It shouldn't even be possible." Jason says. "If resurrection was so easy..."

He trails off, not saying the last part, but Amelia answers for him.

"...then you'd bring your daughter back. Right?"

The Wordsmith nods. "Right."

"Have you tried, yet?" Amelia asks.

"No. I tried resurrecting people in the past. It never worked. I always ended up with lifeless husks. Without the person's original soul, I could maybe mimic them physically, but they'd never be the person who died. And even if I did, I wouldn't undo their deaths. I'd only bring back... a copy of the dead person."

He pauses, as if to add emphasis.

"That's what you are, right? A copy of Amelia. Not her original self. You died when the Polaris star went supernova. Hope must have figured out how to bring you back, but he only succeeded in copying your appearance. That's why you don't have magical abilities."

Phoebe and Belial both look at Jason in surprise.

"Is that who she really is?" Phoebe asks. "That does make sense. All the points add up."

Jason shrugs. "Maybe. Except, I've tried doing that exact thing before. I failed. I can create a body. I can give it a soul, and sentience. I can even give it the memories of someone, but in the end, it always turns out... aberrant. It doesn't work. Something goes wrong, and the resurrectee... dies. Within just a few hours."

"So," Jason concludes, "it's my best guess, but not a satisfying one. Maybe Hope succeeded where I failed. Maybe he perfected that method. Did he, Amelia? Is that how you're here, now?"

The Black Queen turns her head away from the Wordsmith and his companions. She reaches over to caress Hope's hair.

"You know, when you first arrived, I had a huge crush on you, Jason." Amelia says. "But I was just an ordinary woman. I admired you because you were a legendary Hero. It was a childish desire. I knew it wouldn't lead to anything serious."

She pauses.

"But then I met Hope. My sister introduced him to me. He was broken, alone, abandoned. He had just lost everything that mattered to him, all because you brought him into existence."

Her gaze flickers for a moment as she shoots a look of hatred at Jason.

"You broke Hope, and I fixed him. I'm not Amelia, and I never was. My real name is Annette. I'm Debra's sister."

"What?!" Jason asks. "Debra's sister? Annette? What the hell are you talking about?"

'Annette' touches her face.

"This isn't my original appearance. When I first met Hope, he wasn't attracted to me at all, but he found comfort in my companionship. I wanted to please him, to make him like me. So, I made him change my body, my mind, and my memories. I had him turn me into Amelia, so we could be together."

Annette punches her chest, as grief fills her eyes.

"And you... you took that from me! Because of your incompetence, my Hope ended up here, traumatized by a monster! Gressil tortured him! All that time we spent together amounted to nothing!! Gressil removed my memory blockers, violated my mind, and ruined the man I love!"

The Wordsmith's eyes widen as he re-evaluates Annette's appearance, the perfect facsimile of Amelia.

"You're... you're not Amelia? I see. Hope put her memories into your mind and changed your appearance, then he blocked out your original memories. That would stabilize your thoughts... it's... it's the only way a 'resurrection' would actually work. He converted another person into the one who died."

"That's awful." Phoebe says. "Twisted, even."

"You shut your mouths, both of you!" Annette says, rising to her feet. "Especially you, Phoebe, you fucking bitch! You're the one who messed Hope up the worst! Because of you, he nearly committed suicide!"

"Suicide?!" Phoebe asks, bewildered. "W-what did I even do?"

Annette's anger visibly fades. She chuckles wryly and turns her attention back to Hope.

"It's not what you did. It's what you *didn't* do. You rejected Hope for Jason, and just left him alone. Did you even think of how that would affect him? No. You and Jason were happily married. Why should you care about his clone? You could have made a clone of yourself so Hope wouldn't be alone, but you never cared. None of you did. He was just your tool to fight demons. A piece of meat."

Phoebe's lower lip trembles. "That's not..."

"It is true." Annette snarls. "So don't you fucking dare judge my relationship with Hope! I don't care if you think it was messed up for him to change my appearance. It's none of your god-damned business! He was in a dark place, and I saved him! Every day we spent together was like bliss for both of us! I got my Hero, and he got his Amelia. Why should you give half a damn what we did for each other in private? You didn't care six years ago, so don't act like you do *now*."

Annette waves her hand flippantly at the trio.

"When Hope wakes up, it's me he'll want to see, not any of you. So, *get out*."

Jason's mouth turns to cotton as he robotically nods.

"...Yes. I see. Sorry, Amel- err, Annette. I'm sorry that we..."

Words escape the Wordsmith's grasp. He, Phoebe, and Belial all share awkward and confused glances with one another before slowly turning around and walking out the door.

After it closes, Annette sits back down and returns to stroking Hope's hair.

"I'm sorry, love. The awful people aren't here anymore. It's just me and you, together, forever."

Part 334: Trauma, Torture, Terror

Jason, Phoebe, and Belial all trudge out of Hope's makeshift hospital room, past his guards, and arrive just outside his temporary hospice residence. After closing the door behind them, they walk a short distance away, toward a nearby building, before stopping and heavily leaning against its walls.

"Well." Belial says. "That could have gone... better."

"I thought I felt guilty before," Phoebe says, "but compared to now, that was nothing. I feel as if I've failed Hope completely."

"You and me both." Jason says. "Annette, huh? I didn't even know Debra had a sister. As soon as we started talking about how weird it was for Hope to change her appearance and identities, I felt like I'd screwed up again. Then she drove that gut-punch home."

"The situation is strange," Phoebe says, "but I feel as if Annette didn't speak any false statements. Hope suffered because of us. She was there for him when we weren't. We don't have a right to judge their relationship."

The Wordsmith throws his hands in the air helplessly. "I don't know what to do now. I want to help and comfort Hope, but seeing how badly I've aggrieved him, I can't say I deserve to be in his presence. I wish I'd paid attention to him sooner, if not from the very beginning. It's too late for me to make up for my past failures."

"You both can still treat him better moving forward." Belial says, keeping her voice low. "I don't think it's too late to patch things up. He's going to need a lot of emotional support. The abuse he suffered was well beyond what most humans can take. I would know. I've seen many cruel demons torture many mentally resilient people, but I've never seen any suffer as badly as Hope did. Gressil went far beyond the limits of even demonic cruelty."

She shakes her head with a resigned sigh. "Even the worst demons have limits to which they'll torture humans. Ose hates humans from the bottom of her heart, but she doesn't get any particular thrill from their screaming and crying. She just wants to hurt them a bit before killing them. Anything more, she sees it as a waste of her time."

"Wow," Jason groans, his tone sardonic, "I guess I should give all the nice demon torturers a fucking gold medal, huh?"

"You know what I meant." Belial says, waving her hand in front of her face. "For now, let's just set Hope aside. I think Annette is uniquely qualified to help him, moving forward, so let's leave it to her. What about that angel girl? We need to take care of her. Whatever Hope suffered, she's clearly had it a million times worse. I'm shocked she's stayed alive. She must have had an incredibly formidable willpower before Gressil captured her."

Phoebe nods. "I put her in a nice, comfortable room on the city's north side, away from people. Let's go and pay her a visit."

Jason and Belial both frown in unison.

"I don't know..." Jason says. "I don't think she'll want to see a man at a time like this."

"Or a demon." Belial adds. "You should go and see her alone, Phoebe. You're good at empathizing with other people."

Phoebe casts a glance back from where they came, toward Hope's hospice unit.

"Am I?"

Neither Jason nor Belial can give her an affirmation.

"...I'll send your spiritual self along, too." Jason says. "I'll stick around in the area, so if you need me, I can pop right over."

"Alright." Phoebe says. "But I don't know if I'll be able to get through to her."

A momentary silence falls between the trio. Jason's eyes glimmer for a moment as he speaks with the people in his Mind Realm.

"Ah. Here. Take Gabriel's ring. Give it to the angel girl. Gabriel says he'd like to talk to her..."

The Wordsmith pauses to frown.

"No, we're not done with this, Gabriel," He says, speaking out loud to the people in his head. "I won't press you for her identity, but I don't like that you're hiding things from me. When we see Uriel, Raphael, and Michael next, I'll have some words for them."

The Wordsmith scowls for a moment before shaking his head. He gently pulls Gabriel's ring off his finger and hands it to his wife.

"Here. Don't drop it. It's one of a kind."

Phoebe smiles. "Yes, I know."

She gives her husband a kiss, and he summons Spirit-Phoebe to join her physical self. Afterward, Belial remains in the hospital, while Jason wanders off to talk to Hans Wagner about some ideas for new inventions that will boost humanity's firepower.

Left to her own devices, Physical-Phoebe joins her spirit self in walking half a mile to the north, where she arrives at a quiet building covered in flowers, plants, and other greenery designed to give the place some natural beauty. Sunlight streams through the square building's skylight, but when Phoebe steps inside, she finds the angel girl sitting on the floor in the darkest corner of the room, her head buried in her knees, and her arms wrapped around her legs.

The angel wears a simple white sundress, cute, yet elegant, a luxury she hasn't had in ages. Compared to laying naked in Gressil's cell, injured, suffering from agony, her current appearance is practically that of a heaven-sent blessing.

Even so, when both Phoebes step into the room, they sense the presence of deep, unfathomable sadness in the air, like a blackened aura that pervades all of their emotional barriers. Just taking one look at the silent, miserable girl makes Phoebe's heart ache worse than ever in her life.

"Um... e-excuse... me..." Phoebe croaks, her voice hoarse. "It's m-me, Phoebe. I, ah, I helped save you... from..."

She trails off when the angel girl doesn't move at all. She doesn't raise her head to look at her guests. She doesn't even flinch at the sound of a voice, making it seem almost as if she has fallen asleep in that pose.

Yet, when both Phoebes start to walk around the large and comfortable bed in her room, they stop a few feet away, noticing her shivering body.

Spirit-Phoebe chews her lip. "I... don't think she's cold."

"Neither do I." Physical-Phoebe whispers.

Both of them get on their knees and slowly shuffle across the floor, drawing within an arm's length of the angel girl.

"Uh, hey..." Phoebe says, reaching out her hand, yet pausing just short of initiating physical contact. "I'm Phoebe. Err, I said that, already. Um. How are you? No, that's..."

that's a dumb question. You must be, ah..."

She speaks haltingly, unsure of what to say.

After a few minutes of Phoebe stuttering and tripping over her words repeatedly, the angel girl still doesn't move a muscle, not once acknowledging Phoebe's presence. This stymies the Hero's wife, making her wonder just what she can say to get a response.

"I... I brought you something... it's a ring," Phoebe says. "It once belonged to a friend of yours, I think. Archangel Gabriel. Do you know Gabriel?"

At the mention of the Archangel of Power's name, the angel girl finally flinches. She lifts her head a fraction of an inch to peer across her knees at the ring in Phoebe's outstretched hand. A moment later, she lowers her head again, still remaining silent.

"So, you do know Gabriel, right?" Phoebe asks, her voice cracking as she finds a light in the darkness. The angel's slight response makes her feel a hint of a chance at breaking through. "He, um... he wants to talk to you. He's inside this ring, you know. I thought you might like to say hello to a familiar face..."

Phoebe pauses for a moment, before lowering her hand to the floor beside the angel girl. She puts the ring down, then retracts her hand.

"Here. I'll, um... I'll leave the ring beside you, okay? You can talk to him alone. I won't bother you. He really misses you, miss angel-person. Angel-girl. Lady. Sorry, I don't know your name. I don't mean to be rude."

Physical-Phoebe shoots an awkward look at her spiritual companion. Just as she starts to take a step back, the angel's body twitches. Her left arm moves slightly down her leg before pausing. Then, she lowers it a few more inches, before pausing again.

Slowly, hesitantly, it takes her a full minute to touch the floor, move her hand around, and feel for the ring.

When she finally touches it, she doesn't put it on. Instead, she merely pokes it with her index finger and leaves her hand there for several long, silent minutes, before raising her arm back to her legs.

Spirit-Phoebe creases her forehead. She looks at her physical self and shrugs, as if to ask, *did she talk to Gabriel? I don't know if she has to put the ring on to talk to him or not.*

Both Phoebes remain silent for another long minute.

The angel doesn't move. She remains rooted in place, with her hands wrapped around her knees.

Phoebe reaches back over and picks up Gabriel's ring. Unable to communicate with the Archangel herself, she can't ask him if he made successful contact. So instead, she places it into her pocket, then starts to stand up.

Just before she fully rises, Phoebe hesitates. She drops back down to a crouching position, then reaches out to lightly touch the angel's arm.

"Hey... I know it's going to be hard to adapt... to re-acclimate... after going through what you have. But I want you to know we're all here for you, okay? I'm here for you. You can take all the time you want. Nobody will hurt you here, and I won't let anyone lay a hand on you, ever again."

The angel girl doesn't visibly react to Phoebe's touch. After a few seconds of maintaining this light, almost imperceptible contact, Phoebe pulls away. She stands up and turns to leave.

As she turns her back to the angel, a faint noise whispers behind her.

"Nnn..."

Phoebe turns around once more, only to be surprised when she finds the angel girl hesitantly looking up at her.

"Nnn..."

She croaks out a weak sound, something so faint that if there were any other noises nearby, nobody would hear it.

Phoebe drops back into a crouch.

"Yes? What is it? Can I get you something?"

The angel stares at her with half-closed, watery eyes. "Nnn... nnn... na... name..."

"Name?" Phoebe repeats. "Yes. Yes, my name is Phoebe. Phoebe Hiro. And... what's yours?"

The angel hesitates. She averts her eyes shyly.

"C... C... Ca... Ca..."

Phoebe smiles sweetly and nods. "Yes, just like that. Just like that. It's okay, you can say it. Ca...?"

The angel falls silent. She closes her eyes and lowers her head, unable to say the rest.

Spirit-Phoebe kneels down beside her physical self. "'Ca,' huh? So, perhaps... Cassiel? That's an angel name. It's cute, like you. Cassiel? Is that your name?"

"It's probably not," Physical-Phoebe says. "Cassiel was one of the Archangels. It might be disrespectful to give the name of an Archangel to... well, a Lazarite."

Her spiritual self shrugs. "I think it's a lovely name. Cassiel? Are you okay with that name? We can call you something else if you want."

The angel raises her head. She eyes the two identical looking flesh and spiritual women for a moment, before slightly lifting her head up and down in a barely perceptible nod.

Then, she lowers her head into her knees once again.

Spirit-Phoebe smiles. "There, see? She likes it. Cassiel. That's a fitting name, for now. She can tell us her real name later, if she wants."

Physical-Phoebe nods. "That's enough for now. Okay, Cassiel. Thank you for talking to me. I enjoyed our conversation! I hope we can talk more, soon."

She pauses to touch the ring in her pocket, debating whether she should leave it behind for Cassiel to have someone to talk to. Uncertain regarding what path to take, she merely shakes her head.

"I'll come by to visit you every hour or two, alright? There's a button on the dresser beside your bed. If you need me, just push it, and I'll come running."

Phoebe waves goodbye to Cassiel, though, judging by the girl's inability to even see her, the action ends up feeling useless.

A few minutes later, Physical and Spirit-Phoebe slowly trudge away from the house, simultaneously happy at making a small amount of progress, yet frustrated by not making nearly as much as they wanted.

Physical-Phoebe pulls Gabriel's ring out of her pocket. "I should give this to Jason right away so he can ask Gabriel if he made successful contact."

"I think he did." Spirit-Phoebe says. "If someone is able to communicate with an Archangel, making just a little physical contact with the ring should be enough. You don't need to wear it."

Physical-Phoebe stares off into the distance, at her husband, talking to Hans Wagner about something she can't make out from so far away.

"I haven't really spoken to Gabriel much." Physical-Phoebe says. "What's he like?"

Her spirit self shrugs. "Quiet, polite, introspective. He's like a giant teddy bear."

"Mmm..." Physical-Phoebe murmurs. "Say... why do you and I get along so well, but not Jason and Hope? We're clones too, right?"

"You know the reason. It's because our husband bottles up his emotions and lashes out," Her spiritual self answers. "And we're at fault, too. We should have been more empathetic to Hope. Or rather, you should have. I didn't exist at that point. Or maybe I did, since I share those memories. Huh... I guess this is how Jason and Hope often feel about their shared-"

Spirit-Phoebe abruptly stops talking, startling her physical self. Phoebe turns around, only to see her spirit-self nowhere in sight.

"...Uh. What?" She asks.

Phoebe glances to the left and right. She frowns as something makes her stomach churn, some unknown sensation she can't fully identify.

From a distance, Jason shouts something, but she doesn't quite make it out. Phoebe turns to look at him, only to frown when she sees the Wordsmith running toward her with a look of panic on his face.

"Huh?" Phoebe asks. "What's wrong, Jason? Why did you recall my spiritual..."

Phoebe pauses mid-sentence. That unsettling feeling in her gut boils over as she turns to look back at Cassiel's plant-covered house.

"Oh, no. No! NOOO!!"

A minute earlier.

After Phoebe leaves, Cassiel remains in the same place as before.

The angel girl sits motionless on the ground, her thoughts a mixture of hyper-speed contemplations regarding her freedom, but also molasses slowing her down and preventing her from making a move.

The fear of the unknown. The fear of possibilities. The fear of new horizons, and even the fear that this new life might not entirely be real, but a hallucination inside her mind.

How often has she dreamt of seeing sunlight again, or the sky, or grass, flowers, and pretty birds? How many times did she sob silently, wishing someone would come to save her, yet know she was trapped forever?

She questions herself constantly. Her stomach swirls as she struggles to orient herself with the unfamiliar world around her, a world she hasn't seen in one hundred thousand years.

As a Lazarite, she only experienced a relatively short period of life in Heaven before the end of the Energy Wars. Then, she ended up inside Gressil's dungeon, tormented for close to ninety-nine percent of her entire life.

For almost the entirety of her existence, she has known only pain and suffering. She has become a shell of her former self. A fragile glass ball suffering from thousands of hairline cracks, ready to burst at the slightest touch.

Her halo hangs listlessly over her head, barely bright enough to be visible in pitch-blackness, let alone daylight. Once a brightly glowing symbol of her resurrection, she used to see herself as a fighter for the Divines, a warrior who could do anything if she put her mind to it.

But those days faded away, reduced to faint, barely perceivable memories.

In her head, only one thing ingrained itself into her mind.

The face of her tormentor. A monster who used her for his own pleasure. A vile beast who punched her, beat her, stabbed her, and did other vile things no person should ever do to another.

Every time Gressil's face appears in Cassiel's memories, she bites her lip, slowly chewing it raw.

What normal life can she ever lead, after suffering so badly?

How could she ever return to normal society after being defiled by his hands?

These thoughts spin like a tornado in her mind, right up until all the light in her room disappears.

A sickening, yet overwhelmingly familiar sensation explodes in Cassiel's stomach.

She jerks her head up from her knees. She opens her mouth in a silent scream as, just two feet away, a pair of greyish, corpse-like legs stand before her.

Cassiel's eyes flick upward, to the torso of a demon with six arms, two heads, and dozens of glowing eyes embedded in his flesh.

Gressil, her most hated and feared person in existence, towers over the little angel girl, a vicious grin plastered on his face. Having not yet fully healed himself, his body appears scarred and disfigured, but this only makes his sudden and unexpected arrival even more horrifying!

"Haha. Hello, Birdy." Gressil says. "Did you think... you escaped me?"

Cassiel jerks her head back, smacking it against the wall. Before her silent scream can become an audible one, Gressil lunges out one of his hands to grab her by the throat. He yanks her away from the wall, presses her against the ground, and crouches over top of her small, defenseless body.

"Haha. Haha." Gressil gurgles. "You did, didn't you? You thought the humans saved you. They didn't. You're not safe here, Birdy. You never were, and you never will be. I let you escape. You weren't a fun toy anymore. You didn't scream like you used to. You stopped giving me pleasure."

Gressil licks his lips. Cassiel weakly grabs at his wrist in a desperate attempt to pull him off her, but her sickly, impoverished body can't do anything to stop him.

"Yes. Fight back more." Gressil says, as a dark hunger appears in his eyes. "Just like that. You're so beautiful. I forgot how pretty you once looked. All those years in that smelly cell... it made your skin *rotten*. You're much better the way you are now... but this isn't enough for me. I want you to gain back more of your spirit, Birdy. Then, when you think you've finally escaped me, I'll appear again. I'll take you for myself, pluck out your cute little wings, and ravish you until there's nothing left."

His smile spreads even wider, turning truly lecherous.

"Your new friends don't know who you are. Even if they did, they'd only feel shame for you. You're nothing but a shadow of your old self. Do you think they'll be able to protect you? Do you think you'll be able to protect them? You failed everyone. You led your sisters right to me, and I devoured their cute little bodies whole. Haha. They used to cry out your name, before I snuffed them out like candles."

Gressil lowers his head. His long tongue snakes out of his mouth, as he forces it down Cassiel's throat, making her gurgle and choke in fright.

When he retracts his tongue, he smiles one last time.

"Just a parting kiss to go. Never forget whose girl you are. If you don't want the others to suffer... you'd better not get any bad ideas. I'll make sure to punish you ten times worse when we next meet. Haha."

He releases Cassiel's neck, but even with her windpipe freed, she doesn't scream. She lays on the ground, too frightened to move, shaking and petrified out of her wits. Her mouth opens and closes involuntarily as she recalls the revolting taste of his rancid, rotten saliva.

"Yes. Just... like... that..." Gressil says, as he traces his hand across her chest.

Gressil stands up. His body fades away, as if swallowed by an invisible doorway. Moments later, his presence vanishes, along with his magic-suffocating aura.

Cassiel lays still, shaking and staring at the ceiling, unable to stop her body from trembling. Tears well up in her eyes, and a faint, distant scream gurgles in her throat, never to fully emerge.

Moments later, the door to her room flies open. Jason and Phoebe charge inside, only to spot Cassiel laying on her back, shaking like a leaf.

"Oh, no." Phoebe whispers, her heart in her throat. "Cassiel! Cassiel! It's okay! We're here, now!"

She rushes over to Cassiel, but the angel continues to stare at the ceiling, as if having lost touch with the world around her.

Jason keeps his distance and investigates the area with his senses. His eyes narrow to slits when his Wordsmithing gives him solid evidence of the events which just transpired.

"Gressil. You mother fucker."

Part 335: The Power Glove

Dozens of troopers rush to Cassiel's residence. They swarm around the exterior and sweep the perimeter, but nobody finds any indication of the Emperor of Chaos's presence. As if having stepped through time and space, he vanishes, never appearing on anyone's sensors.

Phoebe holds Cassiel in her arms while the angel quietly shakes and trembles, too petrified to move a muscle. Phoebe hastily cleans up the disgusting saliva left on her face, all while rage-filled thoughts boil in her mind.

"I won't leave you. Don't worry, I'm here for you, Cassiel. Just stay calm, take deep breaths..."

As Phoebe consoles the broken woman, Jason storms outside and grabs the nearest trooper.

"Well?! Where is he?! Don't give me that shit! You find that cocksucker! Shut down the portal and trap the motherfucker here! I'll kill him myself if I have to!"

The Wordsmith exhales so hard that his nostrils flare up and his eyes turn bloodshot. Even as the trooper stammers out several apologies, Jason continues ranting.

"How did he get here unseen, anyway?! I fully upgraded and reinforced the Core's security and scanning protocols to ensure this wouldn't happen! What, did he fall out of the fucking sky?!"

"I-I'm sorry, sir," The troopers says. "We don't know how Gressil made it past our barriers. Since he can use illusion magic, and he has some sort of teleporting ability, we think he might have-"

"I don't want you to goddamn *think* about what he did, I want you to make sure this doesn't happen again!" Jason roars. "What if he'd gone after Phoebe, or Hope, or even me?! Hell, if he can get past the Core, he could go anywhere in our defensive line! We can't just sit here and-"

Before Jason can continue any longer, a hand grabs onto his shoulder and forcefully spins him around. Jason scowls when he finds himself face-to-face with Belial.

"Alright, Jason. Simmer down. Stop blowing your top at this poor guy." Belial says, frowning at him. "It's not his fault."

Jason inhales and exhales several times before pushing Belial's hand away. He shoots a glare at the trooper, but then softens his expression.

"You're right. Sorry! Never mind. Keep looking for him, and let me know if you find anything."

The trooper nods hastily. "Y-yes, sir!"

He leaves Jason alone to rant at Belial.

"I didn't realize- I didn't think he could just wander in through the front fucking door." Jason growls. "This is absurd, absolutely god-damned absurd! How the hell are we supposed to deal with an illusory, teleporting, sadistic fuck-bastard like Gressil?!"

Belial glances at the open doorway leading to Cassiel's room.

"I don't know, Jason. Now that Gressil has shown he can come and go as he pleases, we'll have to figure out how to even detect him. Magical technology won't work; he'll shut it down when he gets close, or it won't even penetrate his anti-magic aura in the first place. And traditional technology probably won't work either, because he can hide himself in illusions."

"What, so we're just screwed, then?" Jason asks.

"I... I don't know." Belial says with a sigh. "I punch things, and I heal things. I also sneak around and stretch my limbs. None of my skills will be of any use in tracking Gressil down, not unless he wants to make a booty call."

"Hilarious." Jason mutters.

"You're missing the bigger picture." Belial says. "We don't know what Gressil said or did to Cassiel. What we do know is that he could have easily whisked her away from right under our noses, but he didn't. Why do you think he left her here?"

Jason frowns. "Are you implying..."

"I'm not implying anything," Belial says. "I'm postulating that Gressil *let us* take Cassiel and Hope from his dungeon. Think about it. As hard of a task as our escape was, if Gressil didn't want us to rescue them, we'd have been powerless to stop him. He could

have grabbed Cassiel and Hope both and teleported away. He must have some broader aim, some goal he's pursuing."

The Wordsmith's expression turns chilly.

"So, what? He only came here to traumatize Cassiel? Or do you think he did something else to her?"

"One thing is for sure." Belial replies. "Gressil isn't right in the head. He devoured his mother, and now she's become part of him. Looking at the facts I've uncovered, Gressil... seems to be able to consume others and merge them into himself. Since that's the case, it might explain why he captured Hope."

"You mean..." Jason says, while sucking in a shallow breath. "...He wanted to merge Hope into his body? He wanted to steal Hope's Wordsmithing powers?"

"Possibly." Belial answers. "But I'm only guessing. Then, of course, we have to ask why he didn't do that in the first place. Why rip off all of Hope's limbs and torture him until he fell into a coma? Maybe there's some... some other reason for his actions we aren't seeing? And Cassiel, he might have some awful, nefarious plan for her, too."

Jason falls silent. He drops to the ground and plunks on his butt as many heavy thoughts weigh on his mind.

Several minutes pass. While the troopers hustle and bustle around Cassiel's residence and swarm around the city, searching for life signs or magical technology failing to do its job, the Wordsmith merely closes his eyes and thinks.

Belial sits beside him. She waits for him to finish thinking, and to finish conferring with his mind-wife.

Eventually, Jason opens his eyes. He lifts his gaze upward, to the sky.

"...Tarus II isn't safe." Jason mutters. "Not in the least. It has a fixed location. It's easy to infiltrate. I was planning to remedy this in the future, but I thought I could rebuild and fortify here, at least for now. As it stands, we're sitting ducks."

Belial raises an eyebrow. "What do you mean? Should we move to another planet?"

"No." Jason says. "Not another planet. Camael's Cube. It has a vast living space inside its interior. It would be the ideal position for a mobile base. The demons wouldn't be able to touch us. The Volgrim would have a hard time even detecting us. We'd be so much safer than here, living on this blasted mud-ball. I already planned to move everyone into

the Cube at some point, but I didn't expect to have to move so quickly. Gressil's abilities change things."

"How long would it take for you to make the Cube hospitable to human life?" Belial asks.

"I don't know." Jason answers. "Currently, the interior of the cube is rich with magical energy. But oxygen? An ecosystem of plants and animals? Doesn't exist. I'd have to Wordsmith all of that into existence. I'd have to terraform the Cube into something more livable. I could make it like a giant space station, but I'd rather give it seasons, functional day/night cycles on a 24-hour rotation, and so on. I haven't thought about how to imitate sunlight, though, or set up photosynthesis and all that other stuff. No offense, but Phoebe is only a substitute for Solomon's abilities. His Crown could make terraforming take minutes, or perhaps even seconds. It will take Phoebe a lot longer to compute all the variables, and that's while she's working on all our other projects."

"In the meantime..." Jason continues, slowing his words down while he continues to think, "I have to find some way to protect Cassiel and the others. Once Hope awakens, he should be able to protect himself. But right now, he's helpless."

"Should we leave him alone?" Belial asks, glancing at Hope's infirmary. "Gressil could grab him right this second."

"If he didn't capture Cassiel, I don't think he'll take Hope." Jason answers. "But that being said, I placed a dozen of my best soldiers in his room, and I shut down the portal to the Labyrinth. Gressil should be either stuck here, or stuck in the Labyrinth..."

While talking, a glint appears in Jason's eyes. He suddenly stands up and nods, as a look of surprise appears.

"Of course! I didn't even think about that."

"Think about what?" Belial asks, also jumping to her feet.

"My Black Hole Constructs." Jason explains. "For now, what Hope and Cassiel need are bodyguards, someone who can stay awake 24/7, maintain a vigilant watch, and never leave their side. My constructs are perfect for that job. Unlike normal sentients, they never get tired, and they're excellent at focusing on one task. Their bodies are damn-near indestructible, and they hit like firetrucks."

Jason glances at Belial. "You fought Gressil. How strong was he? Do you think he'd win if he and one of my constructs came to blows?"

Belial scrunches up her face. "Um. It's hard to say. His ability to teleport is really, really troublesome. His illusions screwed with my mind, making him able to trick me repeatedly. But physically? He's not even close to my match. I beat the crap out of him, with ease."

"So he's not invincible." Jason concludes. "That's fine. I can work with it. **Recall. Recall.**"

Jason utters two words of power, causing both of his Black Hole Constructs to appear before him. The eerie copies of his body stand at attention, their vacuous eyes gazing forward at nothing in particular.

"Is it alright to put the constructs into such minor roles?" Belial asks. "I thought you built them to protect the Core?"

"I did, but they're more of deterrents, or ultimate weapons. Using them as bodyguards for VIPs is perfectly fine. Maybe I'll even make more, to protect my wife and other high-profile people."

"Including yourself?" Belial asks. "Jason, if Gressil can get the jump on Hope, he can certainly do so to you. You definitely need protection. Maybe even me, too. If Gressil were to attack me at an inopportune time, I'd probably end up on the losing side of a fight."

"We need to catch that slippery cunt in some sort of trap." Jason says, while scrutinizing his constructs. "For now though, let's work on one thing at a time. **Appearance. Shift. Morph.**"

Jason mentally manipulates the face and body of one construct, changing it from an ugly facsimile of himself into a pretty, delicate, and gentle-looking angel, not dissimilar to Cassiel, but with red hair, a tiara on her forehead, and a cute red dress.

Belial glances at him. "Um."

"It's not what you're thinking," Jason says. "Cassiel is obviously afraid of men and demons. If I'm going to give her a bodyguard, they should look like an angel, you see? Then she'll feel more comfortable. So I'll give her a dainty, sweet-looking girl to protect her."

Jason smiles evilly and chuckles to himself. "And if Gressil reappears, maybe this little cutie will catch him offguard. He might not realize how terrifyingly strong she is, heh heh heh..."

"Are you sure you didn't hit your head recently?" Belial asks. "You worry me, sometimes."

Jason waves his hand. "I'm just messing around. Anyway, this isn't enough to stop Gressil. Let me add some new 'features' to this Construct."

Jason falls silent for several minutes while conversing with his mind wife. After some time, he speaks a word of power.

"Transmitter."

Jason holds out his hand, and a tiny bean-sized gadget appears in his palm. He grabs the hand of the female construct and slaps the device into its grasp.

"Swallow this."

The Construct doesn't nod or acknowledge his words, but it does open its mouth and toss the gadget into the back of its throat. After swallowing, it returns to a neutral standing position.

"What was that?" Belial asks.

"I'm making the Construct better able to contact others for backup in the event that Gressil or some other enemy does appear." Jason explains. "The transmitter will work anywhere on Tarus II, and it has a triangulation beacon in the event the Construct ends up inside the Labyrinth. Even if Gressil's anti-magic field appears, the Construct will be able to send out a distress signal."

"Such a bland term." Belial comments. "Why not give her a name? Just calling her 'Construct' seems lame, right?"

"It's essentially a biological machine." Jason says. "Its appearance doesn't matter. It's not a real girl, you know?"

"Sure. But why not treat her like a real person?" Belial asks. "Let's call her... Sally!"

"That's terrible." Jason says, rolling his eyes. "If we're going to name the Construct, let's at least make the name something angelic. Uh..."

He pauses for a moment to think.

"How about... Soleil?"

"Bit of a mouthful." Belial says.

"Sure, but Cassiel, Muriel, Samael, etc. They all have names that end in I-E-L or A-E-L. Since she has red hair, that made me think of fire, the sun, Earth's former star, Sol... So, why not Soleil?"

Belial mulls the idea over in her head for nearly a full minute. She finally nods.

"Alright. Soleil. It's adequate."

"Right, and for the other construct..."

Jason snorts to himself and tries to suppress a smile. He Wordsmiths again, this time aiming to change the appearance of the other Construct.

"Appearance. Shift. Morph."

This time, Belial crosses her arms, turns to look at Jason, and shoots him an expression which seems to ask, *are you an idiot?*

"What are you even doing, Jason? Stop messing around. That looks totally stupid."

"No it doesn't!" Jason says, defensively. "He looks awesome!"

"No. He doesn't. What's with the black, rubber suit? And the pointy horns on his head?"

"They're not horns. They're like, uh, animal ears."

"Animal ears? They look like horns! Also, a cape? Why would you give the suit a cape? It's completely impractical."

Jason scowls at Belial. "Come on, don't tell me you don't recognize *Batman!* He's so cool! Hope will get a real kick out of waking up and seeing Batman protecting him. It might even make him laugh!"

Belial facepalms. "I don't know who 'Batman' is, but he looks utterly stupid. Do something else."

Jason rolls his eyes. "Fine. **Appearance. Shift. Morph.**"

Upon seeing the Construct's second change in appearance, Belial groans in displeasure. "Ughhh. Seriously? Why is this guy made of nothing but muscles? He looks like some dumb idiot roid-rager. Like Bael, but even more ridiculous."

"He's *Arnold Schwarzenegger*!" Jason protests. "A super cool 80's action star! He can definitely intimidate Gressil if he shows up."

"He won't intimidate anyone! He looks like a lunkhead!" Belial says, cracking a smile in part due to the ridiculousness of the situation. "Are you messing with me? Get serious, Jason!"

"Fine, fine." Jason grumbles. "*Someone* isn't any fun. Alright... lemme think."

Jason falls silent for another minute or so before his expression becomes more serious.

"Alright. This should unironically be pretty useful in a lot of ways. **Appearance. Shift. Morph.**"

This time, when the construct changes its shape, Belial nods along, silently examining it from all angles. She walks around the construct and flashes a look of surprise at Jason.

"King Arthur. That's an... interesting choice. Why make a doppelganger of the Hero King himself?"

"A few reasons." Jason explains. "First, he's intimidating. Second, he has one hell of a reputation with the demons. Just seeing him should spook anyone who remembers his face. And thirdly..."

Jason pauses.

"...Wouldn't it be incredible if I could mimic some of Arthur's powers and give them to this construct?"

"Can... can you even do that?" Belial asks. "I know you boosted Phoebe's body to give her super-strength, but... how do you mimic or recreate someone's powers?"

"My Wordsmithing is versatile." Jason says. "But its true power lays not in making myself a godly fighter, but in improving other people and creating artifacts and gadgets. I've boosted Phoebe's strength and durability to her biological limits, sure, but I've also given myself telepathy, and telekinesis, flight, and super-speed. Surely, with some effort and careful thought, I could grant other types of abilities."

"Have you tried doing that before?" Belial asks.

"Sort of..." Jason says, his tone slowing down. "The thing is, me doubling the gravity in an area through my Wordsmithing isn't the same as giving someone else the power to

manipulate gravity. I've always hesitated to dole out powers, because if they were used for evil, turned against me, or mishandled by accident, someone could do a lot of damage. Even so, Phoebe and I have been talking. She's working on a... a new gadget."

The Wordsmith glances around at the troopers in the area. Without hesitation, he Wordsmiths a privacy field around himself and Belial, hiding them from view and turning their words inaudible to the outside world.

"I don't want to get anyone's hopes up." Jason says, keeping his voice low. "But... basically, I think it might be possible to mass-produce something that will benefit every single person that pledges themselves to humanity's cause. Not just humans, but monsters and demons alike."

"In what way?" Belial asks, her curiosity piqued.

"**Projection.**" Jason says, summoning a small ethereal image in the air above his palm.

A mechanical glove-like device appears, one with all sorts of technical-looking pieces, a display screen, and a mechanical rotator dial built-in to the wrist.

"This is the next step in humanity's warfare doctrine." Jason says. "I call it the Power Glove."

Belial groans louder than before. "Your names *seriously* suck."

"Nah. The Power Glove is so *bad*," Jason says, offering her a faint smirk before continuing. "But, true to its name, the Power Glove will give people the ability to shapeshift into other forms, or to switch between wielding different sorts of magical powers."

He pauses before adding, "As far as the Shapeshifting thing goes, I got the idea from you."

"From me?" Belial asks. "Wait, can this Power Glove turn people into... anyone else?!"

"Well. Sort of." Jason says. "It has some... technical limitations. Currently, I can only store a few blueprints in it at a time. After all, storing an entire entity's genetic makeup would require a lot of digital storage space. If you wore it, you could turn into a human, an angel, a monster, or whatever was programmed into your module. Your appearance would only be capable of becoming one type of thing, though. So it's not like you can select 'human woman' and then customize your hair, eye color, or anything else. You'd

only have access to a few pre-programmed appearances. And the glove would have to stay on, so it would make identifying a transformed person pretty easy."

"I see." Belial says. "What's the functional reason for allowing people to swap species?"

"Humans have a serious problem." Jason explains. "Magically speaking, we're all utterly dull and useless at it. We don't have Psionics, magic, or any other sort of extraordinary abilities. Only I do, as a Hero. But a Power Glove, if it works, could upend all of that."

Jason becomes more excited as he talks. "I mean, think about it! If someone needs to move a bunch of debris, they could morph into a huge Troll! Or they could select the super-strength augment! Flight? Got that covered. Invisibility? Check. Teleportation? Yup."

"There must be a catch." Belial says. "Surely, a device this ridiculous would shatter the balance of power."

"Oh, it *will*." Jason says. "I promise that. But yeah, it's going to have some limitations. From what I've discovered, most people have 'affinities' for different types of power. Phoebe is pretty versatile. She can handle super strength, telekinesis, some other stuff, but her ability to summon and fling fireballs is complete crap. We'll have to build Power Gloves individually, customizing one for each soldier. It'll take a lot of time and effort to do all that."

"Plus," He adds, "There's one other limitation. Humans innately can't control magic very well. Not only are they useless at it, but their bodies can't store much of it at all. So, do you remember what I said during the meeting earlier? About making something like a mana battery to store humanity's collective magical energy?"

Belial nods. "I do. Will the gloves pull from that power source?"

"Kinda. If everything works out, people will be able to recharge their Power Gloves at the Mana Batteries. The gauntlets will store mana until needed, and then people will be able to use magical powers for a short time. But! There's one neat factor. Someone who possesses a lot of mana in their body already, such as a high-ranking demon, or a monster like Blinker... they'd be able to use the powers much more versatilely. They can run the abilities not only through the glove's internal batteries, but through their bodies' mana circuits."

The Wordsmith stares at Belial meaningfully. "You have a lot of mana, but not many ways to use it. With a Power Glove, you'd gain access to an entire arsenal of powers."

"Whoa." Belial mutters. She falls silent for half a minute, contemplating Jason's words. "This is... this is kind of huge, Jason. A genuine game-changer."

"Yeah. But right now, it's all theory. I need to do some other stuff first before the Power Gloves become viable. Phoebe hasn't even completed the designs yet. They might not be practical."

The Wordsmith shrugs. "Even if the Power Glove idea doesn't work, I have other concepts that will reshape our society. Ever since... ever since Stormbringer... I've been thinking more in the bigger picture."

Belial rests her hand on Jason's shoulder.

"You're doing a good job, Jason. You're trying your best. I'm sure, with Phoebe's help, this Power Glove thing will work out. She's a genius, you know. That's why I love her, among other reasons."

"Haha..." Jason chuckles. "There you go, getting all starry-eyed about my wife, again. Are you going to pull her aside one of these days when I'm not looking? Get a little smoochy-smooch going on?"

Belial's skin flushes with color. "No, no, don't be silly! I'd, I'd never do something like that! That would be a betrayal of our friendship!"

"I'm just kidding." Jason says, waving his hand. "And hey, if anything happens, I'll just look away for a bit."

He smiles at Belial, but a hint of sadness rests in his eyes.

"You've suffered a lot in your life, Samantha. I'd like for you to find happiness, too."

The former Second Emperor stares at the Wordsmith for a moment before averting her gaze.

"Thank you."

Jason nods. "Anytime."

He shifts his attention back to the two Black Hole Constructs.

"Ahem. Now then, returning to these two... how can I make them into Gressil-slayers, I wonder?"

Part 336: Too Many Spies

After attacking his precious 'Birdy,' Gressil departs her room, arriving outside the building and shrouding himself in illusions. He turns his body invisible, then shoots a glance at the approaching Wordsmith, not far in the distance.

"Haha. What fun it is to sow chaos among the righteous."

Gressil closes his eyes. He inhales deeply, and suppresses the corrupted mana emanating from his body, that same anti-magic aura which has currently snuffed out the powers of every entity in a several-mile sphere.

He condenses his power, his 'Chaos Energy' into himself, making it only surround his body and the immediate five-foot vicinity. In this way, he becomes completely stealthy, able to walk around without alerting everyone possessing a magical nature to his existence.

The Emperor of Chaos takes a heavy breath, pained by having to forcefully subdue his demonic nature.

"I cannot suppress the energy of Chaos for too long," He mutters to himself. "My rage knows no end."

He casually strolls forward, occasionally flickering a few hundred feet in one direction or another, passing through walls and stepping into fortified and unprotected areas alike.

Hell's prison-warden eyes the humans, monsters, and demons on Tarus II coldly.

"They will shut down the portal to the Labyrinth, soon enough. I shouldn't linger for long. Ah, but how I wish to check up on my *worms*. So many spies, but so little time..."

Gressil steps through space into a large tent, one with a mid-level military officer sitting inside taking notes.

"Hello." Gressil says, his voice rumbling in the air. "It's been a while since we saw each other, little human."

The man turns around and gasps in horror, seeing the specter of his nightmares standing before him. "M-master Gressil! I-I-I..."

"You've been keeping to yourself lately." Gressil says, his tone ice-cold. "I want to see you out and about more, *worm*. A spy is no good to me in their room."

"Y-yes! Of c-course, master Gressil!"

The man practically pisses himself in fear, even after Gressil departs. The horror of having succumbed to Gressil's worms some years earlier has made not only his life a living hell, but the lives of hundreds of other infiltrators as well.

Unlike Ose's bewitched servants who follow her orders, Gressil's 'worms' maintain their free will. However, knowing that their master can appear before them anywhere, at any time, keeps them dishonest to their fellow men and women. None of them wish to end up on his torture table.

Gressil visits a few other spies before traveling to a small house just outside the city's limits, but within its hardened, crystalline wall.

When he appears, a demoness inside nearly jumps out of her skin.

"M-m-mister Gressil!" She gasps.

Gressil glances around inside her small and humble abode. He quickly spots what appears to be an elderly man laying on a bed, with both of his wrists chained to the headboard, and his legs tied to the base of the bed through ropes.

"Rosalia." Gressil growls. "I see you've found the one you were pursuing. How... *precious*. To think one of demonkind's rising stars would end up here, trapped in the palm of your hand. You have promise."

Rosalia flinches when she sees Gressil eyeballing Beelzebub, chained to the bed and unconscious, sleeping due to exhaustion.

"M-Mister Beelzebub is- I already told you I found him! You're not going to take him from me, are you?!"

"Why would I bother?" Gressil asks. "No. I just wanted to thank you. Your eyes have provided me... valuable information. In particular, you have kept a close watch on the former Second Emperor's movements. You are one of my more exemplary worms."

Gressil smiles, but his expression appears far more cruel than kind-hearted. He leans forward and reaches out his hand, seizing the plump demoness's shoulder. He squeezes it hard enough to make her cry out in pain, but no matter how she tries to pull away, she can't break free.

"Your efforts are appreciated, but still too *lacking*." Gressil growls. "I gave you Desire, yet you barely feed her anything of value. Stop holding back. You have the power now... the power to shape your own destiny. I expect you to make dramatic improvements in the coming months. Do not disappoint me."

Rosalia shivers. She averts her eyes, too terrified to meet Gressil's piercing gaze.

"B-but... what you want me to do... I can't get away with it! There are too many fleshbags! They'll see me! They'll find out!"

"You work in a hospital." Gressil says. "Accidents happen. Do not give me excuses. Give me *results*."

He continues to stare at her for a few moments before casually flicking his wrist and sending Rosalia flying backward. She screams in pain after crashing against the wall, but when she opens her eyes again, the prison-warden no longer appears anywhere in sight.

Gressil continues traveling. Before long, he arrives at the Warpgate leading from Tarus II to the Labyrinth. He walks casually, not moving with any particular haste. Thanks to the intelligence granted by his many worms, he arrives moments before the troopers at the gate receive their orders to shut it down. Right as they start to key in the command codes, Gressil teleports forward and passes through, arriving inside the Core at the same time as the Warpgate closes.

The Emperor of Chaos continues his previous objective. He casually traverses around the Core in the same way he always has. No matter whether humans or demons or monsters stand near him, he passes by their sensors and eyes without the slightest trouble.

For years now, he has popped by the Core at random times, infecting worthwhile humans and their allies with his worms. Today, a few hundred spies linger among humanity's forces, unknown to their brethren.

Gressil sighs. "How troublesome it is, growing new worms. Such a slow process. And then I have to hunt down worthwhile hosts with a high compatibility... if only I could entrust this matter to a capable slave."

He visits a few more worm-hosts in the Core before ultimately waltzing out through the front door, unseen by his enemies. Not one person notices any trace of his presence.

After leaving, the pressure in Gressil's body begins to take its toll. He slowly releases the Chaos Energy he's built up, allowing him to once again emanate his anti-magic aura. The further he gets from the Core, the more of it he releases, until finally, he can breathe easily.

"Chaos. It is a power, and a curse..." He muses. "It is hatred and rage. Emotions too overwhelming to control. Few can harness its might. Ah, but that Beelzebub fellow... for a moment, he did manage to tap into it. Such an interesting candidate. How glad I am to have found him when he was only an imp. Giving him that piece of the Phoenix was, indeed, the appropriate choice."

Gressil chuckles to himself. He changes direction, heading back not to Faith's End, but a short detour elsewhere.

Soon, he arrives at a curious sight. Three goblins travel through the Labyrinth's winding hallways, their gait taking them directly toward the Labyrinth Core.

"Ah. There you are." Gressil says to himself.

He steps out of his illusory world to arrive directly in the Goblins' path. All three of them flinch in alarm, but upon seeing the entity in front of them, and recognizing who is is, their postures become even more defensive.

"N-no want trouble!" The lead Goblin says. "Please, Gressil! What you want?"

Gressil snorts. "Stop the act, Changeling. All three of you."

The lead Goblin, none other than 'Grima' himself, stares at Gressil for several seconds before standing up straight. He nods slowly, re-evaluating the Emperor before him.

"Prison-Warden Gressil. This one has heard your name come up recently through our contacts."

"I'm sure you have." Gressil says. "And it looks as if you've enjoyed a little vacation from the Core. Did the Founders reward you for your... delivery?"

Grima's expression remains impassive. "What do you mean?"

The Emperor of Chaos merely chuckles. He flicks his gaze toward the other two Goblins.

"This 'Kotori' fellow is still a little new to infiltration. But you two... you appear much more capable than him. It seems Unarin is sending a few high-level Changelings to Tarus

II, eh?"

One of the other two Goblins takes a step forward, his demeanor assuming a much more calm and poised stance. "You have no right to interfere in matters regarding the Overlords, demon. Step aside."

"The *Overlords*." Gressil snorts. "Just say 'Volgrim.' Don't play games with me. I follow your movements carefully. I know what it is that you seek."

"We seek to empower the Founders." Says the second Changeling. "Tactical information is of use. Ancillary conversations are not."

"Oh? Then I suppose I should not stand in your way." Gressil says, smiling sinisterly. "I just wanted to make sure you knew... your movements are not as stealthy as you think."

He chuckles softly, then shoots one last look at 'Grima.'

"By the way, regarding that... *special item* you found. Did you think you stumbled upon it by chance? Hehe. You have assisted me well, little Changeling. Perhaps, in the future, you will do so again."

Gressil's body fades into the ether, turning invisible and teleporting away.

After he leaves, Kotori and their fellow Changelings turn to look at each other with uncertain expressions.

"What does Gressil speak of?" Asks the second Changeling from earlier, a Seventh-Class Operative named Duugo. "Are his words implying the artifact you delivered to the Founders was a fake?"

"Negative." Kotori answers. "This one is certain the artifact was truly Solomon's Crown. However, this one was unaware they were being manipulated. Why would Gressil use us to place the artifact inside the Founders' grasp?"

"This one is uncertain," Says the third Changeling, a Sixth-Class Informer known as Jin. "It seems you did not find the artifact by chance. This one believes we should alert the Founders as to Gressil's words."

"The demon may be lying." Duugo states. "Perhaps he merely observed Kotori's actions and wished to place doubt in our minds. Nevertheless, this one will deliver a report to the Founders before we return to the Core."

"Demons are excellent at the art of deception." Jin observes. "We must always contemplate and comprehend if we seek to look past their trickery."

"Yes, we must." Duugo agrees.

Tarus II.

Phoebe tenderly holds Cassiel and rocks back and forth, while the angel shivers unceasingly from fear. Having cleaned up Gressil's saliva from Cassiel's face, Phoebe coos to her softly, as if Cassiel were her own daughter.

"There, there. It's okay, now. I'm not going anywhere. I won't leave you alone, honey."

Cassiel clings to Phoebe, the two of them wrapping their arms around each other, as if terrified to let go. She buries her face in Phoebe's chest and remains silent, never once saying a word.

Some time passes while the many troopers outside and inside the room comb every inch of the premises, but as expected, they don't find Gressil. Still, they stick around and keep a wary eye, ready to jump in if he reappears.

Jason enters the room after a time, and smiles weakly at his wife.

"How is she?" He asks.

Phoebe doesn't reply, but her eyes tell him all he needs to know.

"...Fair enough." Jason says.

The Wordsmith walks over and sits on the bed beside Phoebe and Cassiel, while the two of them sit on the floor.

"We can't leave her alone again." Phoebe says. "It's too dangerous."

"I agree." Jason replies. "That's why I've come up with a counter-measure. Don't freak out when you see my two guests, they're not who you think they are."

Invisible question marks pop up above Phoebe's head as she tries to understand her husband's words. A moment later, Phoebe's eyes nearly pop out of her head when two figures walk into the room.

"W-what?! An angel? And... King Arthur?!"

Were Phoebe and Cassiel not holding each other, the former Knight of the Round Table might have leaped to her feet in shock. Even as she struggles to comprehend the appearance of her long-dead king, Jason shakes his head.

"Not quite. Remember my Black Hole Constructs? These are them now."

Phoebe blinks several times, suppressing the emotions within her heart as she gazes at the face of the man she has always admired most. The long-dead Hero, King Arthur, stares at the wall above Phoebe's head, paying neither her nor anybody else in the room any mind.

"Constructs..." Phoebe repeats, slowly shaking the shock from her thoughts. "He's not Arthur? Ah... you Wordsmithed one of the Constructs to look like him. But why?"

"I got the idea from Annette." Jason explains. "I can change the appearance of other people as needed. Hope placed all of Amelia's memories inside Annette and changed her appearance, effectively resurrecting the Black Queen. While I could do the same for King Arthur, it wouldn't feel right. However, making a Construct that simply looks like him can serve many purposes."

Phoebe gently strokes Cassiel's hair while calming her beating heart. "I see. Your Black Hole Constructs are already pretty sturdy. You must intend to have them guard Cassiel."

"Yes, but also no." Jason says. "This angel girl will protect Cassiel, while Arthur will protect Hope and Annette. Once Hope revives, I'll reassign Arthur to protect you. As for the angel..."

He turns to look at her. "I've named the female construct 'Soleil.' Arthur currently doesn't have a personality or sentience, but Soleil is different."

Soleil stands at attention, but unlike Arthur's lifeless eyes, hers sparkle with the gift of life. She lowers her head to offer a simple, flat smile to Phoebe.

"Standard greeting. I am Soleil."

Phoebe nods. "Uh, hi. I'm Phoebe."

"Yes. Thy name is known to me." Soleil says. "Phoebe Hiro. Wife of Jason Hiro. Humanity's lead inventor. Importance Classification Level: Omega. Protection Priority: Highest."

Phoebe frowns. "She's a bit robotic."

"Only for now," Jason says. "I didn't copy her memories from anyone, like I did for Hope, or Hope did for Annette. She's a self-learning construct. I only gave her a few baseline personality rules. She won't hurt any humans, monsters, or demons who ally themselves with us unless she determines they are a threat to humanity as a whole. I worked with your spirit-self to try and make her basic restrictions airtight."

He smiles.

"She's not just a protector. She's a companion for Cassiel. I thought it would be nice if Cassiel had a fellow angel to talk to."

Soleil continues to smile, though her expression doesn't quite seem 'right.' It feels somewhat forced, making Phoebe feel awkward.

"Err, well, let's hope the personality quirks iron themselves out over time."

Unprompted, Soleil walks over and sits down beside Phoebe and Cassiel. Her smile disappears as she turns her attention to the angel tightly clutching onto Phoebe.

"Hello, Cassiel. I am Soleil. I am here to protect thee."

The red-haired construct doesn't reach out to touch Cassiel, but she does do something which surprises Phoebe. She projects a faint but noticeable aura of holy energy. Soleil effortlessly conjures angelic energy in the same way any living angel would, as if she were born and raised a pureblood.

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "How...?"

"I've added some 'features' to these constructs." Jason answers. "If a *certain someone* shows up again, he'll encounter a nasty surprise. I doubt we'll be able to catch him off-guard, but if we do, it should prove quite fun."

Phoebe rubs Cassiel's back. "There, you see? We know you're afraid, Cassiel, but my husband will protect you. You don't have to be scared anymore. We'll make sure you enjoy a life of freedom. We'll never let that awful person hurt you again, I promise."

Cassiel doesn't answer, but for the first time in nearly an hour, she lifts her watery blue eyes a smidge to glance at Soleil before lowering her gaze again.

She continues to hold Phoebe tightly, to which the Wordsmith's wife can only shoot her husband a helpless look.

"I'll just stay like this for a while."

Jason nods.

"I'm going to go place Arthur with Hope. Let's talk later."

"Sure." Phoebe concludes.

Sometime later, after putting the Arthur construct inside Hope's room and confirming his clone hasn't awoken from his coma, Jason finds himself standing alone, staring out at the waning sunlight.

"Hidden Emperors. Gressil. Volgrim. I need to be proactive. I can't sit on my ass and pray our problems fix themselves."

He activates his T-REX, enveloping his body in the nanite-based armor. When it seals up, Jason activates a series of recorded files given to him by Belial.

"Let's see. Names of the Hidden Emperors. Known power types. Personalities. This information is fairly comprehensive, but there are some significant holes. Who is this 'Glinch' fellow, and why doesn't Samantha know anything about him? Yumagi... last sighting was not long after the Energy Wars. Is he even still alive? He runs the Tarot Sect, and his powers seem to be identical to Mara's. But how does that work? I thought all demons evolved unique powers once they became Lords? Does he pass them down to his subordinates, somehow?"

Jason chews his lower lip while he reviews the information.

"Emperor Fenrir. Soul-attacker. She can traumatize her victims to the point they commit suicide. Emperor Kristoff. Blood-manipulator. He can create weapons and other implements using blood. Eugh, how grotesque."

The more Jason reads, the more pained his expression becomes.

"Any one of these Emperors could flatten humanity if I'm not around. Belial might be strong, but I doubt she can take on three Hidden Emperors at the same time. If they unite their strength and attack all at once, it could be a doomsday event..."

"We'll have to prepare appropriate responses for each Emperor," Jason's mind-wife, Phoebe, says. "I can help out a little, but I'm stretched pretty thin, currently. Working on all of these new projects is wearing me out. Maybe if you cloned another of me..."

Jason immediately shakes his head. "No can do, Phoebe. I already regret cloning you once. I won't do it again."

"What?" She asks. "You... regret cloning me?"

"No, no, I don't mean like that." Jason says. "Rather, I regret cloning you without asking your physical self for permission. That was wrong of me to do. Besides, I already trapped you in my Mind Realm, and I still feel guilty about that. I don't think it would be ethical to have a second one of you in there, too."

Phoebe glances around Jason's Mind Realm, taking note of Shana, Sir Lorent, and Gabriel, all off doing their own things.

"You already cloned me once," She says. "And that worked out fine. Having another copy of me in here would be pretty useful. I'm run pretty ragged right now. There are at least a dozen major projects on my plate. The Lazarus Tower and Power Gloves, especially. Getting any progress made on terraforming the Cube, creating the 'Demon Empowerment Sigil,' and getting a 'Belial Booster' working are all going to take a lot longer if I have to go at these problems by myself."

"I... I just feel as if playing with lives isn't something I should be abusing..." Jason murmurs. "Somehow, I intuitively feel that if I clone you, the result won't be good. Something feels off to me, but I can't quite put my misgivings into words."

"Is it because of what happened with Hope?" Phoebe asks.

"Sort of. But also, something else. I don't know. I really don't. It's just a feeling in my gut..."

Jason trails off. He shakes his head and returns to thinking about other things.

"Regarding the Demon Empowerment Sigil, the 'DESI'... is converting human energy to demonic energy genuinely viable?"

"It is," Phoebe answers immediately. "We'll be able to temporarily empower allied demons to the rank of Duke, but their bodies won't be able to contain the power for more than a few hours. We also won't be able to use the effect on the same demon in rapid succession. Soul exhaustion seems to be a limiting factor. The body may become stronger, but a Lord's soul is simply not as resilient as a Baron or a Duke's. I think the Belial Booster will be more viable in the long run."

"Mmm..." Jason murmurs. "A smaller but more permanent powerup, granted by Samantha, will do a lot more for empowering humanity's allied demons. It'll help us out more while we don't have many of them, but if more join our cause, Sam alone won't be able to provide enough energy to create Dukes and Emperors."

"Yes, but you're forgetting something important," Phoebe says. "When Samantha uplifts the first demon to Emperor rank on a permanent basis, they'll also be able to donate their energy to a lesser demon. Their numbers will grow slowly at first, but exponentially over time. The more Emperors willing to donate their demonic energy to the 'Belial Booster,' the faster we'll make new ones."

Jason frowns.

"That is true... but then we run the risk of having walking time bombs lurking in our midst. What if enemy demons join us, intending to use the Belial Booster to empower themselves? Then, when we least expect it, they could attack us from the inside. I'd rather focus on empowering our human assets first."

"Alright. Then I'll put the Belial Booster and DESI on the backburner." Phoebe replies. "They can come last."

"Good." Jason says. "Let's focus on the Lazarus Tower first, then the Power Glove. We need to start rescuing fallen souls as soon as possible."

"Actually, I've been thinking about the tower," Phoebe says. "Jason, shouldn't we reconsider putting people back in copies of their original bodies? I can't turn them into Lazarites, but the human body itself is flawed from the beginning. We should consider something stronger and more resilient."

"Like what?" Jason asks. "Body compatibility is a huge issue. If you put people in the wrong bodies, it will take them longer to reacclimate. Souls already suffer trauma due to the First Death. We don't want people to suffer inexplicable pain and whatever else due to being slapped into a 'superior' but lower-compatibility vessel."

Phoebe hesitates.

"...Well, I guess you have a point. Then maybe, once we resurrect someone, we should have some method of strengthening their original body? Some sort of magical beacon that can empower existing people? The way you gave my physical-self super strength is a good

example. If you have to Wordsmith that for each individual, your work will never be complete, but maybe we can automate the process?"

"Like you said, one thing at a time." Jason replies. "Let's get people resurrected first, and make sure we stand a fighting chance against the Emperors if they show up. I'd rather not have to-"

Jason suddenly stops mid-sentence. A frown crosses his face as he looks around the vicinity.

"Hmm? What's this strange feeling, like I'm being watched? Gressil? No. It's... something else."

"Someone's trying to look into your mind!" Phoebe exclaims. "It's a Psion! A Volgrim!"

Reflexively, Jason's eyes flick upward, into the sky. He fixates on a point far in the distance, as if looking directly at something blatantly obvious, even though nothing seems to be there.

"Oh? Now, who could that be? **Reveal.**"

The Wordsmith utters a Word of Power, causing a speck in the void to materialize. His T-REX instantly zooms in on the distant dot of light, providing him a crystal-clear image of a squarish, kilometer-long spaceship hovering in space above Tarus II.

"We have guests." Jason says.

"I prevented the Psion from intruding," Phoebe says. "I shut them out completely. How long have the Volgrim been there?"

"A while." Jason says. "I bet they were observing us. Why don't we go and say hello? The fact they haven't attacked must mean they don't harbor outright hostile intentions."

"Or they're acting with caution." Phoebe says. "We beat the shit out of one of their fleets, after all. Do you think they figured out your identity?"

Jason remains silent for a few seconds before nodding.

"Yes. I think they did. **Wings.**"

Jason summons a pair of angelic wings, not dissimilar to those of the Archangels or Cassiel. After pausing for a moment, he casts another word of power.

"Recall."

An instant later, Belial appears next to Jason, startled and bewildered. She whips her head toward Jason and scowls.

"Do you mind?! I was right in the middle of talking to Doctor Fathy! You scared the shit out of me!"

"Sorry," Jason says, gesturing to the speck in the sky, "but we have a problem. The Volgrim are here."

"They are?" Belial asks. She follows his finger, and using her Emperor-level eyesight, manages to pick out the hazy ship hovering in the sky above.

"Shit. That's not good."

"It's not." Jason says with a nod. "But the situation is still salvageable. The fact the Volgrim are observing us, and were doing so from stealth, tells me they're not here to blow us to pieces. I say you and I should go and say hello."

"Okay, but why bring me along?" Belial asks. "As a show of force?"

"I guess that would be a useful side-effect." Jason says. "But, no. I want you to give me information. I want to know which Volgrim we're dealing with, what their goals might be, and anything I might overlook. I lack a lot of information regarding their species, their hierarchy, and how they act in general. I don't want them to catch me off-guard. I'll give you telepathy so you can communicate with me in secret."

Belial waves her hand. "I can already transmit my thoughts to you magically. Most high-level demons can."

"Great." Jason replies. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go greet our pesky observers."

Part 337: First Contact

The VLL Hatoraxia hovers in the void, roughly a hundred miles above Tarus II's surface. Its stealth modules camouflage it from view, making the primitive species on the planet below unable to see Captain Kordonis's vessel.

Sangin Kordonis, the newly promoted Ambassador for Founder-Human Relations, stands at attention on his ship's Bridge, observing several readouts detailing the nearby planet's activity.

"Mud-dwellers, indeed." Kordonis says. "There is a small settlement on the moon of Kelkin, but its people are incapable of detecting us. Similarly, the humans on Tarus II lack the technology to penetrate our stealth systems. I expected better from the Wordsmith, given how Founder Unarin spoke of him."

Standing at Kordonis's side, Invocator Miikil scans the local world and its moon with her psionic sense. While nowhere near as powerful and versatile as sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth-ranked Psions, a fifth-ranker like herself still manages to survey hundreds of kilometers of Tarus II's surface with ease.

[I've located the Wordsmith.] Miikil says. [I have also detected a creature boasting a high reserve of mana. I believe they are the former Second Emperor of Demonkind, Belial, rumored to live among the mud-dwellers.]

"Our intelligence suggests several high-ranking defectors have joined the humans' side, but not many of them are demons." Kordonis comments dryly.

[I do indeed sense the presences of a few low-ranking demons, but they mostly only consist of Lords. As for the Archangels, I cannot detect them... oh?]

Miikil cocks her head.

[I sense the presence of two Holy Energy signatures, but they appear much weaker than I expected. If they are two of the Archangels, then their strength appears to have dropped significantly since the battle on Hell Harbor. Perhaps they are different angels?]

Kordonis nods. "Perhaps. If the Wordsmith has somehow revived the Archangels, then bringing back lesser angels should be expected."

The two of them check several additional readouts, eventually completing their preliminary survey of the planet.

"Founder Unarin insists we make friends with the Wordsmith, if possible." Kordonis says. "That being said, I cannot help but wonder if a preliminary attack wouldn't eliminate his threat in an instant. The planet has few safeguards in place, only a five-hundred-meter wall of artificially hardened crystal which surrounds the primary Terran living space."

He shakes his head. "No, never mind. We should never question the Founders. Founder Unarin knows best."

[Founder Unarin is wise. He is just.] Miikil affirms. [I am going to scan the Hero more closely, now.]

Miikil focuses her senses, piercing Jason Hiro's body from afar with a gaze that sees through his bones, his marrow, and even his cellular structure itself. Even with a hundred miles separating the two of them, the young Psion easily makes out the Hero as if he were standing inches away.

[Currently, the Hero wears some sort of nanite-based armor system.] Miikil comments. [I am too ignorant to comment on its composition, but I will transmit my mental impressions to you, Captain.]

Kordonis remains silent as Miikil copies the images from her mind and 'uploads' them to the Technopath Captain's brain.

Several seconds later, she stops, leaving Kordonis to sift through the images.

"It is a primitive design," Kordonis says, "yet surprisingly power-efficient and light on resource-consumption. Given the humans have only rebelled for a mere six orbital cycles, the design of this armor system is quite good. I imagine that they will improve it over time."

[Mmm. I will read the Hero's thoughts,] Miikil says. [Perhaps I may glean some useful intelligence from him before we begin our descent.]

"You have my permission." Kordonis replies.

Miikil focuses her mind. As the first skill that all Psions ever learn, Miikil enhances her telepathic abilities to form a piercing beam of telepathic energy. She reaches toward the

Wordsmith's mind and attempts to break through, only to flinch in shock, making her eyes widen.

[Nnn! Rrrgh! Something is wrong! There is... a barrier... surrounding the Wordsmith's mind! Ahh! So many thoughts! His mind is formidable! It is as if he is thinking with four parallel brains at once! All of them are working together to keep me out- oh no!]

Alarms flash on the Hatoraxia's Bridge. Several Bridge officers rush around, checking displays.

"Our cloaking field has dropped!"

"Attempting to reinitiate cloaking mechanisms! Failure! All of the power conduits have stopped working!"

[What caused the malfunction?]

"Unknown! We cannot locate the failure point!"

As the Hatoraxia's officers struggle to fix the sudden failure of their ship's stealth systems, Invocator Miikil takes a step back and sags into her second-in-command chair.

[The Wordsmith knows.] She says. [He is coming for us.]

Kordonis frowns. "What does he know? What are you saying? Did he do this?"

[Yes. He cast a magical spell after locking onto my position. He's traced us and found the Hatoraxia. We don't have long before-]

Miikil doesn't get to finish her sentence.

As she speaks, a pair of alien life-forms materialize on the Hatoraxia's Bridge. One of them is a human cloaked in metallic, nanite-based armor. The other is a high-ranking demoness with Emperor-level horns, wearing a shockingly small amount of clothing. The human's faceless armor and tall, muscular build gives him an intimidating presence that dwarfs all the Volgrim on the Bridge.

Immediately, the Bridge goes quiet as all of the officers reflexively spin to face the newcomer in their midst. Intruder alarms go off, warning the ship's crew of the newcomers, but for some reason, nobody makes an immediate move. All of their bodies lock in place, including Invocator Miikil and her Captain as well.

Frozen by some unknown force, Kordonis's eyes widen. He fights back against the invisible pressure holding his body in place, but no matter how he struggles, he fails to

move a muscle.

What's going on?! Kordonis thinks, his mind swirling in a panic. *Has the Wordsmith attacked us?!*

His thoughts get picked up by Miikil, who also ends up frozen in place, unable to move.

[No! The Wordsmith's emotions are not tumultuous. He has simply-]

"Hello." Jason Hiro, the leader of humanity says, interrupting Miikil's private words to her captain. "So you're the ones who were trying to peer into my thoughts just now. I recognize this ship. It's the same one I disabled some time ago, in Hell Harbor's system."

His calm tone sends chills down Kordonis's spine. The fact that his crew has been rendered defenseless in an instant makes the Captain feel utterly inferior and incapable of fighting back. So suppressive is the Wordsmith's power that Kordonis, if only for a moment, considers him more frightening than Unarin himself!

"You... we..." Kordonis sputters, speaking in the Wordsmith's native language instead of Volgarian. "We are... not here to fight! We come in peace."

Realizing that his plan to intimidate the Hero with a show of Volgrim might has failed, Kordonis pivots to a second option, attempting to display the more benevolent side of his species.

Belial, standing beside the Wordsmith, glances around the Hatoraxia.

"Founder Unarin really sent out the C-Team, huh? And here you'd think he'd want to leave a strong impression on the leader of humanity. The mightiest Psion present is barely even a 5th-rank grunt. The Captain doesn't bear any stripes. It's a ship full of insignificant nobodies."

The Wordsmith glances at Belial and nods. An instant later, the suppressive pressure holding everyone in place abruptly vanishes, causing several Bridge officers to stumble forward and collapse against their consoles. Their original desire to intimidate the Hero reverses, making all of them feel smaller than ants before his presence.

"I've released you." The Wordsmith says. "Don't do anything stupid. Consider this an act of goodwill, since it's clear you didn't bring along an invasion force."

The Wordsmith eyeballs Sangin Kordonis up and down.

"You're in charge?"

Kordonis nods heavily. He struggles to keep his body from shaking, due to the alarm the Wordsmith caused him.

"...I am." He says. "My designation is Sangin Kordonis. I was sent here by the First Founder Unarin himself. He wishes to extend diplomatic negotiations to the leader of humanity, the Wordsmith, Jason Hiro. Judging by your means of arrival... you must be him."

Jason remains aloof, examining the Technopath elite casually. He doesn't seem to worry that the Volgrim might attack him.

"You know a lot about me." Jason says. "I guess I've been a bit too active, lately. I knew the Volgrim would come knocking sooner or later."

"It was you we encountered in the Hell Harbor system..." Sangin Kordonis says. "And it is you who has upended the Labyrinth Core, recently. The Founders have investigated you, and they have interrogated the leader of demonkind, Emperor Ose. They are aware of your abilities and wish to extend you the same courtesies they previously have to the demons."

"The same courtesies." Jason repeats, his tone turning cold. "Is that why you've come? You ignored humanity's plight for 100,000 years and left my people to suffer under the torture of our demonic oppressors... yet you claim to now care about our welfare?"

The Wordsmith takes a step forward, his boot heavily clanking against the deckplate.

"I don't like dishonesty, *Sangin Kordonis*. Speak the truth. You want something from me. I'm guessing it has to do with the *Plague* that's keeping your Empire busy."

Kordonis stands his ground, eyeing the Wordsmith's faceless helmet with only a hint of worry. His belief in Unarin leaves him confident the Hero won't attack him, for after all, who would be so foolish as to anger the Founders?

Even so, he isn't completely sure if that will save him.

"You know about the Plague." Kordonis states. "You might have gotten that information from the demons, but more likely, you learned of it through Marie Becker. Perhaps when Confessor Vulpanix visited her laboratory and discovered an errant soul flying around?"

The Wordsmith and the Hatoraxia's Captain both remain silent for several long, tense moments. Kordonis's crew gaze at the Wordsmith and their Captain, uncertain whether or not they'll have to engage in hostilities against an opponent capable of subduing them with a single word.

For once, the proud and haughty Volgrim feel less than capable when facing a so-called 'primitive mud-dweller.'

The Wordsmith raises his hand. He taps the side of his helmet, causing it to dissipate into particles and reveal his unprotected head.

"Indeed. That was me." Jason states, smiling coolly. "I barely escaped with my life. But... judging by our interaction so far, your 'Founders' appear to have moved on from that misunderstanding. So, let's cut the crap. Why are you really here, and what do you want from me?"

The human takes a step back, arriving at Belial's side. The two of them exchange knowing glances, and their eyes linger on each other for a few seconds.

In that moment, Invocator Miikil transmits a warning to her Captain.

[The Wordsmith and Second Emperor are conversing telepathically. I am unable to intercept their words. Forgive me, but my abilities are too weak.]

Kordonis shifts his posture slightly, but otherwise says nothing verbally or mentally to his second-in-command. He merely waits for Jason to turn back to him before answering the Wordsmith's previous questions.

"I had hoped our meeting would go differently," Kordonis states. "But what's done is done. Why am I here? Founder Unarin has heard of the demonic attacks on Tarus II by Emperor Ose. As per the old treaties, he should have been informed of your insurrection, but Ose moved in secret and without his knowledge. We understand that her intent was to capture you and forcibly use your powers against your will, and to her benefit. This has angered the Five Founders, and now they wish to see justice restored on your behalf."

Kordonis nods at a nearby Technopath officer, who activates a holographic projection of several large, metallic crates.

"We have reserved one hundred 'war provisions' worth of equipment, food, and other useful resources which your people can use to rebuild. We understand that the demons

detonated some sort of thermonuclear device inside your city and killed over a million inhabitants. Our resources will assist you in rebuilding much more quickly."

"How very generous of your Founders." Jason says, his expression hardening. "Your leaders must truly be the most benevolent beings in existence to give me such a windfall for free while fighting the so-called 'Plague.' I don't suppose they would want some sort of repayment in exchange for their generosity, would they?"

Kordonis meets the Hero's gaze.

"What do you know of the Plague?" He asks. "Are you familiar with the creatures that have ravaged our galaxy for the past eighty-five thousand cycles?"

"I don't know anything about them." Jason answers. "But if your 'almighty' civilization is suffering to the point that it can only send this 'low class' diplomatic vessel here, then I think I can safely assume you have fallen into dire straits."

Kordonis lowers his eyes.

"Indeed. Modern times have become both difficult and dangerous. The Volgrim, the demons, and even your people are now under threat by the Plague menace. It started as a parasitic infection, and quickly spread across several sectors..."

Kordonis takes a few minutes to explain the threat his people face, and by proxy, the threat humanity and demonkind may soon fall under if nothing changes.

The more Jason hears, the more downcast his expression becomes. He glances at Belial and frowns.

"Did you know about any of this?"

The former Second Emperor shrugs. "I heard about a 'Plague' many millennia ago, but I assumed the Volgrim were on their way to cleaning it up. After all, if they couldn't deal with some new enemy, how could the demons? Their might vastly exceeds ours. Other than that, I didn't pay attention to a lot of happenings following Satan's death..."

Her tone becomes lightly wistful, and she looks away, clearly uncomfortable with talking about the deceased Devil any more.

Jason respects her wishes and resumes talking to Kordonis.

"So let me get this straight. There is an infectious disease in the Milky Way which turns living creatures into... what, zombies? And then they attack the populace. Somehow,

they possess the ability to travel across space, yet you aren't certain how the Plague does this, and you're unable to properly contain its spread. Did I get everything?"

Kordonis winces. "Yes. That is why the Founders seek to make amends with you. Your strength could prove pivotal in upending the Plague. If it defeats my people, it will come for yours next. It is indiscriminate and unstoppable. With your Wordsmithing, you might be able to come up with some novel ways to defeat it."

Jason lifts his chin to stare down the notably shorter Technopath Captain.

"So you *do* want something from me. Handouts never come freely, as expected."

"Once you have rebuilt your world, Founder Unarin wishes to invite you to the Founder's Hand." Kordonis explains. "He wishes to talk to you in person, but he is a very busy person and cannot come here himself."

"Busy getting his ass kicked," Belial says, rejoining the conversation. "It sounds like your people are desperate for help. But don't you think your actions come off disingenuous? You paid no attention to humanity until it could offer you something. Now millions have died because of your inattentiveness. A few measly 'war provisions' will hardly settle the debt."

"Ah..." Kordonis says, pausing to stare at her meaningfully. "It seems you... don't understand the value of the First Founder's gift. A single War Provision is incalculably valuable in our society. Ninety-nine percent of our people will never obtain one, and of those who do, they will often have to share it with a large group of other Volgrim. It is, essentially, a form of rare monetary compensation, something humans will be familiar with, except what it purchases is far beyond anything you can imagine."

He gestures to Invocator Miikil.

"If my esteemed Invocator colleague here were to obtain a War Provision, she could apply for several hundred cycles of personal training with a high-ranking Psion. This would allow her to evolve far faster than her compatriots, rapidly turning her into an elite warrior. By the end of her training period, she might already be a seventh or eighth-ranked Psion."

Belial widens her eyes. "Oh! Well, actually... that does sound quite valuable."

Jason nods. "It does. Frankly, I don't need your resources or gifts. I can already uplift my people to heights you can't imagine *without* any help. However, the process I had

planned would take a significant amount of time, and this generous 'gift' from your Founders would certainly speed up the process. Still, I have to consult with my advisors before accepting. After all, only a fool would rush himself into debt needlessly."

"A fair compromise." Kordonis states.

He pauses.

"By the way, Jason Hiro. I must ask... the attack on Hell Harbor... was it your doing?"

Jason blinks. "What attack?"

Kordonis scrutinizes the Terran's face, but he fails to find any sign of deception.

"...The Cherubiim was... not your doing?"

"Err..." Jason grunts, then raises an eyebrow. "Cherubiim? What is...? Ah!"

His eyes flicker with insight. He looks away, then rubs his head thoughtfully. He spends several long seconds staring off into space while rubbing a simple golden ring on his finger, before turning back to Kordonis.

"I see. The Cherubiim, you said? It attacked the demons?"

"Indeed. You know of this creature, then." Kordonis says, not bothering to ask a question, but instead speak a statement. "Did you unleash the Cherubiim upon the Demon populace? We have already confirmed the presence of two angel-class lifeforms on your world. We thought their entire species had been rendered extinct, but now there seem to be at least five of them still alive. What say you regarding their survival?"

Jason smiles.

"I did not send the Cherubiim to attack Hell Harbor. In fact, I was unaware the Archangels had made such a sudden attack. They did not inform me of their plans. But yes, I am aware of their existences. No, I did not bring them back from the dead."

The Wordsmith leans forward, and his smile widens by a small amount.

"Your people simply didn't clean up well enough. I didn't need to bring the Archangels back, because they never died in the first place. Now, is there anything else I can help you with?"

Kordonis hesitates.

"I... suppose not. I will have to inform Founder Unarin of your response."

"That's fine." Jason says. "But as of this moment, the Tarus System is part of humanity's sovereign domain. You are not to set foot on Tarus II, the moon of Kelkin, or any other world without my permission. I would appreciate it if you took your vessel out past the furthest planet to await my reply. Only venture back on official business, and take care to respect my species' privacy."

The Wordsmith narrows his eyes, and his smile turns chilly.

"Anything more, and I will consider it a provocation. I would prefer not to subject such honorable delegates as yourselves to a 'diplomatic incident.' Do we have an understanding?"

Invoker Miikil steps toward the Hero. [Watch your tone, mud-dweller! Our ship may not frighten you, but we are representatives of the Five Founders, the sovereign rulers of the Milky Way! If you continue to insult us and turn up your nose, the Founders will-!]

"Calm down, Miikil," Kordonis says, waving his hand in her direction. "We will make concessions to adequately satisfy the Wordsmith's wishes. After all, we are requesting his assistance. It won't do for us to throw our authority around, unwarranted."

[But...]

"I have spoken." Kordonis concludes. "Forgive my Vice-Captain, Wordsmith. She holds strong feelings for the Five Founders, as do we all."

"I understand." Jason replies. "I won't bully the young. Take care."

His helmet reactivates, and Jason Hiro warps off the Bridge along with Belial, leaving all the Volgrim personnel to stare at their departed afterimages in quiet contemplation.

"How worrying..." Kordonis mutters. "The Wordsmith bypassed all our defenses and rendered us incapable of retaliation. Nobody could move a muscle. Founder Unarin gave me several files detailing his known and hypothesized abilities, but reading data-files is very different from experiencing them in person."

[What do you think the Wordsmith's relationship with the Second Emperor is?] Miikil asks. [They seemed close, but far from intimate. Do you think she is his sexual consort?]

"Your guess is as good as mine." Kordonis replies. "I know little about the primitive biological interactions of mud-dwellers. Were you able to read the Second Emperor's mind?"

[No. The Wordsmith's protective energy extended to Belial, as well.]

"Hmph. Founder Unarin was correct. This Wordsmith is... worrying. He's more intelligent than I imagined. It seems he will not be a simple person to bend to our will."

As Kordonis ruminates on his conversation with the Wordsmith, an alarm beeps on the Hatoraxia's Bridge.

"C-Captain!" Another Technopath crew-member exclaims. "The Planet! Tarus II! It is... becoming indistinct!"

"What? Explain!" Kordonis barks.

However, even as he utters those words, the Technopath glances out the Hatoraxia's windows, where he spots the beautiful green and blue world of Tarus II slowly becoming fainter and fainter, as if turning invisible.

[By the Founders!] Miikil exclaims. [What is going on?! How is that... that *anomaly* occurring?!]

"We've detected extreme levels of magical energy coming from an unknown location in subspace," The officer answers. "These focused particles have enveloped the world of Tarus II. They are coagulating into a field of interference. Our sensors can't penetrate the exterior!"

As Kordonis watches, Tarus II continues to fade away, until eventually, it becomes completely invisible and disappears from his sight.

Invoker Miikil roars in exasperation. [He... the Wordsmith... turned an entire world invisible?! Impossible. The Founders will never believe this happened!]

"No." Kordonis says, calming his voice. "The planet isn't invisible. Instead, an energy field has surrounded it, blocking it from our sight. I suspect that if we were to descend below the layer of interference, we would see the planet once again."

His eyes lose focus as he gazes downward, at the floor.

"This Wordsmith... his powers defy reality. I have heard my elders propose the usage of a planet-sized 'Laprox Cage,' but never did I think the Wordsmith could so casually construct one mere seconds after leaving. Truly, we cannot afford to underestimate his genius."

The Captain gestures to his Navigational Officer.

"Set a course back to Volgarius. I must report today's events to the Founders, preferably in person."

"Yes, Captain."

Kordonis shoots one last look at the empty space where Tarus II once hung. As his ship turns around to set a course back to Volgarius, he shakes his head.

We must not make an enemy of humanity's leader!

Part 338: Tension and Longing

Jason teleports himself and Belial back to the edge of the Fortress of Retribution, just inside its crystalline walls, but away from the populated areas. He observes the inside of the Hatoraxia for a few moments using his Wordsmithing and listens to the conversation between Kordonis and Miikil while his mind-wife works in secret.

"Alright," Phoebe says. "I've updated the files. You should be able to transform all the existing 'Spatial Pylons' into their updated configuration."

These pylons, the same ones she made during the Stormbringer Invasion to 'harden' the space around Tarus II and make it impervious to Warpers opening portals, now sit in hundreds of pre-selected locations around the world of Tarus II, all casting a net of spatial-strengthening magic to envelop the planet.

Thanks to her technical expertise, Phoebe adds a new function to them, one which requires a mass-update of all their internal workings.

Jason nods, while listening to Kordonis's words. "Alright. Thanks, honey."

Belial raises an eyebrow when she hears Jason say that, but immediately realizes he's talking to his mind-wife and not her.

"What's up?" Belial asks. "You planning something?"

"The Volgrim came here ahead of schedule," Jason answers, "But I had Phoebe prep a possible solution to them in case they ever were to reveal themselves. While we chatted with that Kordonis fellow, she finished her work. One moment."

Jason inhales deeply and closes his eyes. He focuses his mind, reaching into the files his mind-wife has given him, and producing a technical readout of the Spatial Pylons before and after Phoebe's updates.

After absorbing these thoughts into his short term memory, a feeling of technical expertise momentarily swallows the Wordsmith's thoughts. He opens his eyes and utters a Word of Power.

"Update."

His spell permeates the hardened spatial area surrounding his world, infiltrates its central nexus, and travels around to all of the many hundreds of Spatial Pylons dotted

around the Planet's crust.

Moments later, the Wordsmith nods.

"Done."

Belial raises an eyebrow. She glances around, from left to right, and even up toward the distant speck of light representing the Volgrim spaceship.

"Uhh... what did you do?"

"From our perspective, nothing has changed." Jason explains. "But from the perspective of anyone more than half a mile above Tarus II's atmosphere, our planet will start to become hazy before turning completely invisible. No technological or magical item will be able to pierce the veil and observe us from afar. It should cut down on Volgrim spying. I also have to make something similar for Kelkin, but the moonbase isn't nearly as high of a priority."

"Oh!" Belial says. "I understood about half of that. If it was Phoebe talking, I'm pretty sure I'd have understood nothing. You're good at this. You should become a teacher."

Jason rolls his eyes. "Teachers don't get paid enough. Wouldn't suit me. Err, well, they *didn't* get paid enough in the society I came from. I'll have to change that in mine."

Jason and Belial fall silent. They watch the sky for a few minutes until the speck of light vanishes, when Kordonis's spaceship jumps to Warp and leaves the system.

"How troublesome." Jason mutters. "The Volgrim are onto me, but we're not ready to deal with them. I don't have any defenses set up. The only reason they haven't attacked is because they probably aren't too sure of what I can do. Hopefully, my little planet-go-bye-bye trick will worry them a little bit. According to what I just heard, they aren't even able to replicate my little 'Laprox Field,' though they've theorized it's possible."

"The Volgrim want to use you." Belial comments. "Don't trust them. They made all sorts of promises to the demons. They told Satan he could rule over the Earth if he helped them, but they failed to mention they would eventually glass the planet and leave him with a lifeless rock. The only reason they haven't attacked you is because Unarin sees you as a useful tool."

"Do you know Unarin pretty well?" Jason asks.

"Not especially." Belial answers. "I've spoken to him only a few times. Or rather, Satan did. I didn't have anything to say. I just watched them talk while I stood off to the side like

a good girl."

She pauses.

"I must say though, Unarin never dismissed me. He seemed to think my shapeshifting abilities were quite formidable. He even commented to Satan that if I were to partner with the Changeling division, he would repay the demons greatly."

"Changelings." Jason repeats, his tone pensive. "I assume Satan didn't take Unarin up on that offer?"

"No, *I* didn't." Belial corrects him. "I have known many liars, deceivers, and backstabbers. I never trusted Unarin from the moment I laid eyes on him. He was polite to me... perhaps too polite. He never looked at me in a sexual way, or like a piece of meat, but perhaps as something lower... a barely functional tool. He looks at all 'mud-dwellers' in that way. To Unarin, and the rest of the Volgrim, you're either insignificant, or useful. You're not a living, breathing entity with a right to live."

Jason listens quietly to her words. He waits for her to finish, then raises a question.

"Can you show me what the Volgrim leaders look like? With your shapeshifting powers?"

Belial blinks. "Oh? You want me to play dress-up for you? This is a first."

"I only want to know what my enemies look like," Jason says, waving her teasing away with a hand. "You don't have to if you don't want to. I can always extract images from someone's brain, or something."

The former Second Emperor smiles cutely. She wraps her arm around Jason's waist and pulls herself right up next to him. "If you say *please*, I won't tell Phoebe. It can be our little secret."

The Wordsmith rolls his eyes. "My mind-wife is always watching, Sam. She keeps me honest. Now, knock it off, will ya?"

"Am I not cute?" Belial asks, pulling away. "Come on, be honest. Most men can't help but stare when I walk past. It's not insulting or anything. I actually find it quite flattering."

"Oh, you're extremely attractive," Jason says, "and I might sneak peeks if I weren't married. But, eh. I dunno. You're always 'out there,' you know? You don't leave much to the imagination."

Belial glances at the tiny strips of cloth covering her boobs. "Hmm. What, you like Phoebe because she wears more clothes?"

"I like Phoebe because she's the woman I love." Jason explains. "She could wear anything and I'd stare- oh, dammit, now we're making her blush. This is causing my mind-wife secondhand embarrassment, you know."

The Wordsmith crosses his arms. "So, are you done horsing around? You're pretty, Sam, and that's the truth. But I'm a married man. So... let's stay friends, okay?"

"Monogamy is such a *human* thing." Belial protests. "Most demons faff about with whoever they want. I'll never understand why humans insist on staying committed to one single person. Don't you know variety is the spice of life?"

"Are you even talking about you and me?" Jason asks, tilting his head slightly to the side. "...Or is this actually about Phoebe? Are you thinking if you can convince me to become polyamorous, then you and Phoebe might...?"

Belial blushes. "No! It's not like that! Geez, never mind. Forget I brought it up. I'll turn into the Volgrim suits, so let's drop the conversation."

Jason smirks. "Spirit-Phoebe says you're cute when you blush."

"AHM! First Founder, Unarin! Get a good look at him!" Belial says, becoming even more flustered at having her thoughts seen through. She quickly activates her magic, changing her physique into that of the leader of Volgrimkind.

"Alright, alright, we'll move on," Jason says, as his smile recedes. In its place, a look of concentration appears as he examines Belial's transformed appearance. "He's shorter than I expected. Is this his actual body size?"

"Unarin is only about six and a half feet tall." Belial says, her voice a perfect imitation of Unarin's baritone. "Or, 198 centimeters."

Jason gestures to the thick hair-like tendrils spilling down 'Unarin's' front and back. "What are those?"

"These are called 'Haa'ti' by The Ascended." Belial says. "From what I understand, they have a bunch of useful properties. I've never examined them in-depth, though, so I don't know what exactly they do. I only know because I heard someone else mention them once."

"Haa'ti." Jason repeats. "I've actually heard about the Volgrim sub-species from Marie Becker. Do you know her?"

Belial shrugs. "Name doesn't ring a bell. But then again, I don't pay much attention to random people. If I don't talk to someone a lot, I tend to forget about them."

"...She was the leader of humanity at one point." Jason says. "During the Energy Wars. Apparently, she ruled Earth for quite a long time."

"Ohhhh..." Belial says. A faint light appears in her eyes. "Right... yeah... Marie Becker... I don't know. I sort of remember something about a Marie Becker... maybe. But look, Jason, I've met a *lot* of human leaders. They all blend together after a while. When you've slept with as many humans and demons as I have, they stop feeling special or significant at a certain point. Arthur stands out, as did Joan of Arc... for similar reasons. Maybe a few other Heroes... but generally, normal humans who weren't Heroes? I didn't care much about them."

"Mmm. Fair enough." Jason says. "Err... I guess this is sort of rude to ask, so ignore it if you want, but why did you sleep with so many people? Do you still do that now?"

Belial shrugs. "Oh, I didn't love or care about pretty much any of them. There were a few humans and demons I liked a little... but they died. Then Satan died, too. And... well, I haven't felt much interest or passion ever since."

Belial's current appearance, that of Unarin, contrasts with the sadness in her eyes. She lowers her head and sighs.

"Succubi and incubi... we are different from other demons. We experience deep 'cravings' that prompt us to cavort with others. At the lower ranks, we aren't even immortal like other demons. We die if we don't absorb any 'life energy'. But since I'm an Emperor, I don't have to deal with that anymore. Sometimes the cravings flare up, but I just ignore them until they go away. I used to vent on my husband, but I can't really do that anymore. I've been frustrated and hollow for so long... I think I've even forgotten what it meant to love someone."

"They always die." Belial continues. "Everyone I love. Yet somehow, I stick around. Phoebe will die too, you know. I don't know when or how, but if I get too close, something will happen to her, like it did to Satan. That's why I have to keep my distance."

Belial demorphs from Unarin's form back to her original self, sighing deeply.

"Sorry. I shouldn't throw that on you."

"No." Jason says, offering a faint smile. "It's fine. I'm glad we're close enough that you feel secure around me. You can tell me stuff like this whenever you want. For what it's worth, I don't think you're cursed at all. Bad things happen, you know? Terrible things. Whole worlds die. Freaking space zombies attack. You spent a lot of good years with Satan, so if you continue to live on... so will he. In your heart."

"Sometimes..." Belial says, her tone heavy. "When... when the pain gets to be too much... I turn into him and stare at myself in the mirror. I make myself into my fallen husband, hoping to keep his memory intact."

She shakes her head.

"But it's not easy, Jason. I spent a few thousand years with Satan, following our exodus from Heaven. I've spent a hundred thousand without him. His memory... it grows fainter every day. I worry that if enough time passes, I'll forget him the same as I have everyone else. At some point, I thought I could even move on... but then... then Amelia returned. She revived him and turned him into her puppet."

The succubus plops down on a nearby rock, a boulder with a flat top.

"I wasn't prepared to see my husband. I was shocked. Elated. Terrified. Worried. So many emotions all at once. Then he attacked Phoebe, and... and I had to make painful choices. I knew if I killed him, he wouldn't die. He wouldn't *really* die... but I'd already lost him once. And then... after everything concluded, and he was still alive... after Polaris's star detonated, I thought the Creator had finally showed me some faint mercy."

Tears well up in Belial's eyes.

"But... but he didn't! He took Satan away from me, again! I had to watch him die, turning to dust in my arms! He fell apart and I was- I was completely helpless again! I couldn't heal him, I couldn't do a thing! I was just useless, like always!"

Jason walks over to sit beside Belial. He wraps an arm around her shoulder, disables his T-REX, and pulls her in to cry against his side.

"It's okay. I'm here for you..." Jason says. "**Projection.**"

He summons the spiritual projection of his mind-wife, who also embraces Belial from the opposite side. Her body, faintly corporeal and able to interact with physical object to some small extent, projects an aura of warmth onto the succubus.

"We're both here for you." Phoebe says. "It's okay to cry, Sammy..."

"I just- I miss him so much!" Belial sobs. "The pain never goes away... it never stops hurting..."

Jason rubs her back and falls silent, allowing her to vent her feelings unabated for as long as she wants.

* * *

Some time later, Belial wipes away her tears and laughs dryly. "Sorry. I'm such a mess."

Spirit-Phoebe smiles sweetly. "Maybe so, but you're *our* mess. As long as you remember you have us, you'll still have reasons to continue living on."

"I... I feel so guilty about Daisy." Belial murmurs. "If I hadn't let her go-"

"We've been over that." Jason says curtly. "It wasn't your fault. It was mine. I should have taken more preventative measures to protect her, and all the others who died. You can't blame yourself when you protected Phoebe well."

"I guess not." Belial answers noncommittally. "Let's, uh... let's get back to talking about the Volgrim."

She hesitates for a moment before standing up, pulling away from Jason and Phoebe both.

"Did you... hear what Kordonis said? About Ose?"

"Yeah." Jason nods, remaining seated. "She's still alive. But we knew that already. She fell into Mephisto's clutches, the poor bastard."

"As much as I love that she ended up a slave to some other demon," Belial mutters, "it's not a bitter enough ending for her. Bael stole my chance to kill her. I still want revenge... not only on Lucifer, but Ose too."

"We beat her once." Jason says. "Hell, you did it without me. We'll do it again. I'll let you finish her off yourself if you want."

"Yes. I'd like that." Belial says, steeling her eyes. "But, moving on. What do you think about Unarin's offer? He's giving you such a large 'donation,' the debt you'll accrue may prove insurmountable."

Phoebe nods. "The First Founder clearly wants to bind Jason to himself as tightly as possible. He wants to put humanity on a leash and make us thoroughly indebted to the Volgrim's 'goodwill.'"

"What comes after the Plague?" Jason ponders. "Let's say I do help the Volgrim fight this terrible zombie menace. What then? We can't seriously expect them to leave us be afterward, can we? We'll go from being the heroes who saved the galaxy to the Volgrim's enemies. It seems likely Unarin will simply turn on us right afterward."

"The treaty my people signed was done so under duress." Belial states. "Before the Plague, the Volgrim were unstoppable. They consisted of five factions, each warring against each other some some small or large extent, but when faced with an external enemy, they united in an instant. They placed shackles on us to limit our development so we couldn't threaten them... and I need not tell you about the Humanity Containment Project. They turned humans into little more than cattle and sheep for demons to eat, yet restricted your birthrates to the point where my people had to live on scraps."

Jason snorts. "I don't know how scary some stupid space zombies can be, but I bet I'll be able to clean them up pretty easily. However, it would be best if I took my time and made sure to leave them as a threat the Volgrim can't overlook. So long as I keep their threat at roughly equal levels to the Volgrim, both will have to leave humanity alone to fight each other."

"I think you're missing something." Phoebe comments. "Jason, calling the Plague mere 'space zombies' makes no sense. How could a galaxy-class civilization fall so easily to a mere bunch of drooling, slowly-shambling zombies? Mephisto summons 'zombies.' Whatever the Plaguehosts are, they must be much more terrifying to have broken the Volgrim as badly as they have."

"I imagine Unarin will tell me more about the Plague when I meet him in person..." Jason ponders. "But... hmm."

"Problem?" Belial asks.

"It's just... I've had too many demons try to take over my brain and enslave me or Hope, recently. My powers would be far more valuable to Unarin if he could definitely control me. We're talking about a species which is basically a Class III on the Kardeshev Scale. Who knows what kind of crazy fucking mind-control techniques they might have? Nanites, brain implants, Psionic abilities, to name a few. They probably have shit I can't

even imagine. If I go to meet Unarin in the heart of his Empire, do you *really* think he'll be okay with just a simple 'chat,' especially when I pose a major risk to him?"

Belial shakes her head. "When you put it that way..."

"I have to protect myself." Jason says. "But I also need to make Unarin respect and fear me. I need him to know that crossing me in *any* way will result in an event he won't be able to undo."

"If he fears you, he might take drastic measures." Phoebe points out. "Ose planned to capture me and Daisy both. She was going to use us to manipulate you."

Jason taps his lip. He frowns several times, thinking to himself about many possible eventualities.

"Say... do you think the Volgrim know about Hope?"

"They know about you." Phoebe says. "And they interrogated Ose. I'd say it's a 50/50 whether they do or don't."

"I cloned myself once." Jason says. "Could that be something that keeps Unarin at bay? If he does know I cloned myself, and that my clone has all the same powers as me..."

Belial's eyes sparkle. "Oh! Then he'd worry you might have other clones nobody knows about. He'd fear capturing you, because another clone could take your place, but would also be much angrier than you and out for revenge. He could kill you, but he'd never know if there were other Wordsmiths out there. Even if he captured you, one of your clones could free you, potentially without even breaking a sweat."

Jason chews his lip.

"But that's the thing... I only have one clone, Hope. And frankly... I don't want to make any others. Hell, without Solomon's Crown, I can't. The Crown made it possible to perfectly recreate every atom of my body, soul, and magic. Phoebe can replicate a lot of its functionality, but not its cloning potential."

"Unarin doesn't need to know that." Belial says, flashing a mischievous smile. "You have me. I could mimic you. You could also summon fake Jasons to intimidate him."

"If Unarin is as smart as you've implied," Phoebe says, "then we shouldn't stoop to trickery. He might see through our deceptions. Hell, he's probably even better than us at weaponizing it. The Volgrim have been around for millions of years, and Unarin has, too. We shouldn't underestimate the cunning of a monster who's led a civilization for eons."

Jason rubs his forehead. "I'm getting a headache just thinking about this. I shouldn't have made such a scene in Hell Harbor's space. I brought the Volgrim knocking."

"Mmm. I don't think you did." Phoebe says. "Look at the timing. The Archangels apparently attacked Hell Harbor a day or two ago. Then, the Volgrim must have come and investigated the disturbance. We know they monitor the Hell Harbor system, because that's how they encountered you. They must have found out the truth when they interrogated Ose, Mephisto, and the others."

"Do you... think the Archangels are okay?" Belial asks.

The Wordsmith shrugs. "Kordonis didn't mention them getting killed or captured. They might be fine. One second, I'll check. **Locate.**"

Jason's eyes turn foggy, and his head lolls forward. At the same time, Phoebe's spiritual figure disappears, and he raises his head once again.

"Oh! No warning, huh?" 'Jason' says. "Uh... I guess I'm in control now."

Belial raises an eyebrow. "...Phoebe?"

"Yup! Whenever Jason leaves his body, I get to take the reins. It's a defense mechanism so he isn't left vulnerable."

The succubus pauses for a moment before nodding.

"And you have access to his Wordsmithing when he's gone?"

"I do." Phoebe answers. "Why? Are you worried I'll turn into a megalomaniacal dictator whenever my hubby isn't around?"

"Oh. Um, no. Not that..." Belial says, her words trailing off. She crosses her arms and looks away, not wanting to meet Phoebe's gaze.

"Sammy?" Phoebe asks. "Is something wrong?"

"No. No, probably not. I mean, definitely not." Belial says, shifting uncomfortably. "It's just... well..."

She pauses for several long seconds.

"I, ah... I don't know how to say- to ask this..."

"Do you want me to do something for you?" Phoebe asks. "With Jason's Wordsmithing?"

"No! No, no, not at all!" Belial hurriedly answers. "I mean, well, it would be... I shouldn't. Never mind. Forget it."

She starts to turn away, but Phoebe stands up and grabs her wrist.

"There's no need to be nervous, Sam. Come on, it's just me here. Well, me, Shana, Lorent, and Gabriel... but that's beside the point. Just ask. I won't bite."

Belial fidgets. She shifts the weight of her feet several times while side-eyeing Phoebe, now inside her husband's body.

"It's not right. I shouldn't." Belial says. "Jason is a Hero... and Satan was the First Emperor of demonkind. He'd get mad if I asked."

"I don't think he would." Phoebe says, smiling. "But even if he did, I'm in charge right now. So, what do you want? You can tell me."

The former Second Emperor gnaws on her lower lip, wavering between an awkward smile and a look of sadness so deep it hurts Phoebe's heart.

"I just... I want to remember things more clearly. Not just *things*... but Satan. I feel as if I've forgotten his voice. When I saw him on Polaris, it made all those ancient feelings come back, and it made my faded memories hurt so much more. I keep wanting to ask Jason if he can restore my memories of Satan... but I shouldn't. Satan nearly killed Jason, after all. He nearly killed *you*, Phoebe."

"He was under Amelia's control." Phoebe reminds Belial. "Neither Jason nor I blame him for his actions."

Phoebe pauses for half a breath.

"Well, not fully, anyway."

Belial nods. "Right. So, yeah. Just forget it. I shouldn't have mentioned it. Besides, if those memories come back to the surface, so will all the pain and trauma. I wouldn't want to have to feel all that anguish a third time..."

Phoebe nods her husband's head slowly. "Yeah... maybe not. Look, Sam, I have a better idea. Why don't I work on making a special... gadget! A special gadget, just for you. I'll work out the specs for it, and have Jason create it when it's ready."

"What sort of gadget?" Belial asks. "I don't understand."

"Haha. It'll be a secret." Phoebe says, smiling mischievously. "I promise you'll like it."

"Alright." Belial says, lowering her eyes. "Thank you, Phoebe. I... I really appreciate it."

The two fall silent for several seconds. Phoebe walks over to Belial and wraps her arms around the succubus.

"Mmm. Oh, how I miss having a physical body..." She says, as Belial reflexively hugs her back. "I miss it soooo much. I'm so envious of my physical self."

"Is that the reason for this hug?" Belial asks, tilting her head up to look into Phoebe's eyes.

Phoebe looks down at the succubus, momentarily enjoying the height difference compared to her original body. In the past, she stood a few inches shorter than Belial, but in Jason's body, she towers over her by nearly a full foot.

"I hug little Shana and my nephew all the time," Phoebe says. "But I don't get to hug you anymore. I... miss that. I miss talking to you like I used to. In a way, I sort of feel trapped in Jason's Mind Realm."

The two of them fall silent once again, yet continue to hold each other. Belial smiles, then averts her gaze.

"Um... you know you're still controlling Jason's body, right? It's a little strange looking up into his eyes like this..."

She pauses before raising her head once again. "Mmm... his blue eyes *are* really pretty, though..."

Phoebe lowers her head, ever so slightly, bringing her face a nudge toward Belial's.

"You're not alone..." Phoebe says. "You still have me."

"I know." Belial answers, her voice softening. "But... there's this barrier between us..."

Phoebe smiles. She leans down a little closer.

"Well. Jason does always say he'd be okay if something happened between us. I sometimes wonder if it isn't his little... *fantasy*."

"A lot of men have fantasies like that." Belial answers. "A lot of women, too."

The two of them bring their faces an inch closer, leaving just enough distance for their breath to brush against each other's skin.

"Sam..." Phoebe whispers. "My real body won't admit this, but... there's more than just sisterly feelings in there, for you. It would be okay if-"

Her voice cuts off abruptly. A moment later, Jason blinks.

"Alright. I found the Archan- what the goddamn shit?!"

The Wordsmith's soul returns to his body, giving him full control. When he reappears, he finds himself within kissing distance of Belial, a fact which momentarily throws his thoughts into disarray.

"Uh-uh, Sam?! What's..."

He pulls away from the succubus at nearly the same time as she does. Belial's skin flushes with blood, turning it to an even deeper shade of red than usual.

"It's- it's nothing!" Belial exclaims. "Phoebe was in control, and I just... I wanted to check your body to make sure th-the Volgrim didn't hurt you! So, no damage found! I just remembered I have some patients to check on. Talk later!"

Before Jason can fully understand what just happened, the succubus darts away, traveling at a speed only a Demon Emperor could achieve on this quiet, backwater world.

Jason turns his thoughts inward to find his mind-wife sitting beside a water fountain, crossing her arms, and looking more than a little annoyed.

"What was that about?" Jason asks. "Were you... about to make out with Samantha? While controlling my body?"

Phoebe snorts. "Who knows? Maybe. Thanks for the cock-block, hubby."

"The *cock-block*?" Jason sputters. "You don't even have a- *never mind*. Good lord. Get a room, you two."

Phoebe smiles. "Maybe we will! You'd better keep an eye on my physical body, or Sam might steal her away."

The Wordsmith rubs his eyes and sighs.

"This is just like that time on Hell Harbor, with that 'Lily' girl."

Phoebe blushes. "Lily was a pretty good kisser, I'll have you know."

"Yeah, yeah. So, *anyway*." Jason says, changing the topic. "I had a quick chat with Uriel. She's going to head here, soon. Just taking care of some business elsewhere."

Phoebe nods, accepting the conversational pivot. "Right. And?"

Jason smiles.

"She and her brothers fucked the demons up good. Real good. Hell Harbor is in ruins, and several Emperors are dead."

"No wonder the Volgrim showed up..." Phoebe mutters. "The Cherubiim probably has them running scared."

"We'll know more soon." Jason says. "In the meantime, I have work to do."

He glances inward at his wife.

"And as for you... next time, ask permission!"

Phoebe sticks out her tongue. "Nyeh."

Part 339: Memory Restoration

Hell Harbor, inside the broken and shattered remains of where the Hidden Emperors first met.

Ose stands at the head of the meeting table, her eyes glowering with annoyance at the fact that that all of the seats have been destroyed and the table itself is in shambles. Along the edges of the table stand more than a dozen of the Hidden Emperors and their minions, but none of them appear to be in high spirits anymore.

Well, except for Bael.

The Duke of Pain casually sits on a nearby rock, leans back against another slightly bigger rock, and splays out his legs, leaving little to the imagination for the others present.

"Damn. You guys screwed up real good this time." Bael idly comments, picking at something stuck in his teeth with a random twig. "Archangels, aliens, and all kinds of other crap. Really screwed the Hellhound."

Ose inhales deeply.

"It's safe to say all of you performed miserably. Were it not for me, your worthless lives might have been extinguished by the Cherubiim, once and for all. I suppose some of that isn't your fault, given the sheer strength of our opponent. Even a bloody Confessor couldn't handle the Cherubiim."

Mephisto levitates off to the side of the room. His larger horns and significantly larger body make him stand out, giving him a somewhat fearsome appearance compared to his past self. Now an Emperor, Mephisto stands at the top of the demonic food chain, in much the same way as all the others present.

Along with Mephisto, Zamiel stands idly inside Monster King Kar's body, never having gotten a good chance to fight the Cherubiim. Emperor Gorn, clearly displeased by being held under Mephisto's control, still remains inside his 'Vermillion' body, with flames wafting off his bird-like appearance. Lastly, Emperor Fenrir sits on a large boulder, but instead of her original soul, a new one takes her place.

The new possessor of Fenrir's body is none other than Emperor Lupus, who lost her body during the Cherubiim's attack.

"This sucks." Lupus mutters. "So many Emperors dead, including me. Wolfram... gone. Even the Glyphmancer died to that Cherubiim."

Emperor Kristoff stares with rage-filled eyes at Mephisto.

"My wife's body is not yours to puppet, *Emperor of Legions*. You had better give her back... or face my wrath."

Mephisto turns a sly glance to the Emperor of Blood.

"Kekeke. You want your precious little woman? Come and take her. Ssshe isss mine, now. If you think you can defeat four other Emperorsss in combat... be my guesst."

"Don't think I won't." Kristoff says, as he takes a menacing step toward Mephisto.

"Stop squabbling." Ose says, turning a cold eye to their hostilities. "Hell Harbor is in ruins, but instead of taking responsibility, you want to blame Mephisto for your wife's demise, Kristoff. Hmph. At least her body is still being useful. Since Lupus has lost her body, Fenrir's will prove an adequate vessel."

"My wife is not some trinket to be used for Mephisto's purposes!" Kristoff roars. "He should give her back to me!"

"Why? So you can wrap her up and bury her to honor her memory?" Ose scoffs. "Or maybe you still crave the taste of her flesh, hmm? I don't care whether you want to fuck her corpse, Kristoff, but keep it in your pants. We need every Emperor-level powerhouse we can find at this critical juncture. One more word from you, and I'll do to you what I did to that Cherubiim."

Kristoff shoots Ose a nasty glare. "Oh? And what would that be? A swing and a miss? Will you let me escape while giving me information on your abilities? You were outmaneuvered by that crafty Archangel of Wisdom, and you know it. Stop acting so high and mighty."

Emperors Guura and Melody sit off at the far edge of the table on two rocks they've plunked down. Not far from them sits Emperor Viola, a member of their Hell who was also one of the very few Hidden Emperors to miss the Cherubiim battle entirely.

Viola's drab black dress, eyeliner, and hair give her a distinctly gothic appearance. She watches the proceedings with a look of boredom so profound that an observer might expect her to fall over and die if she becomes even a little bit more bored.

"You guys are suuuch a *drag*..." Viola groans. "Seriously, just get on with the... *whatever*. I only came because this was like, an emergency, or something."

"You have no say in this matter." Kristoff replies, glancing at Viola. "You weren't there when the Cherubiim attacked. You just sat at home playing with your little toys."

"True. I didn't get my butt kicked." Viola says, smiling slightly at her jab. "Unlike you."

Yardrat stands at the far end of the table, directly opposite Ose. He waves his hand flippantly at the others and sighs. "Never mind all of that. Ose, that creature who appeared in the sky; a Confessor, you said? I presume she was one of the Overlords. Given the events that have just transpired, I think you should forget the old treaties and whatever else. It's time to fill us in on who these Overlords are and what our next move should be. With that Wordsmith sending Archangels our way, we can't sit in the dark any longer."

Despite being one of Mephisto's thralls, Gorn still retains his free will, except for when it interferes with Mephisto's commands. He nods along with Yardrat's words. "I agree. It's time we cast aside the mind-wipes. If the Overlords couldn't protect us from the Cherubiim, then I don't think they're much of a threat anymore. Be it the First Emperor or Ose's newly empowered self, the Overlords aren't a threat to us any longer. We need to rise up and take back our sovereignty."

"They absolutely are still a threat." Ose interjects. "The Overlords are not entities you can merely overthrow or ignore on a whim. Even at their absolute weakest, so long as the Second Founder exists, they can destroy any world they like and claim supreme rule over the galaxy. My new power might be incredible, but I'm not confident I can defeat Dosena in a fight to the death. She probably can't kill me, but then again, perhaps she can. Bael's body is nearly invincible... but 'nearly' does not mean 'entirely.'"

Bael nods. "Yup. I fought Grandma Camael during the War in Heaven. Damn geezer broke my arm! And heck, Ose's speed-punch broke my arm again! So it's doable."

"Not to mention the humans ruined your right eye," Ose says, reaching up to touch the now-fully-intact appendage, restored through Mephisto's necromancy. "So, truly, I can't afford to be completely arrogant. Let's just say that if I had to fight the strongest overlord, I'm 10% confident I could win and 50% confident I could flee and survive."

She smiles, revealing a hint of ambition.

"Of course, that is as I am now. Presently, my powers have been limited to the rank of Duke. Once I evolve Bael's body to the rank of Emperor, I will regain my full strength. Perhaps then, that ten percent will climb much higher. Maybe Bael's old body will become truly invincible."

After a momentary pause, Ose changes topics.

"Regarding the Overlords, I do agree that the mind-wipes have become irrelevant. Humanity's leader either knows or will soon know about the Overlords' true identities. There's no point in keeping you all in the dark, so, rather than wasting my time blabbering on about it all..."

Ose closes her eyes. The more spiritually aware Emperors, such as Mephisto, watch as her Astral Body steps out of her fleshly figure and rushes away.

Half an hour later, Ose returns and re-enters her body. A human steps through the broken door to the chamber, revealing his identity to be Benjamin Brown. In his hands, he holds a small silvery metal orb, one that pulses with magical energy.

Benjamin walks up to Ose's side and raises an eyebrow. "Are you certain? There's no undoing this, not without a lot of time, effort, and pain."

"The memory blockers don't matter anymore." Ose says, snatching the metal ball out of the human's hands. "If anyone acts too rowdy... I'll just have to kill them."

Several Hidden Emperors frown.

"What do you mean?" Yadrat asks. "Act rowdy? Kill someone? What's this about?"

"Well, as I'm sure you can imagine," Ose explains, "some of you were very naughty demons. You nearly caused the Volgrim to condemn our species to Total Rendition, back in the day. I would hope you won't entertain any delusions of grandeur once you get those memories back... but if you do, and if you insist on rallying armies to smite our *benevolent* Overlords, I'll kill you myself."

She shrugs.

"What are you going to do? Fight me? If the lot of you couldn't beat the Cherubiim, you'll be helpless if I attack. So keep your ambitions buried, for all our sakes."

Ose doesn't wait to hear any further objections. She simply holds the orb up in the air and shoots it with electrical magic from her eyes.

"Unlock for me."

Ose activates the magic contained within this special orb, which causes a burst of energy to well up inside it. The device glows for a few seconds before firing a beam straight upward, a single pulse of energy that passes through all material in its path, reverberates through Hell Harbor's upper atmosphere, and races across the entire galaxy.

Moments later, every single Emperor in the room buckles forward, falls to their knees, and screams in pain.

Yardrat howls as if his soul has caught fire. Kristoff screams bloody murder.

Mephisto's undead servants, including Lupus, Zamiel, and Gorn, all lose their footing and tumble to the floor, curling into the fetal positions.

The Dukes from the Hell of Lust weep tears of blood as their brains strain under the pressure of new memories reasserting themselves.

Fae, Crow, Serena, Maltus, Huul, Melody, Guura, and Viola all suffer the pain of brain-drain coming within inches of ravaging their souls.

Only one figure remains unmoved.

Bael calmly lays back and watches as everyone screams, begs for mercy, and wails as if their lives are about to end.

"Damn. That sure looks like it hurts. Hehe. Poor buncha silly cunts."

All across space and time, every demon who had their memories sealed, all the monsters, and all the rest, experience a sudden and unexpected burst of agony inside themselves as they suffer the same pain as their leaders.

Aside from a minuscule minority of elites from the First Hell, nobody older than eighty-five thousand years escapes the pain of reintegrating their memories. Billions of demons and monsters fall into temporary comas, unable to rouse themselves until they've reintegrated their memories.

A full hour later, the Emperors begin to wake up, one by one.

As one of the demons possessing a strong soul, Serena opens her eyes first. The blind Emperor grabs onto a nearby block of demonstone and pulls herself to a languid sitting position.

"Oh... devils... my... head..."

Emperor Viola wakes up next. She immediately jumps to her feet and shoots a look of angry annoyance Ose's way.

"Maybe a little warning, next time?"

One by one, the other Emperors rouse their spirits and souls. In the end, the Dukes from the Hell of Lust, and Dorma, the Duke of Delicacies, end up reviving last, due to their weaker souls and minds.

Several emotions reverberate around the room.

Emperor Gorn gazes at the floor while long-buried memories evoke thoughts of anger.

"I remember. I was one of the leaders of that... insurrection. I wanted to topple the Volgrim and put demonkind at the top of the galaxy's power structure."

"Yeah, and I helped you out." Fae says. "I couldn't stand the thought of a boring, miserable existence where we'd only ever get the scraps the Volgrim gave us. And look what's happened now! What a bunch of bullshit!"

The many assembled demon elites slowly grapple with their restored memories, their senses of self, and their long-lost ambitions that were snuffed out by Diablo in the past.

After witnessing not only the might of the Cherubim, but the powers of the Volgrim in the past, even the most ambitious demons present, such as Gorn, find themselves struggling to reconcile their hatred of their current circumstances with the harsh reality that they simply aren't strong enough to change their fate.

As Gorn wanders back and forth, flames wafting off his bird-like body to fall to the floor, a hollow look appears in his eyes.

"Truly, I was a frog in a well." He mutters. "The Volgrim nearly destroyed us, the last time we fought them. Now, the Wordsmith's rise threatens us a second time, but our situation is even more precarious than before."

"If only you knew." Ose says. "Now that you all have comprehended the might of our alien overlords, you can begin to understand the Threat they fight against now, the menace known as the Plague. Even I am not privy to the most sensitive details, but from what I have gleaned, this 'Plague' is something we absolutely cannot withstand."

The Hidden Emperors listen intently to Ose's words as she reveals information surprising to all of them.

"The Plague first appeared eighty-five thousand years ago," Ose explains. "It arrived long after the mind-wipes, when the lot of you were fully ignorant as to the identities of the Volgrim, and our galactic situation. Had you known, you probably would have launched another attack on the Volgrim and gotten us all killed. Instead, you stayed ignorant and left the Volgrim to fight that battle themselves. Now, after all these years, the fight is ramping up, and its conclusion appears inevitable."

She pauses.

"The Volgrim will lose. And once they fall, the Plague will come for us. We will all perish. None will be able to stop it."

"This 'Plague' sounds alarming, to say the least." Yardrat says. "What can you tell us about it?"

"It's not a sickness, not in the strictest sense." Ose explains. "Rather, it's more of an infection that forcibly mutates the host's body..."

Ose begins explaining in detail the Plague's parameters, or at least those that she knows, to the other demons. The more she talks, the graver their expressions become.

"Bloody hell." Bael grunts. "Space zombies. Probably scarier than Mephisto's undead goons. Sheesh. The 'Volg-rats' really know how to pick their enemies."

"How are we even supposed to contend against such a foe?" Emperor Crow asks. "What use is a Demon Deity if even the Volgrim's mightiest Psions can only slow the Plague down?"

Emperor Gorn casts a shrewd glance Ose's way.

"That's why you pushed for Stormbringer so hard, isn't it? You wanted to capture the Wordsmith. He was to be your insurance against the Plague."

"Correct." Ose affirms. "I believed, and still do, that if we capture the Wordsmith and bend him to our will, we can make demonkind more powerful than ever, to the point we can defeat not only this Plague, but the Volgrim as well."

Bael snorts. "Ose, you're such a dumbass. Seriously! You already lost to that Wordshit once. You had the winds at your back and the upper hand, but you still lost. What makes ya think you could do it again? Especially when you done killed his little girl. He won't hold back if ya clash a second time."

"I took on the Wordsmith by myself," Ose reminds Bael and the others. "I arrogantly believed my strength was enough to capture him and make him my slave. But now, I know better. If all of us work together, and if we join hands, we can defeat the Wordsmith. Not only one Emperor, but all of us. The Cherubiim won't be a threat as long as I'm around. If we all join together-"

"Why should we go along with your plan?" Yardrat interrupts. "Maybe we can all defeat the Wordsmith, but maybe we can't. You just want his power for yourself. Admit it, Ose."

"I *did* crave his power," Ose replies, "but no more. Now, I only want it to empower demonkind as a whole. Don't you understand? This is all or nothing. We have to capture the Wordsmith's family, force him to submit, and ensure he becomes our slave. The Volgrim already have their sights on him, but they fear his potential. They won't make any sudden moves, not just yet anyway, and we can use that time to quickly overwhelm him before he rebuilds and fortifies humanity's defenses!"

Ose continues. "If we don't take this chance, the Wordsmith will surely build weapons capable of suppressing and repelling us. Once he fortifies Tarus II, we'll lose our chance forever! Humanity will become unstoppable. Prior to the Volgrim, humanity was already acting as the apex predator of Earth, and that was without a Hero guiding them! With a Hero, and especially the Wordsmith taking command, we'll lose our status and become second- no, third-rate citizens of the Milky Way! Behind humanity and the Volgrim both!"

Ose's tenor and tempo increases as she speaks, sweeping up her audience in the moment.

However, one demoness remains immune to her words.

Emperor Serena raises her hand. "This sentiment is all well and good. However, why have you pivoted? You mind-wiped all of us to ensure we wouldn't rebel against the Volgrim, yet now you seek to capture the Wordsmith in order to do exactly that. With all your comments about the Second Founder's strength, Dosena surely is not an enemy we can afford to provoke."

"A lot has changed since the ancient insurrections." Ose dryly says. "The Volgrim are stretched thin. The Wordsmith is weakened. And, according to the intelligence I've received... he does *not* possess Excalibur."

"What? He doesn't?" Yardrat asks. "But you said-"

"I know what I said." Ose replies. "I detected Camael's magical signature, the same one we always felt in the presence of her mightiest artifacts. However, it did feel slightly different compared to Excalibur's signature, and now that the Volgrim have confirmed they still possess Excalibur, we know the Hero was merely trying to deceive us. He used his Wordsmithing to trick Mephisto's senses. Don't forget, the Wordsmith's powers defy comprehension. It's not out of line to suggest he could fake a powerful mana signature. As it happens, he can perfectly mimic a demon's energy too, based on how he first came to meet me on Hell Harbor."

"Hmph. Well, I suppose dealing with him quickly isn't out of the question." Yardrat mutters. "But many of us are still utterly drained and exhausted after fighting the Cherubiim. It will likely take Kristoff weeks to replenish his mana. Lupus exhausted herself battling the Cherubiim, and she needs time to acclimate to Fenrir's body."

Ose nods. "We can't delay too long. I say we prepare and launch an attack with the Dukes and Barons of our respective Hells within the next... two weeks! The more time we give the Wordsmith, the faster he'll be able to rebuild and erect defenses."

"I will help you devise a plan of attack." Gorn says. "I may have lost my head, but I hardly lost any mana, since I fell so early. While the others rest, you and I can exploit the Wordsmith's vulnerabilities. We must succeed, or our species is doomed."

"That is acceptable." Ose concludes.

While the many assembled Emperors begin detailing their plans and how they might attack the Wordsmith while he's still weak, Bael stands up and saunters over to the three Emperors from the Hell of Isolation.

"Hey. Viola, Guura, Melody. You gals got a sec?"

Bael keeps his voice low, surprising them. Guura is the first to reply.

"What's up, Bael?"

"Is something the matter?" Viola asks.

Bael glances around the room.

"Hmm. I think it's better if we go back to your Hell to talk. You've got those anti-peeping things there, right?"

"Isolation barriers." Viola affirms. "We do. Why the secrecy?"

Melody slaps Bael's arm. "Yeah, Bael! No need to get all serious on us! Just say it!"

The Duke of Pain shakes his head.

"Sorry, ladies. I'd rather keep this between the three of you and me. Besides, none of you are gonna get involved in Ose's thing, right?"

The three Emperors shake their heads in unison. "No."

Bael gestures to the doorway.

"Then let's ditch this joint. You just know Ose's gonna mess up real bad anyway. No point in sticking around."

"Alright." Viola says, sweeping a few strands of black hair out of her eyes. "We'll head back now."

Ose shoots a suspicious glance at Bael and the Hell of Isolation, but says nothing. She knows perfectly well how they will perform if forced to enter battle, so she doesn't even bother with requesting their assistance.

However, as Bael, the three Emperors, and Duke Dorma head out, a shadowy figure follows in their wake.

Emperor Yama hisses quietly to himself while skulking in the darkness.

"Kekeke... you have seen something we did not intend for you to see..." Yama mutters. "Oh, Bael... your soul is formidable, but your body is tender. We must make you and these other pretty girls our obedient little *sluts* for the rest of eternity... kekeke..."

Part 340: Bael's News

Bael, Dorma, Viola, Guura, and Melody leave the Hidden Emperor meeting without any fanfare. Now that the Duke of Pain lacks an indestructible body and magical talents, he won't be of any help during Ose's next invasion. Similarly, the Hell of Isolation's members never tend to involve themselves with the militaristic aspects of upper demon society, so they don't care much about how the invasion turns out.

The group of five hikes across the ruined surface of Hell Harbor. As they walk, they stop every so often to examine the devastation left behind by the Cherubiim's attack, as well as the subsequent artillery bombardment dropped by the Volgrim. Massive craters scar the planet. Burning rubble fills what were once sizable and well-populated demon cities. Among the victims are not only demons and monsters, but numerous human slaves, too.

The uneven ground makes the journey take far longer than usual. All of the five demons possess the ability to travel much faster if they so desire simply by running and jumping with their enhanced demonic physiology, but they still take their time to look upon the ruined world and soak the devastation in.

"I had forgotten everything." Viola says. "The Volgrim, our history... so many things. The sheer devastation our Overlords can wreak, but they still couldn't defeat the Cherubiim."

"Man, that whole situation SUCKED!" Melody complains. She flexes her huge arm muscles and laughs. "Me and Guura got our shit kicked in! We barely managed to play half a tune before old man Raphael turned the tables on us. Have we gotten weak, or what?"

"Nah. You gals ain't weak." Dorma says. "Your opponent was just too strong. Who knew the Archangels had such a powerful transformation tucked away for a rainy day? At least you managed to slow them down for a few minutes. I couldn't help at all. Just wasn't a fight Dukes like me could get involved with."

Guura lightly slaps Bael's back. "Maybe not, but Bael coulda kicked butt if he was in his old body! Man, did you see Ose prancing around like she was Queen Bigshot? She's only as strong as she is because she stole Bael's body! In her old body, she'd have been as

useless as all the rest of us! She got lucky, but she acts like it was some special Devil-given talent! Sheesh!"

"We're honestly lucky to have Ose at a time like this." Viola says, always the one who examines the facts. "However she got her abilities, it really doesn't matter. She alone is capable of defeating the Cherubiim. Perhaps the First Emperor would have had to use his powers if Ose hadn't been as capable, but we don't know how strong he actually is."

"Of course we do." Melody snorts. "The First Emperor completely suppressed Ose even in her Super Lightning Balrog form! Totally! He's way beyond the level we can imagine! I'll bet he's a Demon Deity, or even higher!"

"What do you think, Bael?" Guura asks, jumping out in front of him and spinning like a ballerina. "Have you met the First Emperor before? Is he super strong?"

Bael shrugs. "Dunno. Seems like a poser to me."

"A poser?" Melody frowns. "In what way?"

"Ah, you know how it is. Bunch of smoke and mirrors." Bael says nonchalantly. "Don't let some poser pull the ghouls over your eyes. I bet he's not even that strong. Just knows how to scare other people."

"Yes... maybe..." Viola ponders. "But he *did* completely suppress Ose. She couldn't move at all. I'm sure, considering her level of power, it was a humbling, if not humiliating experience."

Bael shrugs. "I don't buy it. But what do I know? I ain't that smart. All that magic crap goes right over my head."

The group continues walking. At some point, they pick up the pace and eventually reach the Hell Harbor Annex, where the lone Warpgate on the planet remains standing. Unsurprisingly, a massive amount of devastation surrounds the area, but the Warpgate itself remains perfectly intact, not so much as a scratch on its surface.

When the Emperors draw close, some nearby demon grunts with bad burn wounds scurry up to them.

"What happened, Ose? There were all these big explosions, and then all of a sudden we got blasted into the sky! We woke up on the ground and nearly everyone was dead!"

Bael pauses, realizing they've mistaken him for Ose based on his appearance. "Uhh..."

"Some angels attacked." Viola interjects. "You've heard of angels, right? The humans sent them to attack us. Ose took care of them, really ruined their day. They unleashed a lot of devastation, but the forces of Hell won again, as always."

The young, low-ranked demons glance at each other, mildly confused.

"Angels... yeah, I've heard about them. So they still exist, huh?"

"Dunno. Must be true."

Bael's group exchanges a few more words with the grunts before walking up to the Warpgate. There, they find a tired goblin, beaten and exhausted from all the recent hubbub.

"We need a portal opened to this location." Viola says, handing him a jade-green tablet with temporal information carved on it.

The goblin glances at her suspiciously. "Yeah? Who you? Me can't just change portal whenever want! Get big trouble!"

Viola sticks her thumb out to point at Bael. "Ose's orders."

"Ohhh, Ose!" The Goblin says, quickly 'recognizing' the figure of his Emperor. "So sorry! Bad eyes, very tired!"

Bael starts to protest about being misidentified, but instead shrugs and just goes along with it.

"Meh. Less of a pain this way."

The Goblin contacts a group of other monsters in a location hidden several miles beneath Hell Harbor's surface, in a hidden cache where they can perform temporal calculations without their work being easily interrupted. These hundreds of monsters spend the next thirty minutes running calculations, adjusting spatial frequencies, and lining up infinitesimally minor but significant math equations to ultimately discover the precise location of the Warpgate belonging to the planet where the Hell of Isolation is located.

Abruptly, the Warpgate's entrance shuts down, flickers for a moment, then re-establishes itself, revealing an opaque portal with no hint of what's on the other side.

The Goblin checks a few numbers, then gives a thumbs-up to Bael's group.

"Okay, okay! Is good now! All donezo!"

Without any fanfare, all five demons step through the portal.

Upon arriving on the other side, they pause to acclimate themselves to the new environment. They arrive on the world of Sharmur, an average planet with gravity levels twenty percent stronger than those of the demons' ancient homeworld, Earth. Sharmur's Warpgate stands atop a small, flat mountaintop, half a mile above sea level. Across the horizon, Bael and the others get a good look at the distant ocean, the sparsely planted forests in between, and many different plumes of smoke gently rising into the air.

Unlike Tarus II or Hell Harbor, which are classified as Paradise-Class worlds, Sharmur is merely an average habitable world with decent growing seasons, sometimes extreme hot and cold temperatures, and a moderate level of foliage. Powerful apex predators roam the planet's forests, but they have long since evolved to know not to mess with demons and the upper-strength level monsters which now populate their world.

Bael strides over to the edge of the plateau and inhales deeply.

"Mmm. Smells good. Been a few years since I popped over."

"It's been at least thirty *thousand* years." Viola points out. "At least, by my count. Why did you stop visiting, anyway?"

"Lost track of time." Bael says with a shrug. "I dunno. Things haven't been exciting for a while. Now that the Wordshit's making moves, seems the Hells are gonna get spicier again."

"Well, not ours, and probably not the Hell of Lust either." Melody says with a shrug. "Speaking of which, I think I'll invite Jahn and Silvia over, later. We should throw a big party!"

"A party?" Guura asks. "After what happened on Hell Harbor?"

"Psh, I don't see why not." Melody replies. "Hell Harbor's the First Hell's territory. Ose can clean up that mess. It's not like we pissed off those Archangels! We never did anything to 'em."

The group heads over to a trail leading down the mountain. As they start to descend, Bael shoots a look back at the now-closed Warpgate.

"Hmm."

"Something wrong, Bael?" Dorma asks.

"Nah..." Bael mutters. "Just had this weird feeling someone was lookin' at me. Must've been the wind."

Once they arrive at the bottom of the summit, Viola, ever the responsible among her fellow Emperors, uses a mana beacon to call for a Warper grunt. Moments later, a portal opens, and a pretty young female demoness jumps out.

"Hihi! Where can I getcha, boss?"

"We're looking to head to the Temple of Isolation." Viola says. "It's secret business."

"I can drop you off in the town just outside," The Warper says. "But you'll have to walk the rest of the way!"

"Acceptable."

After a moment's wait, the Warper opens a second portal and sends her esteemed guests through.

Bael and the others step into a different location elsewhere in the planet, where a towering temple of vaguely Spanish design looms not far from a town of fifty thousand humans, monsters, and demons.

What makes Sharmur different from other demon controlled worlds is the way they treat their human slaves. Even calling them slaves seems something of a misnomer. While the elites of Sharmur, the Emperors, Dukes, Barons, and so on do maintain a hierarchy wherein demons are of a higher caste than most monsters, and monsters are higher up than humans, humans are never beaten or whipped. Humans hold all of the same rights as those of a higher caste, and they lead relatively pleasant lives compared to the human slaves on Hell Harbor or in the Labyrinth.

Thanks to the heavy gravity on Sharmur, most humans possess strong bodies that have adapted over tens of millennia to effortlessly cope with the pressure bearing down on them every minute of every day. Humans perform menial tasks, such as cleaning and managing minor affairs the demons and monsters consider too mundane, but the hardest and most back-breaking work goes to those who are most capable, such as Minotaurs, Trolls, Demon Brutes, and other such non-humans. Rarely do even the most sturdy male humans step in to help out.

On Sharmur, all humans receive adequate food to feed them and their families, houses to live in, and living standards the humans serving under the more vicious demons of

other Hells would consider enviable.

Bael glances around as him and the other four walk toward the giant, pyramid-like Incan temple in the distance, a several-hundred-foot-high structure that calls attention to itself due to its unique appearance.

"Damn." Bael says, glancing at a family of tall, sturdy humans nearby, consisting of a father and his two daughters. "I forgot how chill this place was."

The man and his children purchase some extra food for a nice feast they'll enjoy later that day, namely some odd-looking fruit grown on Sharmur's nearby fertile land. The man jokes around and plays with his kids while he wanders the shopping district, where dozens of food stalls sit, advertising low prices.

"We've become more 'humanized' over the last several millennia." Viola explains. "Of course, we keep within the upper limits of the Volgrim guidelines, but letting humans do agriculture stuff seems to make them happy. It turns out humans, demons, and monsters can all live together decently without exploiting each other. The Hell of Lust... sort of understands our position, but you know how those sex-fiends are. They're a little too focused on carnal pleasures, and not enough on the simple fun in life."

She sighs deeply. "I'm just glad to get out of that *boring* meeting. Every time I visit Hell Harbor, my 'chi flow' gets messed up for a week. Can't focus or think properly. I bet it's because the whole planet smells like depression and misery."

"Yeah, the other Hells are really miserable," Guura pipes up. "Everyone is always such a bum. But not us! All that stupid 'power' stuff messes with your head. I'm just glad we get our own world where we can have fun and live the good life, all the time!"

"So what's up with all the secrecy?" Melody asks, turning her gaze Bael's way. "You're acting so tight-lipped today! Just tell us! Nobody's gonna make a move on the three Emperors of Isolation!"

Bael frowns. "Well..."

He glances around the area, as if looking for someone, then shakes his head.

"I'll tell ya when we're safe."

Melody shrugs. "Okay, weirdo. Suit yourself."

Dorma pauses in front of a food stall selling some traditional human-made cakes. "Oh, how tasty-looking! How much for these?"

The human owner beams brightly at him. "Duke of Delicacies! My food is but ash in the mouth compared to yours! If you want to try my pitiful wares, just take one! I would feel too ashamed to charge you for these substandard baked goods!"

Dorma reaches into his belt and fishes out a gold coin. "Nonsense! Do you think one can become a god of baking without eating a little of everything under the sun? This fat demon only is as good as he is because he makes sure to expand his horizons every day! I smell some Hutendlaur in your goods, and that's not an ingredient people use often. I'd like to try this for myself, so there is no shame even if you are a beginner!"

The Duke of Delicacies buys five slices of cake from the man, flashes him a thumbs-up, then walks the food back to his friends.

"Come! We will eat cake while we walk!"

After waving goodbye to the human, he and the other demons dig into the cake while continuing on to the temple.

"Mmm. Not bad!" Dorma says. "Tangy, like lime, but it sticks to the roof of my mouth and slides into my throat. And that creamy texture, delicious! I tell you what, if you let humans thrive, the food they make is even better than their weapons!"

Bael swallows the last bite of his cake and shrugs. "Human food, demon food, it's all good to me, bub."

"You'd be surprised," Viola says. "There are a lot of demons who only insist on eating human flesh and blood. They say human food tastes bad and they won't even try it. They've all become so locked in their ways..."

"Yeah. We'd all be a lot better off if demons didn't insist on eating humans." Guura adds. "Fleshbags are friends, not food! That's my motto. I'd feel weird if I had to eat humans again... it's so icky and gross, eating sentient beings. I have a lot of human friends, I'll have you know!"

"Agares used to talk like you guys." Bael comments. "But after the old lizard kicked the bucket, Beelzebub came in, and... well, he's dead now, too. But I don't even know what the Slithering Spire looks like after the angels went all-out. Hope it didn't get hit too badly."

"The Spire was built into the side of a mountain," Viola points out. "I'm sure when the attack started, the humans there took shelter."

"It'd be great if they did." Bael mumbles.

Before long, the group arrives at the bottom of the Temple of Isolation, a holy site where all of the Sixth Hell's most valuable artifacts and ancestral heirlooms rest. Bael and the others walk toward its bottom, where a single door sits. After passing by a few demons standing guard outside, they step inside the tomb, close the door, and head deep underground, where they enter a massive sprawling complex.

Hundreds of rooms sit filled with treasures of sentimental instead of monetary value. Many of them are personal objects that were once owned by the demons of ancient times, including long-dead ones from before the fall of Earth.

The group arrives at the end of the hall, where they take a right turn and enter a sacred room, filled with carved images of every Demon Emperor that has ever existed. In this chamber, the Hall of Emperors, a statue of Satan stands at the apex, along with a statue of Belial standing by his side. Satan holds a cup of wine in his hand and holds it aloft, as if toasting the other statues before him. Belial smiles at him seductively, her expression identical to the one she always wore when in his presence, so deep was her love for him.

"Alright." Viola says, hovering her hand over a magical control module next to the entryway. "I've activated the isolation barrier. Only the five of us are here, nobody else. Not even Ose's Astral Form could slip inside, let alone any other monitoring device. Even the Volgrim wouldn't be able to peep on us."

"Right!" Melody says. "Finally! So, Bael, what's up with all the secrecy, huh? You got something to say?"

Bael doesn't immediately answer. He walks over to the left wall, to one of the hundred statues in the room, where a familiar duo of Emperors catches his attention.

The images of Shax and Murmur.

He gazes up at his 'long-dead' friends and sighs.

"She's still alive, guys."

The other four blink.

"She?" Melody asks, directing a suspicious gaze at Bael's back. "'She,' who?"

Guura's expression becomes uncertain. "You... you don't mean..."

"Murmur." Bael says, his voice quiet, while gazing up at the little girl's statue. "She's alive. I saw her with my own eyes."

He turns around to look at the others, sadness in his gaze.

"...Yama's got her. She's one of his Shades."

"**WHAT?!**" Melody snaps. "Yama? YAMA?! You're lying! That's impossible! We saw her body! The humans killed her!"

"We did see her corpse..." Viola says. She pauses for half a beat before adding, "But... Mephisto was... unable to bring her back to life. We thought, maybe, possibly... the humans had done something to her, evaporated her soul. Their weapons were so formidable, we couldn't be sure..."

Bael purses his lips. "It wasn't just me who saw her. Fae did, too. So did Mara, from the Tarot Sect. Yama's got our friend... and I dunno how to get her back."

Melody's legs go soft. She crumples to the ground, a look of hatred, rage, and defeat on her face.

"No, no, no... that can't be true... it mustn't... all this time? She's been... she's been in Yama's clutches?!"

"That sick, rapist bastard." Viola hisses. Bloodlust fills her eyes as she imagines what 100,000 years of being Yama's plaything must have done to her 'little-big sister.' "I'll kill him."

"Not if I get to him first!" Guura proclaims. "I'll rip his shadowy little demonhood off and feed it to the dogs!"

Bael allows them several minutes of ranting and raving before speaking again.

"Murmur ain't the only one who's still alive. Shax is, too. Sort of. I think."

This news sends another wave of shock through the Hell of Isolation's Emperors.

"No!" Viola exclaims. "Don't tell me Yama has him too?! That spawn of a broodmother!"

"Not Yama." Bael says. "It's, uh, me. Me? I think it's me."

He proceeds to explain his recent discoveries to his shocked audience, all of whom listen with bated breath, hanging onto his every word.

"You're kidding." Melody says. "After the humans shot you in the eye, that's when you started seeing Shax? So he's just a soul fragment, now?"

"That's what he says." Bael explains. "But I can't really just tell him to come out. He beat the crap outta Yama, and then his spirit-body fell apart afterward. I'm not sure if he's still alive or not. He's just kinda... *in me*, ya know?"

The other four demons quickly walk over to Bael. They sweep their demonic senses across his body several times, but no matter how they probe or search him, they don't find anything.

"I don't sense any errant souls attached to you..." Viola mutters. "Are you sure you're not just hallucinating?"

"Nope. I'm not." Bael says. "You should've seen it, sis. Shax beat the crap out of Yama, like he beat his ass real good. If it wasn't for Fae, he might've killed the poor bastard."

"What a pity that would be." Dorma snorts. "So, what do we do about Murmur? Can we save her?"

"I've never heard of Yama giving up control of a Shade." Viola says, her expression sinking. "But that hellhound-fucker had better start to sweat. There's no chance I'm letting him hold onto my little-big sister for a moment longer."

The group falls silent while thinking about how to deal with the situation.

"...I don't know of any way we might convert a demon out of Yama's control." Melody says. "Except... well, maybe the... the Wordsmith?"

Viola scrunches up her face. "You want to ask *him* for help?"

"Hey! Hear me out!" Melody protests. "We didn't piss in the Wordsmith's cereal! Ose did! I bet if we explained our position and that we didn't have anything to do with Ose, he'd help us out! His magic should surely be able to convert Murmur back to a normal girl!"

"There's no way the Wordsmith would be so kind." Viola says, shaking her head. "In his eyes, all demons are the enemy. Ose made damn good sure of that."

"But doesn't he have Belial with him?" Guura asks, her eyes sparkling like stars. "We know Beli! We're good friends with her! If we ask the Hell of Lust nicely, they can also put in a good word for us!"

"Maybe." Viola mutters. "...Maybe."

"The Wordshit was real angry." Bael says. "Ose said he was a nice guy, wouldn't hurt a fly. But he got mad. He killed a lot of demons. He even killed me. I can't blame him. We murdered his little girl, after all. His friends. His family. You think he'll help you, when Ose's made him our enemy?"

Bael shakes his head.

"Nah. We have to find a different way... for Murmur's sake. We gotta save her, man. She's hurting."

Viola lowers her eyes.

"I suppose you're right, Bael. We'll have to find a different way to save our sister."

Part 341: Shax's Return

After explaining Murmur's situation, Bael and the Hell of Isolation's top demons don't feel much enthusiasm for small talk. Viola glances around the chamber and wriggles her nose.

"Is that why you wanted to chat with us in private, Bael? So Yama wouldn't know you told us?"

Bael raises an eyebrow. "Eh? Nah, sister. I ain't no yellow-belly coward. If Yama's got half my brains, he already saw us leavin' and put two and two together. No, I just wanted to keep this info hush-hush. It wouldn't look good for your Hell if the others knew Yama had one of your founders in his grubby little paws."

"That's very considerate of you." Viola says, flashing a sweet smile at the Duke of Pain. "But, frankly, it doesn't seem to matter much. We don't have a way to deal with Yama. I'm sure if the three of us worked together, we could beat the snot out of him, but... as for how to get Murmur back..."

Guura glances around the room. "You... you don't think Yama's here right now, do you?"

"In here? Not a chance. I can sense every drop of demonic energy inside our Isolation Barriers." Viola says. "If you weren't so out of practice, you could too. But as for just outside the barrier? Who knows. Yama could be lurking around every corner."

She gazes meaningfully at Bael.

"You have to watch yourself now, Bael. Yama wants you. He wants your, erm, *body*. He'll do anything to get it, the sick bastard. Unless you stay with us all the time, you're in grave danger!"

Melody slaps Bael's back. "No worries though! You ain't got any powers, but we'll protect you, Big Bael Bro! You've helped us out a whole bunch by letting us know about Murmur! We owe you!"

Bael gently pushes Melody's hand away. "No need, ladies. I ain't afraid of one little turd-sniffer. Yama's big, and he's scary, but I know all sorts of tricks. I can protect myself."

"Oh? What sorts of tricks?" Viola asks.

Bael stares at her blankly. "Huh?"

"Tricks. You said you knew tricks to protect yourself." Viola repeats, raising an eyebrow. "What sorts of tricks?"

Bael stares at her for several seconds.

"I... ain't got no idea what you're talking about."

"Hahaha! Freaking Bael, man! Such an airhead!" Melody laughs. "The moment something leaves his mouth, it's gone forever! In one ear and out the other!"

Bael chuckles. "You said it, sister."

The group of demons continues chatting about relatively banal happenings for a while before lowering the barrier and heading out of the room.

As they walk, Bael glances inside the various chambers of the Temple of Isolation. He pauses at the entry to one and narrows his eyes while looking inside.

"Oy! What's in here? Looks like a bunch of instruments!"

Bael walks inside, and the girls follow after him, along with Dorma.

"Yup, this is the chamber where we store all of the most famous musical instruments from demon history," Dorma says. "Look over there. See that golden fiddle? That's the same one Satan used to play. And that piano? We stole it from that human, Mozart. It's authentic!"

"Damn, Satan's fiddle, Mozo's piano..." Bael mutters, while giving them a casual glance. He stops in front of a pair of demonstone drums and gasps. "Oh, heck! No way! Are these... MY drums?! I thought they were gone for good!"

"Of course not!" Dorma says, laughing. "We saved your drums, Shax's guitar, and even Murmur's clarinet. All the parts of the old band are here. We don't have hardly any of the band *members* still around... but, well, that's just how the dominoes fall sometimes."

Bael gently touches his old drumset, the same one he used to play while on the big stage, all those millennia ago.

His expression softens as he reminisces about the good old days.

"Yeah... most of 'em are dead. Just me left."

"Well..." Guura starts to say, before getting a pair of evil glares from Melody and Viola.
"...I guess that's true! Ehehe..."

Bael pulls up a chair and sits before the drums. He lifts his hand, then swings it toward the unthinkable hard demonstone to slap it with all his strength.

Crack!

Rather than making that satisfying bongo sound he remembers from millennia ago, Bael practically shatters his bones on the unthinkable hard demonstone surface.

"Aaargh! Aw, shit! Shit! I broke all my fingers! Oh, the pain! The pain! Someone kiss the boo-boo!!"

Bael frantically shakes some feeling back into his hand, while the other four simply offer him polite smiles.

"Don't you remember, Bael?" Melody asks. "You only played these drums because your hands were too clumsy to play anything else. If you don't have a super-strong, invincible body, these drums are basically unusable. You're better off trying to play with normal drums, or maybe even another instrument entirely."

Bael continues to rub his hand while wearing a hurt expression. He gazes sadly at the drums and nods. "Yeah. Guess that's true. I never had no feeling in my fingers before, couldn't play any of them delicate instruments, like pianos or guitars. I guess I could give it a try, now."

He shakes his head.

"...But it just ain't the same without others. I'm too old for this band stuff. Ain't no fun anymore."

"It's funny..." Viola muses. "Demons gave humans music, and they evolved it in their own way. We gave them suits and fine culture, and they evolved that, too. Humans are great at taking things from other species and changing them to fit their wants and desires."

"That's just another way to say they're a bunch of thieves." Dorma rebuts.

"No... not thieves. Just adaptable little critters." Viola concludes.

* * *

After Bael messes around with the instruments for a while, he gets bored and decides to leave.

"I've seen enough. Just a bunch of rusty music stuff anyway. Ain't nobody gonna touch it ever again. I'll just be heading back to Hell, if it's all the same to the rest of ya."

The other demons nod, but Guura and Viola both stare at Bael's back with saddened eyes, feeling for once just how sad and lonely the poor guy feels. Having lost his powers, all his friends, and even the hobbies he once loved, Bael doesn't have much left from his past that he actually enjoys.

"Bael, will 'your girls' be okay?" Guura asks, as she hops over to his side and skips along beside him. "You know, all the girls at your place on Hell Harbor."

Bael shrugs. "Prolly. There's a whole thing underground where they can hide out if the planet goes to shit. I bet they went down there to wait for me to return. I haven't told 'em I'm a girl, yet, so... that's gonna be weird."

Bael pauses.

"I am a girl, right? I'm a chick? I got lady parts."

"If you feel like a woman, then you are a woman!" Guura exclaims. "And if you still feel like a guy, that's fine too!"

Bael groans. "How the heck's a fella 'sposed to take a leak when his junk's all fallen off? Ose done stole my Little Bael... not sure how I'm gonna deal with these lady parts. It's all new to me."

Viola coughs into her fist. "Um, if you're not sure, I'm sure one of us could, uh, help you out, Bael. It'll take some getting used to, but it's not all that difficult to deal with."

Bael shrugs. "Whatever works."

He and the other four leave the temple, travel back to the town, and warp to the mountain where the Warpgate rests. After hiking back up the trail, Bael waits for the monster locals hidden elsewhere to key in the command codes to Hell. They aim not for the Labyrinth Core, but one of the four 'corners' of Hell, where single Warpgates sit ready for accessing distant worlds.

Unlike the Labyrinth Core, where six Warpgates stay, just one gate sits in each of Hell's four corners, making it a real pain to travel around. All demons have to either enlist

the assistance of Warpers to reach the Warpgates, or they have to walk through the Labyrinth's winding, shifting passages for days on end.

Bael starts to get a headache just thinking about it.

"Man, I could go for a game of Sticks and Bones, right about now. Artorias ain't around though... he's got an angel in his head. Mephisto's probably busy doing stuff with Ose. Uhh... Beelzebrat done offed himself... Agares is dead..."

While Bael waits for the Warpgate to open, the other four demons stand behind him, listening to his muttering.

"Hey, Bael." Melody says. "You know you can come by anytime, right? It's great to see you again, buddy! Just because you're in Ose's body doesn't mean you're not the same Bael as ever. We won't ever treat you any differently."

Bael smiles.

"Thanks, sugar. You know I'd drop by if I remembered more often. My memory just sucks, is all."

The Warpgate opens up, and Bael walks toward it.

"Peace out, ladies. Dorma too. We'll keep in touch."

The Duke of Pain swaggers through the opaque portal, disappearing inside the depths of Hell and leaving his friends behind to watch his back.

"...I don't like leaving Bael alone." Viola says. "There's no way Yama will stop pursuing him... but we can't just follow him around. He has a right to privacy."

"We could be all sneaky-like!" Guura chirps. "He won't even know we're there!"

Melody shakes her head. "It's not our place. Bael knows what he's doing. He might be an idiot, but he's not stupid."

The Warpgate closes, leaving them no chance to follow in Bael's footsteps.

"...Damn. Maybe I should contact one of my friends from the Hell of Lust..." Viola mutters.

Bael exits the Warpgate in the northern region of Hell, a swampy place with all kinds of nasty smells floating in the air. He passes by the nests of several large, lizard-like

monsters, not dissimilar to the crocodiles of Kar's tribe.

"Sup." Bael says, giving them a nod of his head. The reptiles merely blink their eyes and watch him pass, utterly confused as to why Ose is 'walking funny.'

As he makes his way down the darkened corridors, Bael begins to whistle a merry little tune. He swings his arms and legs in rhythm, getting himself up to a jolly good time.

"Hey there honey mama, hey there honey sister! Don't know if I'm a fella, or done turned into a sister..."

The Duke of Pain sings and whistles, his voice loudly bouncing around the Labyrinth's halls for hundreds of meters in every direction.

Bael passes several goblin dens, where hundreds of the little monsters congregate inside cramped spaces. Despite the lack of elbow room, most of the goblins find their living situation to be just fine and dandy, as they hold very little love for privacy and tend to stick together in large groups to stand a chance against the much bigger and stronger monsters of other species.

The further Bael gets from the Warpgate, the quieter the Labyrinth becomes.

Eventually, he comes to a stop in a pitch-black area, one where his eyes can easily pierce the gloom, but where the purity of the darkness would still make anyone's skin crawl.

Bael puts his hands on his hips, stands in place, and taps his foot impatiently.

After several minutes, he rolls his eyes.

"Oh, for Devil's sake, Yama! Just show yourself already! I know you're there. Sheesh, you think this powerless guy is gonna beat you up or something? You're such a friggin' coward."

The shadows around Bael physically thicken, as if turning to a river of dense gas. On the wall, just a few feet away, a pair of blood-red eyes emerges, peering at him from the darkness.

"Kekekeke. We have been watching you for some time, Duke of Pain. We are curious as to why you would come here, all alone."

Bael shrugs. "Here, there, wherever. What's it matter? I'll be alone in a dark place at some point. You're real good at playing the waiting game. Figured I'd just get this over

with."

Yama's eyes blink slowly. His gaze flickers up and down Bael's feminine body.

"You hold control of something we want. Now that we are alone, we can take you by force. That pesky soul of yours will have to break at some point!"

Drool begins to drip from Bael's mouth. He nods dully.

"...Uh-huh. Sure, pal. Whatever you say. Look, here's how this is gonna go. You're gonna give me Murmur back, or I'm gonna sic Shax on ya. He's real unhappy about what you did to his sister. Give her back now, and I won't have to break your shadow-ass into pieces."

At the threat of seeing Shax again, Yama shows visible alarm. He shrinks back from Bael for a moment, before realizing the Duke of Pain is only making a fool of him.

"Ludicrous! Kekeke. If you could summon Shax, you would have already done it! Just shut up and succumb to our control, Bael!"

Like a viper, Yama pounces at Bael! He fires off hundreds of shadow-tendrils from every direction, grabbing onto Bael's four limbs and spreading him out in an awkward position that makes resistance futile.

Bael groans. "This again? You didn't get my soul last time, and you won't this time, bub. If you try, I'll fry ya. You'll regret it."

Bael concentrates hard, digging into his innermost thoughts as he tries to call out to his friend.

Shax! Come on, buddy! Help me out here! I need ya, pal!

Yama slithers up to Bael and starts groping him all over, enjoying the future sensations of his unwilling pleasure slave.

"You will bend to our desires as we please, whether you want to or not! Kekeke!"

Bael frowns. "Hey, hands off, creep! This ain't funny anymore!"

"There is no humor in the art of seduction." Yama whispers. "We love the taste of fresh females. We crave more and more of them. We wish to enjoy the bodies of every beauty in the universe, no matter their species or whether they like us or not. We will go to *any* length to satiate our lust!"

The more Yama talks, the more Bael starts to panic.

Okay, Shax! Hah hah, good joke! Come on out, now! This creep is touching places that make me feel all weird inside! Shax! SHAX, come out, man!

Bael's vision becomes blurry as Yama grabs onto his head and stares into his eyes. Yama attacks Bael's soul directly, causing the Duke of Pain to violently jerk around as painful stabbing sensations bite into his very essence.

"Keh! Damn, this soul is so formidable! How can a mere Duke possess such a foundation?!"

Yama turns his soul attacks into swords. He stabs Bael's soul, cuts it, slashes it, and does everything he can, and slowly but surely begins to make a small amount of headway.

Panting wildly, Yama's eyes turn bloodshot as he desperately attacks Bael's soul in an effort to break him down and ultimately convert him to one of Yama's Shades.

"Stop resisting! Gah! You aren't even conscious anymore, how can your soul put up such a fight? This is ridiculous!"

Just when it seems all is lost, Bael suddenly snaps his eyes open.

"Oh! It worked!"

He completely ignores Yama's soul-attacks and turns away from the Shadow Emperor to look at a figure materializing in the darkness.

"Shax! Buddy, took ya long enough!"

Yama nearly jumps out of his skin. The Emperor of Shadows follows Bael's eyesight to the short, fat little figure materializing in the darkness. A vaguely ethereal body, similar to how Shax materialized before, appears in the Labyrinth's blackest recesses.

However, in unison, both Bael and Yama freeze up in shock.

"W-what..." Bael mutters. "No... no that can't be right..."

"What have you done?!" Yama hisses. "That isn't Shax! He's... he's....!!!"

The figure fully materializes. He glances around in confusion.

"Eh? Where am I? What happened to my girl?"

His eyes fall on the ensnared Bael and Emperor Yama, both standing remarkably close together, as if caught in the middle of a sacred act.

"Uh... Ose? Yama? Did... did I interrupt somethin'? How the hell'd I get here?"

Bael's jaw drops.

"B-boss? BOSS? Is that you?"

"Impossible!" Yama hisses, pulling away from Bael. He shoots the Duke of Pain a fear-filled look. "How could you bring back... Satan the Devil?!"

The former First Emperor, Satan the Devil, stands in the darkness, instead of Shax. He raises an eyebrow at the strange antics of 'Ose' and Yama, not sure what exactly is happening.

"Why're you two acting so weird?" Satan asks. "Guys. It's just me. Old buddy, Satan. Sheesh, you look like you ain't seen me in a hundred years!"

The short, pudgy First Emperor starts to stick his hands in his pockets, only for them to smack his hips uselessly. He looks down and becomes shocked to find that, for no reason he can recall, he's completely naked!

"What in the Seven Hells?" Satan grumbles. "Why the dickens am I standing in a dark hallway naked while Ose and Yama have a go at each other? This is all so strange..."

"Y-you died!" Bael sputters. "You died, boss! Right in Belial's arms! Remember? The Black Queen? Fightin' me and Deebs as the Balrog and Archdemon?"

Satan raises an eyebrow. "Yeah, of course I do. What about it? That was like 5 minutes ago."

He pauses.

"Wait, you said I *died*? But that can't be right. I'm right here, and still alive!"

The Devil takes a step toward Bael and frowns.

"By the way, Ose. You don't sound like yourself. You kind of sound like... Bael! Is this some kind of practical joke? Messin' with ol' Satan? A real knee-slapper, I bet."

"It's a long story!" Bael says. "I'm Bael! Me and Ose had our bodies swapped. It was Mephisto's fault. But forget that, boss! Can you beat the crap out of Yama for me?"

Yama flinches. "No, no, there's no need for *violence*! We're all good friends, yes? Good friends!"

Satan glances back and forth between Yama and Bael.

"Uh... huh... and why would I beat the crap out of Yama?"

"Because!" Bael answers. "Yama captured Murmur, boss! He took our little sis and made her one of his shadow-sluts! He's holding her hostage!"

"WHAT?!" Satan abruptly roars. "Yama! You little...!! Is that TRUE?!"

Yama's shadows slowly loosen around Bael's ankles and wrists.

"Kekeke, no, no! Do not be ridiculous, oh, great Emperor Satan! Bael is lying, of course! He's making it all up! It's all false, yes!"

The more Satan acclimates to the situation and realizes what he 'walked in on' with Bael and Yama, the more disgusted he becomes.

"I take a nap for five seconds, wake up in some dark alley, and little *Davook* is up to his raping ways once again!" Satan yells. "You little shit! I should've slapped the crap outta you sooner!"

Satan storms toward Yama with bloodlust in his eyes. What little excitement Yama had toward capturing Bael vanishes in an instant.

"Y-you! You're just an undead fossil!" Yama exclaims. "You cannot threaten us, errant soul!"

"Oh, we'll see about THAT!" Satan says, while lifting his palm.

A ball of fire engulfs the space above Satan's palm. The Devil's eyes glow with scorching heat as he burns souls contained within his vessel, doubling, tripling, and quadrupling the fire's power to fill the chamber with piercing light.

"Fuck off back to the shadows!" Satan yells, as he hurls the brilliantly glowing orb of light.

Yama's expression turns to rage.

"Times have changed, grandpa! We'll see if you still have the qualifications to MAKE US, old Devil!"

Part 342: Let Sleeping Devils Lie

Hardly has the battle begun before Satan hurls a truly massive fireball down the pitch-black corridor, lighting it up enough that any observer can easily make out the blackened tendrils comprising Yama's smoky body. The Emperor of Shadows drops to the floor and compresses himself into a paper-thin form, then slides away, easily evading Satan's attack.

However, Bael doesn't.

The fireball explodes when it hits the far wall, catching the Duke of Pain in its blast. Bael lets out a horrible scream, a sound he has never made in his life, and goes flying away. He crashes against the opposite wall and collapses to the floor in a heap, trembling and gritting his teeth while agony wracks his body.

"Uhh... uhhh... oh, d-devils... hurts..."

Satan blinks in surprise. "Eh? Bael! Are you okay?"

The Devil starts to run toward Bael, but at that moment, Yama bursts out of the darkness from behind him. As the Emperor of Shadows, his power in absolute darkness reigns supreme. His speed, might, and overall strength sits atop the demonic hierarchy, muted only when any amount of light enters the equation.

Satan senses the danger. He turns to conjure a bolt of lightning, but before he can complete the spell, a lance of darkness flies up from his feet, impales the Devil's head, and kills him instantly.

The former First Emperor's body goes limp. Yama raises a massive palm of shadows, then brings it down on the Devil's corpse, crushing him into meat-paste.

"Kekeke! So much for the First Emperor! Easy to kill, easy to handle."

Being well aware of Satan's powers, Yama keeps an eye on his corpse while quickly slithering across the ground to Bael's body.

"Now then, where were we? EUGH!"

The Emperor of Shadows recoils in disgust when he reaches Bael. The Duke of Pain's body, now covered in horrible, melted-skin and burns, stinks of cooked flesh. His

appearance no longer appears as 'sweet' and 'succulent' as Yama likes, making the Emperor of Shadows groan with displeasure.

"How awful! Ugh! That damned Devil ruined our toy! What an absolute bastard! Now this body isn't even desirable! Who would be able to heal burns of this level? Perhaps Belial? Nobody we know!"

While Yama roars to the Seven Hells about Bael's twitching, pain-filled figure, a minute passes.

Blood-colored light appears above Satan's body. The Devil rematerializes, recreating himself due to his vast store of souls.

Yama turns to face him. "Preposterous. How can an errant soul possess subordinate souls? There is no precedent! What kind of monster are you, undead Devil?"

Satan motions with his hand, summoning a fresh new suit to cover his naked body. "Punk. You had best step away from my friend. You can't defeat me. *Nobody* can. Even when I'm long dead, I *still* come back."

Yama's eyes flicker with thought. He expands his size to cover the whole corridor, then chuckles deep in his throat.

"Yes, yes, we understand. You want Bael back. Of course. We were wrong. Here, take him."

Yama gently picks up Bael and sets his pain-wracked body at the Devil's feet, while Satan gives the Shadow Emperor the stink-eye.

"There, see? We can be quite reasonable." Yama purrs. "But ah, look at what you've done. You have burned Bael so badly nobody could even recognize him. What a bastard you are, Satan."

Satan smirks. "Not a problem. Lilia might be a one-of-a-kind healer, but this old devil has his own methods."

The Devil conjures a ball of water in his hands. He presses it against Bael's body, infusing him with the calm and healing effects of a long-dead Hero, one whose abilities Satan took millennia before.

Within seconds, Bael's agony subsides. He breathes more evenly as Satan heals him up. The burns recede, and after just a minute or two, he returns back to his previous condition.

Bael groggily opens his eyes and stands up, shivering from the cold water, as well as the phantom pain.

"Nnn. Th-thanks, boss. Shit. That really fuckin' hurt."

Satan eyes the Emperor of Shadows, looming behind Bael.

"No problem, pal. Now get behind me. Seems I need to have a little chat with Yam-"

Satan doesn't get to finish his sentence. All at once, a thousand tendrils of darkness burst out of the walls, ceiling, and floor. Countless Shades and Shadow-Walkers pounce at Satan, having stepped across vast distances by traveling within Yama's 'Shadow Realm.'

Before the Devil can fully react, Yama's minions screech at him, pounce at him, and attack him from all directions. Some grab his limbs and yank him around, while others stab at him from all directions.

However, before Yama's minions can kill the Devil a second time, an explosion engulfs Satan's body, blasting away all the shadows. Satan's signature Vectors, the eight invisible limbs granted to him by the fallen Archangel, Samael, burst out of his body and whip around him at lightspeed, ripping apart everyone and everything daring enough to draw within a few meters of the Devil's figure.

Satan's expression becomes deadly serious as he kills more than a hundred Shades and Shadow-walkers in only a few seconds. He conjures two more balls of fire and flings them in front of and behind himself, illuminating the corridor with blinding light and forcing the Shadow Emperor backward.

"You're starting to piss me off." Satan says, his voice eerily calm. "You really don't want to piss me off, *Davook*. You ain't as scary as you think you are."

"Do not call us by that name!" Yama roars in the distance. "We are Yama now! We are mighty!"

Satan's body levitates half a foot off the ground, lifted up by two of his Vectors. He stares at Yama and shakes his head.

"I've killed Dukes and Emperors before. Never liked it, but I always do what's necessary. Sometimes, scumbags simply have to die. Sometimes, a fella has to clean up shop."

Satan and Yama launch into a brutal battle. The Shadow Emperor bobs and weaves while Satan hurls bolts of lightning, fireballs, and other attacks containing inherent

illumination effects. At the same time, Yama fires off hundreds of darkness spears, sends his Shades and Shadow-walkers to attack Satan from all sides, and otherwise reveals that the illuminating effects of Satan's magic don't hinder him as much as the Devil remembers.

Bael ends up caught in the middle, ducking, dodging, and hollering bloody murder while his boss battles Yama on his behalf.

"Aw, shit! Shit! Why do I gotta be so weak? I'm pathetic!"

Satan's expression grows more and more troubled. His Vectors fend off attacks from all sides, freeing up his hands to summon magic attacks of all different kinds. As the minutes pass, he continues bombarding Yama, yet his attacks seem to have no effect on the Shadow Emperor.

"Kekeke! You are weaker than we remember!" Yama says, taunting Satan. "To think we were actually a little afraid of your return! Looks like the fossil has lost his edge!"

Satan snorts. "Imbecile. I'm only holding back because I don't want to destroy half of Hell. If I really go all out, the entire area will look like Heaven after the Archdemon's rampage. Do you seriously think you're my equal?"

"We don't think so." Yama replies. "We know so."

Suddenly, Yama's body flickers. He vanishes into the shadows, and a vague feeling of threat screams in the back of Satan's head.

An instant later, a wall of shadow rushes down the corridor, swallowing all the light and snuffing out Satan's fireballs. The Devil jerks in surprise as his vision goes black and everything vanishes.

Not even his demonic vision penetrates the blackened gloom.

Satan looks around, left and right. He tries to look at his hands, but even when held half an inch from his face, he can't make out its shape.

"The hell is this?" Satan mutters.

"Kekeke. Welcome to the Shadow Realm." Yama hisses, his voice coming from all directions at once. **"It is our ultimate domain. We control everything. You must be feeling quite a bit... stifled."**

Satan summons a fireball in his hand, one which momentarily illuminates his body, but only a second later, it snuffs out, sucked into the ether by some invisible force.

"Magic is greatly weakened in the Shadow Realm." Yama says, continuing to taunt the former First Emperor. **"Not just magic, but all forms of light. You should be familiar with this sort of domain. After all, we based its existence on the Cosmic Realm."**

Satan frowns. "The Cosmic Realm. Old Man Raphael's blindingly bright place, huh? I guess yours is the opposite. Well, what are you waiting for? You gonna kill me or what?"

"There is no point. You revive endlessly." Yama explains, his words coming slowly and methodically. **"We would much rather investigate the source of your power. You are nothing but an errant soul, after all. Perhaps, we can devour you. Consume you. Add you to our collective power. We do not like corrupting the minds of males, but holding dominion over a former Emperor is always worth trying."**

"Oh. Is that so?" Satan asks. He yawns and cracks his neck. "Well, damn. I guess I'm stuck here. This place is pretty scary. Any time I use my mana, it gets sucked away. Let me guess... you're eating my mana to empower yourself, right?"

Yama hesitates.

"...A lucky guess."

"Dumbass." Satan says. "You don't get it, Yama. I've fought so many Titans, angels, and demons alike... I've seen all kinds of crazy shit long before you were a speck in your broodmother's eye. While you were off dicking around during the War in Heaven, I killed millions of angels with a single attack. By the time you made it to Emperor, I'd already killed more angels and Titans than any other demon alive. Even if I've been dead for a hundred thousand years, I doubt anyone's matched my record."

Satan gestures toward the infinite abyss surrounding him, despite being unable to see his own hand.

"This? Pft. Big deal. There's no way you can easily summon and control some all-powerful domain of darkness. It certainly can't be any stronger than the Cosmic Realm, since that was made by Archangels at the height of their power. At best, this is a decent imitation. Beating you is just about winning a game of attrition."

"And..." Satan concludes with a smile, "...when it comes to battles of attrition, nobody beats the Devil at his own game."

Without any fanfare, Satan flicks his fingers. In his hands, a magical piece of parchment appears, one which makes the shadows tremble.

"**No...**" Yama hisses. "**That... how can you still have that?!**"

Satan rolls his eyes. "I made all the demons sign my contracts. Hell, I made all the Broodmothers sign those contracts, too. Every demon born since the beginning of time has ultimately fallen under my domain. That's why I'm the First Emperor, punk. And you ain't no different. You signed one, too, back when you were just a scrawny little imp."

With a light tap of his finger, Satan presses on the Blood Contract. Yama screams violently, causing the Shadow Realm to tremble.

"**Aaaargh!**"

His previously domineering voice no longer sounds as scary as before. Satan smirks and holds up the contract.

"Listen up, punk. I don't give a damn who you think you are. In the end, you're my *slave*. I had to remove a bunch of clauses in my contracts way back in the day, but I kept a couple in. Since you've attacked me, your master, you activated those clauses. That means *I own your ass*."

He laughs cruelly. "Let's get down to business. Retract this stupid Shadow-shit."

Hardly have the words left Satan's mouth before a violent *whooshing* sensation rips the air around him. Satan stares idly at the contract's terms of service while Yama's Shadow Realm pulls away, leaving Satan back in the hallway, alone.

He frowns. "Give Bael back too, you little runt."

A moment later, Bael seemingly tumbles out of the ceiling. He flops to the dirt and bangs his head on the Labyrinth's floor, cursing loudly.

"Aw, shit! Damn! What happened? Where am I?"

Satan pats him on the shoulder. "You'll be okay, Bael. Yama! Get your ass over here! Show yourself!"

The Shadow Emperor pops into existence not far from Satan's figure. Without warning, he lashes out, striking at the Blood Contract hovering in midair.

"We will NOT be your slave!"

Yama's attack shreds the magical parchment, scattering it to the winds.

However, Satan merely stares at him blankly, as if looking at an idiot.

"You done? Stand still. I don't have any more interest in playing games with the likes of you."

Satan flicks his fingers again, resummoning the still-intact Blood Contract, revealing that Yama's attack did not harm it in the slightest.

"What?" Yama hisses. "But we tore it to shreds!"

"You really are an idiot." Satan mutters. "It's a magical contract. I ain't gotta explain shit. Now then, bring out little Murmur. I want to see her."

Yama tries to resist, but Satan's orders press on his soul unstoppably, forcing him to obey. After a few moments of fighting, Yama hesitantly summons one of his many Shades, a small, featureless blob of darkness that hovers at his side.

"Keh. This is Silent. She does not speak." Yama grunts.

"Silent." Satan repeats. "Cute rename. Now, release her. She won't be one of your Shades anymore."

However, despite his order, Yama doesn't move. The Shadow Emperor cocks his head, then smiles.

"Ah. We see. Your Blood Contracts cannot compel us to fulfill an order we are incapable of following. How interesting! We have no way of 'uncorrupting' a member of our harem. We cannot do as you command."

The Devil frowns. "You can't? Bullshit. You must have some method."

"We do not." Yama answers. "We never intended to release our women. Why would we even bother creating such a spell? What is ours will always remain ours."

"You piece of shit!" Bael yells. "Murmur! Murmur, get away from that shadow-creep!"

The blob of shadow hovering beside Yama remains silent and impassive, saying nothing. She levitates idly, as if oblivious to the conversation taking place before her.

"I don't get it." Satan says. "Yama, you chase down women, you turn them into shadow-sluts because you think they're cute, but then they just become ugly blobs of darkness. Are you an idiot?!"

"You cannot see their true forms as we do," Yama replies, eying Murmur's shadow-body hungrily. "Our women's true figures remain apparent only to us! We would not want other men to gaze upon them anyway, for they are ours, alone!"

The Devil's expression turns ugly.

He remains silent for several minutes, unsure of how to resolve the situation.

I can protect Bael just fine. I can even order Yama to never touch another woman again, and he'll have to obey my command, at least until his soul builds up some resistance to my orders... but I can't save Murmur! What the hell? That's messed up! There has to be another way...

Reluctantly, Satan realizes he cannot force Yama to do the impossible. He glances at the Blood Contract and skims its wording just to make sure he fully understands his limits, before returning his attention to Yama.

"Alright, punk. You're getting off real lucky this time. From now on, you won't ever touch Bael, nor any woman ever again. Got it? No new Shades, no new Shadow-walkers, either. You've ruined enough lives."

Yama flinches. "What! That is an outrageous order! How dare you?! This Emperor will not bow to your commands like a beaten dog!"

Satan shrugs. "Suit yourself. If you fight them, you'll only have to suffer the most terrible, soul-ripping pain you've ever felt in your whole life. Good luck on that."

The Devil pauses to shoot Yama one last stink-eye.

"Now get the hell out of my sight. I don't want to look at you a moment longer, punk."

Yama once again struggles to disobey Satan's order, to launch a futile attack on him, but his body fails to obey, and he eventually relents. He disappears into the darkness, leaving Satan and Bael to stand alone.

"Boss!" Bael says, visibly excited. "You saved my hiney! Thanks a lot!"

"It was nothing." Satan says, waving off Bael's thanks. "More importantly, now that we've got a little time, what the heck is going on? You've gotta tell me everything, Bael. Where's Lilia? What happened after the Black Queen fight? And what about that little Hero punk? The Wordsmith?"

Bael scratches his head. "Err. Well, it's been six years, boss. A lot changed. After the big fight, Deebs got KO'd. He's been napping somewhere like he did after the War in Heaven. Ose took control of the Seven Hells, but then some other stuff happened, and then..."

Bael spends the next half an hour yapping at Satan, telling the Devil about all the things that have happened since he 'died.' By the time Bael finishes, Satan can only shake his head.

"Damn. A Cherubiim, huh? To think old man Raphael had a trick like that up his sleeve. Wonder why he never transformed during the finale battle of the Energy Wars. And Ose seems stronger than ever..."

"Yeah, but that's not all!" Bael says. "We finally found out the truth, boss! It turns out that bitch Lucifer was the one who set you up to die! She tricked you into fighting the Black Queen!"

"She did?" Satan asks. "...Huh. Guess that makes sense."

"You ain't pissed off?" Bael asks.

"A little. But what's done is done. Lucy's dead. I died, too. I'd rather focus on the future."

Satan turns to Bael with a look of intense concentration.

"Bael. I don't know how, but you brought me back. This must have happened for a reason. Did you develop any new powers, recently?"

The Duke of Pain shrugs. "Dunno. I lost all my powers, actually. All I ever had was a big, strong body... and now Ose's got that. I should be able to use her zappy-magic, but I'm too stupid."

Satan rubs his chin. "I've never heard of a Duke without powers. And since you're in Ose's body, you should even have access to Emperor-level powers, probably. Maybe you developed something new? Something that brought me back?"

"Dunno." Bael repeats. "I didn't do anything at all. You just showed up. Honestly, I was expectin' Shax, not you."

"Right. Because Shax appeared last time you faced Yama..." Satan muses. "Huh. There must be something more to this. I already died along with the Black Queen. My soul should be in the Great Beyond, yet I'm here, now. Whatever happened to you, I bet it had

something to do with you swapping bodies. Heck, here's another idea! Maybe you had the power all along, but your old body was just too strong! Maybe it was, I dunno, keeping all your magic stopped up or something? Like a dam in a river!"

Bael's expression becomes dazed. He drools a little the more Satan talks.

"Uh huh... I don't get it. Whatever works, boss."

"Yeah, forget all that crap." Satan says, waving away his concerns. "Let's talk business. Now that I'm back, I can get to work fixing all the things that've gone south since I died. I'll leave Ose in charge for now, but no way am I letting that Wordsmith run amok with my girl, Lilia! It's about time she and I had a good smooching session, I'll tell you that!"

Satan and Bael turn to walk down the corridor, heading back toward the distant Warpgate.

"It's great to have you back, boss." Bael says. "Honestly, I was just talking to the girls from Shax's Hell about you. If I can somehow bring Shax back, we can reassemble the old band! Wouldn't that be..."

Bael pauses. He turns to the side and frowns.

"Boss?"

The Duke of Pain rubs his eyes. The Devil doesn't appear anywhere in sight, no matter where Bael looks.

"Eh? Boss? You playing hide and seek? Boss?"

Bael turns back and wanders down the corridors, becoming more and more confused by the second.

"What... where'd he go? He was just here!"

The Duke of Pain, once again, finds himself all alone.

His best friend, Satan, has vanished.

Part 343: Deception, Disgrace, Lying Face

Hell Harbor, at the Hidden Emperor meeting area.

Ose straightens her posture and stands upright. She smiles at the other Emperors and Dukes present, of which there are now more than fifty.

"So we are in agreement? I don't want to have to change these plans a fifteenth time. The hour grows late, and I need to start amassing forces before we invade."

Jahn, the Duke of Cuddles, frowns at Ose. "I still don't think a second invasion is a good idea. Even if all the Emperors attack, that Cherubiim alone handily dealt with us. And you say the Wordsmith doesn't actually possess Excalibur, but what if he has a weapon of similar strength?"

"*Enough* complaints from the Hell of Lust." Ose snaps. "Jason Hiro has no super-weapon. Like I told you before, he used his Wordsmithing to trick us. That is what he does. He may have mentally changed to become a bit more vicious, but he is not some unstoppable threat we need to fear. We won't give him enough time to rebuild, especially with his limited mana reserves. We'll dogpile onto him and destroy him before he can fight back. If we capture him, we'll solve the problem in the most efficient way. And if we kill him, we'll at least eliminate his threat."

"I still don't approve of this attack." Silvia, the Duke of Whips says. As another resident of the Hell of Lust, she voices her opposition to the invasion plan. "I'm not convinced the Wordsmith is 'faking' his power. And even if he is, I'm not convinced we could defeat a combination of him and the Cherubiim. You don't know for *certain* that the Cherubiim won't be able to regenerate and return sooner rather than later, especially with the Wordsmith's magic assisting it. It may be unlikely, a final-ditch move to defeat us quickly in the aftermath of Stormbringer, but I feel that the Cherubiim's appearance was merely a warning shot across our bow. We're taking too great a risk attacking the Wordsmith!"

The other Hidden Emperors shake their heads at Jahn and Silvia's opposition.

"Your Hell of Lust is truly pathetic." Maltus, the Second Ancient of the Orcs, says. "We must admire a Hell which possesses two times more Dukes than all the other Hells combined, but without any Emperors to guide you, you have fallen into degeneracy and fleshbag-loving. You are far too kind toward these undeserving inferiors."

"You cannot sit this battle out." Ose adds. "You were useless against the Archangels and the Cherubiim, that much is true. But no amount of quantity would have helped defeat an ancient monster like the Cherubiim. Attacking humanity is different. The Wordsmith is only one Hero. Even if his clone assists him, the two will not be our opponents. Dukes can make a huge difference when crushing human resistances. Losing out on more than seventy Dukes will put a large dent in our invasion force's strength."

Jahn and Silvia shoot a glance at each other.

"Well..." Silvia mutters, chewing her lip. "I... I suppose if we must..."

"Yes. You must." Ose says, narrowing her eyes. "Unlike the Hell of Isolation, your Hell has no Emperors to hand down orders. So, consider this *my* order. You will gather your troops and prepare to invade. I want billions, if not trillions of demons to descend on Tarus II. We must annihilate the humans and capture or kill their Wordsmiths. Only in this way can we finally save our species from annihilation."

"But what of the Volgrim?" Silvia protests. "And the Plague they're fighting? Don't you think-"

"No more complaints. I'm tired of listening." Ose says, snapping her fingers. "The meeting is adjourned. Everyone, pass down my orders to your Hells. Time is of the essence."

Given Ose's force of personality, and her much more intimidating presence while now owning Bael's body, she comes off sounding much more authoritative. Bael's formerly goofy expressions give way to a deadly seriousness that makes anyone think twice before contradicting him.

The two Dukes from the Hell of Lust shoot each other helpless looks before turning and walking away.

"It can't be helped." Jahn says, resting a hand on Silvia's shoulder. "Our Hell is too weak to resist. If Ose gets pissed at us, she can wipe us out without a fight. We should just go along with her orders."

Silvia purses her lips, but says nothing. A fierce light of determination enters her eyes as she and Jahn walk away from the table, heading toward the back of the hall, where Warpers from their Hell have begun the procedures to open tears in Hell Harbor's space back to their homeworld.

Ose, meanwhile, turns to Mephisto.

"Alright. Finally. I've no more time to dilly-dally. Mephisto, start amassing your undead. We'll need to sneak as many troops onto Tarus II as possible prior to our big attack. I'll be relying on your newly empowered stealth abilities for this mission."

The Emperor of Legions rises up to his full height, now nearly as tall as Ose herself.

"Kekeke. We will be sssure to sssupport you in thisss esssential endeavor, Ossse. Why bother worrying about old woundsss? We can sssimply wasssh that water under a bridge, yesss?"

Mephisto rubs his boney hands together, grinding their ossein in a manner most unpleasant.

"Of coursse, if thisss plan of yoursss failsss... then it would be a ssshame if the Wordsssmith were to ssslay you where you sstand. He already killed Bael onccce, after all."

Ose rolls her eyes. "Bael's Balrog Form has a critical weakness. It gives up durability in exchange for power. The Wordsmith killed Bael because Bael allowed himself to be controlled by his emotions. I will not fall for such a trap. Now, if you don't mind, I'll be excusing myself."

Ose turns to Benjamin Brown and nods. The two of them depart, leaving Mephisto behind.

"Kekeke!" Mephisto chuckles, before turning to his newly empowered minions. "Gorn. You are a pawn mossst desssirable. And Lupusss, you will require sssome time to adjussst to your new body. Will you be able to wield Fenrir'sss powersss, or not? Only time will tell."

Lupus stretches her arms and legs.

"It's been a long time since I was in such a.. *weak* body. Fenrir's figure is far too tall and slender for my liking. I'll need to build up her muscles to make myself fight better. As

for using soul-attacks... I'm not good at that sort of thing. I just like punching stuff until it breaks."

Gorn, still in his fiery bird-body, merely gives Mephisto a cold look.

"Now that I am under your control, I suppose I have lost my autonomy. What would you like me to do, oh, great and wise *master*?"

Mephisto grins, momentarily reveling in having two Emperors forced to submit to him, with one of them being the former leader of a Hidden Hell.

"Kss. You will sssave me time and effort. The two of you will return to your former domainsss and rally your troopsss. Lupusss, you will asssisst Krissstoff in gathering Dukesss, Baronssss, and Lordssss. Gorn, you will do the sssame. Asss for me, I will rally my necromancersss. We mussst sset up forcesss all over Tarusss II before the invasssion beginsss."

Gorn nods. "You give the orders, now. I follow."

His simple acceptance of Mephisto's authority gives the Emperor of Legions great pleasure. Mephisto slithers away, fading into the underground while chuckling softly to himself.

After he leaves, Gorn, Lupus, and Zamiel remain behind.

Gorn smiles slightly, drawing Lupus's attention.

"Is something funny?" She asks. "Stop smiling. I've never seen you do that. It creeps me out."

Gorn's smile spreads a little further. "Oh, am I? It's hard to tell. I must just be in a good mood. Hmm. I will see you later, Lupus. For now, I'll deliver news back to my Hell."

He departs, leaving Lupus and Zamiel to stare at his back as he walks away.

"The heck was that about?" Zamiel asks. "Gorn seems to be a little too chipper for a guy who just died and got reanimated as someone else's slave. I can't imagine he'd be anything but pissed at a time like this."

Lupus shakes her head. "That Gorn has always been strange. Don't underestimate him. Even as a slave, I bet he's plotting ways to free himself."

She and Zamiel go their own ways, leaving the other Emperors behind.

Not far away, Kristoff and several Dukes from his Hell talk quietly, keeping their voices low.

"Frankly, I'm not a fan of going along with Ose's plan." Kristoff says. "But she makes good points. If we don't eliminate the Wordsmith while we still can, he'll soon overpower us. Let's just do as she says and get this over with."

"I'm coming with you." Lupus says, as she walks over. "Just don't get any ideas, Kristoff. I might be in Fenrir's body, but I'm not your wife."

Kristoff shoots a disgusted look at Fenrir, then shakes his head. "It's not your fault, Lupus. I won't blame you. I just hate that... my wife..."

"It's a real tragedy what happened." Lupus mutters. "But at least there's still a body. Not like my husband."

Kristoff's expression softens. "I'm sorry about Wolfram. He died honorably."

"Demons don't give a shit about honor." Lupus responds. "Let's get back to our Hell."

After they leave, Yardrat and Fae linger behind, quietly talking to one another.

"We didn't come out bad at all." Yardrat says, smiling slyly at Fae. "You almost ended up in Yama's clutches, but luckily you escaped. Not one Emperor from our Hell died. It seems the biggest losers in all of this were the Hells of Blood and Calamity. The Hell of Blood lost three Emperors in various ways, and Gorn's Hell will soon fall to pieces. I bet Mephisto will keep Gorn alive as a puppet to control the fifth Hell. And with Yumagi dead, Crow and the Orcs will be the only genuine leaders capable of standing up to the necromancer."

"I'll bet Auger is pretty pleased." Fae says. "But what about Ose's plan? Will he go along with it?"

Yardrat's smile turns vicious. "Oh, yes. For now. Auger thinks this invasion could be our ticket to supremacy over all Seven Hells, especially if things were to... go south. It would be a shame if Ose ended up hoisted by her own petard."

"Never liked that bitch," Fae says, "but she's so much more annoying now that she's gotten a taste of 'true power.' Oh, if only someone would come in and give her a good slap into the dirt, it would make my day. I'm even starting to miss Beelzebub."

"Let's head back home." Yardrat says, waving his hand to summon a portal. "Emperor Auger wishes to discuss strategy with us."

After they leave, only the members of the Fifth Hell remain behind. As the hell which previously boasted the most Emperors, one might still grant them that definition, despite losing Yumagi and having Gorn fall under the control of Mephisto.

Emperor Crow, Emperor Serena, and both of the Ancient Orcs greet Gorn with dismay in their eyes. Seeing their former leader, a mighty demon who seemed poised to take a stab at Auger's power-base, fall under the control of the First Hell, dims their hopes substantially.

"Gorn." Crow says, her feathers bristling at his undead eyes. "I'm sorry for what has happened. If I had been there, perhaps Michael might not have landed that killing blow."

Surprisingly, Gorn doesn't appear too aggrieved about his circumstances. As if taking his second lease on life in stride, he merely reaches up and pats Crow's shoulder.

"Don't you worry, Lady Crow. We've plenty of interesting events on our horizon. Only a fool would count out the Hell of Calamity. Don't forget, our founder was none other than Diablo, the Archdemon himself. It was because of his leadership that the other Hells only dared whisper behind our backs. I will not fail his legacy. When he re-awakens... hehe."

Gorn's light chuckle raises some eyebrows, especially among the two Orcs.

"Is something funny?" Huul asks, nursing a minor shoulder injury that hasn't yet fully healed. "If it weren't for the dead look in your eyes, this Ancient might think you hadn't even died. Your mood seems far too 'chipper' for my liking."

"What can I say?" Gorn asks. "Sometimes, returning from beyond the grave can open a man's eyes. Let us return to our world. We have much to discuss."

"Lover," Serena says, walking over to Gorn's side. "I am simply glad to count you among the living. Considering how badly the Hell of Blood has suffered, your fate could have proven much worse."

"Indeed, it could have." Gorn replies.

He and his group, including half a dozen Dukes, head over to a nearby Warper to return to their realm.

Not long after, they travel across space in an instant, arriving on their home world of Diabolus.

As the homeworld of the Fifth Hell of Calamity, Diabolus is a torturous rock made up chiefly of molten lava, toxic fumes, and little life-sustaining forces. On this world, only the strongest demons survive the intense gravity, more than double that of the ancient Earth, and the thin oxygen, which only replenishes thanks to several magical devices littered around the planet, built by famous Orc artisans.

Upon arriving, Gorn breathes in the toxic fumes and smiles.

"Mmm. Smells like home. I always hate leaving, but it does make returning all that much sweeter."

The huge increase in gravity doesn't affect anyone in Gorn's group. Having lived amidst such heavy gravity for so long, they barely even notice the strain. To them, it feels almost like a weighted blanket, giving them a feeling of comfort.

While most other Hells live on habitable worlds or in places that some might call 'pleasant,' the members of the Fifth Hell actually prefer the choked air and high temperatures of their hellish world. To them, living on a paradise-class planet would mean turning soft. Their ambitions lay far beyond those of the other Hells.

Gorn and his group arrive at the edge of a large city made from demonstone. No matter what storms ravage Diabolus, the fortified buildings inside weather all the planet's fury without suffering so much as a scratch. Huge walls stand erected around the central structures, a series of castles built for the many Emperors and Dukes and Barons that comprise Calamity's forces. On the outskirts of the city, but still within its walled border, the more humble but still somewhat extravagant abodes of many high-ranking Demon Lords also stand, mostly standing as symbols of their authority.

Many members of the Hell of Calamity live outside the capitol city of Diabolus, but all the highest ranked ones have a vacation home inside the capitol, useful for meetings or lounging around when they've nothing better to do.

Huul and Maltus take their leave, not bothering to care about what happens with Gorn or the others. They head off to the south, toward a distant portal leading to the other side of Diabolus, in the Orc Capitol of the world.

Gorn leads the rest of his group inside, wading through crowds of low-ranking Demon Grunts who all attend to various duties. Unlike the world of Sharmur, with its rich trade and industrial roots, Diabolus mainly deals in violence. Every day, across the planet, thousands of battles take place in fighting pits, arenas, and heavily fortified stadiums

capable of withstanding the shocks unleashed by Barons and Dukes. As a mainstay of entertainment among the residents of Diabolus, few demons would dare to consider themselves pacifists, and not one would mention their thoughts publicly. Gorn's world is one built on violence and barbarism, and all his elites take pride in being the deadliest among their peers.

Gorn walks down his capitol's streets, ignoring the awe-filled gazes of his lessers. His striking appearance, that of a large, fiery bird, draws countless eyeballs. It's not often he wears a different 'face', and when he does, it always attracts envy from the peons.

"I wish I could be as powerful as Gorn!"

"Did you hear? Apparently Gorn died, and now he's become a pawn of Mephisto!"

"Mephisto? That guy's just a Duke. There's no way."

"I heard Mephisto got promoted to Emperor!"

"Seriously? You can't believe all the crap the First Hell says. Those guys are a bunch of weaklings!"

Emperor Serena glides along behind Gorn, her white dress and fairy-like appearance drawing just as many eyeballs as Gorn himself. She stares at her mate silently, evaluating his condition.

Deep in her soul, she comes to a realization.

Gorn doesn't appear worried in the slightest.

Even after losing his freedom and becoming a pawn to another Emperor, Gorn appears totally unmoved, as if he never lost anything at all. Perhaps Serena might normally chalk this feeling up to him taking things in stride, but his placidity goes well beyond any previous moments she's observed him fail or lose in battle. In all those cases, he became enraged beyond belief and nearly destroyed entire planets.

But his sheer calmness now makes her wonder if dying wasn't one of his master plans.

Serena silently shakes her head.

How could that be? Gorn isn't the type to deliberately let himself die.

But then again...

It does seem odd he wouldn't be able to dodge Michael's attack. Gorn has always been one of the most capable melee combatants among all the Hells. How could he fall in

battle, even if to an Archangel, when that Archangel only possessed a mere construct-body?

The group of Emperors and Dukes keeps walking until they arrive inside the main castle, away from prying eyes.

One of Gorn's Dukes takes a step forward.

"Gorn. Would you like for me to call the elites here? So you can make an announcement?"

Gorn walks up to a throne sitting in the middle of the hall. He eases into it, settles down, and smiles.

"Let's hold off for now, Duke of Moonlight. While we still have a small audience, I'd like to... try something."

The dozen or so assembled demons raise their eyebrows. Crow, in particular, appears more than a little annoyed.

"Try something? What do you mean? Don't tell me Mephisto told you to attack us once we made it home?"

"No." Gorn says, his smile widening further. "I'm not so sure I could beat you in a battle, let alone all of you at the same time. Actually, I just felt that now was the perfect time to test a... hypothesis of mine."

Without any fanfare, Gorn motions with his right hand. He summons a tiny portal beside himself, and a mask appears, one that resembles his original self. He grabs onto his face and begins to tug, pulling off the mask known as Vermillion. As he pulls, dazzling light envelops his body, shrouding his figure in blinding radiance. Once he pulls off Vermillion, he then follows up by putting on the other mask, returning himself to his 'normal' form, that of a tall and muscular Demon Emperor.

Gorn cracks his neck as his transformation finalizes.

"Ahh. How about that? I was right. It worked."

Invisible question marks pop up over the heads of his fellow Emperors and Dukes.

"Huh? What worked?" Crow asked. "What are you on about?"

Gorn doesn't immediately answer. Instead, he holds up his Vermillion mask and gazes at it with a look of sadness.

"...Pity. I always liked this face."

A moment later, Gorn squeezes his hand shut, compressing the mask with all its strength, until it explodes and sprays magical dust all around the room, making the other Emperors flinch.

"Gorn!" Serena exclaims. "You... you destroyed your Vermillion face! Why would you do that?"

Gorn chuckles softly.

"Hehehe. That Mephisto. He's not as smart as he thinks. You should know me well enough, love. Why do you *think* I destroyed Vermillion? It has become worthless to me."

"Worthless?" Serena repeats. "I don't follow."

Crow stares at Gorn for thirty seconds, silently evaluating his actions. All at once, a spark appears in her eyes.

"Haha... hahaha! HAHAHAHA! There's no way... are you jesting, Gorn? Did you actually...?"

"Yes. I did." Gorn replies, exposing a toothy smile. "Mephisto didn't revive and enslave *me*. He enslaved Vermillion, one of my many disposable faces. Once I took Vermillion off, he lost all control over me. My Gorn face has a completely different soul imprint from Vermillion. I have regained my sovereignty!"

Gorn rises from his throne and spreads out his arms.

"Hahaha! The First Hell is truly full of fools! Mephisto never imagined there would be such a loophole to his powers, but I did, ages ago. His loss of control over Bael and Ose only confirmed my suspicions!"

Serena breathes a sigh of relief. She walks over and presses herself against Gorn, smiling up at him with her hollow eyes. "I am glad. I thought you had been lost to us. To me..."

Gorn tenderly caresses her chin. "Worry not, love. I am just as free as I have always been. Mephisto won't know that I've broken free of his shackles... not unless I tell him so."

A spark of evil appears in Gorn's eyes.

"Say. Wouldn't it be a shame if we didn't inform the First Hell of my newfound freedom? You never know when an 'accident' might befall Mephisto. His undead minions

can be so clumsy."

Crow grins back at Gorn, a vicious and cruel light sparking in her eyes.

"I was worried I'd have to take care of this Hell in your absence. Now I can focus on restoring my ritual reserves. It's good to have you back, future First Emperor."

"It's good to *be* back." Gorn says with a laugh. "Now, if you'll all excuse me, I need to forge a duplicate of Vermillion. We can't have Mephisto growing wise to my deception, can we?"

"Indeed, we cannot," Serena says, kissing her mate gently. "I'll see you in our chambers later."

As the other demons depart and Gorn stays behind, the Emperor of Many Faces laughs uproariously.

"Oh, ho ho ho! The future is looking brighter every day!"

Part 344: Tarot Sect

Unlike most of the Seven Hells, members of the Second Hell of Lust do not live on any specified capitol world. Rather, their many assorted Dukes live on the distant reaches of Hell Harbor, while their lower-ranked members live right inside the Labyrinth, where they have ready access to humans and other demons alike.

Consisting almost entirely of succubi, incubi, and a handful of Satyrs, the Hell of Lust is a surprisingly homogenous organization. They do not pay attention to the battles and power struggles waged by the other Hells, but instead cavort sexually with their many human followers and servants. Unlike the other immortal demons comprising the Seven Hells, succubi and incubi must absorb small amounts of life energy through intercourse to sustain their existences, right up until they become Dukes and Emperors. The higher a sex-fiend's power rating, the less energy they must consume overall.

In addition, they possess another surprising advantage. While other Hells must evolve and mutate into higher ranks by consuming the souls of humans and other beings, succubi and incubi evolve simply by consuming the sexual essence and vitality of other species. This incredible ability allows them to rise through the ranks without ever harming another soul, but it comes at a price.

No member of the Hell of Lust can reach the rank of Emperor. Even Belial and Nerissa, two famous succubi from the Ancient Era, only reached their levels through the power of a dragon. Others of their kind can only reach an impenetrable barrier at the rank of Duke, one which they can never surpass. The amount of life energy needed to evolve to Emperor becomes too vast, too unbridgeable of a gap, to the point that even if they start consuming souls, their bodies will still never evolve to the next rank.

Thanks to this sad fact, Duke Silvia and her mate, Jahn, end up trapped at the rank of Duke, living in a Hell looked down on by their competitors in the other Hells. As such, they avoid conflict and instead use their bodies to curry favor with the other Hells, avoiding the rat-race of power entirely.

Even so, every member of the Hell of Lust can't help but feel that, in the end, they have become nothing more than disposable pawns, incapable of guiding their own future. Any Emperor from any other Hell could walk all over them. Despite being able to raise vast

numbers of succubi and incubi to the ranks of Baron and Duke, the lack of Emperors among their kind leaves them defenseless and easy to bully.

As Silvia and Jahn ride atop a magical flying implement, a disc-shaped demonstone platform that races across the horizon, they both think the same thought, in unison.

If only Belial were still here.

As the founder of the Hell of Lust, the former Second Emperor still commands a lot of respect among her fellow sex-fiends. Many of them deeply wish she would return to guide and protect them once again, but alas, they know that she doesn't care at all for the trappings of power. Responsibility and leadership are not the thoughts which occupy her mind, and as such, she all but ignores the Second Hell.

We could have our own capitol world, if only Belial were to put her foot down. Silvia thinks. *I wish I could speak to her again.*

The two Dukes gaze down upon Hell Harbor's shattered and obliterated landscape, grimacing at the sheer amount of death and destruction. Entire villages and cities of demons lay in smoking ruins, with survivors scattered about haphazardly. Debris from the Volgrim ships continue to rain down upon Hell Harbor's surface, sparking more wildfires and filling the sky with ash.

"Those Archangels bent us over savagely." Jahn mutters, his dreamy tone intoxicating to females of other species. "I do hope our boys and girls weren't hurt too bad."

"We probably fared worse than all the other Hells, since our top members are all concentrated here." Silvia responds. "Don't be too shocked if we get back and..."

She trails off, leaving the implication hanging.

"Right." Jahn simply mutters.

Silvia's black dominatrix outfit, her tall figure, and her long black eyelashes give her an aura of authority. Contrasted with Jahn's soft, pretty-boy body, his delicate satin clothes, and his golden eyeliner, the two of them appear like a master and servant, in some sort of odd power-dynamic relationship.

However, the truth is, the two of them are equals. Their love for each other, while deep, is also surprisingly casual. Having been on countless flings with other demons over the millennia, neither one acts particularly possessive toward the other, though they do enjoy their shared time, having lived similar lives to one another.

Jahn gently bats his eyes while gazing at the obliterated world beneath the two of them.

"This conflict isn't drawing to a conclusion." Jahn says, his words quiet and measured. "It has hardly even begun. Ose's actions have continued to escalate the war, time and time again. Imagine if she had entertained the Wordsmith's offer, prior to Stormbringer. He thought our species could live together in harmony."

"It was a good offer." Silvia mutters. "Too good. That's why Ose rejected it. If demonkind's power growth decouples from our need for souls, it will create an era of upheaval. This will ultimately benefit demonkind and humanity both, but the humans will receive a disproportionate amount of the gains. With no predators to feast on and control them, the human population will explode, eventually surpassing our own. Broodmothers simply cannot keep up with the ridiculous breeding speed of fleshbag society."

"Is that true, I wonder?" Jahn asks.

"I don't see why not." Silvia replies, turning to look at him. "Unless you think differently."

"Don't you think the fate of our species is too pathetic?" Jahn asks. "We allow ourselves to remain enslaved to the dynamic established by Satan, Lucifer, and all the leaders of the Old Guard. But how many of them still remain? Only a handful. If we were to forge a new path with the Wordsmith, we could turn our eyes toward our true enemies, those monsters lurking in the distant reaches of the Milky Way. Not just the 'Plague,' but the Volgrim as well."

Jahn's upper lip twitches. He balls up both his hands into fists and crosses his arms in a huff.

"They destroyed Earth... rendered it inhospitable to life for the rest of eternity. That wasn't just any mudball. It was *our* mudball. Our home. How shortsighted have we become that our people are content to live inside a pitch-black Labyrinth, or spread across multiple inferior worlds? The new generations don't understand how badly they've been robbed, and we lost our memories, so we weren't able to adequately inform them. But now, that has changed. We could..."

He pauses, as if becoming lost in thought.

Silvia shoots Jahn a suspicious glance.

"We could, *what*, Jahn? Make friends with the Wordsmith? Cozy up to him?"

"Perhaps." Jahn affirms. "Belial is our founder. We have not personally harmed the Wordsmith, nor his people. But if we join Ose in enacting her plan, we will irreparably damage our relationship with him. We will lose all chance at a peaceful reconciliation."

"If Ose's plan works, the Wordsmith will become demonkind's slave." Silvia counters. "At that point, our 'relationship' won't matter. He will benefit us, and only us."

"But are you content with that conclusion?" Jahn asks, meeting her gaze. "I know you hold no genuine hatred for humans, all the same as myself. Must we simply accept Ose's demands?"

"...You are playing with fire." Silvia warns. "Ose is a shrewd woman. If your thoughts were to reach her in any way, she would execute you without mercy. Nobody would protect you, and neither would I be able to do so."

Jahn stares at Silvia for a moment. He takes a step closer to her side, reaches out his arm, and loops it around hers.

"Most likely. But... perhaps it is time we admit the truth. Humans are not our enemies. We and the Hell of Isolation aren't so different. We both understand that coexistence with humanity is possible, and maybe even preferable. Before, we had the excuse of the greater majority of demons needing to consume human souls to evolve... but if that isn't the case any longer, then it is potentially time we pursue a new path for our people. Someone has to make the first stand. Why not us?"

As Jahn's hungry eyes fall on Silvia, she looks away and sighs.

"This is why the Volgrim demanded we seal our memories. Before the mind-wipes, you were eager to overturn the Old Order. Once again, that hunger has returned."

She pauses.

"...But you're not wrong. I, too, tire of the race to the bottom."

Jahn loops his fingers through Silvia's, cozying up to her while looking up at her face.

"The time for old fears is over. The Wordsmith is our chance at a new tomorrow, Silvia."

"Indeed, he is." She whispers.

On the distant world of Diabolus, ruled by the Hell of Calamity.

A demon Baron dressed in black leather pants and a jacket, with a hood pulled over her head, walks with precise intentions toward a mountain base. Winds filled with corrosive gasses attempt to buffet her body, but a shield of fire revolves around her, protecting her from the acrid elements. Several beads of light shimmer on her forehead, the indicators of powerful spells staying active to shield her from Diabolus's elements.

The demoness flickers forward, skipping pass rivers of acid. She teleports a few dozen feet at a time, sometimes walking, sometimes running, and sometimes jumping toward her end destination.

She flickers toward a path leading up the mountain and begins the arduous climb up one of three bluffs, all of them more than five thousand feet tall. This middle mountain, known as Player's Peak, leads to a destination few bother to visit, despite who it belongs to, an Emperor of some previous level of fame and infamy.

The demoness spends more than an hour hiking the path winding up the mountain toward a spot near its middle. Ordinarily, she would simply fly to her destination, but powerful restriction magic hangs in the air, serving as a deterrent for those who would try to skip the tedium.

She passes by several other demons along the way. Surprisingly, not one of them exceeds the rank of Baron. They all look at her and nod, but otherwise exchange no words.

Eventually, she reaches a passage leading deep into the mountain. A pair of female Barons stand outside, eying her as she approaches.

"Mara. You're finally back." Says one of the Barons, a female with blood-red hair, bewitching eyes, and a body that would tempt any man to sin. Like Mara, she wears a protective layer of leather clothing to combat the elements.

"Hello, Xena." Mara says, pulling back her hood to reveal her face. "Is he awake?"

"Naturally. He has anticipated your coming, though he expected you hours ago." Xena, the Baron of Trickery, replies.

"After what happened on Hell Harbor, returning to Diabolus took me longer than I anticipated." Mara says with a shrug. "I'll head in, now."

"Don't keep the Master waiting." Xena says, returning to her guard duties.

Mara walks past the two guards, stepping into a brightly lit underground cave, one with hundreds of extravagant crystals embedded in the ceiling to light her way.

This cave, belonging to the Tarot Sect, is part of a massive organization based on Diabolus which the other Hells take care not to offend. Despite possessing a seemingly 'weak' foundation of zero Dukes and only one Emperor, the Tarot Sect punches far, far above its weight class. The powers of Tarot Cards grant all its members firepower and killing potential at the top of Baron fighting levels, and even sometimes into the ranks of Duke.

Mara strides down several elaborately carved hallways, past multitudes of beautiful and handsome Barons of both sexes, up stairs and down stairs, traveling into the heart of the sect's interior.

Eventually, she reaches an area of overwhelming extravagance, with opulent golden chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, marble-tiled floors and walls, and gems of all different colors embedded in every single outcropping and item that sticks out of any surface. So ritzy and over-designed is the place, that if anyone were to step inside for the first time, they would certainly feel a sense of inferiority, followed by annoyance at whoever thought such a tacky display of wealth would make them intimidating.

The moment Mara enters, a powerful spiritual aura locks onto her position.

"Mara. MARAAAA! Finally. *Cough, cough.* You're back."

A male voice speaks from an upper platform, one with a pair of stairs on either side leading up to his position. Mara raises her eyes, but doesn't see beyond the banister on the second floor leading to him. His voice, best described as 'corpulent,' makes him sound stifled and choked by fat.

Indeed, as Mara climbs the stairs, she comes face to face with a morbidly obese demon sitting in a huge chair with a pair of pretty female Barons by his side, waiting on him hand and foot. Two huge horns stick out of his head, those of an Emperor. His body, weighing at least three quarters of a ton, appears immovable, grotesque, and utterly unattractive at every level. Layers and rolls of fat spill off his figure, covered only by loose-fitting robes.

The balding Emperor squints at Mara as she appears. His face appears somewhat rotted, as if maggots have infested his flesh for centuries. The sight doesn't bother Mara, though, given the number of times she has spoken to him over the millennia.

"*Cough, cough!* Mara! Tell me... did Yumagi die a death worth admiring? What say the other Emperors regarding his fall?"

Mara walks up to the hideous, blobular demon, drops to one knee, bows her head, and presses her fist against the floor.

"They suspected nothing. Yumagi's fall was both glorious and memorable."

"Pah! Kuhak, pah!"

The flabby Emperor coughs several times, spraying spittle in Mara's direction. His two Baron servants quickly reach over and clean his face with towels. He remains silent for a moment afterward, then raises a hand with great effort.

"*Cough.* You two, leave us. I must talk with the leader of my Tarot Sect in private!"

The two Barons nod, turn around, and leave Mara behind with her master.

After they depart, Mara rises to her feet.

"...Master Yumagi. I still do not understand. Why would you fake your death? What purpose do your actions serve?"

The Glyphmancer smiles widely, exposing his teeth.

"Pahaha... those fools in the other Hells- *COUGH, COUGH!* Those fools care only about their own gains. Sooner or later, they would have pulled us into their dispute. I have no interest in making an enemy of the Wordsmith. Better to use a False Body spell to fake my death and trick those oblivious idiots! With me gone, they won't bother with my Tarot Sect. Barons will be of little use in battling the Wordsmith."

Emperor Yumagi, still alive despite his supposed 'death' at the claws of the Cherubiim, absentmindedly fiddles with an object attached to a chain placed upon his neck. The palm-sized piece of jewelry appears quite eye-catching, given how it looks to be an upside-down golden pyramid with one eye on each of its four sides.

The simple-looking piece of jewelry bounces about between his fingers while he fondles it.

"*Cough!* Now, then, Mara! You have done well. I want you to announce publicly that the Tarot Sect will be closing its doors while we decide on a new leader. Let the other Hells think I've died! Those brats can fight their own wars! In the meantime, we must

continue accumulating resources. I must find the correct combination if I am to craft the card that will restore myself to my former glory!"

Mara nods. "Of course, Emperor Yumagi."

She falls silent for a few moments, yet lingers in the same spot, making the obese Emperor glance at her again.

"Eh? Are you waiting for something? Oh, ho ho! Don't tell me. You are still waiting for your merits, hmm?"

Mara nods excitedly. "Yes, yes! I hope I have contributed well to your glorious cause, Emperor Yumagi! I helped fool the other Emperors into thinking you had died. I also fought against the Wordsmith's troops and gained valuable intelligence for you."

"Indeed! This old master will not be stingy in his rewards." Yumagi says. He leans slightly toward Mara and holds out his flab-covered hand. "Bring me your neck."

Mara hesitates for a moment before stepping toward him. She drops to her knees obediently and brings her face closer, while Yumagi reaches out and wraps his hands around her throat. He squeezes only a little, but even so, the strength of an Emperor proves overwhelming. Magic pulses from his palm into Mara's soul while he conducts a sweep of her spirituality.

"Hmph! Look at how many cards you've lost, recently! Mara, Mara! How many times must I tell you? You cannot simply throw away cards through summons and transformations! Do you think these cards grow on trees? I have to expend my vitality to create them! Are you trying to kill this old ancestor?"

A look of pain crosses Mara's face as Yumagi squeezes her throat tighter. Like a kitten held in place by the back of its fur, she can only stare into her master's eyes and grit her teeth while her body loses its ability to fight back.

"Yes... this frail servant... knows she has not met... your expectations..."

"Hmph! At least you know your place!" Yumagi grunts. "Here. I will grant you... one platinum aspect, three golden ones, and five silver. You had better not throw them away again! Especially the platinum one! You cannot imagine the price I pay to make just a single one!"

Yumagi coughs a few times, then transfers magical power through the connection of his palm and Mara's throat. When he releases the Baron of Games, she crumples to the

floor, convulsing for several minutes while the pain of adaptation courses through her veins.

The Glyphmancer snorts. "I will allocate you a further seven hundred and thirteen Merits! Any more, and the others will think I'm showing you favoritism!"

Shakily, Mara rises to her feet and performs a clumsy bow.

"Th-thank you, Master Yumagi. This servant will take her leave, now."

"Make sure you get me more resources!" Yumagi snaps. "I want to see more eggs of mighty monsters, but with their spiritual essences INTACT. The quality of stock your juniors have given me lately is simply inadequate!"

Mara nods. "Yes. Yes, of course, Master Yumagi."

Still trembling, she stumbles away from Yumagi and departs the room, leaving the Glyphmancer by himself.

After the departure of his vaunted Sect Leader, Yumagi continues to play with the pyramid hanging from his neck-chain. He grins widely and chuckles.

"Hehe... these foolish children. They are all so willing to humor an old demon, so long as it grants them a slice of power. They are but pawns to my ambition... *cough, cough!*"

Yumagi bursts into a violent coughing fit, one much more severe than those he suffered before. After a half-minute of choking on his own saliva, he settles back down and sighs.

"Tch. This cursed artifact. Ptah, you really damned me, didn't you? My greedy nature couldn't resist the pull of controlling a Hero's power... ah, but I've almost fully tamed your soul. I just need to find the last ingredients... perhaps then, I will wield all your strength as my own."

The slovenly Emperor curls his lip up into a sneer.

"Wordsmith. Pah! Your power is incredible, but you are far from the only being who can wield godlike power. Compared to the ancient Ptah, you are only a little better. Wait until I master this relic... then I will come for you, as well. You will wish you had died, rather than awakened my greed, *Hero*. I will make you MINE!"

As his servants return, Yumagi unleashes a violent laugh at the ceiling, cackling at the thought of someday enslaving the Wordsmith for his own purposes.

He is far from the only being with such thoughts...

Part 345: Raphael's Revelation

An alarm blares inside the Labyrinth Core. Hundreds of humans, monsters, and demons jump into action, rushing to activate their T-REX armor and take up defensive positions while aiming at the newly-rebuilt double doors leading out of the Core. Powerful restriction magic coats the walls, making it impossible for Mephisto to slither around and pop in and out like he did during the Stormbringer invasion, and the walls themselves have been heavily reinforced with Wordsmithing. Not even a nuclear bomb could destroy the Core to the same extent the demons did during Stormbringer's first phase.

Even so, every human grimaces as they listen to Centurion's words.

"DEMON DUKE ENERGY SIGNATURE DETECTED. CURRENTLY EN-ROUTE TO THE LABYRINTH CORE. ALL PERSONNEL, ASSUME DEFENSIVE POSITIONS! THIS IS NOT A DRILL!"

Moments later, Jason Hiro teleports into the Core, having had a magical beacon alert him to Centurion's warning. With the Wordsmith in their midst, everyone breathes a collective sigh of relief, especially due to his calm posture.

"There's no need to be afraid." Jason says, transmitting his words to the headsets of all the other soldiers. "It's not an enemy."

Minutes pass as Centurion's warning grows more dire.

"DEMON DUKE SIGNATURE HAS CROSSED DEFENSIVE LINE BETA."

"DEMON DUKE SIGNATURE HAS CROSSED DEFENSIVE LINE ALPHA."

"DEMON DUKE SIGNATURE HAS REACHED THE IMMEDIATE EXTERIOR OF THE CORE. TAKE COVER!"

Jason watches and waits. A moment later, Archangel Uriel casually steps through the gap in the Labyrinth doors, still holding control of Barbatos's body.

"Jason Hiro." She says, her masculine voice no different from the Duke of Steel. "My apologies. Not even Raphael was able to break through the spatial barrier on Tarus II. Thou hath reinforced it well."

"A necessary measure." Jason says, holding up a hand to signal his subordinates. They visibly relax and lower their weapons, returning the Core to green alert levels. "I hear the

three of you had a bit of fun on Hell Harbor."

Uriel and Jason walk up to each other, casually examining different aspects of themselves. Uriel notices how different the Core appears compared to just a few days before, when she left. Already, numerous fortifications have been put in place, making it much more difficult to assault than at any point in the past. As for Jason, he examines her body to see if she's suffered any serious injuries, but to his surprise, she appears completely fine.

"We succeeded, and we failed." Uriel says. "We slew several Demon Emperors. Three from the Hell of Blood. Two from the Hell of Calamity. Unfortunately, some have already revived under Mephisto's employ."

"I hear Ose is back, too." Jason says. "Damn demons. They never just stay dead."

"Regarding Ose... and other matters..." Uriel says, before glancing around. "Let us travel somewhere more private."

"Sure."

Jason utters a Word of Power, returning himself and Uriel to the world of Tarus II. They arrive atop a tower being constructed inside the same crater left behind by Beelzebub's detonation. While the tower's exterior appears fully finished, its interior still has much work to be done.

Standing five hundred feet tall, the replica of the Lazarus Tower starts off wide at its base, but tapers upward into a flat top with four upright 'points' on each corner, aimed at the sky. Its white, marble-like exterior makes it appear flashy, like a beacon on the horizon. It sticks out compared to the ramshackle houses and structures springing up all over the formerly ruined city. With so many parts of the Fortress of Retribution having suffered total annihilation, a lot of room appears for new interpretations of how the city should look.

Jason doesn't tell Uriel what the structure is, but she immediately recognizes it. Or, perhaps, her brother does and informs her.

"This is a recreation of the Lazarus Tower." Uriel says. "Why make another one? And art thou even capable of replicating all its effects?"

"Not all of them." Jason says. "But the important ones. It's close to completion. Once we turn it on, all the errant human souls in the universe will fall under humanity's

control. I don't have the ability to do the same for monster, demon, other other types of souls... but humans are enough."

Uriel gazes at the Hero's face.

"I am sorry about thy friend, Monster King Kar."

"He lived a good life..." Jason mutters. "I'm not done saving him. I'll keep trying, no matter the cost."

He pauses for a moment before changing the topic.

"What were you going to say about Ose?"

"Art thou aware of Ose's new... circumstances?" Uriel asks.

The Wordsmith shrugs. "Nope. Feel free to elaborate."

Uriel touches Raphael and Michael's rings. A moment later, she conjures a pair of construct bodies, this time deliberately modeling them to look like their original selves, rather than generic male and female constructs. Those forms were only intended to fool the demons, after all.

Raphael gazes around the Fortress of Retribution, smiling as he observes the humans' rebuilding efforts.

"Ose and Bael have traded bodies." Raphael says. "This has resulted in a complete loss of power for Bael. His talents lay not in the arts of magic, but in his previously formidable strength and defenses. He is a stupid, dull-headed simpleton. When souls and bodies exchange with one another, verily, they often gain one another's powers in addition to their own. A certain degree of compatibility is required, but 'tis otherwise an established fact of life."

"However," Raphael continues, "while Bael has completely lost all power and become nothing more than a training dummy for stronger entities, the same is not true of Ose. She hath obtained Bael's invincible body, in addition to her already formidable intellect and lightning-based powers."

Raphael goes on to explain what happened on Hell Harbor, finally enlightening the Wordsmith as to all the intricacies he missed out on from his talks with the Volgrim.

"Damn..." Jason mutters. "Ose got a hell of a power-up. She defeated the Cherubiim, despite only possessing the power of a Duke."

"She will soon advance to the rank of Emperor." Raphael warns the Wordsmith. "This... Lazarus Tower... t'would be quite inconvenient for her if thou were to drastically accelerate its construction. I shall assist thee."

"Thanks. Phoebe can definitely use the help." Jason says. "By the way... considering you fought against the Emperors a few days ago, what took you so long to come back? Were you off killing other Emperors?"

For a brief moment, a look of fear appears in the eyes of Uriel and Michael. They look at their brother, waiting with bated breath to see what he has to say.

"We... took a detour." Raphael says, speaking slowly. "I wished to visit Earth. To see what it had become. And also... I wished to search for a number of other things."

His expression turns ugly.

"Jason Hiro. I went back to Earth in the hopes of accessing Heaven. Its temporal coordinates tie it to thy homeworld's position. It surrounds Earth, and accessing it requires one to stand upon the planet's surface. Yet, no matter how I tried, I was unable to do so."

With a heavy sigh, Raphael shakes his head.

"I am afraid that... Heaven is gone. The Volgrim destroyed it."

"They did?" Jason asks. "Damn. How would they even do that? Were they able to access Heaven during the Energy Wars?"

"I thought not, originally." Raphael replies. "But considering how high-level Psions can manipulate space, and even time, 'tis likely they located and annihilated Heaven in its entirety."

Michael steps forward. "No. There is another possibility, brother."

Raphael glances at him, then nods.

"Aye. There is another. The Volgrim may have stolen away Heaven to use it for their own purposes. Heaven was rich in life energy, siphoned away in small amounts from every creature on Earth."

"Stolen away?" Jason repeats. "How would they even do that?"

"By unhitching Heaven's temporal anchor from Earth, the Volgrim could have moved it from Earth to another location." Uriel replies. "Perhaps Volgarius. Perhaps elsewhere."

As long as they anchor Heaven to a world rich in life, it would continue to sustain itself. Raphael originally created Heaven thinking the Archangels might someday need to move it away from Earth, should the alliance between Titans and Angels fail."

"So Archangels can move Heaven through space?" Jason asks. "Does that mean if we figure out where Heaven is, one of you can latch onto it and move it somewhere else? Perhaps Tarus II?"

"Aye. Uriel's body may be that of a demon, but her soul is still connected to Heaven." Raphael says. "She can move it to a secure location, but that is assuming it wasn't destroyed, and that we can find it. Based upon my observations of thy power, thou art incapable of searching for Heaven's location, unless I am wrong...?"

Jason shakes his head. "I won't be of much help. My 'Locate' ability can only hunt for souls, not objects or places. If the Volgrim have taken Heaven for themselves, what use might they have for it?"

"Assuming they uncovered a way to manipulate its life energy," Raphael says, "they could perform experiments, mutate lower life forms into higher ones, or do other sorts of things. But, that is not the only news I bring. The next bit of news..."

Raphael pauses. This time, his expression becomes hideous. A look of disgust and fear spreads across his face and body, making him visibly shiver.

"The... the Cosmic Realm..." Raphael mutters. "I... I accessed it... it was..."

Jason frowns deeply. "What happened to the Cosmic Realm? Was it stolen too? Or destroyed?"

"WORSE!" Raphael barks. "Far, far worse! It still exists, but it has become... corrupted! Vile!"

Michael and Uriel both look away from their brother.

"Monsters." Michael says. "It was infested with... strange creatures. Terrifying monstrosities."

"We nearly died trying to escape." Uriel says. "The light of Creation no longer shines in the Cosmic Realm. Instead..."

"Somehow, monsters have stolen control of the Cosmic Realm!" Raphael roars. "My fallen brothers and sisters... gone! Their souls, extinguished! In their place, creatures roam with mottled, mossy skin, dead eyes, and soulless gaits!"

"We weren't sure what they were at first." Michael says, his tone heavy. "But after we escaped, we took time to dwell on what we had seen."

All three Archangels fall silent.

Several seconds pass, as none of them with to say the truth they have uncovered.

"Those monsters..." Raphael whispers. "They were the **Plague**."

"The same Plague the Volgrim are fighting." Uriel adds. "They have overtaken the Cosmic Realm. They have infested the galaxy. And before long, they will move inward, to kill us all."

Jason shudders. "The Plague have taken over the Cosmic Realm? Do the Volgrim know about this?! And how did they even make it there?"

Raphael sighs.

"Haah... the Cosmic Realm is different from Heaven, yet similar. Heaven once enveloped Earth. 'Twas a planet-sized realm folded within another dimension, anchored to a celestial body. At the time of its creation, 'twas all I and the other Archangels could make, with what remained of our cosmic power. But the Cosmic Realm is different. I personally forged it at the height of my power."

Raphael shoots a meaningful look at the Wordsmith.

"Much like how the Labyrinth is a massive, interconnected and living organism folded within the Milky Way's space, the Cosmic Realm sits one realm further. It envelops our entire galaxy! If one were to know of its location, and if they were to possess a high-level understanding of temporal and quantum mechanics, they might just divine a method of entry."

"I see." Jason says. "That makes sense. Since the Cosmic Realm envelops the Milky Way, anyone can access it from anywhere. They just need, like, a password, or something. But, wouldn't that leave only..."

"The Psions." Uriel says, her voice dripping with hostility. "From what little we hath gleaned regarding the Plague, 'tis claimed to be a scourge borne from a Volgrim science facility. Knowing this, tis' possible the Plague has evolved enough to tear through the barriers to the Cosmic Realm, or... perhaps the Psions planted it there themselves."

"Regarding the Plague," Michael says, "I am surprised thou knoweth its existence, Wordsmith."

"Marie told me a little about it." Jason says. "And while you were gone, I had some Volgrim pay me a visit."

He quickly tells the Archangels about Sangin Kordonis, his visit, and the words they exchanged.

This new information gives the Archangels more to work off. They glance at one another, exchanging insights wordlessly through their shared soul-links.

"The Plague is indeed more serious than we expected." Raphael murmurs. "What we saw in the Cosmic Realm... it chilled me to my core."

"Can I see for myself?" Jason asks. "I want to know what I'm up against."

"NO!" Raphael exclaims. "Step not into the Cosmic Realm! Verily, we entered its embrace for but thirty seconds before an uncountable number of horrifying monsters attacked from all sides!"

"They were powerful. Durable. Unkillable, even." Michael says, his eyes losing focus as he remembers the battle they fought. "My sword struck their skin, but glanced off as if impacting the hardest demonstone armor ever forged. What few cuts I landed drew no blood."

"Their bodies were humanoid, bipedal." Uriel recalls. "As best as we could tell, they were... reanimated. Perhaps from death, perhaps not. Their movements were coordinated, yet instinctual. They fought without fear. They thirsted for my flesh. The very air shook with their hunger."

"We lasted not a minute before escaping in a panic!" Raphael says. "Whatever actions thou taketh, step NOT into the Cosmic Realm! And believe nothing the Volgrim say! Those lying bastards unleashed these hellish monsters onto the universe. Their ignorance will be the death of all of us!"

"It's like a famous man once said." Jason muses. "They were trying so hard to see if they could, they didn't ask if they should."

"Strength, speed, and stamina rivaling the mightiest Demon Emperors." Uriel says. "Lacking intelligence, but still possessing enough thought to know when and where to find their next meal. Make no mistake, Wordsmith. As thou art now, thou art far from an opponent to this so-called 'Plague.' The Volgrim hope that thou can't assist them in

destroying it, but they intend only to use and discard thee once thy existence has served its purpose."

Jason and his mind-wife exchange thoughts regarding what the angels have told them.

He meets Raphael's gaze once again.

"You said before the Demon Emperors were having a meeting on Hell Harbor. Any idea as to the reasons why?"

"Indeed. I gleaned some insights into their future plans." Raphael affirms. "They fear thee, Wordsmith. Not enough to avoid thee, but enough to wish to exterminate thy existence, or capture thee. Before, during Stormbringer, Ose wished to capture thyself and thy clone for her own purposes, but now, she must accept a deal that benefits demonkind more than herself. All of the Hidden Emperors will join together and launch an assault on thy world. I know not when they will take this action, but logic dictates it must happen soon. They are likely worried thou shalt build defenses no invasion force can overcome."

Despite Raphael's dire prediction, Jason appears unmoved.

"Mmm. If they think they'll be able to catch me offguard, they have another thing coming. Thanks for the heads-up, but I'm already working on a solution. The Volgrim showing up scared some sense into me."

Jason walks over to the edge of the tower and gestures toward the west.

"I've encapsulated the entire Fortress of Retribution in transparent crystal. It doesn't only cover the entire city's upper area, but also its lower sections. I reinforced it a hundred times over, making it harder than the hardest demonstone. I daresay it may even be comparable to that material the Warpgates are made of, Living Moldanium."

He sighs.

"There's one other thing. Ahh... I'd like to show you, since you weren't available when I rescued Hope. We... picked up someone from Gressil's dungeon. I think you might know them."

Raphael raises an eyebrow. "And who might this mysterious person be?"

"Well. That's the thing." Jason says. "She's not very talkative. She was one of Gressil's prisoners since... well, since the end of the Energy Wars, it would seem. He performed all sorts of heinous acts on her... so she's understandably quiet, tight-lipped, and

traumatized. I'd love it if she could see some friendly faces... but there's no way I'm bringing you to her with Uriel looking like... *that*."

He gestures to Uriel's body, that of Barbatos's armored figure, and raises his eyebrows as if to imply, *I'm sure you know what I mean*.

However, the angels don't quite pick up on the meaning behind his words.

"This body is a weapon." Uriel says. "I do not love it. I do not cherish it. I simply use it to execute the Creator's retribution."

"Fair enough. But, we're still going to need to make you not so traumatizing to the poor girl." Jason says. "Give me a minute. **Transform. Reshape. Purify...**"

Jason spends the next few minutes completely reshaping Uriel's body, transforming her from the specter of a cold-blooded Demon Duke to that of her original self. He shifts her appearance into a facsimile of her original body, including her wings, her untarnished skin, and her ruby-red dress.

For several minutes afterward, Uriel stares at her arms in shock. With Barbatos's armor removed, and his demonic aura temporarily purified to resemble that of an Archangel, Uriel can't help but feel as if she has been given a new lease on life.

The Archangel of Retribution stares at herself numbly. Jason summons a mirror so she can look at herself, and to his surprise, a few tears well up in her eyes, then slide down her cheeks.

"I... I never thought... I would someday..."

Raphael and Michael smile warmly, finally glad to see their sister looking as she should. Not as a corrupted demon, but as the pure and righteous figure of an Archangel.

"I... knew what you looked like from Solomon's visions." Jason explains. "But, I'm sorry, your aura can only temporarily resemble your original self. In the end, you're still in a Demon Duke's body. Perhaps..."

Jason pauses.

"...Perhaps there might be some way I can put all of you into real bodies. Unfortunately, it's not as simple as merely transferring your souls into flesh-vessels."

Raphael nods. "I remember thy experiments well. Bodies lacking naturalized life energy tend to fall apart after a time. Thou shalt have to nurture them carefully over a

period of a few years before they might become suitable for my brother, my sister, and I."

"They won't be the same as your original bodies, either." Jason cautions. "Sure, they would be genuine angelic bodies, but they just wouldn't have the same strength as you once boasted in the Ancient Era, or the Primordial Era. They'll just be... relatively strong. Stronger than an average human, to be fair."

"An Archangel's might comes not from their body, but their soul." Michael declares. "Though, in my case, if my body is unable to keep up with my Omni-Perception, my legendary blade techniques will fail to impress."

"I guess you'll have to start training, then." Jason says with a smile. "Now, then. Uriel, Raphael, Michael. Are you ready to meet an old friend?"

Uriel nods. "Yes. Who?"

She quickly grows accustomed to her 'new' body, though not even the stoic Archangel of Retribution can hide the happiness in her eyes at this sudden and unexpected blessing. Even her voice returns to its original cadence, making her feel as if she has been totally reborn.

"I'll show you all, now." Jason says.

He utters a Word of Power, and all three of the Archangels vanish from atop the Lazarus Tower to arrive in front of a small house.

The moment they appear, the Archangels sweep their senses around and turn toward the house.

"...What? I sense... angelic energy!" Michael gasps. "'Tis faint, but discernable!"

Jason nods. He opens the door, and leads them inside, where they find a pair of angel women, one with red hair, and one with white. The white-haired woman sits on the floor in a corner, while the red-haired one sits beside her, a hand resting on her shoulder.

Both of them raise their heads to look at the guests as they walk in.

Raphael stops halfway through the door. His body seizes up, and he gasps a few incredulous words.

"Im-impossible! The Daughter... of Heaven?!"

Part 346: Heaven's Daughter

Raphael, Uriel, and Michael all stare in absolute shock at the woman curled up in the corner of the room, her arms wrapped around her legs. Cassiel, apparently known as Heaven's Daughter, blinks her watery eyes as her gaze flicks between the three Archangels, yet she says nothing. Instead, a look of deep shame appears on her face. She lowers her head again, burying her face into her knees and tightening her arms around her legs.

"How can the Daughter of Heaven be here?" Michael whispers. "We... we were certain she perished..."

Jason allows the Archangels a few moments to look at Cassiel, but seeing her clear discomfort, he doesn't invite them inside. Instead, he ushers them back outside and closes the door before conjuring a sound isolation barrier.

"Heaven's Daughter?" Jason asks. "So you do know her. I asked Gabriel, but he kept his lips sealed. **Projection. Projection.**"

Jason conjures Gabriel and his Mind-Wife, Phoebe, into the physical realm. When they appear, Gabriel towers over the others, nearly double their height. Aware of his immense height difference, he drops down to sit on the dirt.

"I hath spoken with Heaven's Daughter." Gabriel says. "Our sister... had little to say. She barely spoke a few words before withdrawing."

"Where didn't thou find her?" Raphael asks. "Gressil's prison?"

Jason nods. "I assembled a platoon of soldiers to rescue Hope and several humans from the Labyrinth. While we were there, we uncovered a locked room Gressil clearly didn't want anyone to enter. Cassiel was inside."

Raphael frowns. "Cassiel?"

"That is the name the humans have decided to call her." Gabriel quickly interjects. "Considering the torture she has suffered, I thought it prudent to allow her to keep her identity hidden, until she decided to speak her name, herself."

Michael's expression becomes heavy. "...I have spoken with Heaven's Daughter on many occasions. She used to wear my ring on her finger and talk to me while she went

about her business. She always had such a... bubbly personality. So full of life and joy. But now..."

"A dark cloud pervades her gaze." Raphael says, sighing deeply. "Tell me more about the state thou hath discovered her in, Wordsmith."

Jason nods. He spends the next several minutes detailing what happened in Faith's End to all of the Archangels, including the revelations about Lucifer being trapped inside of Gressil's body, and Gressil's apparent ability to nullify magical energy.

"Tsk." Uriel hisses. "I am only a little familiar with Heaven's Daughter. Rumors of her name reached Barbatos on a few occasions... but I never had the privilege to speak with or see her in person. Now that I have... she seems so... frail."

"She was not like that in the past." Raphael murmurs. "She was the mightiest of Lazarites. She earned countless titles for her bravery in battle. Daughter of Heaven. Child of the Light. As a mere Lazarite, she even slew Emperor Red Raven in one-on-one combat, earning herself the title of Blood Reaper. Previously, only the Archangels could accomplish such a feat."

Jason widens his eyes in surprise. "What the hell? She's that impressive of a figure? Could that be why Gressil... kept her alive?"

Raphael's expression turns grim. He nods slowly, disgusted by the notion. "What an unforgivable hellspawn Gressil is. To bring the Child of Light to such depths of despair... I can only imagine the horrible cruelty he heaped upon her."

"Undoubtedly, she suffers not only from the trauma of physical and mental torture, but the burden of our expectations..." Michael murmurs. "For her to have been unable to free herself and eventually learn that she is the last living angel... she bears a weight heavier than any mountain."

All of the Archangels fall silent.

"It doesn't matter if she is the greatest Archangel or the weakest Lazarite." Phoebe says, piping up in the absence of conversation. "She has suffered terribly. If she wants to stay silent, then we must allow her to do so. Let us hope that Soleil will be able to offer her some comfort."

Raphael blinks. "Soleil? Ah! Was she the other angel sitting beside the Child of Light?"

"Soleil is not an angel, but a construct." Jason explains. "I wanted to give Cassiel a friend she could lean on and confide in. Soleil is simply the first idea that popped into my head."

Jason explains Soleil's purpose and capabilities, leading the Archangels to nod along to his words.

"I see." Raphael says. "Aye, t'was a thoughtful measure to take, Wordsmith. I doubt... 'Cassiel'... would enjoy the company of demons or monsters. As for humans... I dare not postulate."

"Why didn't thou nameth her Cassiel?" Michael asks. "The name of my fallen sister... an Archangel... 'tis not appropriate for a mere Lazarite-"

"It is a fine name." Raphael interjects. "The Child of Light is not to be compared to other Lazarites. Her control of the Lazarite Essence towers above those of her kin. For her to use an Archangel's name as an alias, I do not object."

Michael opens his mouth to retort, but thinks better of it.

"...Thou art right, eldest brother. Our precious sister deserves accolades. She carries our hopes and dreams. Even if all of us should perish, she may still bear our torch. And if she wishes to remain on the sidelines, she has also earned that right."

"The old distinctions of purebloods and human-born matter little." Gabriel muses. "What remains of our people all stand here, upon this world. We are nothing more than a sliver of our former strength. We must respect Cassiel's wishes, no matter what they be."

All of the Archangels reach a consensus, leaving Jason to shrug and go along with them.

"I won't lie. I'm still interested in what makes Cassiel so... special. What is this 'Lazarite Essence' you spoke of? Can you at least tell me that much?"

All four of the Archangels become quiet. They look thoughtfully at one another, as if unsure what they should say.

Raphael waves his hand. "Bah. There is no point in hiding the truth. The Lazarite Essence is the core of their power structure. It was intended to be a simple power that any human could master, upon resurrecting in a Lazarite body. Humans are naturally incapable of understanding complex magic, especially those who die later in life. But the Child of Light was different."

"She died when she was still only a babe." Michael explains. "As such, she was able to grasp hold of important concepts more easily than adult humans could. Of course, countless children perished and revived as Lazarites, so that situation was not particularly unique, but she also..."

He pauses.

"She also... possessed a certain affinity to holy magic. She was able to control it in a more unique manner than other humans could ever hope to copy. As such, she became the mightiest wielder of the Lazarite's Essence."

"Alright, but what is this whole 'essence' thing?" Jason asks. "Just give it to me straight."

"Very well." Raphael responds. He summons a tiny, illusory image of Cassiel above his palm, levitating her like a poseable action figure. "All Lazarites possessed the ability to summon holy magic into existence. We taught them to use this ability in order to don weapons and armor, protecting themselves and increasing their fighting capabilities."

Raphael alters Cassiel's figure, making shining golden armor materialize onto her body, its appearance resembling hardened mana of average strength.

"This would allow any Lazarite to conjure swords, hammers, spears, shields, and other simple implements into existence to battle their demonic foes. The problem came in that the vast majority were simply incapable of conjuring anything more complicated, than bows and arrows. The moment they tried to create complex forms of mana, their efforts fell apart."

"And Cassiel was different?" Jason asks.

"Oh, yes. Very much so." Raphael affirms. "She was the Child of Light! Her ability to conjure and control holy energy went well beyond the limits of all other Lazarites. Indeed, she was even more capable than the Valkyries, and her proficiency nearly reached the level of my brothers and sisters among the Archangels! She was truly an elite!"

Michael smiles. "I admired her tenacity and willpower. She never stopped learning. No matter what humans invented, she would learn to craft weapons and implements similar to those found on Earth. By the time of the Energy Wars, she had become so deadly in battle that Demon Emperors regularly avoided her whenever she appeared."

"We had to engage in some level of subterfuge to keep the demons guessing." Raphael says with a smirk. "We placed Cassiel under the care of humans on occasion, hiding her identity with special talismans, so she could locate and sneak up on demons to kill them. Once the Blood Reaper appeared on the field of battle, even an Archangel would seem preferable to fight."

"She always did detest demons, from the depths of her soul." Gabriel muses. "Not dissimilar to..."

He trails off, leaving the sentence to linger in the air.

"Not dissimilar to who?" Jason asks.

"If Cassiel wishes to say, so she shall." Raphael says, falling silent.

"She really does sound incredible..." Phoebe says. "What a tragedy for her to end up like this. I wonder how she ended up trapped with Gressil? How did she fall into his clutches?"

"Gressil can nullify magical energy." Jason says. "He probably caught her offguard. It's not too hard to imagine."

"Mmm." Michael grunts, looking at Cassiel's abode. "I... wish to speak to my sister alone. Wordsmith, brothers, sister, wouldn't thou allow me a few minutes with her?"

Jason and the others nod.

"Go ahead. All of you can take turns." Jason says. "But... try not to overwhelm her. If she doesn't want to talk, don't force her to speak."

"I know." Michael says, his tone softening. "I won't do anything that will hurt... Cassiel's soul. I just wish to spend a little time with her."

Michael steps out of the sound isolation bubble and walks over to Cassiel's door. After stepping inside, he closes it, leaving the others to wonder what they might discuss.

After Michael leaves, Raphael turns to Jason.

"Regarding other matters, there is something I wish to discuss, Wordsmith. Verily, I hath failed to mention this before, but my brother, sister, and I observed the First Emperor of demonkind on Hell Harbor. His title..."

Raphael pauses abruptly, as if momentarily confused.

"His title is... 'twas... erm..."

The old man hems and haws for a few long moments before frowning.

"I... cannot recall. I forgot to mention him before, though the reason why escapes me. He appeared at the end of our battle against Ose. He spoke to her and said..."

The Archangel of Wisdom pauses once again.

"Verily, he spake to her. I watched their exchange. I listened... but regarding the contents of their discussion..."

"I cannot recall either," Uriel says with a frown. "I do not remember what he looked like, or what he said. I remember only that he appeared and said... *something*."

Jason listens to their conversation with rapt attention.

"...You mean to tell me two Archangels have become totally forgetful? Maybe I can help. **Remember.**"

Jason aims his magic at Raphael's mind, intending to make the old Archangel remember just what, exactly he observed. However, instead of revitalizing Raphael's thoughts, his vision dims considerably.

"Erm... forgiveth me, Wordsmith. What matter was I speaking about?"

"The First Emperor." Jason says, his frown deepening. "I just- don't you remember anything?"

"First Emperor?" Raphael repeats. "Dost though referreth to Satan the Devil? What of him?"

"I don't know." Jason replies. "I assume you meant someone else. What the hell is going on? Why are you forgetting, all of a sudden? You brought him up!"

Raphael stares at the Wordsmith as if gazing at an idiot. He turns to Uriel.

"Sister. What nonsense does the Wordsmith speak of?"

"The First Emperor." Uriel repeats. "He was... we saw him, brother. I believe? He was on Hell Harbor."

"Satan the Devil is alive?" Raphael asks, nearly jumping out of his skin. "I thought he perished along with the Black Queen!"

""Uh... well, he *did*..." Jason interrupts. "I don't think you guys are talking about Satan... so let's just drop the subject. But, uh... regarding the Black Queen... boy, do I have something that will get your noggins jogging."

With the Archangels having left immediately following Stormbringer, none of them know of Amelia's reappearance, her subsequent assistance in locating Hope, and the revelation that she is not, in fact, actually Amelia. Annette, the sister of Debra, turns out to be a huge surprise for the Archangels, as Jason's story leaves them reeling from one twist after another.

"For there to be such a matter!" Raphael exclaims. "Verily, thy clone hath gotten up to some tomfoolery!"

"Yes." Jason affirms. "But I don't blame him. I blame myself. I blame myself for a *lot* of things that have gone wrong in the last six years."

The Wordsmith sighs.

"In the meantime, Uriel, why don't you have Gabriel's ring back? I expect you'll be sticking around here for a while?"

The Archangel of Retribution crosses her arms.

"Indeed I shall, Wordsmith. I still hunger for my spears to taste the flesh of bloodskin Emperors, but for now, I must rest. Transforming into the Cherubiim has drained my soul, and without my original body, my soul's recovery speed shall prove quite slow."

"Can you transform again?" Jason asks.

"...Perhaps. 'Tis within the realm of possibility, but it shall require a not-insignificant sum of time. In the worst case, I may require several months, years, or even decades to transform again."

"And Uriel shall require my assistance, as well as Michael or Gabriel's," Raphael explains. "'Tis impossible for one or two Archangels to transform into a Triad State. The Ophaniim, Seraphiim, and Cherubiim are all mighty forms that would cause despair to fall upon the demon Emperors."

"I assume each of the three forms has their own advantages and disadvantages?" Jason asks, probing for more information.

"Aye, they do. But for now, only the Cherubiim and Seraphiim lay within reach. None of the Ophaphs remain among the living. Not Samael, not Cassiel, nor Muriel, so that transformation has been lost forever. And as for the Seraphiim..."

Raphael chuckles coyly.

"Well, it has a few merits."

"I imagine so." Jason replies.

None of the Archangels or Jason bother talking about Cassiel or the First Emperor again, especially as Raphael appears to have completely forgotten what he was saying. Jason chalks his memory loss up to dementia and decides to say nothing, not wanting to insult the old man.

A few minutes later, Jason passes Gabriel's ring to Uriel, and she conjures a summon identical to his original form. While lacking all his physical strength and other attributes, the fact he can interact with the physical realm for the first time in millennia makes Gabriel noticeably happier. He pokes the dirt with his fingers, then scoops it up and allows it to fall from his palm.

"Mmm. Physical sensations. How long has it been...?"

While Gabriel casually plays with his sense of touch, Raphael turns to another topic.

"Jason. During the meeting between Confessor Vulpanix and Ose, I overheard an important piece of intelligence."

He leans toward the Wordsmith with a grave look on his face.

"The Volgrim... have Excalibur in their possession."

"What? They do?" Jason gasps. "Why would Vulpanix mention something like that?"

"Because." Raphael answers. "The demons know not of Camael's Cube, nor do the Volgrim. 'Tis thy secret weapon. However, due to this misunderstanding, Ose let slip that she believed thou possessed Excalibur, and Vulpanix set the record straight. Currently, Excalibur resides in some sort of secret Volgrim vault; so claimeth the Confessor."

Jason frowns. "A secret Volgrim vault. Hmm. If I were to obtain Excalibur, would that make any sort of difference? Can I even wield a weapon of that power level?"

Raphael nods. "Heroes are generally capable of doing so. Excalibur still possesses the intact soul of King Arthur. However, thy ability to master it is limited by thy control of mana. And forgive this old bird for his bluntness, but thy control is quite... *shoddy*. Compared to Arthur himself, thou art barely a hatchling. Thy instinctual control of mana is all but nonexistent, and thy internal reserves are quite minuscule. Still, Excalibur is always useful as a simple mana battery. Compared to Camael's Cube, it is a 'perfect' artifact that does not leak mana. It is the mightiest of my sister's creations for a reason."

"Obtaining Excalibur needs to become a high priority for thee." Uriel says. "The Volgrim have possessed it for a hundred millennia. What use they have obtained from it, we do not know. T'would be unfortunate if they had obtained a method to tap into its mana reserves."

"Well. I can't use 'Locate' to find Excalibur." Jason mutters while rubbing his chin. "I'll have to put it on the backburner for now. Uplifting humanity is my primary goal."

Jason continues to talk with the Archangels, exchanging ideas about how to proceed.

While talking, Jason's T-REX beeps three times, catching his attention. The Wordsmith activates it, covering his body in nanite armor.

Once the T-REX helmet covers his head and face, a message pops up, along with Physical-Phoebe's face.

"Hey! Jason, you won't believe who popped by!"

"Who?" Jason asks.

"Blinker! She said Marie Becker had something she wanted to give you. Said it was urgent, so I contacted you right away."

"Marie Becker..." Jason mutters. "Sounds like trouble. Let me see what it is. Where is Blinker now?"

"She's at the Core. Mind popping over?"

"Sure thing, honey."

Jason turns off the call, deactivates his helmet, and smiles apologetically at the Archangels.

"Scuse me a minute, everyone. I have a friend waiting for me in the Core. Blinker's back, and she has a present from Marie Becker."

Raphael waves Jason away. "Yes, yes. You may go. We shall continue to wait for our time to speak with Cassiel."

"Alright. I'll be back soon."

Jason offers a wave goodbye, then utters a Word of Power.

"Return."

His body, and Spirit-Phoebe's, both vanish from Tarus II and instantly reappear inside the Labyrinth Core, atop an elevated outcropping on the wall where nobody is allowed to

enter, lest Jason teleport inside of them.

The Wordsmith levitates to the floor and trots over to his wife, where he finds Blinker sitting on her shoulder, back in her tiny fairy-form.

"Blinker!" Jason says. "Heya, girl. How are you doing? That baby bump looks a little bigger than I remember."

Blinker shrugs. "Hey, Jason. I'm doing alright. Still trying to find happiness... you know how it is."

Jason's face twitches, making his forced smile more than a little uneasy.

"Haha... yeah. I do."

Neither of them mentions Kar's name, but both of them think it.

Blinker sighs. She motions with her hands and summons a rip in space, where a small black 'bead' the size of a marble falls out of a dimensional storage space and levitates in the air.

Jason gently plucks the bead out of the air with two fingers and frowns.

"Uh. What's this?"

"It's... something really exciting." Blinker says, without a hint of a smile. "You'll hate what you see, Word-man."

"What do you mean?" He asks. "I don't follow."

"It's some sort of computer... data... *thingy*..." Blinker says. "I don't know all the details, okay? Miss Marie just told me to tell you it has a recording of something really important on it. Specifically..."

Blinker leans forward and crinkles her nose.

"...It's a recording of a really big, important Volgrim meeting. The Founders addressed their entire species, collectively. And they talked about *you*. A lot."

The hair raises on the back of Jason's neck.

"Oh. Oh, yeah. That... certainly does sound *important*."

"And scary." Phoebe affirms. "Let's not delay. I want to hear what they had to say."

"As do I." Jason concludes.

Part 347: Phoebe's Request

Jason and his spirit-wife join her physical self and Blinker to walk over to a nearby computer terminal. Despite the data-bead's odd shape and seeming lack of any way to put it into a computer, Phoebe still figures out how to activate it. She takes it from Jason, holds it near the terminal, and a wireless transmission transfers between the nearby interface and the flat screen before them.

Several nearby personnel shoot curious glances in the Wordsmith's direction when the 100-inch screen lights up with the faces of strange, never-before-seen aliens. When they start speaking, an automated filter inside of the file translates their words into English, allowing the humans to follow along. As Jason, his two wives, and Blinker watch, a video recording taken from an intercepted broadcast plays out. The Volgrim Founders identify themselves and speak, one after the other, of the many matters plaguing their society.

Jason learns more about the Plague than he ever did before, including the name the Volgrim have given them, 'Kolvaxians.' He finally obtains a true idea of just how badly the Volgrim have been beaten by the monstrous Plague, and how much ground they've lost. A cold sweat goes down his back when he hears that the Kolvaxians have taken over more than 10% of the Milky Way's inhabitable worlds, or caused others to fall to ruin.

The more he hears, the graver his expression becomes.

"Kolvaxians. Seven Great Wars. Sentinels. God, damn. This is a lot to take in."

Physical-Phoebe chews her lip. "Blinker, did you see this transmission already?"

The Monster Queen nods. "Yeah. Miss Marie showed it to me. It's grim stuff, alright."

"This 'total rendition' term is the same as what Raphael mentioned," Spirit-Phoebe says. "To think the Volgrim would not only have the power to annihilate entire worlds, but the willpower to do so. What a tragedy, and a waste."

"I doubt they'd go to such lengths unless absolutely necessary." Jason says. "These Kolvaxians must be more frightening than any nightmare we can dream up."

"The 'Sentinels' also seem alarming." Physical-Phoebe adds. "They killed 97% of all Volgrim, and they weren't even destroyed. They're just... inactive. Hidden somewhere. They sound even scarier than the Kolvaxians."

"Let's not overlook an important tidbit." Jason says, rewinding to an earlier point in the speech. "This Muuxunuu lady says the Volgrim didn't create the Kolvaxians. They're supposedly invaders from another galaxy. Is she telling the truth?"

"Why would she lie?" Blinker asks. "She's talking to her own people."

"Yes. But sometimes leaders do lie, especially if the purpose is to prevent mass panic. It's entirely possible she and the other Volgrim are making up the Kolvaxian's origins. They may originate from a Volgrim research facility, but the higher-ups don't want the common folk to know. Back when I was a kid, the president of my own country lied about finding 'weapons of mass destruction' in another country to justify invading them. Don't count out the possibility of a well-told lie."

"Raphael found Kolvaxians in the Cosmic Realm." Spirit-Phoebe points out. "Is it possible they originated from there? Or perhaps, they did come from another galaxy and they somehow found their way into the Cosmic Realm? Hell, they might have ended up in there by accident."

"...Or someone put them there *deliberately*." Jason says, lowering his voice. "Maybe the Psions tried to contain the Kolvaxians inside the Cosmic Realm. Or maybe when they condemned a world to Total Rendition, it ended up blasting a hole in the Cosmic Realm big enough for the Plague to slip inside. We don't have anything to go off except Muuxunuu's words. Let's keep watching."

More details emerge as the group of four observe. They learn that a pair of Executors died and became weapons used by the Kolvaxians. They learn of ten ships known by the code-name of Refuge. The fact the Volgrim are considering fleeing the Milky Way leaves them even more concerned than before.

"We absolutely cannot underestimate these Kolvaxians." Jason says. "They're bringing a Type III civilization to the brink of despair. The Volgrim seemed unstoppable before, yet they cannot stop the spread of these invaders."

Some of the subjects the Founders discuss go right over Jason's head, as he isn't familiar with Volgrim society. Unsure of how Psion powers work, the details regarding Specialist Psions mean little to the Wordsmith, though he gathers based on the audience's reaction that this must be quite a surprise to the important delegates in the audience.

"It sounds like becoming a specialist is simultaneously easier and a faster route to achieve power," Jason says, "but it comes at the cost of a diverse arsenal of abilities. Do

any of you know how Psion powers work?"

The women all shake their heads in unison.

"No idea." Physical-Phoebe says.

"Not a clue." Her spiritual self confirms.

"In that case, I'll have to grill Raphael and the other Archangels." Jason says. "I can't deal with threats I know nothing about."

"It seems the Volgrim don't have a viable method to quickly travel between galaxies." Spirit-Phoebe says. "They sent probes to the other galaxies in the Local Group, but beyond that, the distance is too vast. They don't have any way to colonize them or assess their threat levels without risking losing the people they send."

"Would it be in bad taste to say these Kolvaxians might be an ironic fate heaped upon the Volgrim by their own hand?" Jason ponders. "Imagine if their own probes caused the Kolvaxians to come here. That would mean they really kicked the wrong can of shit."

"Sounds like the Plague is either super smart, or super-adaptable." Blinker says, thinking out loud. "Plus, they must be strong as heck, if they were able to kill two 'Executors.' I wonder how strong an Executor is..."

When Unarin brings up humanity again, Jason can't help but scowl at the First Founder's digitally projected face.

"A small scale conflict! The war that destroyed our world was barely even a trifle in Unarin's eyes! Get a load of this prick!"

"To us, the Energy Wars were a terrifying matter of life and death. But to the Volgrim, we probably weren't more than a minor distraction requiring a few small-scale forces to subjugate." Physical-Phoebe says. "We just aren't a threat to them."

"Maybe we *weren't*, but we are *now*." Jason says, quietly resolving his heart.

Finally, the recording reaches a point that makes all four viewers lean forward and watch with rapt attention. Unarin arrives, along with Dosena, and the two of them start speaking to the rest of their species the details they've uncovered about Jason.

They talk of of the Wordsmith's appearances in Marie's facility, his battle against their forces in Hell Harbor, and even the Cherubiim's later appearance.

"I've been too sloppy." Jason says with a grimace. "But to put all of these pieces together, Unarin is no idiot. He's the leader of a species that once controlled the entirety of a frigging galaxy. I guess it's to be expected his intelligence-gathering capabilities would be this frightening."

"He seems to be a little scared of you." Physical-Phoebe says. "That's at least somewhat... comforting. I suppose."

"Or distressing." Jason mutters. "Scared dogs tend to bite when they're cornered. Damn. He even knows I caused the Polaris star to go supernova. How the hell does he put all these pieces together?"

"He knows about Hope, too." Blinker says, quietly. "Isn't Hope still injured? I heard Gressil tortured him."

"Did Phoebe tell you that?" Jason asks, glancing at his wife.

"Nope. Miss Marie did." Blinker replies. "She... keeps an eye on you."

"Hmph. I'll bet she does."

The group continues watching. Even crazier facts come to light, making Jason widen his eyes.

"Seriously! He's afraid I might have more clones besides Hope? That's ridiculous! Just one clone is enough to make me tear my hair out!"

"It's a reasonable assumption." Physical-Phoebe says. "You know the limits of your powers, but Unarin doesn't. He can only guess based on what his interrogation of Ose revealed. And it's clear she hid things from him because she still wants to obtain your powers for demonkind, not the Volgrim."

"Still, the fact remains that Unarin is scared of me." Jason says. "And that's good. He should be. I'll make humanity so terrifying he won't dare to mess with us. Once we stomp down the Kolvaxians, there won't be anything he can do to defeat us."

The Wordsmith glances at his wife.

"I'll just have to make sure to protect you even more than I do now. I have no doubt Unarin would try to capture and turn you into a weakness for me. I won't let him touch you, though. No matter what."

Physical-Phoebe smiles. "You're so romantic."

When the recording continues again, Jason nearly has a heart attack.

"What the fuck?! SOLOMON'S CROWN?! How in the goddamn shit-fucking-shit did Unarin get the Crown?? Is that why it randomly disappeared? I thought Solomon sent himself away!"

"Maybe... a Psion... stole it from you?" Spirit-Phoebe asks, shrugging heavily. "I wasn't there, so I can only guess."

"Yeah... perhaps it was a Psion..." Jason mutters, clearly unconvinced. "Either way, I have to get the Crown back, and Excalibur, too. They're too dangerous to remain in enemy hands."

The next subject of War Provisions doesn't interest the Wordsmith and his cohorts much, but it does contextualize to them the value of the 100 provisions Kordonis offered. Dosena also mentions Excalibur, confirming its presence inside some unspecified 'secure vaults,' but this doesn't surprise Jason given what Raphael told him.

Unarin then discusses how to deal with Jason. When he explains his plans, Jason frowns deeply.

"I see. So he *doesn't* want to fairly parley with me after all. He wants to control me. And this bit about Changelings... he really think he can so easily infiltrate *my* civilization? I won't let him."

"We'll have to come up with ways to detect Changelings." Spirit-Phoebe says. "But I don't know anything about them, so we'll have to capture a few and experiment on them to find out how they differ from humans."

"Not just humans," Physical-Phoebe says. "Monsters and demons too. It seems Changelings can shift their appearances to all sorts of different forms. I'll bet Samantha would know more about how their transformations work, so we can ask her to tell us about them."

"Good idea."

When Unarin concludes the assembly speech and turns to the audience to ask questions, more tidbits emerge regarding the capabilities of Jason's potential enemies.

"It seems the mightiest Psion, Second Founder Dosena, never leaves Volgarius." Jason muses. "But that also means she'll be their final defense. I wonder how strong she is compared to the Cherubiim, let alone me."

"This 'Order to Chaos' book sounds interesting." Spirit-Phoebe chirps. "Look at how Unarin evaluates our entire society! He even gleans details that go well beyond the surface! I never knew architecture could have such an interesting side to it!"

"I'd like to get my hands on that tome." Physical-Phoebe adds. "It sounds like an interesting read, at the least."

Blinker pokes Phoebe's cheek. "No problem! Miss Marie thought you'd want to read it, so she included a copy of Order to Chaos along with the recording. It's really easy to find, since it's a mainstay and required reading for all Volgrim. It's kind of like... like..."

"Like their Bible?" Jason asks.

"Yeah!" Blinker exclaims. "It's like a holy book! The Volgrim revere their First Founder more than you'd find comfortable."

"Great." Jason says. "I'm sure both Phobes will love it. I'll pass, though. I've got more important things to worry about."

He pauses.

"...Kind of rude to say I'm lazy, though. I mean, he's not wrong, but damn. Talk about slapping a man right in his ego."

"What's the matter?" Physical-Phoebe asks, poking her husband's ribs teasingly. "Are you mad the big mean Volgrim Founder called you out? You'll just have to work harder to break that image!"

The Wordsmith smiles and rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I know."

The recording concludes, and the group of four find themselves at a momentary loss for words. The revelations contained within shock them to their cores, making them re-evaluate the situation significantly.

"Solomon's Crown... Excalibur... Changelings... and the Kolvaxians, too." Jason says, trying not to sound too worn-out. "I knew the Volgrim wouldn't be easy to deal with, but this is worse than I expected."

"Well, at least you have advance warning," Blinker says with a shrug. She kicks her feet back and forth while sitting on Phoebe's shoulder, as if splashing them in a small pond of water. "Don't say I never help you out."

"I'd never say that." Jason chuckles. "You've helped me out more than I deserve. It's me who owes you."

Spirit-Phoebe coughs.

"Say, um. Jason? Other-Phoebe? While we're all here, there's something I've been wanting to talk about."

"Yeah?" Jason asks, turning to his soul-wife's projection. "Is something eating at you?"

"Well. Yes, actually." She answers. "It's... it's just... I want a new name."

"You do?" Physical-Phoebe asks. "Why?"

"I think you know why." Spirit-Phoebe says. "It's confusing having there be two of us. And, well, Hope has a different name from Jason, right? I'd like a name of my own. We're similar to each other, yes... but I feel as if I've started to become my own person, recently. I just want a new name, that's all. I want to feel distinct from you."

Jason listens attentively. "That's totally fine. You can change your name, no problem. What would you like to go by?"

Spirit-Phoebe pauses.

"I've... given it some thought. I don't want my name to be as big of a change as Hope's is compared to yours. I just want to be a *little* different. How about... Daphne? Or Fiona? Or maybe even Penny?"

"Daphne sounds good." Jason says. "It'll take some getting used to, but I like it."

"I like Penny!" Blinker says. "That's a heckin' cute name!"

"Fiona doesn't sound too different from Phoebe." Physical-Phoebe says. "Yet it also sounds distinct."

"Which one are you leaning toward most?" Jason asks.

His mind-wife chuckles nervously. "Well, uh, I was leaning toward Fiona, personally. Is it weird if I just agree with my other self?"

"Not at all." Jason answers. "I like Fiona. That's a great name, and it fits you well!"

"Fiona." Phoebe repeats, looking at her spirit-self. "Yeah. I can get behind that."

"I liked Penny more." Blinker complains. "But hey! Maybe I'll name one of my baby crocs Penny instead!"

Blinker rubs her belly, smiling warmly at the thought of her future children.

"That's a great idea." Fiona says. "Make sure you bring your kids to see us when you finally pop them out. I'll be their aunt! Me and... and Phoebe both!"

"Yeah. Me and Fiona!" Phoebe says, repeating her spirit-self's name to get a better 'taste' for it. "We'll both be their aunts!"

Jason laughs. "Well, at least we've gotten all that resolved. Thanks for bringing the recording by, Blinker. You should probably head back to Marie's laboratory, soon. I have to prep for the demon invasion."

Blinker's smile instantly evaporates. "What?! Another demon invasion? What are you talking about, Word-man?!"

Jason smacks his forehead. "Oh, yeah. I didn't tell you. Uhh... the demons are probably going to attack Tarus II again, but this time, all of the Hidden Emperors will join the attack. So, I'm currently planning our defenses out so they'll fail."

"That's terrible!" Blinker gasps. "Haven't they hurt you enough? I won't forgive them! I HATE demons!!"

The fairy's expression turns vicious. For a brief moment, a flash of absolute bloodthirstiness washes across Blinker's face as countless suppressed emotions rush to the surface.

"Calm down, calm down." Phoebe says, raising a finger to touch Blinker's tiny arm. "Don't get angry. It won't be good for your babies. Jason and I will take care of the demons, this time. We have a new weapon, after all."

"I can't go back to Marie, not now!" Blinker snarls. "Those demon-bastards... they took Kar from me! I need to pay them back tenfold! Especially Mephisto, that absolute little shithead!"

"You and me both." Jason says with a nod. "I'll bet the Battle Brothers are still alive, too. Mephisto probably reanimated their bodies. I'll make sure to crush them for you and deliver their heads on platters."

Blinker crosses her arms. She flies into the air, rising off Phoebe's shoulder to hover between the Wordsmith and his wife.

"No need! I'm joining you! I'll kill the rat bastards myself!"

"Uhh..." Jason says, frowning at the fairy. "You're pregnant. You shouldn't do anything that will risk your children's lives."

"I'm barely pregnant." Blinker retorts. "I'm not at a point where I can't kick some demon butt! Besides. How will I be able to look Kar's babies in their cute little eyes if I let their father's killer roam free? Zamiel's days are numbered, and so are Mephisto's!"

Jason glances at Fiona, then Phoebe. Both of his wives shrug at him.

"I think it's fine." Fiona says. "Blinker, you can stay, but don't go charging into battle. This isn't the same as the Stormbringer Attack. We're not fighting one or two strong enemies, but dozens. I don't even want to imagine what would happen if two or more Emperors ganged up on you."

Blinker's enthusiasm deflates visibly.

"Well... alright. I'll just have to be careful, then. But Word-man, how exactly are you gonna deal with a bunch of Emperors? We barely made it when only Ose was attacking us!"

All three women turn to look at Jason. He shrugs nonchalantly.

"Killing all those Emperors is probably impossible, even for me. If I rely on my new weapon's energy, I might be able to smite them all dead, but that would drain its reserves, possibly until they run dry. I can't afford to waste mana like that, not with the Volgrim breathing down my neck. Even though that's the case, there is another option."

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "And that would be?"

"Scaring the absolute *shit* out of the Hidden Emperors." Jason says, with a smile. "Confessor Vulpanix assured the demons I don't possess Excalibur, and that is true. However, based on what I've heard, the demons don't... *trust* the Volgrim. They certainly don't *like* them. All it will take is one little seed of doubt and their bravado will come crumbling down..."

Jason cracks his neck. He holds out his hands, face-up.

"Sword."

In the air before him, Jason's Word of Power conjures a perfect-looking replica of Excalibur. The blade falls a few inches and lands atop his palms with a *plop*.

Fiona cocks her head. "A fake Excalibur?"

"Sure." Jason says. "The thing about war is it's not always about what you have, but what your opponent *thinks* you have. Solomon may have slapped me in the face when he left, but he was a good teacher. Sun Tzu once said that all warfare is based on deception, and to that, I agree."

Jason utters additional Words of Power. "**Strengthen. Reinforce. Reinforce. Sharpen. Attune. Crystallize...**"

Over the next several minutes, Jason alters the simple-looking blade in his hands to the point that all the magically sensitive creatures in and around the Core turn in his direction, surprised by the powerful emanation of holy energy coming from the object in his hands.

Jason not only strengthens the blade until it becomes nearly as durable as Living Moldanium, but he makes it ultra-sharp, to the extent it will never dull, no matter how many limbs it severs or however many blunted surfaces it strikes. Just like he once did with Dellfingler, Jason creates a blade capable of cutting nearly anything.

Additionally, Jason attunes the blade so that it emanates Camael's Cube's aura, but with a mana-flavor identical to that of Excalibur!

"It's nowhere near as powerful as Excalibur, nor does it have the heroic blade's powers." Jason says with a smile. "But it doesn't have to, because I'll pair it with a certain Black Hole Construct."

"A what?" Blinker asks.

"I'll let you meet him later." Jason replies. "For now, just trust me. This isn't my only measure, but it will absolutely prove among the most effective. If there's one thing Solomon made clear to me over the years, it's that no Hero has inspired as much terror and as many sleepless nights as the famous Hero-King. The demons have been sleeping a little too easy lately, so I think it's time we reawaken their dormant nightmares. Don't you?"

Blinker nods excitedly. "Heck yes! Scare those demons, Word-man!"

Fiona exhales. "And here I once thought you were a little slow on the uptake, Jason. Have you been holding back, all this time?"

"I have." He replies. "I never wanted to be the guy who stepped up to the plate and took control, but I was just denying reality. Now I know what has to be done. The demons

will suffer for killing my friends and family."

He looks at Blinker.

"My little girl, and your husband. We'll make them pay."

The Monster Queen nods.

"Yeah. We will."

Part 348: Changelings

Tarus II, inside a makeshift community center where people sit indoors to wind down after a long day.

Hundreds of tables sit inside the large, dome-roofed building, while lightbulbs powered by the internal mana and energy of the patrons illuminate the ground below. The air itself glows faintly blue due to the magically-powered illumination, giving everything and everyone a vaguely cyan tint. A thrown-together bar with whatever reserves the local community could pick back up following Beelzebub's detonation passes out limited quantities of alcohol to the troops and civilians enjoying their downtime.

At one of the many tables, a trio of goblins sits on elevated chairs suitable for their species, while two male humans sit on the same side as each other. The married couple aren't people of any notable reputation, but simply a couple of troopers who survived the many tragedies of the past several weeks without either of them dying.

"...was crazy. I've never seen monsters like them before." One of the men, Darrel, says. He leans back heavily in his chair, spreads his legs out under the table, and lets his arms hang off the sides of his chair. Clearly tired from a long day on the job, he doesn't seem to have much energy left. "Then Po tells me they weren't monsters, but aliens! Yeah man, aliens! Crazy shit."

Po smiles at his husband and nods. "Yeap. That's the rumor going around the Core, anyway. My gal-friend Sally said lots of people saw the Wordsmith and his wife watching some video in the Core. Sally was too busy to catch the whole thing, but apparently she heard something about a 'plague' and a 'Volgran.' We're hoping the Wordsmith passes down more details. He didn't seem to give privacy much thought, after all."

Across from the two men, one of the goblins, a little fellow with a refined and elegant manner, politely sips on a red-colored mango-like fruit drink, allowing its sweet waters to slowly parch his thirst. This goblin, Grima, is none other than one of the three Changelings who recently returned to the Core.

"'Volgran,' you say?" Grima asks. "Oh, how scary. I hadn't heard anything about this. I just got back today. I thought after that terrible demon attack, we could use more... 'friends' to help clean up."

"YEAH!" One of the other goblins yells, slapping the table. "Me and Grima go way back! We both real good litter-mates!"

The other goblin, sitting across from him, between Grima and the humans, also flashes a stupid grin. "We hears fleshies needs digging! We supers good at digging! Help build, get paid in meats!"

Po chuckles. "Well, things are pretty bad right now. We can use all the help we can get. You'll find that goblins are quite appreciated around here. I hear Jason is gonna start digging more underground installations, which will be safer for people to evacuate to if the demons attack again."

"Speaking of the demons," Darrel interjects, "did you hear about that new development? Corporal Hurent mentioned it to one of her friends in passing. Apparently, the Hero has some new secret superweapon. That's how he managed to kill the Duke of Pain! The demons would have to be braindead to attack us again!"

Grima continues to casually sip his drink.

"A superweapon? I don't care much for those matters. I only wish to help out at the hospital and ensure wounded soldiers receive the treatment they need. But, if that 'superweapon' can prevent another tragedy, it would ease my worries. I nearly died during Beelzebub's attack, after all."

Darrel's expression turns ugly. "Yeah. A lot of people died. That piece of shit killed so many innocents, so many mothers, fathers, and even their children. Demons are scumbags, plain and simple."

"Not the ones that join us, though." Po says, quickly speaking in his husband's place. "The Second Emperor of demonkind abandoned her people to help us. I hear she killed a hundred thousand of our enemies during the Stormbringer Attack. And don't forget others like that Kiari gal. She's used her bugs to help us rescue lots of trapped civilians, people who got buried under rubble we'd never have found otherwise."

"Right, right, not the 'good' demons." Darrel says with a nod. "But you done know what I mean. Somethin' like ninety-nine percent of all demons are absolute pieces of shit. If we exterminated them, I wouldn't bat an eye!"

Grima shoots a quick, surreptitious glance at the other two goblins, but otherwise keeps his body language as casual as possible.

"I am pleased that distinguished soldiers such as you protect us all." Grima says. "I will put your drinks on my... 'tab.' If I do not respect the ones protecting us all every day, I will experience a great sorrow in my heart."

"Thanks, Grimmy." Po says, flashing the goblin a thumbs up. "But don't look down on yourself. Lots of my buddies would have died during Stormbringer if it wasn't for you helping keep the hospital a smooth-running operation. Damn shame about those bloody Shades that got loose... fucking bastards. Anyway, you do good work, too. We're stronger as a people when everyone does their best for the collective."

"I am wonderin', though," Darrel says, while raising an eyebrow. "Grima, you talk so fancy and all that, but most goblins ain't all prim and proper. Why are you so different?"

Grima lifts his hand in a sign of uncertainty. "I do not know the answer. I enjoy reading literature and a great many classics. I suppose I am a little different from the others of my species. Not like Duugo and Jin-Jin, here. They are quite... bog-standard."

"Pahaha! Yeah we are!" Duugo says, before swinging his arms wildly and 'accidentally' knocking his glass off the table. "Ahh! Broke cup-glass! So sorry, did not mean to hurt!"

"That's alright," Po says, while standing up and gesturing to the bartender. "Accidents happen. C'mon, Darrel. Our shift starts in six hours. We need to get some rest before then."

Darrel stands up, a bit more reluctantly than his husband. "Yeah, fair enough. Thanks for buyin' our drinks, Grima. We owe ya."

"Speak nothing of the matter." Grima says, while slowly blinking his eyes and expressing his thanks through a wave of his hand.

After the two humans walk away, the three goblins remain silent for a while. They continue to drink, then quietly shuffle out of the bar once a nearby waiter has cleaned up their broken glass.

The three of them silently walk away from the building, toward a nearby cliff on the northern side of the city, and climb over its edge until they reach a secluded area among some trees.

After arriving, the other two goblins noticeably lose some of the idiocy in their eyes. Duugo, one of the Changelings brought back by Grima to the humans, looks at his junior with an expression of blank judgment.

"Kotori. This one is displeased. You are not to refer to us by our original designations. Furthermore, your ability to blend in with the local goblin populace is sloppy and subpar. Even the most dull-witted and unobservant humans are able to see that you act too differently from other goblins."

"Agreed." Says Jin, the other Changeling. "It is a miracle your identity was not discovered before now. Since the Wordsmith has observed the Founders' broadcast, it is possible he will begin taking measures to identify Changelings. Your choice of verbiage, and your uncanny manner of speaking will draw too much scrutiny."

"This one knows he is an inferior and low-class Observer." Grima says, bowing his head meekly. "This one was originally placed upon Tarus II to observe the monster royal known as Bahamut. This one would have drawn too much scrutiny if we were to have changed our manner of speaking. For now, this one must continue to act the same as we have already."

"Agreed." Duugo says. "However, this one believes that you are a liability that will impact the Founders' goals for this world in a negative manner. This one is considering reassigning you to a lower danger mission more befitting your... status."

Kotori raises his head. "With respect! This one delivered an item of critical importance to the Founders! This one also delivered intelligence of a similar level regarding the Hero's return! This one has landed in a unique position where we can observe the former Second Emperor, Belial, without drawing attention. Our position as the hospital's head administrator gives us-"

"Enough." Duugo says, raising a palm. "You have become emotionally invested in this mission. Changelings are not to experience attachment to any of their duties. You are too young and inexperienced, not to mention untrained, to handle an Observation and Infiltration mission of this level."

"This one guided your feet into the humans' core world!" Grima says. "How can this one suffer such a humiliation? This one may be inexperienced, but we have assisted the Founders' mission greatly!"

"A fortunate set of circumstances, to be sure." Jin says, blinking its eyes slowly and deliberately. "Were any other Changeling to stand in your place, they too would have accomplished great feats."

"With respect. This one disagrees." Grima snaps. "This one has forged close bonds with the humans. They trust this one to deliver medical attention fairly and neutrally. Even just now, both of you saw what this one's clever infiltration revealed. We now know about the data-stream the Wordsmith intercepted in the Core. Would you two be able to obtain such crucial intelligence for the Founders if this one were not here?"

Duugo and Jin both glance at each other for a moment before turning back to Grima.

"In time, the two of us will also ingratiate ourselves to the humans." Duugo says. "In that respect, you are not exceptional."

"However," Jin interjects, turning its attention to Duugo, "intelligence of this nature is also time-sensitive. Were Kotori not here, we would not have been able to obtain this information until a later date. Despite their inexperience, our junior still possesses a position of relative prestige among the mud-dweller populace."

"You are correct." Duugo states. "For now, Kotori, you must continue to update us on the movements of the humans, as per your position in the hospital sector. This one will attempt to gain access to more sensitive areas, while Senior Infiltrator Jin will blend in with the civilian populace to learn the general sentiment of the humans."

Kotori blinks twice. "The general sentiment?"

"Affirmative." Duugo says. "The Founders have bequeathed this Senior Observer of the Seventh Class with an essential mission. We are not only to gather intelligence on the humans, but to undermine and destabilize their society at all possible points of entry. This one will gather additional Changelings over time, as per Founder Treyza's explicit orders."

"You have spoken to Founder Treyza?" Kotori asks, trying to hide their emotional response. "This one has never spoken to a Founder directly... only the executive assistants."

"You are too inexperienced to warrant a visit with the Founders." Duugo coolly says. "This one is already an experienced Observer, as is Observer Jin. The two of us were both stationed on the ancient world of Earth, long before your cells became viable for a spawning pod."

Duugo's relatively mild disposition shifts slightly as it momentarily reminisces on the glory it experienced during the Energy Wars.

"Observer Jin and this one learned countless truths regarding the nature of the Earth's mud-dwelling species. We are both adaptable enough to blend in with any populace, as are many other well-known and respected Seventh and Eighth-class Changelings. Perhaps someday, you too will obtain some renown."

Kotori lowers its head. "This one contemplates. This one comprehends."

Duugo raises its hand flippantly.

"Let us split apart. Kotori. You will continue to remain in the hospital district. Jin and this one will go our separate ways. Humans are terrible at telling Goblins apart. To a human, creatures of other species always look similar to one another, but if we remain together in a group of three, they will be able to identify us more easily."

"Kotori acts in an especially eye-catching manner." Jin says, nodding along to Duugo's words. "The humans will be more likely to catch us if they notice us always traveling with Kotori."

"One last thing." Duugo adds, before reaching into the pocket of their tattered, raggedy clothing. The Changeling pulls out a tiny, blackened marble. "Kotori. You will swallow this device."

The junior Changeling looks at its seniors with confusion. "This is... a self-immolation nanite vessel?"

"Affirmative." Duugo says. "If the humans discover you due to your inexperience and dramatic manner of speaking, you must activate it without hesitation. It will annihilate your body down to its last atom, preventing them from uncovering any essential truths about your Changeling biology. Typically, these are only given to Apprentice Observers and above, but since your mission was previously not of critical importance to the Volgrim as a whole, you were not required to possess one. Times have changed."

"But... this one is still only an Initiate... a Junior..." Kotori says, while cautiously taking the marble from his senior's fingers.

"If you wish to stay on this mission, you must swallow the SIN-V." Duugo says. "Senior Observer Jin and this one have both swallowed ours. If you do not comply, we will forcibly end your assignment here."

"Of course. This one contemplates, and this one comprehends." Kotori says, before leaning its head back and swallowing the orb in one smooth motion.

"Excellent. We will all take our leave, now." Duugo says, before turning around and climbing the sheer cliffside without fear. "Junior Observer. Do not allow the humans to uncover your identity. If they do, it will spell a crisis for our Founders."

"Yes, Senior Observer." Kotori says, while offering a bow.

Jason, Fiona, and Blinker leave Phoebe behind in the Core to handle the important organizational matters demanding her attention. As humanity's premier innovator and inventor, her input is always necessary for major logistical decisions.

But for the other three, and in particular, Blinker, they mostly stick to dealing with organizational details on Tarus II.

The Wordsmith teleports himself, his mind-wife, and Blinker back to the city center. When they arrive, he immediately beelines for the hospital district to look for Belial.

"Hey, Sammy!" Fiona calls out when they finally locate the succubus. "Guess what? I changed my name!"

She quickly fills Belial in on the details, to which the former Second Emperor appears totally fine with.

"Great! New name! I was thinking it was getting awkward having two Phobes around," Belial says, while nudging Jason playfully. "You should have given her a better name from the start."

"For the record," Blinker interrupts, holding up a finger. "I still like Penny more! I'm gonna keep calling her Penny, because she's as cute as a dime!"

"Hmm. Penny is a cute name too," Belial says, winking at Fiona. "But I'll stick with Fiona. Anyway, what's up? Don't tell me you guys came all the way here just for this?"

Fiona shakes her head. "Not quite. We actually found out something important."

The four of them walk inside a small hospital administrative hut, one currently empty due to Grima having a day off. Little bits of technology, broken T-REX's, and other assorted junk sit in piles. Jason illuminates the room with his Wordsmithing, then recounts the entire recording he watched to Belial. The more he talks of the Volgrim's plans, the quieter she becomes.

"Changelings, huh?" Belial mutters. "Hmm. I am familiar with their handiwork. Unfortunately, during the Energy Wars, we never got to learn how exactly they change their forms. What I do know is that their shapeshifting abilities are nowhere near as convenient as mine."

"What do you mean?" Jason asks.

"Well, I can change my body's appearance in seconds. I can mimic voices, physical attributes, all sorts of things. I'm not a mind-reader, and by no means a perfect infiltrator or anything. I can still slip-up and reveal my false identity by saying the wrong thing or acting uncharacteristically. However, one thing I know for certain is that Changelings *cannot* change their appearances at will. They have some sort of... long-term changing function."

"Like, maybe they need to go dormant for a period of time?" Fiona asks. "Or perhaps they have some technology or tool that changes how they look?"

"Something like that..." Belial reluctantly says. "One big advantage they have over my abilities is that their bodies fully 'become' that of their target. If you were to knock me out and cut me open while I was mimicking Jason, you'd immediately know I was a demon. My demonic physiology doesn't change internally. A careful probe could 'out' me. But that's not the case with Changelings. They can fundamentally transform into biologically identical replicants of a target species."

"Wait!" Blinker interjects. "Does that mean if they copied you, they could copy your powers too?"

"No, no. Certainly not." Belial says, shaking her head. "Changelings can mimic my appearance, my voice, my mannerisms, and all of my other features quite well. But magical powers? Super-abilities? Not a chance. For this reason, Changelings never attempt to mimic demon or monsters of a magical nature."

Jason's gaze turns sharp. "So what you're saying is they tend to become Humans, Minotaurs, Goblins, Orcs, and other monsters lacking magical abilities?"

"Yes. Exactly." Belial nods.

"But..." Fiona says, sighing. "There are well over a million humans and monsters already among our people. We might be able to filter by those who came to visit us after the Founders' broadcast, but even so, their biology is going to be difficult to tell apart."

"Not just those who came after," Jason says with a warning tone. "Those who came *before*, too. I bet Unarin would have sent Changelings here as soon as possible, in advance of the broadcast. Samantha, didn't you say once that the Volgrim are ageless and immortal? They don't die?"

The succubus nods. "That's right. The same is true of Changelings. There were countless Changelings among the humans and monsters of Earth. No doubt, some of them are extremely adept at camouflaging themselves to blend in with native populaces. Only Novices and Juniors would stick out like sore thumbs."

Jason glances around Grima's office absentmindedly.

"Hmm. It's going to be tough tracking them down. If we can just find one Changeling, I can use my Wordsmithing to scour for any discrepancies in their biology. Fiona can make a magical tool that will automatically weed out every Changeling in our midst."

Fiona throws up her hands. "Yeah, but finding the first one is going to be the hardest part! I say for now we focus on the Lazarus Tower. It won't take much longer before we can complete it. I've even designed a new system for it that you'll find incredible."

"You did?" Jason asks, bewildered. "When did you have the time to do that?"

"Jason... I sit in your Mind Realm all day long." Fiona says, staring at him bluntly. "I have more time than you'd ever imagine. Plus, when you sleep at night, all your excess mental energy boosts my thinking speed. And I never need sleep either, so... that helps a lot."

Jason blushes. "Ah. Right. My bad..."

Blinker flies off Jason's shoulder.

"Well, until the demons get here, I can help out a bit! I'll go fly around and see if I can catch anyone acting suspicious! With my fairy magic, I'll be totally invisible, just you watch!"

Jason rubs his chin. "That's a good idea. Catching someone when they think they're being sneaky... it's the oldest trick in the book. Who needs a spy camera when you have an illusionist fairy helper?"

Blinker gives Jason a cute little salute, then teleports away, hiding herself from the outside world.

After she departs, Jason glances at Belial.

"I know you were thinking of heading into Hell to do some spying, but until I handle the Hidden Emperors, I'd like it if you could stay on Tarus II. Once I deal with them, you can leave."

"Also," Fiona says, "Sammy, it would be great if you could help me out a little with Cassiel. And by 'me' I mean my physical self, Phoebe."

"Why do you need my help?" Belial asks. "I doubt she'll like me, since I'm a demon and all..."

"Well, Phoebe is always busy, and so am I." Fiona explains. "Jason's not a great choice either, since he's a man. We do have the Archangels, but they won't be sticking around on a permanent basis. If you transform into Phoebe, you can get a little comfier with Cassiel, maybe draw her out of her shell. Besides, you're the most intimately familiar with me, so you probably won't draw any suspicion. You just need to get Cassiel acclimated back into greater society."

Belial chews her lower lip. "I... I don't know. I don't particularly detest angels, but I won't say I have any good feelings toward them. And the Archangels, especially.. I know they loathe me."

"By the way," Jason says, looking at Belial intently. "Does the name 'Daughter of Heaven' mean anything to you?"

"Daughter of Heaven?!" Belial asks, a flicker of shock crossing her face. "How do you know that name?"

"Um. It's... apparently Cassiel's identity." Jason answers, wincing when he observes Belial's pupils dilate in horror. "She's also known as-"

"Blood Reaper!" Belial gasps! "The Child of the Light! You're telling me... *she* is the angel we rescued? The mightiest of the Lazarites? Slayer of Emperor Red Raven?!"

"Well. Yeah." Jason grunts. "Is... is she that scary?"

"Scary?! She was a terrifying existence!" Belial exclaims, before hurriedly lowering her voice. "Aside from the Archangels, not a single angel was feared more than Blood Reaper! How on Earth can Cassiel be the Blood Reaper?! She should be dead!"

"I don't know." Jason answers. "But she's alive now. If you don't want to speak to her, I'll understand."

"Do you know her real name?" Fiona asks.

Belial slowly shakes her head. "...No. I don't think any demon does. All we know is that she appeared at some point around the year 1700 and began slaughtering demons en-masse. We never knew where she came from, what her origins were, or even how she looked. She always wore shining golden armor. Her aura was... it was terrifying. I never fought her myself, but Satan did."

"Did he win or lose?" Jason asks.

"He won. Of course. She was no match for the First Emperor. But then again, how could any Lazarite possibly beat Satan's Ultimate Offense and Defense? She did her part though, and held him back long enough for Camael to smite a different Emperor dead. Satan was... not happy about that."

Belial sags into a small, goblin-sized chair. Her body seems to become exhausted merely from contemplating these past events.

"The Blood Reaper... to think she was such a young, beautiful looking woman. Fair white hair, a face no parent could deny... she was the vicious and bloodthirsty menace that terrorized demonkind. And look at her now. She's not even a shadow of her former self."

The succubus hesitates.

"It's... tragic. To think such a figure would fall to such a state. I can only imagine what Gressil did to her."

"I'd rather not." Fiona mumbles. "Poor thing."

Several seconds pass while Belial weighs Jason's request in her mind.

"...Alright. I'll do it. I'll try to help... Cassiel... reintegrate. I don't think I'll mimic Phoebe, though. That simply feels wrong."

Belial stands up. She shifts her skin color from red to black, recedes her horns, and changes her hair color. After also changing her clothes and other features, she becomes a conventionally attractive dark-skinned human woman with a face only somewhat different from her normal appearance.

Jason smiles. "Cute."

Fiona nods absentmindedly. "Yeah... very cute... cute as heck."

"Stop. You'll make me blush." Belial says. "When you see me like this, you can call me Lily. It's the name of a... friend of mine."

Jason blinks. "A friend named Lily? Err, does she have dark skin too?"

Belial raises an eyebrow. "Yes. Why?"

"And does she live on Hell Harbor?" Jason asks.

"She *does*..." Belial mutters. "Don't tell me you met her?"

Jason shoots a dirty glance at Fiona.

"Yeah... you could say that."

Fiona sticks her tongue out.

"Ehehe... oops. She was very friendly!"

"I'll bet she was." Belial says with a chuckle.

Part 349: Hope Awakens

Annette sits beside Hope's bed, quietly watching over the Wordsmith while he sleeps. The hours stretch into days, and visitors come and go, but aside from eating food delivered to her by various medical staff and occasionally saying hello to her sister when Debra drops by, she remains content to sit beside the man she loves.

Eventually, a week after his return, the Wordsmith finally awakens from his coma.

Hope's eyes flutter open. He remains motionless, dazed and confused by his surroundings. Jason's clone stares at the dim ceiling-mounted lights, then slowly moves his eyes around as he tries to gather his wits.

Hope swallows heavily, but fails to make a sound, due to his dry, parched throat. An intense thirst bubbles up in his brain, making him feel like a wild animal that has choked on desert dirt for months.

He lolls his head to the right, then to the left, where his heart skips a beat. He finds 'Amelia' sitting beside his bed, reading a book. When she notices Hope's head moving ever so slightly, Amelia nearly jumps out of her skin. She drops the book, stands up, and turns to face him.

"Hope! Hope... you're awake! How are you feeling?"

The Wordsmith blinks a few times. He opens his mouth and licks his dried lips.

"Oh! You must be thirsty. Here, one second..."

Amelia grabs a plastic water bottle from a set of ten beside her chair. She props Hope's head up, and helps him greedily gulp and choke the water down until it sufficiently wets his palate.

"Cough... cough... where am... I?"

Amelia lays Hope's head back against his pillow, then pulls up her chair so she can sit facing his bed.

"Well. A lot happened, Hope. A lot. Um. We rescued you... from... from Gressil's prison..."

The mere mention of Gressil's name makes terror explode in the Wordsmith's eyes. A jolt of electric pain fires from his heart, making him jerk abruptly in bed and whip his eyes around.

"No.. no.. no... not him! Not..."

Hope raises his arms to swat at the air, but his movements appear clunky and uncoordinated. He abruptly slaps his own face, startling himself and making his adrenaline skyrocket even further.

Gently, Amelia presses on the Wordsmith's arms and holds them in place.

"Calm down, Hope. Nobody's going to hurt you. I'm here, now. Amelia's here. Remember me? I love you. I love you so much... listen to my voice..."

After several minutes, Amelia manages to somewhat calm Hope down. Sweat drips off his face as he tries to comprehend his circumstances.

"Arms... my arms... gone? Not gone? What- where did they go? Why they are back againnn...?"

He slurs his words, suffering from disorientation. But even so, Amelia quietly listens to him and explains what happens.

As more time passes, she manages to fully explain the situation to Hope. He calms down more and more as he realizes his current situation is not, in fact, a trick designed by Gressil to lower his defenses. Even so, the phantom memory of horrible pain wracks his mind, making him mentally flash-back to those horrible moments, such as when Gressil took a sharp knife, cut into his shoulder...

"Ahh! It hurts! It hurts!" Hope screams, grabbing his left shoulder. He touches it all over, checking to make sure his arm is still attached. "He cut it! He cut it off! Why did he do that? WHY?!"

"Jason grew it back." Amelia whispers. "He... he fixed you up, Hope. You're fine now. Everyone's here for you."

"I'mnotfine!" Hope mumbles loudly, slurring his words again. He blinks heavily as dizziness wracks his mind. "Itallhurts... ribs... throat... legs... ahh! AHH! My legs! My LEGS!"

"We grew those back, too..." Amelia says, fighting back tears. "You're fine now, Hope. You're okay. You're alright. Nobody's going to hurt you again."

For the next half-hour, Hope rants and raves, still not sure if he's experiencing another one of his delusions. Compared to the physical torture inflicted upon him by Gressil, the prison-warden's mental means proved far, far more long-lasting and sinister.

When he calms down again, Amelia returns to explaining what happened. She conveys not only how Hope was rescued, but all of the events he missed. Hope discovers, to his horror, that while Gressil was torturing him, humanity lost millions of people during the Stormbringer Attack. Jason's daughter died. Kar died. Neil was taken prisoner. Beelzebub self-detonated, killing a million people in one massive thermonuclear attack.

Then he learns about what transpired after. Not only the attack on Hell Harbor, but the arrival of the Archangels, the transformation of the Cherubiim, and its battle against the Volgrim.

"The Volgrim... they're involved, now?" Hope asks.

"Yes. I heard from Jason yesterday. He got a visit from someone named 'Kordonis.' Also, the Demon Emperors are planning a second big attack, but Jason seems confident he can stop them."

Hope grits his teeth. "Stop them?! Jason is worthless! He couldn't save anybody! Not even Kar! Kar was my BEST FRIEND!"

Amelia winces.

"Jason... is different now. More like you. Losing Daisy... it changed something in him. You'll understand, soon. Oh, and you should probably know..."

She hesitates.

"Everyone knows my real identity now. They know I'm not 'Amelia.' They know I'm really Annette."

Hope blinks twice.

"Annette... wait, you remember, too? But... but I thought the memory-blockers..."

Annette smiles at Hope.

"It's not your fault. Gressil's anti-magic energy... It erased your mental blocks. But don't worry. I'm fine the way things are, now. I'm Amelia too, you know? And if you want me to be Amelia again, you can just block my memories once more."

The Wordsmith sags against his pillow.

"So that's why you've been calling me 'Hope.' We agreed that you would always call me Jason, but I overlooked... I'm sorry. I failed you, and everyone else. And... and Gressil... he..."

"Let's not talk about that monster." Amelia says, her smile tinged with pain. "He won't hurt you ever again. Look. Jason made you a... friend?"

Amelia points toward the far corner of the room, parallel to Hope's headboard. When he turns his head to his right and follow her finger, he nearly jumps out of his skin! In the dimly lit room, a man in shining armor stands at attention, his brilliant blonde hair, light blue eyes, and fair skin giving him a heroic aura unlike any other.

Hope nearly chokes on his own spit. "K-King Arthur?!"

"A construct. Not a reanimated body." Amelia clarifies. "Jason made him from... well, I don't know, exactly. He's not a human. Think of him like a robot or something. He doesn't have a soul. He's just something Jason made to protect you."

The surprise of seeing a guy creepily standing in the corner gives way to a different set of indescribable emotions. Hope examines King Arthur closely, noticing that he doesn't wear any specific facial expression, but instead gazes at the opposite corner blankly.

"A construct. Right. That's... okay. And why is he here?"

"To protect you." Amelia explains. "I don't know how strong this fake Arthur is, but Jason claims he can fight Dukes and even Emperors."

She pauses.

"I fought Arthur, you know. Well, not me, but Amelia. Since I possess her memories, I remember the battle. She ultimately lost to him, but after he died, she dug up his body and enslaved it with her draconic magic. That's how she was able to bring him out to fight the Archdemon on Polaris."

Hope licks his dried lips. "More water, please."

After Annette passes Hope another bottle of water, he spends a minute chugging it down, finishing off every last drop. When he finishes, Hope casually drops the bottle off the side of his bed. He lifts his right hand to stare at his regrown fingers, while innumerable dark thoughts cloud his mind.

"I have to tell everyone you've awoken." Annette says. "They asked me to alert them the instant you woke up, but, well... I wanted to spend some time with you alone, first."

"Thank you." Hope says, his voice a whisper. He turns to Annette to smile tenderly at her. "I... I don't think I could have faced the others so soon. I'd rather spend time with you... not Jason."

"I know." She replies, reaching out to grasp his hand. "I'm just glad you're okay. You're still alive. We can work through what happened together."

He nods.

"Amel- Annette. I... I don't want us to have to lie to each other, anymore. So, after this, why don't we just change you back to your original self? I love you, not Amelia. I'm sorry you had to go along with my selfish desires, six years ago. It was thoughtless of me to force you into that position."

"You didn't force me." Annette answers. "I offered. I wanted you to be happy. Besides... I'm just an ordinary woman. It's expected that a plain Jane like me wouldn't catch your interest. The Black Queen is so much more... fun. She's so much cooler than I ever was. I don't want to go back to being an ordinary woman again."

"That's not true." Hope counters. "Amelia was never the person I thought she was. When it was just Jason, before I existed, she cut open his throat and left him an invalid. Compared to her, you're so much more compassionate. I love *you*, Annette. Not Amelia."

"But... but you're wrong!" Annette protests. "I may be Annette, but I'm Amelia too! I have all of her memories. I'm not purely one or the other. And I wouldn't want you to take her memories from me, either."

Listening to the force behind her words, Hope creases his brow, but ultimately relents.

"...Alright. But I won't lock away your memories again. And I'll call you Annette, instead. Is that fine?"

"Yes. I'd like that." Annette says, with a smile.

The two of them spend a few hours catching up, reminiscing on their lives spent together.

Eventually, Annette pulls away.

"It's time. I need to tell the others you've woken up."

Hope sighs.

"Okay. Just do it. Let's get this over with."

"Hey..." Annette whispers, gently touching his arm. "Give Jason a chance. I know you hate him more than life itself... but he *has* changed, and for the better. He lost his little girl. He lost his best friend. I feel when I look at him that his eyes have become... sharper. Like yours."

The Wordsmith snorts. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Annette stands up, walks across the room, and touches a button on the wall, pre-installed for her convenience. She walks back over and sits down. Fewer than five minutes pass before the door to the hut opens and Jason walks in, flanked by Phoebe, Belial, and Blinker.

"Hope! Hope, you're awake!" Phoebe exclaims, beaming a sunshine-smile at him. Her smile deflates after she remembers his condition. "H-how are you feeling? Are you doing okay?"

It takes Hope a few moments to respond.

"Yes. I... I think I am. Annette explained everything to me. I know you all rescued me from... from the prison."

Annette smiles guiltily. "I told Hope about what happened to spare you the trouble. I also caught him up on all the current events. He knows about the Volgrim and stuff."

"How long has he been awake?" Jason asks, shooting a mildly annoyed look at Annette.

"Few hours." Hope answers. "Don't blame her. I asked her not to tell anyone until I got my bearings."

Jason waves off Hope's worries. "It's fine. I'm just glad you woke up... pal."

"I'm not your pal." Hope mutters. "Don't give me that nonsense."

As Jason's group steps into the room, another figure follows in their wake, one that draws Hope's attention due to her pale, translucent body. The Wordsmith flicks his gaze away from Jason, then weakly rubs his eyes.

"Huh? Another Phoebe? Why is she a ghost?"

"Oh, hi. I'm Fiona." Fiona says, waving at Hope. "Um. Well, I'm a clone of Phoebe, sort of. A spirit-clone. Jason made me after he lost Solomon's Crown. I help him out with stuff."

"Solomon's Crown..." Hope murmurs. He doesn't say anything else, but in his heart, another bolt of shock fires through his veins.

Where did the Crown go? I'm not wearing it!

Not wanting to alert Jason to his knowledge of the Crown, Hope keeps silent. Instead, he frowns at Jason again, this time, with a look of visible disgust.

"Hold on. You *cloned* Phoebe?"

"I had to." Jason says. "Well, I guess it wasn't *absolutely* necessary, but I needed a way to protect my mind from Ose and others like her. With Solomon gone-

Hope sits up straighter in his bed. "That's beside the point! Six years ago, you cloned me but wouldn't give me a clone of Phoebe because you said it would 'feel weird,' yet when the time came, you made a clone for your own purposes! What kind of goddamned hypocrite are you?!"

Fiona and Phoebe exchange wordless glances.

"To be fair..." Phoebe says, directing her words to Jason. "You didn't even ask me before you cloned me. I'm still annoyed about that, if only a little."

"Cloning without consent." Hope snarls. "*Typical Jason.*"

The original Wordsmith makes no attempt to defend himself. He bows his head guiltily and sighs.

"Yeah. I fucked up a lot of things. Countless friends died because of me. I regret many of my past choices now... but regret won't bring the dead back."

Seeing Jason's contrite expression, Hope's anger fades. He sags back against the bed and shakes his head.

"Whatever. At least you know you did wrong."

Blinker flies over to Hope and lands on his shoulder.

"Hey, big guy. I brought you some cake!"

"Hope glances at the tiny fairy. "Cake?"

"Mhm! It's right here in my spatial storage!"

Blinker motions with her hands to make two plates, each with a slice of carrot cake, plop down on Hope's outstretched legs.

"It's a... get-well-soon cake." She says.

Hope smiles weakly.

"Blinker. I'm sorry about Kar."

"Me too." She says. "But don't worry. Kar's still alive. Mephisto has his soul... but we might be able to get him back, someday."

"Really?" Hope asks.

"Yeah." She says with a nod. "And... even if we can't... well, I don't know if you heard, but I'm pregnant. I'll carry on the crocodile lineage myself."

"Congratulations." Hope says, his smile filling with warmth. "If you'd like, I can be your children's god-uncle."

"That would be swell!" Blinker chirps.

Hope passes Annette a slice of cake. The two of them quietly begin to eat, with Hope especially enjoying the sensation of food entering his starved stomach.

"So." Hope says to Jason in between bites. "What's all this about a Volgrim recording? Annette mentioned it in passing, but didn't give me too many details."

Jason gestures to Phoebe, standing beside Belial. "Show him."

Phoebe pulls out a small drone from her pocket, one pre-loaded with the recording. The drone flies into the center of the room, then projects an image of the Founders hovering on their platforms inside a huge arena. For the first time ever, Hope gets a good look at the aliens ruling the galaxy. He continues silently eating, while Jason, Phoebe, and Belial plop down in seats Jason Wordsmithed along the edges of the room.

As Hope watches, he pays careful attention not only to the statements and truths uttered by the speech participants, but the hidden bits they only allude to.

"These... Kolvaxians." Hope murmurs. "What are they?"

Unlike Jason, who picked up bits of information through Marie and others, Hope hasn't learned much about the Volgrim or their enemy. Jason periodically pauses the video to explain to Hope all the bits he's missed out on. Belial fills him in on others, such as information regarding the Changelings.

When Dosena opens her hand to reveal a certain Heroic Artifact, Hope nearly chokes on his last bite of cake.

"Puhak! What?! Solomon's Crown?!"

Jason nods seriously to Hope's confusion, not noticing the other minute details of his clone's expression.

"Yeah. I mentioned before that I lost Solomon's Crown, right? Well, it turns out the Volgrim are the ones who stole it from me. I don't know how, why, or when they pulled it off, but I'm just as shocked as you are. We cannot let it remain in their hands."

While Jason intently gazes at the holographic image of Dosena hovering the Crown a few inches above her palm, Hope quickly suppresses his panic.

This... how did this happen? Wasn't I wearing the Crown when Gressil... but then, how did it end up in the Volgrim's grasp?! Jason thinks the Volgrim took the Crown from him, but he doesn't know Solomon used his own Wordsmithing to transfer the Crown to me!

A cold chill descends on Hope's bones.

Gressil... he must have somehow taken the Crown from me and given it to the Volgrim. But why would he do that? Or was it a coincidence? My memory is so spotty... I don't remember anything before... before he...

When Hope mentally flashes back to the time he spent trapped in Gressil's cell, a panic attack overcomes him. His joints lock up, and his teeth chatter, while he stares vacantly at his knees. The plate in his trembling hand shakes visibly, while he tries to fight off flashes of that hideous, bird-like face hovering over his own.

He cut me. He cut me. He cut me. I don't like it. I don't want it. Stop, please! Stop, it hurts! It hurts!!

"Hope!" Annette calls out, startling the Wordsmith and making him drop his plate. "Calm down. What's wrong? Do you want some water? Are you okay?"

Hope's eyes flicker around the room as he returns to reality. His panic subsides, but that cold fear settles back into his bones, making him feel as if someone evil is watching him.

"No... no... I don't want- I don't need anything. I just- the memories... I can't stop thinking... AHHH!"

The Wordsmith grabs his head and starts to rock back and forth as a second, even more visceral panic attack hits him. This time, the images of Gressil's face stab into his

eyes like pointed barbs, making him blink furiously while tears drip from his sides.

"STOP HURTING ME! STOP IT! **I DON'T WANT IT!**" Hope screams, startling everyone in the room. Jason and Phoebe both jump up, but Belial is the first to reach his side.

Before Hope can fall any further into his deluded state, Belial gently grabs his forehead and injects magical energy into his mind.

A wave of exhaustion overtakes Jason's clone. Hope's body convulses a few times before he slumps backward and Belial gently guides him into a laid-down position.

When the room goes quiet again, Belial keeps her hand placed on Hope's head, a look of sadness on her face.

"His trauma... he was trying to keep it suppressed." She mutters. "But that isn't as easy to do as it might seem. He won't be the same as he was before. We'll have to be a lot gentler with him."

She removes her hand and lifts her gaze to look at a moderately panicked Annette.

"Hope... is he going to be okay?" Annette asks.

"I don't know." Belial whispers. "I'm not a mental health expert. This is all I can do. What he needs more than anything is a therapist."

Jason steps toward the foot of the bed.

"I could erase his memories." Jason says. "I could make him forget about Gressil."

"No!" Annette says, standing up. "You mustn't! That wouldn't work, and it would only mess him up worse!"

"How so?" Jason asks.

"Hope blocked out *my* memory." Annette reminds Jason. "But Gressil undid those blocks! If you block out Hope's memory, you'll only leave him vulnerable if Gressil shows up again! You can't do that!"

Jason winces. "Right. I forgot about that. Well... I don't know what to do then, either. I feel as if I can't leave Hope like he is, now."

Phoebe loops her arm around Jason's elbow. "PTSD isn't something a person can get over easily, remember? We have to let him cope in his own way. Maybe we can find a decent therapist among the people here?"

"Right. What about... Makoto Ueda?" Jason asks. "He helped me out in the past. Has anyone seen him recently?"

The Wordsmith glances around the room, but not one person gives him an answer.

"Makoto... he was that Japanese fellow, right?" Belial asks. "Hung out with Neil a lot?"

"Yeah. Him." Jason says. "Have you seen him? I know he survived Stormbringer. I talked to him not long after."

Belial shrugs. "Haven't heard from him in at least a week. But then again, I'm pretty busy at the hospital."

"I haven't seen him, either." Phoebe mutters. "Jason, why don't you try locating him?"

The Wordsmith nods. "**Locate.**"

A few seconds later, he frowns.

"**Locate.**"

Twice, he tries to find Makoto Ueda, but both times, he fails.

"What the hell?" Jason mutters. "Is he... dead?! I didn't hear anything about this."

"Neither did I." Phoebe says. "I'll ask Hans. He always knows where Makoto is. The two of them are quite close."

Jason chews his lower lip. "Alright. In the meantime, Sam, why don't you stay here with Hope for a while? I need to finish the last bit of work on the Lazarus Tower. Let me know if he wakes up."

Belial nods. "I can do that. See you later, Jason, Phoebe, Fiona."

"I'll stay here too." Blinker says. "Bye, guys!"

"Bye."

Jason and his wives leave the other three women behind with Hope. After they depart, Blinker crinkles her nose.

"Oh. Hope spilled cake crumbs all over the place. Welp, waste not, want not!"

She uses her telekinesis to grab up all the crumbs and form them into a single super-crumbs, then she brings that crumb to her mouth to munch on it.

"Mmm. Not bad."

Annette sighs. "Blinker... you're weird."

"Yup."

Part 350: Ose's Ascension

Hell Harbor. One week after the Cherubim attack which left millions of demons dead.

Hundreds of noblesse demons, including high-ranking Barons, Dukes from most of the Seven Hells, and their Emperors as well, all gather and sit upon ornately crafted demonstone pews in a wide-open, barren field, where a makeshift obelisk and ceremonial alter has been erected. The midday sun warms the planet, but an awning offers shade for the demon elites, allowing them to avoid the heat. Not that it would cause their durable bodies any noticeable discomfort, but still, the image and prestige matters.

These nobles sit in groups, all of them sticking to their own Hells. Many demons from the First Hell gaze at the other Hells in astonishment.

"Wow..." Vepar says. "There really are other Hells that exist. You never see them all in one place like this."

The poison-spewing demoness with a melted face gazes in surprise at the other Emperors and Dukes, while beside her sits Abby, the Baron of Happy Thoughts. Abby beams smiles full of sunshine and rainbows at everyone around, while happily kicking her feet under the pew.

"Oh yeah, the other Emperors and stuff totally exist! They live secluded lives on other worlds, so us country bumpkins never get to see them! It makes sense they'd all show up though, since this is my *pwecious-wecious* Ose's big coronation ceremony! She's going to officially become the Second Emperor after receiving the First Emperor's blessing! How exciting!!"

"Big changes are coming to Hell." Vepar mutters. "Or, I guess I should say, the *First Hell*. It's so strange hearing that. Ever since I got my memories back, I'm not sure what is real and what isn't."

Abby's excited expression momentarily dulls as she spots several empty pews.

"But what a bunch of stinkers! The Hell of Lust didn't come here, and neither did the Hell of Isolation! They totally stood up my favorite girl, Ose! And even that Yama fellow, he ignored us too! What the heck, man?! This is supposed to be Ose's big day!"

Beside Abby, another Baron speaks up, a male with jewels embedded in his body.

"The Hell of Isolation generally does not care about trivial matters or those involving the other Hells," Orias says, wearing a simple set of black and brown robes. Having taken a break from his mining efforts, he decides to visit Ose's coronation as a sign of respect. "As for Yama's Hell, I know that he cares little for Ose. But the Hell of Lust..."

Orias frowns.

"It is more than a little unorthodox for the Hell of Lust not to appear here. Since they are the only Hell lacking any Emperors, they tend to keep up appearances in order to remain friendly with all the other Hells. The last thing they would ever want is to anger one of the Emperors seated here today, let alone Ose."

"Why would they skip Ose's coronation, then?" Vepar asks. "Doesn't that seem like political suicide? They should get on as good of terms with the Second Emperor as they possibly can."

The Baron of the Stars glances at Vepar's shriveled face for a moment, then looks away.

"There may be more to this matter than we can fathom."

As the Barons from the First Hell continue to talk, the lone remaining Duke from the First Hell sits by himself, clearly bored out of his mind.

"Damn..." Bael mutters. "Everyone's gone now. Agares bit the dust. Beelzebub blew up. Mephisto got promoted. Barbatos got possessed by a friggin' Archangel... heck, do I even count as a Duke? Ain't I some kinda weird half-Emperor fella?"

He crosses his arms and pouts.

"We gotta get more dudes and dudettes in the First Hell. It's gettin' all lonely here and stuff."

While Bael sulks, Abby jumps rows to sit beside him.

"Bael! I'm still so shocked to see you in Ose's body! It's a real surprise to everyone! How are you feeling?"

Bael turns his head to look at the chipper demoness, wincing due to the brilliant beams of sunshine-energy radiating from her smile. Despite the formality of the occasion,

Abby still wears a set of punk-rocker clothes, including a T-shirt with a heavy metal band logo on it, and tight little booty-shorts to show off her... *assets*.

"Heya, Abby." Bael grunts. "Long time no chat. Ain't you a succubus? Shouldn't you be with the Hell of Lust?"

"Nahhhh!" Abby chirps. "I wanna be in Ose's Hell! I'm her biggest fan, you know! Although now that her soul and body have been separated..."

Abby frowns.

"Hmm. I don't know what I like more. Ose's boobies, or her bubbly personality!"

Bael stares blankly at the Baron of Happy Thoughts. "Uhh... her bubbly... personality? We're talkin' about Ose, right?"

"Mhm! She's always so confident and sassy! I love Ose lots and lots! I wanna get all smoochy with her, lay her down, and reach between her-"

"I get the picture." Bael says, holding up his palm. "The two of you were Barons, right? Ain't you a bit late to chase after her now?"

Abby's excitement drops visibly. "Well, yeah... to be honest, I didn't realize she'd become a Duke or an Emperor, someday. I got so used to the status quo that I kept putting my feelings aside to focus on... demon business. And now she's so far ahead of me, I don't think I'll ever reach her... uuuu..."

Bael flinches as tears well up in Abby's eyes. Her demonic weakness, that of constantly wearing her emotions on her sleeve, rears up right in front of the demon least capable of handling them.

"H-hey, sister, you don't gotta cry..." Bael mumbles. He awkwardly loops an arm over Abby's shoulder while pulling her in close. "Maybe I can, uh... I dunno. Maybe I can put in a word for ya! Yeah! I can get you and some others promoted to Dukes. That's just what our Hell needs at a time like this. Then ya won't be so far from Ose after all!"

Abby's tears instantly dry up. She looks into Bael's eyes and smiles like a ten-thousand watt bulb. "Really?! You'd do that for me? Oh, Bael! You're the best! And now you're even better because you're inside Ose's cute, tight little-"

"Yeah, yeah." Bael says, rolling his eyes and shoving her away. "None of that, now."

* * *

Ose and Mephisto, along with a handful of Ose's personal attendants, sit and stand behind the ceremonial obelisk, tending to her image, carefully filing her nails, grooming her hair, and pampering her body while also adjusting her clothes. For the first time, Bael's body wears more than just some a pair of leathery black underwear. For this occasion, Ose dons a set of formidable-looking golden and demonstone platemail armor, giving her a regal appearance nobody would ever expect from someone with Bael's appearance.

Long considered the most casual of demons, Bael never once bothered wearing excess clothing, nor did he take care of his appearance. Instead, the slovenly Duke of Pain simply ate, drank, and fought whenever he wanted, paying zero attention to how others perceived him.

Ose, on the other hand, takes her appearance seriously. In order to earn the respect of her peers, she goes to great lengths to ensure she can project the most frightening and commanding aura possible, one that will cow the other Emperors with a single glance.

Mephisto, hovering beside her, chitters to himself. "Ksss. You look sssplendid, Emperor Ossse. Never did I think Bael could appear ssso frightening. You may possesssss hisss original body, but your actionsss have given it an entirely new meaning. Nobody will look down upon you at thisss coronation."

Ose, now wearing a golden crown with seven spikes pointing upward, turns to look at Mephisto.

"Keep your empty words to yourself, Mephisto. I don't need your praise. I just need you to do your job. No screw-ups. Understand?"

Mephisto chuckles. "Do not worry. I have carefully allocated the one million sssoulsss you require. My asscensssion wasss not sssomething worth fretting over, but yoursss iss sssurely one the other Hellsss will pay clossse attention to."

"Good. I'm counting on you." Ose hisses. "I'd hate to have to transform into the Balrog and beat you to death, especially in front of all these *distinguished guests*. What a humiliation that would be."

The Emperor of Legion's cocky expression cracks at the threat of facing the one enemy more than capable of breaking apart his mist-body.

"Kekeke... there iss no need for threatsss. Look. The time iss nigh. You ssshould begin the ccceremony, now."

Ose glances up at the sun, then nods. She gestures to one of her demon Lord attendants, who walks around the obelisk, takes to the stage, and begins introducing Ose through her many accomplishments during and after the Energy Wars, up to and including the battle against the Cherubiim.

As that attendant talks, Ose glances at the lone human sticking out like a sore thumb among her fellow demon attendants. A little blonde woman with pale skin who remains utterly silent, no matter who looks at or speaks to her.

"Amy." Ose snaps. "Make yourself useful. Go and fetch me some water."

Ose's 'favorite' human slave doesn't reply. She merely turns and walks away, heading toward a nearby refreshments bar with all sorts of exotic food and drink sitting at the ready.

As Amy prepares her master a drink, Mephisto snorts contemptuously. "I don't know why you've alwaysss kept that sssame sslave around, even for a hundred thousssand yearsss."

Ose shrugs. "Her identity was once quite important, among other humans. I enjoy torturing her broken little mind. Otherwise, it's none of your concern."

After Amy returns with a drink and Ose ensures her mouth is sufficiently lubricated, she tosses the glass away and turns to the stage.

A vicious smile spreads across Ose's face as her demon attendant finishes announcing her imminent arrival. The swells of demon cheers rises to a crescendo, and Ose begins to walk toward the destination of her ascension.

"Showtime."

Ose strides into view, drawing the attention of all the Emperors, Dukes, and Barons important enough to have earned an invitation to her lauded coronation. Despite fewer than a thousand spectators being present, not a single one is anyone less than a Labyrinth-shaking presence. Even among the monsters, only a few Orcs and a couple other monster royals receive invitations, chief among them being...

Ose shoots a glance toward the Hell of Calamity, where she spots Emperor Gorn's revived body, Emperor Crow, and Emperor Serena. She also spots Huul and Maltus, the

First and Second Ancient Orcs.

But beside them sits another exalted figure. Ashura, the highest ranked Orc of them all, their fabled Zhurm, a figure who once thought himself too important to attend Ose's first strategic meeting, the one which the Cherubiim crashed. Perhaps, had Ashura come, the Cherubiim might have found a worthy competitor, though secretly, Ose doubts he could have accomplished much compared to herself.

Ashura's long, black hair sprouts out of his scalp in thick clumps, each strand as hard as iron. The wildly bushy and thick mane drapes down his shoulders, his back and to his feet, giving him the appearance of a ferocious Dire Wolf. His height, at nine feet tall, puts him among the largest and most intimidating of all the spectators present. He sticks out even compared to Gorn and the other Emperors, drawing more than a few eyeballs.

As Ose approaches the stage, all attention leaves the crowd to fall on her. Audible gasps go up as several Emperors widen their eyes.

That's Ose? I didn't know Bael's body could look so... ferocious. She has turned what was once a calm, coolheaded fellow into a world-conquering king!

Her golden armor seems at first somewhat tacky and overengineered, but at the same time, it also appears completely fitting for Bael's old body. He should have always looked this way!

A few eyes turn to look at the Duke of Pain among the rows, but Bael appears less than impressed by Ose's ostentatious display.

"The heck's up with all the gold and crap?" Bael mutters. "Sheesh. Talk about overdoing it. Ose makes me look like a walking circus. The heck would I need ta' wear all that armor for? My body's harder than any demonstone. And the shoulderpads, why are they so huge? Is she tryin' ta' embarrass me?"

Abby, however, glows with radiance. She beams even more excited looks of appreciation at Ose. "Wow, Ose! You can even make Bael's fat body look gorgeous! So stylish! That's why you're my girl! Eeeeeee!!"

Bael glances at her. "H-hey. I'm not... I'm not fat..."

Abby ignores the look of pain on his face. "You know what I meant!"

Emperor Yadrat, seated among the Hell of Punishment's section, examines Ose's armor with a mixture of disdain and admiration.

Ose wants to overhaul Bael's image, to mold his old body into a weapon that can inspire awe among the other Emperors. Frankly, it's working. I hate to say it, but aside from my begrudging respect and fear for Bael's combat prowess, I never took him seriously, what with his low intelligence. Ose, on the other hand... she can turn his body into a weapon that would destroy any other Emperor. This ceremonial garb really only serves to bring her hidden 'threat' to the surface, making others more visibly aware of how dangerous she is.

Surprisingly, the Fourth Hell is still missing one crucial figure. Emperor Auger does not attend Ose's coronation, a fact that irks Ose when she notices. As Ose approaches the ceremonial altar, a look of disdain flicks across her face.

How about that. The Hell of Lust didn't show after all. Neither did the Hell of Isolation or the Hell of Corruption. For three of the Seven Hells to not attend my coronation... tsk. I'll have to punish them in a manner that will remind everyone why I am Second Emperor, now. And as for Emperor Auger... he must still think himself above me. I will remember his slight in the coming years...

Ose faintly smiles when she reaches her designated position. She sweeps her gaze across the First, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Hells. The many hundreds of attendees sit up a little straighter in their seats, eager to hear what she will say.

"Hello, everyone." Ose says, her quiet voice projecting outward with far more strength than it normally should. Magical enhancers build into her crown beam her words right into the ears of everyone present, working on fairy magic principles to enhance her speech to its greatest effect. "Today is a momentous day. Previously, I was elevated to the rank of Third Emperor by our great hero, the Duke of Pain. The purpose of my ascension was to quickly re-establish order over the human populace. There was no ceremony, and neither did I want there to be one."

"I have always considered myself a demoness who is more of a 'doer' than a 'talker.' Talk is cheap." Ose elaborates. "Pretty words *may* sway minds, but strong actions *always* do so. I also did not have the political capital or interest to bother with a fancy ceremony, but today is very, very different. Not only have I fortunately changed bodies with the legendary Duke of Pain, but I have retained all of his strengths, along with mine. The power and defense of the Balrog, mixed with the speed and agility of the fastest demon

alive. In terms of physicality... not one of you is my equal. Not even the fabled Emperor Wolfram, who temporarily broke through the shackles which bound our species."

"Today, we stand at a crossroads." Ose continues. "The humans are soon to become a threat that not even I can suppress. Their leader, the Wordsmith, wields a power more oppressive than any other Hero before him. King Arthur, Joan of Arc, Solomon... not even the fabled Jephthah could compare to Jason Hiro's potential. Luckily, the boy is still young, and has not yet obtained enough time to further his abilities. So long as we strike soon, hard, and without mercy, we can put an end to his lineage, and humanity's rise. If we are fortunate, we may even be able to seize the Wordsmith's power for ourselves."

In a rare moment of humility, Ose offers a concession in her speech.

"Once, I thought myself capable of taking down the Wordsmith alone. Now, I know that is not possible. The Wordsmith is not an opponent any lone demon, no matter how powerful, can handle. It will require all of our efforts to defeat him. We will have to move swiftly and crush him before he can fortify humanity's remnants and rebuild them to a superior state. You all know how powerful humanity became, during the Energy Wars. Even with the Volgrim's assistance, we barely managed to defeat our enemies."

Ose smirks. "Of course, even this humble *Baron* achieved many worthy deeds, back in those ancient days. As I recall, it was my efforts which ultimately brought humanity to its knees. Not even the seemingly untouchable Marie Becker could stop me. In the end, we won back then, in large part, because of me. And so too shall we once again do so, because of *me*."

Ose lifts her hand and makes a beckoning motion. From the ground beneath her, Emperor Mephisto rises, holding a bone lantern in his hands.

This lantern, the same one previously owned by Emperor Valac, draws countless looks of greed. Several Emperors from the Hidden Hells can't help but wish they were capable of wielding its power for themselves. All of their Hells, long-stagnant due to the First Hell's monopoly on souls, can only sit stagnant and pray for crumbs and morsels from the First Hell's goodwill. Sadly, thanks to the last 100,000 years of demonic rule, not even Emperor Diablo would bolster the ranks of his rivals among the other Six Hells.

"Today, I will ascend to the rank of Emperor." Ose says, her voice eerily calm. "Before, my power was that of an ordinary Emperor, not dissimilar from any of you. I would gladly have placed myself among the higher ranks, but let us not mince words. Bael's body and

my power have elevated me to a station not *one* of you could ever compare. I'm sure you're all wondering, the same as me. Just how powerful will I become, once I elevate my new body to the rank... of Emperor?"

"Will Heaven itself bow before me?" Ose ponders. "Or perhaps the universe itself will split, and the light of creation will shine upon me. I wonder... how fearsome will I become, compared to those ancient Primordials? To me, the Cherubim did not seem that impressive at all."

Ose chuckles deep in her throat. She turns to expose a smile to Mephisto.

"Begin."

The Emperor of Legions nods at her. Mephisto reaches into his lantern to grab at a spot amidst its vast, inner reserves. In that spot where he stored a million human, demon, and monster souls, Mephisto coalesces his power to merge all of them into a single, unified Soul Pill, much like the one he granted Beelzebub, just six years before.

However.

Mephisto's confident expression cracks.

He frowns as he continues to move his boney hand around in that section of the Lantern, yet no matter where he reaches, he finds... nothing.

"Eh?"

Mephisto looks down at the lantern clutched in his left hand. He activates his necromantic magic to peer deep inside.

What he find shocks him to his core.

"What? Thisss... thisss cannot be..."

Ose continues to smile, but secretly, she shoots an impatient look at Mephisto.

"Anytime now." Ose says, suppressing her annoyance. "This is not the moment to be screwing around, Mephisto."

In a panic, Mephisto swishes his hand around inside the lantern's depths. The more he searches, the more frantic his expression becomes.

"No... no... how can thisss be?!"

Mephisto's voice, tinged with panic, makes not only Ose frown, but all of the demon leaders, too.

"Is *something* the matter?" Ose hisses, struggling to keep her simmering anger under control. "Don't tell me you... *misplaced* the souls."

Mephisto snaps his head up.

"The sssoulsss... no! Thisss iss... thisss isss unbelievable! Every sssingle human sssoul in my lantern... they're all GONE!"

Mephisto's declaration makes all of the Hidden Emperors frown. Some of them whisper to one another, trying to ascertain the meaning behind his words. The more intelligent ones, such as Emperor Yardrat, remain silent and draw their own conclusions.

"What do you *mean*?" Ose growls. "This is no time for games, Mephisto. Everyone is watching."

"All the human sssoulsss are GONE!" Mephisto shrieks. "Don't you sssee?! They've vanissshed! I only posssesssss demon and monssster sssoulsss! Nothing elssse! Where have all my precioussss sssoulsss gone?!"

A deep, unsettling dread washes over Ose's body as she realizes Mephisto is not, in fact, screwing with her for a quick laugh.

"That's not possible. You counted the souls right before we came here."

"I did!" Mephisto exclaims. "But in between thossse minutesss..."

Suddenly, one of the Hidden Emperors, Yardrat, stands up. The Emperor of the Void draws a considerable amount of attention, not only due to his status, but also the look of surprise on his face.

"E-Emperor Crow!" Yardrat bellows. "I've just received word from your sect! All of your human slaves... they've vanished!"

"Vanished?" Crow asks, not sure whether to believe him. "I left Duke Heron in charge during my absence. Are you saying two million slaves skipped away merrily under his watchful eye?"

"No! They didn't walk away, they simply disappeared, as if teleported into thin air!" Yardrat cries. "And furthermore-"

Before Yardrat can finish his sentence, one of Ose's attendants runs around the edge of the obelisk to her master's side before whispering something in Ose's ear.

"Since when?!" Ose snarls. "You're saying Amy is gone, too?!"

Her attendant nods guiltily. "I saw it happen with my own eyes. One second, she was there. The next, she popped out of existence with a 'foop'!"

All at once, several other Emperors, Dukes, and Barons receive magical transmissions through various means. They stand up, one by one, and gasp in surprise.

"My human chattel!" Emperor Kristoff roars. "They've disappeared, too!"

"And ours, too!" Exclaims the Second Ancient Orc, Maltus.

All around the ceremony, the scene of what was supposed to be Ose's most important day falls apart as her fellow demons receive the blood-curdling news that every single human in their possession, every last slave, miner, and individual that runs their societies through free labor, has vanished into the ether.

Ose's shocked expression clears up remarkably fast. It doesn't take her much effort to deduce the culprit, though she does figure it out less than a minute before all the other Emperors.

"...*Wordsmith*."

She practically spits Jason's title out, while bloodlust erupts in her eyes.

And, while every demon in the vicinity is panicking, one figure remains remarkably calm.

Bael sits idly, glancing around without a care in the world at the panicked looks on all his friends' faces.

"Damn, that sucks. Ain't life just a kick in the dick sometimes, Abby?"

Abby whips her head in Bael's direction to gawk at him.

"Don't you realize what's happened?! How can you be so calm at a time like this?"

Bael shrugs.

"*Practice*."

Part 351: Belial's Choice

Tarus II, a few hours earlier.

Jason stands inside the bottom of the Lazarus tower, staring in awe at a series of ten differently colored magical orbs hovering in midair. These orbs slowly rotate around a pillar of light that travels to the top of the Lazarus Tower, where it reaches the tower's roof and stops. At the bottom of the pillar of light, a glowing tablet filled with holy energy gently pulses with power, while Fiona stands before it, manipulating it through some unseen mechanism involving her soul.

While Jason watches, Fiona tweaks the pillar of light in small ways, adjusting various energy signatures and other such things that Jason can't even perceive without tapping into his Wordsmithing. Compared to his soul-wife, an entity that experiences life through the sensation of her soul more acutely than Jason's clumsy, physical body ever could, Jason is an absolute amateur at what Fiona has dubbed 'Soulsmithing.'

Soulsmithing. Unlike Wordsmithing, it is an intuitive act of spiritual creation one can only engage in if their souls are sensitive enough to detect magical fluctuations at an incredibly precise level. Much like Camael before her, it turns out that Fiona is somewhat adept at this art, though still shamefully inferior to the legendary Archangel of Divination herself.

While Fiona works her magic, Phoebe strolls into the chamber and stands on her tippy-toes to give Jason's cheek a kiss.

"How close are we?" Phoebe asks.

"Fiona should finish within a few hours." Jason says. "Those Soul Pylons she built have boosted the range of her travel to pretty much anywhere on Tarus II. Given what happened when I was last in a soul-body, I'm a little scared for her safety, but Fiona says the pylons will also protect against foreign errant souls. Ose shouldn't be able to infiltrate us anymore, and if she does, the pylons will detect her at once."

"But you're not going to build any Soul Pylons in the Core?" Phoebe asks.

"No. Too dangerous. The Core isn't Tarus II. I can only imagine what sorts of frightening Demon Emperors might have powers that can bypass their protections. I

don't want Fiona's soul anywhere near the Core if I'm not there, too."

"You should still build them." Phoebe says, shaking her head. "Even if Fiona never goes to the Core, they can still protect our men and women from Ose and other bad actors. The Soul Suppression Field alone will give us a lot of leeway."

"Alright. I'll just have to build them anyway, then." Jason says, smiling at his wife. "But only because you asked."

While the two of them quietly talk, Fiona continues about her business. However, a flicker of movement beside her draws her attention.

Shana materializes in the physical world, just like Fiona. At the same time, so does Sir Lorent, Fiona and Phoebe's nephew, once known as Mordred's Butcher.

"I apologize." Lorent says, smiling at his aunt. "Shana was getting antsy and wanted to see what you were doing, so we materialized."

Fiona pauses her work to turn and hug her nephew, then she drops down to hug Shana as well.

"It's no problem at all!" Fiona chirps. "I'm almost done, anyway. Upsie-daisy, Shana! Take a look at this!"

Fiona lifts Shana into her arms, giving the little girl a better look at the energy matrix of the Lazarus Tower. Shana stares with big, watery eyes while Fiona starts explaining how the tower works.

"At first, I thought the Lazarus Tower would only be good for stealing all the errant human souls hidden around the galaxy, but then I realized I could alter its programming in another way." Fiona says. "I can also make it lock onto all living human souls as well and bring them to Tarus II! I had Jason prepare a huuuuuuuge area for all the refugees, and right now I'm just finishing up the teleportation module. I wouldn't want anyone to get teleported onto the same spot as someone else, or they might end up inside each other! Yikes!"

Lorent listens attentively, mostly grasping Fiona's explanation, but the majority of her words swish right over Shana's head.

[Pretty bubbles.] Shana simply says, glancing at the ten colored orbs floating around the pillar of light. [What do?]

"Those are the... control modules." Fiona explains, trying best to dumb her explanation down. "Each of them does something different. Spiritual engineering is super complex, but I managed to make the red one locate every human soul in the cosmos, and the blue one counts them all and prevents duplicates, while the green one..."

She continues elaborating the purposes of the ten orbs, while Shana and Lorent simply nod along to her words.

"Impressive work." Lorent says. "I only wish I could assist in some way. While I am glad to experience the joy of another person's company, since arriving in your care, I have felt... purposeless."

Fiona frowns. "You want something to do?"

"Yes." Lorent says with a nod. "You are working so hard to help humanity, but I am a Hero, and yet I cannot seem to do anything of note."

"You helped protect Jason's mind several times." Fiona says. "I know that might not seem glamorous, but with so many telepaths, spiritual monsters, and creepy soul-people floating around, protecting humanity's greatest Hero isn't an ignoble cause."

"True..." Lorent mutters. "But what of my heroic power? If I could put it to good use, I would like to do so."

"Oh?" Fiona grunts. "I thought you didn't want to use your ability?"

"That was before. This is now." Lorent says. "I have spent the past month teaching Shana how to paint. Doing so has... it has reawakened my creativity. I should very much like to exercise my power once again, though I know not if that is possible."

Fiona glances back at Jason and Phoebe, both of them engrossed in some conversation she hasn't bothered paying attention to. She purses her lips and thinks carefully for several minutes.

"Hmm... I'll talk to Jason about it, then. Honestly, I've been wondering if..."

She pauses.

"...If making bodies for you and Shana, and perhaps even the Archangels wouldn't be doable. If I could, then maybe you'd be able to exercise your heroic power again."

"That would be fantastic!" Lorent exclaims. "Ah, to partake in food once more, to feel the sensation of wind upon my skin... how I long for those sensations I once took for

granted."

[I can eat cake?] Shana asks.

"Yes!" Lorent says with a laugh. "You will get to taste this delicious cake my aunt speaks of. I promise that you shall enjoy it greatly, little one!"

He pulls Shana away from Fiona and puts the little girl on his shoulders, piggyback style, which causes Shana to squeal with glee.

Seeing the two of them together warms Fiona's heart in an indescribable way.

I've lost Daisy... Fiona thinks. But when I'm with Shana and I see her smile, the pain doesn't hurt like it once did.

Jason and Phoebe switch conversation topics to a few of their other projects. While they speak, an emergency alert suddenly beeps on Jason's communicator.

"MULTIPLE DEMON DUKE ENERGY SIGNATURES DETECTED MOVING TOWARD THE CORE. RED ALERT STATUS DECLARED." Centurion blares.

Jason's expression turns ugly. "Shit. Already? Fiona, stay here. You too, Phoebe. I'll be back. Hopefully."

The Wordsmith utters a Word of Power, vanishing from the spot. He arrives inside the Core atop his designated teleportation point, high above the soldiers, where he quickly evaluates the situation below. Without any sense of chaos or disorder, all the troops in the Core quickly activate their T-REX's and take cover behind designated positions. Unlike before, when computer terminals stood out in the open at the center of the Core, now only heavily fortified bunkers remain, allowing the troopers to take cover in the event of an enemy attack.

Never again will the Wordsmith allow his people to die dog deaths, losing any chance of survival in the face of mighty adversaries.

Jason quickly hops down to the ground level and takes up his position at the front of the Core, where the dual turrets sit outside, ready to blast any intruders to smithereens. He wordsmiths himself to be 'invincible,' making his body all but impervious to damage, then stops to wait while Centurion's alarms blare louder and louder.

"FIVE DEMON DUKE SIGNATURES APPROACHING."

"DEMON DUKE SIGNATURES HAVE CROSSED DEFENSIVE LINE BETA."

"DEMON DUKE SIGNATURES HAVE CROSSED DEFENSIVE LINE ALPHA."

While Jason watches, a group of five powerful Demon Dukes rounds a bend at the far end of the hallway, the wide and open area leading directly to the Core. They walk toward the Hero, but surprisingly, they all raise their hands in unison, moving slowly so as to not show any hostile intentions.

Among them are three females and two males. One of the females is a huge demoness standing nearly eight feet tall, with hulking, Amazonian-like muscles, wearing tigerskin panties and a bra. Another is a short, lithe little woman seemingly suffering from anorexia, so frail and skinny is she. The third is a black-haired woman with hair going down to her butt, wearing what can only be described as a dominatrix-looking black-leather ensemble.

And among the men, one is a pretty-boy with thick eyeliner, wearing a fairly fashionable white and gold jacket, while the other is a brutish-looking fellow with ox-sized forearms, only a little bit smaller than the absolutely giant demoness behind him.

As the five approach, Jason glances at the huge demoness, expecting her to be the leader. Instead, the tiniest girl, not even five feet tall, takes the lead.

"Hello, human. We're not here to fight." She says, her voice somewhat raspy. "I am Maia, The Duke of Empathy. We've come to speak to Emperor Belial, and the Wordsmith too, if he's available."

With Jason's head covered, none of the demons can tell what he looks like, but his unmistakable aura of holy energy isn't something they overlook, nor something he bothers to hide.

"You're the leader of this group?" Jason asks, standing firmly in place, with his hands leaning on his hips. "I'm the Wordsmith. As for Belial, why do you want to see her?"

The five Dukes stop a good distance away, but keep their palms up to continue showing they aren't threats.

"We're from the Hell of Lust." Maia says. "You might be familiar with us. Belial was our Hell's founder."

Jason raises an eyebrow underneath his helmet, but the Dukes don't see it.

"The Hell of Lust, you say?" Jason mutters, while glancing at the other four Dukes.

He points at the giant demoness, the one which draws his attention the most. "You must be Titania, the Duke of Freedom."

The huge demoness bats her eyes. Surprisingly, despite her huge and fearsome body, she blushes shyly. "I... I am."

"And you." Jason says, pointing at the third female. "You look like Silvia. The Duke of Whips."

"That's me." Silvia says, exposing her teeth. "I guess Belial told you all about us."

"I have files on all the Hidden Hells." Jason says. "And you, pretty-boy with the dainty clothes. I'm guessing you're Jahn, the Duke of Cuddles."

"Ahaha. How right you are," Jahn says, flicking his tail coquettishly. "I've heard quite a few stories about you, of late. Can't wait to see what sort of tasty snack is hiding under that helmet."

"Right." Jason mutters. "And finally, you, big guy. You must be... Igor, the Duke of Celibacy."

Igor chuckles, his ominously deep voice reverberating throughout the hallway. "Heh heh heh. Don't be fooled by my title, Wordsmith. It's ironic."

"Yeah. Igor's definitely *not* celibate." Silvia says, rolling her eyes. "Take your eyes off him for a minute, and the damn guy starts ramming his demonhood into every crevice within a five mile radius."

"He who spreads his seed also spreads many a good deed." Igor says, flashing Silvia a thumbs-up.

"Shut the fuck up." Silvia grouches.

Seeing this colorful cast standing before him, Jason lowers his defenses somewhat. He deactivates his helmet, allowing the others to see his face.

"You still haven't answered my question." Jason says. "Why are you here? And why do you want to see Belial? To be frank, I don't care who you are. I *really* don't like demons right now, and I'm about five inches from blowing you all to pieces."

"Oh, my." Jahn says, covering his mouth. "The Wordsmith wants to *blow us*. I do say, Igor, this fellow is quite the saucy devil."

"Don't think he meant it like that." Igor grunts.

Maia strides toward Jason, putting a little distance between herself and her companions.

"I know why you hate demons." She says. "But surely, Belial has explained the situation in the Seven Hells to you, right? We're not all homogenous. There are different beliefs between each Hell. Ours happens to be... quite friendly to humans."

"And?" Jason asks. "So, what? You want to join me and fight against the other Hells?"

Maia chews her lip. Her sunken cheeks and frighteningly rail-thin appearance bely her calm, controlled demeanor.

"Well. Maybe. I'll have you know, Jason Hiro, that not one succubus or incubus partook in that terrible Stormbringer attack. I didn't condone it, and neither did any of the other Dukes from my Hell. However, Ose is planning another attack on your people, and this time... it will prove far more vicious than the one that came before. I don't want to sit back and do nothing. Not this time."

She pauses for emphasis.

"But let me make one thing clear. I'm not doing it for you. I only want to talk to Belial. She cast aside her rule over the Hell of Lust, yes, but we still view her as our rightful queen. Before I even think of joining you and freeing my Hell from the grip of the other six, I want to hear from her lips what it's like living under your rule."

Jason cocks his head. "From what I understand, your Hell has no Emperors, only Dukes. Even if I were to let you join humanity, you wouldn't be much use against all the Emperors of the other Hells. Who says I'll agree to your proposal, anyway? Maybe I should just kill you, right here and now."

Maia meets Jason's gaze. The two of them stare at each other wordlessly for a few moments before she shakes her head.

"You won't do that." She says. "I still see compassion in your eyes. No doubt, due to the loss of... those closest to you, you have become filled with bitter hatred and a deep desire for revenge. But, based on what we've heard, you are still a relatively righteous and just man. Ose told the Hidden Hells that you offered her a peace treaty, one which she refused. This tells me you are not the type to inflict wanton cruelty on others. Even with all you've suffered, that hasn't changed."

Maia cocks her head and smiles at the Hero.

"Am I wrong?"

Jason crinkles his nose at her. "You're walking an awfully thin line. If I want to kill all five of you, it won't take me any effort at all. Where does your confidence come from?"

"I am the Duke of Empathy." Maia says. "I can sense the emotions of others around me. While a deep undercurrent of hatred and distrust flows through your soul, there is also a reluctance to inflict unjustified violence. You are not as cold and callous as you wish to be."

"I'm not strong enough, then." Jason says. "My willpower needs to temper itself so I can make the difficult decisions on behalf of my fellow man."

"Don't be so eager to become a killer." Maia counters. "I know plenty of them. They are all bitter, power-hungry tyrants. I like the 'you' that I see now. Balanced. Willing to do what you must, but not yet willing to go overboard. That's the sort of person who I enjoy taking long walks on the beach with."

Jason inhales deeply, then looks away.

"Alright. You want to talk to Belial? Fine. I'll bring her here. But Belial is not the one to decide who stays inside humanity's borders. I am."

Maia takes a step back. "I understand. Worry not, Hero. I am not your enemy. None of us are. The Hells of Lust and Isolation are the most sympathetic to your cause. We both believe coexistence with humanity is more than possible; it is desirable."

"Yeah." Igor says. "Except the Hell of Isolation is full of hippie-weirdos. What a bunch of dorks. All that music, but not enough fuckin'. Sheesh!"

Titania shuffles nervously on her feet. "I... I like... the Hell of I-Isolation. They're fun to h-hang out with."

Igor glances at the huge, scantily-glad demoness beside him. "Yeah, I bet they like 'hanging' with you, too, sister."

Jason sends a magical transmission to Belial, quickly explaining the situation to her. A minute later, he teleports the Emperor of Passion to his position, popping her into position on his right.

When Belial appears, Jason waits for her to cheerfully greet the other five demons, but instead, she crosses her arms and gazes at them grumpily.

"What do *you* want?" Belial asks, her tone hostile.

"Emperor Belial," Maia says. "It is... good to see you again. I hope you've been doing well."

"As good as you'd expect." Belial mutters. "Living among *free* humans has been a thrilling experience, to be sure."

Maia winces. "Our chattel are about as free as they can get. We don't force them to mine, or slave away, or perform hard labor-"

"No." Belial interrupts. "You just use them as pleasure-toys to bolster your power structure. I hear 'consent' is still a term used loosely in your Hell."

"It isn't only 'our' Hell." Maia whispers. "It... it is yours, as well."

"I swore off that den of debauchery tens of millennia ago." Belial snaps. "Don't lump me in with the rest of you. Why are you even here? Hoping to get let into our good graces? Looking for fresh, untouched, virgin meat?"

Maia flares her nostrils. "I know you are angry, Emperor Belial-"

"It's Samantha now." Belial says. "I *hate* being called Belial. My demon name makes me sick."

"Sorry, I wasn't aware." Maia apologizes. "Samantha, then. I know you are angry, but times have changed. Your departure... it left us all in the lurch. The other Hells have pressured us greatly, these past fifty thousand years. Without an Emperor to protect us, we've become little more than lapdogs for the other Hells. We have to do as they ask, or risk annihilation."

"Oh. Isn't that a shame." Belial says, without a shred of mercy. "Just go away. I'm not interested in helping you."

Maia's shoulders sag.

"I... don't you understand? I cannot refuse the orders of the other Hells. I lack the power to do so. Soon, they will order the Hell of Lust to invade Tarus II. We'll be sent out to the meat-grinder, to fight for a cause we don't believe in. None of us want to follow Ose's ludicrous demands. Her thirst for violence is upending the natural order and will bring a catastrophe upon our species. Even if she succeeds, demonkind will only gain a minor advantage. The Volgrim, or that supposed Plague will wipe us out. I would much rather unite with the humans and achieve... something greater."

"Something greater?" Jason repeats. "Such as?"

"I... can't put it into words." Maia concedes. "Always, demons, humans, and angels have fought. I didn't live through the Ancient Era, but I grew up hearing stories about the War in Heaven. I don't know whose fault is whose, and I don't care. I just want to see a better future for humans and demons alike."

The Duke of Empathy sighs heavily. "I know I've disappointed you, Samantha. I haven't been a good friend. And when I was a Baron, I was always chasing humans like no tomorrow. But... I'm a Duke now, and my 'addictions' don't plague me like they used to. I see the error of my old ways. Please, please don't condemn all your former friends and colleagues to damnation just because a few of those at the top acted greedily and sinfully."

Belial listens quietly to Maia's speech. As she does, her expression softens a little.

"Do you think it's my forgiveness you need?" Belial asks. "I am not the one you wronged. Those humans were. You forced yourselves on them, used them as batteries to advance to the rank of Duke. I'll bet that if it meant you could become an Emperor, you'd still be up to your old ways. I have no reason to trust you. Not when this time, it will be the lives of humans I deeply love and care about on the line."

Jason glances at Belial, reading between the lines of her reply. However, he says nothing.

Maia lowers her head.

"I... I understand. If you wish, then please... kill us. All the sinners. Every Duke, Baron, and Lord who acted without restraint. Me, Silvia, Jahn, every last one. We deserve it... but the younger generation doesn't. They can be better, if you take them under your wing. Succubi and incubi alike, they can flourish under your lead."

Belial's tail flicks around behind her, from left to right, with quick, twitchy moments.

The former Second Emperor carefully evaluates Maia's request over several minutes, leaving her and the other Dukes to wait in silence.

"Other than protecting you, what do we stand to gain?" Belial finally asks. "I'm not much for killing. I have no interest in executing you. In the end, your victims are long dead, and revenge-killings won't bring them back. That being said, you've requested to join us, so you have plenty to gain, but what about the rest of us?"

"We will follow any command you or the Wordsmith orders." Maia says, keeping her head lowered. "We have to redeem ourselves. Succubi and incubi are more than capable of living with humans without coercion or using any other vile methods. We will deliberately restrict our actions and live in colonies away from humans, or however you wish. Just so long as we can live under your guidance once more, Emperor Samantha... I will be happy."

"I don't understand." Belial says, her tone softening further. "Why would you even want to serve me? I'm no leader. I don't know how, and I don't care to guide those beneath me. Satan was a true Emperor. I'm only a lover."

"That is where you are wrong." Maia says, raising her head to gaze into Belial's eyes. "I know you can become a fair and just Emperor. You may say you don't care about our Hell, but I know you don't want to see us forced to become playthings for the sick monsters inhabiting the hells of Damnation, Corruption, and so on. If we follow your commands, we can become greater than the sum of our parts."

She turns her gaze to the Wordsmith.

"Besides. Succubi and incubi, when we aren't forcing ourselves upon humans, can deliver pleasure unlike anything you've ever experienced. In a time of war and hatred, why not allow passion and sexuality to flourish? Perhaps love is the key to defeating hatred."

"I'm married." Jason says, tersely. "But. Well, even if all you bring to the table are the powers of Dukes, that's still quite useful to me. I'm developing methods to counter the Hidden Hells which would benefit quite a bit from the powers of Dukes."

Jason turns to Belial.

"I'll leave this decision in your hands. Do you want the Hell of Lust to merge with us? I have no strong feelings one way or the other. If they join us, we'll make use of them, and we'll provide them a safe haven. If not, we'll continue as we were before. You have the most knowledge and experience with them, Samantha. I think you should be the one to decide their fates."

Another five minutes pass. Belial's tail flicks around faster than before as she contemplates what she should do with these five Dukes, as well as all the others waiting for her reply.

"Well... if I have to choose..."

Part 352: New Allies

Maia, the Duke of Empathy, drops to her knees and kowtows before Emperor Belial.

"Thank you! Thank you, Samantha. Our Hell is in debt to you!"

"It's like you said." Belial says, shooting a complicated look at Jason beside her. "It's still my Hell. I do feel a little responsible for all of you. And since Jason can make use of you, we'll welcome the succubi, incubi, and your human chattel too."

Jason aims his eyes at the kowtowing succubus. "But! In my society, there will not be any slaves, Maia. You will release all of them and they will become free to do as they please. Since succubi and incubi require human 'interaction' to survive, I will do what I can to encourage an atmosphere of 'frolicking' between your Hell and my species, but you cannot force anyone into your bedchambers, nor can you use your magical powers to coerce them. If I find out you've violated this order, you do *not* want to know what actions I'll take."

Maia raises her head to nod at Jason. "Yes, yes. I understand. Thank you, Jason Hiro. I have never bowed to a human before, but please, accept my thanks."

The Wordsmith nods serenely. After she stands up and regains her sense of balance, he raises an eyebrow.

"By the way. I've been meaning to ask... why are you so thin? Do you not get enough to eat?"

Maia's frail, anorexic-looking body worries the Wordsmith, making him wonder if she has some sort of medical condition. However, Maia merely shakes her head.

"Humans often worry about my health. But do not worry, Wordsmith. I am a demon. When demons reach the rank of Duke, they often begin to suffer from some sort of backlash. Mephisto and other necromancers tend to lose their flesh and organs, becoming ghastly bone-walkers. Beelzebub lost his sense of pain. For me, I lost my ability to control my emotions, and my body became what you see now."

Jason looks at Belial. "Do you have anything like that?"

"Don't think so." Belial answers. "But then again, I didn't evolve like normal demons do. I received my power from a dragon."

"So did Valac." Jason points out.

"Yeah. I guess if you count my crippling inability to take responsibility for anything in my life, that might be my demonic weakness." Belial ponders. "But otherwise, I've gotten off easy. Some demons do, and some don't. Ose doesn't seem to have any particular physical condition ailing her, but even you must have noticed how megalomaniacal she's become since ascending to Emperor. I'll bet it's related."

"Mmm." Jason grunts, while glancing at the other Dukes and silently wondering if any of them have similar issues. "Good to know. Alright, Maia, since you're officially under my protection now, when would you like to start transferring your people to Tarus II? I'll need some time to construct a settlement for you, and frankly, the humans must come first."

"There's no need to rush." Maia says. "I doubt the other demons will find out about our pact with you unless someone tells them otherwise. We can keep our meeting quiet for a while until you've situated yourself on your homeworld."

With the most important reason for her coming addressed, Maia relaxes a little bit. Behind her, the other four Dukes walk over, with Sylvia appearing especially attentive.

"Jason. There's another reason we came to meet you today. In less than two hours, Ose plans to hold a coronation ceremony. She will advance Bael's body to the rank of Emperor by ingesting just under a million human souls. We thought you might want to know about this."

"A million souls?!" Jason exclaims. "You should have opened with that!"

"Oh? I'm sorry." Sylvia says, cocking her head. "I... didn't realize the information would be of that much importance to you."

"I can't let her devour so many lives." Jason says, gritting his teeth. "I have to rescue those people as soon as possible. I'll have to ask Fiona to accelerate her work..."

"Rescue people?" Maia repeats. "What work are you trying to accelerate? I don't understand. Souls aren't people, are they?"

Belial smirks. "Well. Jason hasn't been sitting on his ass for the past week. Ever since our raid on Faith's End, Jason has been prepping several counter-measures against demonkind's elites. Most of them are defensive in nature. A few aren't."

Belial doesn't elaborate, deliberately keeping her subordinate Dukes in the dark. After all, they have only just accepted an alliance, and have not yet earned her or Jason's trust.

Sensing Belial's reluctance to explain the situation, Maia wisely chooses not to pry further.

"I see. Ose will be holding her ceremony on Hell Harbor before the leaders of the Seven Hells. The Hell of Lust isn't going to attend, and I'd bet good coin the Hell of Isolation won't, either."

"The Hell of Isolation..." Belial mutters under her breath. "I wonder if we could forge a similar alliance with them? Getting a few Emperors on our side would boost our battle potential considerably."

"Let's hold off on that idea." Jason says. "Integrating a single Hell into our armies is already a tall enough order. I don't imagine the people who lost friends and family to demons will be all too happy about me deciding to just throw millions of former enemies into our ranks."

Jason gestures toward the five Dukes from the Hell of Lust.

"All of you can head back to start preparing for our merge. Right now, Sam and I need to get back to Tarus II."

Maia nods. "I understand. Thank you for listening to us, Jason Hiro. And thank you for accepting us back into your good graces, Emperor Samantha. We will not disappoint you like we did before."

Belial waves her hand. "Water under the bridge. See ya, Maia."

Maia turns to leave, and the other Dukes follow her.

"Hey, Hero," Sylvia says, blowing an air-kiss his way. "Nice talking to you. You're a cutie. Let me know if you're single or looking for fun, next time we meet."

"Still married." Jason simply retorts.

"If you switch to the 'other team,'" Igor says, "Let ME know! I will teach you the pleasures of loving a man."

"I'll be sure to get right on that." Jason quips.

Titania waves shyly. "B-bye bye..."

Jahn is the last to leave. He doesn't say anything, but instead merely eyes Jason from head to toe, faintly smiles, and gives the Hero a thumbs-up.

Once all of the demons depart, Jason and Belial walk back into the Core. The Wordsmith lowers the Core's alert level to return everyone to their posts, then pivots to face Belial.

"Phoebe isn't just going to rescue all the human souls." Jason reveals. "She's going to rescue every single human in the galaxy, all at the same time, and put them in a designated safe zone on the opposite side of Tarus II. I'm going to need your help, Samantha."

"What? Phoebe can *do* that?" Belial asks, visibly confused. "But... but how?"

"It turns out the Lazarus Tower has to be able to detect and triangulate the positions of ALL human souls." Jason says. "Not just errant ones, but living ones, too. This means if we tie it into a mass-teleportation system, we can rescue every human captive in every location known and unknown to man, then drop them into a safe place where the demons can't hurt them."

Belial frowns deeply. "That sounds great, Jason, but teleportation isn't a simple matter. It requires vast amounts of energy even when used efficiently. Where are you going to get all the energy you need for this act of mass teleportation?"

"From our favorite new artifact." Jason answers. "It will drain the Cube's mana reserves by more than half, but I believe this will be an absolutely crucial measure. We will immediately obtain a massive boost in soldiers, laborers, and other types of humans. We'll save all the people being exploited, abused, and injured across all of the galaxy in a single, fell swoop."

"You seem to be handwaving quite a significant matter." Belial counters. "Can you control which humans get summoned through the Lazarus Tower's means? Humans from the Hell of Isolation are neither slaves nor mistreated. You should leave them alone. And more humans are sympathetic to demonic causes than you might expect. You could easily draw in thousands of possible saboteurs, criminals, rapists, murderers, and who knows what other awful types of people."

She continues. "I understand why you would want to do this, but Jason, don't you think this could backfire? You need to be preparing for the Hidden Emperor's invasion, not saving humans who will only overburden the food and water supply, stress your

barely functional infrastructure, and force you to pay attention to fulfilling all of their basic needs, lest they immediately die."

"I need to save lives right now." Jason says. "I probably won't be able or want to kill too many Hidden Emperors when they show up. The more who are left alive, the more likely they'll butcher their slaves in fits of rage, or kill them to create more souls, and so on."

"Human slaves aren't utterly indispensable," Belial counters again. "But they're fairly important to demon society. If killing a million of them were a simple matter, you'd be facing a lot more Emperors right now. It would be trivially easy to have raised a billion humans over the last hundred thousand years and killed them for easy souls."

For the first time in a while, Jason appears stumped. "Why don't demons do that, anyway? Humans are already practically livestock among the Seven Hells. Wouldn't the Emperors want to raise as many other mighty demons as they can?"

"Ah." Belial says, smiling wryly and shaking her head. "You haven't figured out yet how cutthroat demon politics actually are. There are several reasons why the number of Emperors has remained almost entirely stagnant since the Energy Wars."

"First," she continues, "You have to consider the Volgrim rules. Demons were not permitted to allow the human population to swell beyond a certain limit. As Unarin said in his broadcast, the Volgrim consider humans an Omega-level threat. Letting too many breed would not only provide the humans with chances to make small but essential improvements over time, but it would also vastly increase the likelihood the demons would evolve more Emperors and that might ultimately threaten the Volgrim's interests too. Considering the uprisings that led to the mind-wipes, this isn't an inconsequential possibility."

"Secondly, space is more limited than you might think. Demons are inherently selfish. Imagine if demons wanted to raise humans en-masse. Unlike most demons, humans need to eat to survive, so they would need agriculture on a massive scale. This would take away land from demons on their controlled worlds, leading to resentment among the lower ranks. Humans need all sorts of amenities to stay living long enough for their souls to 'harden,' and so on."

"Right." Jason interjects. "Because while infant souls are the purest and most nourishing, demons would want a lot of those children to grow up and reproduce, and

there's a noticeable lull in a soul's nourishment once the immediate powerup from being born takes hold, when an infant leaves their mother. It takes time for a human to reach middle age, when their soul is the strongest, but then it weakens until they reach old age and die."

"Exactly. And going off my second point, the third point continues about how demons are inherently selfish." Belial explains. "Who do you think is going to till the soil and raise the crops these humans need to eat? Not demons. They already have slaves produce food for other slaves, but it's at a much smaller scale than would be necessary to feed a billion humans. And those slaves would need overseers, which would still mean 'work' for demons, which as you can imagine, only gets worse over time, and so on."

"The final reason demons haven't added more Emperors to their ranks is the most contradictory, but also the most important one." Belial concludes. "Demons are even more selfish than my previous reasons might suggest. The current Emperors currently reap all the benefits of being a few at the top. If they wanted, they could monopolize souls to add more and more Emperors, but instead, they spread them out to keep the lower classes in a state of passivity. If the Emperors wanted to better demon society, they could have made huge gains while they enjoyed millennia without conflict, but instead, they just passed the time and became stagnant."

Belial sighs deeply. "Even so, with just the Hidden Emperors who exist now, you're in for a hard-fought battle, Jason. I can't see you winning without losing countless lives."

Jason gently squeezes Belial's shoulder while smiling at her. "Don't underestimate me, Sam. I've barely tapped into Wordsmithing's potential. While I could easily use the Cube to obliterate all the Demon Emperors, that would be a fantastic waste of its remaining primordial energy. Instead, I'm going to use it to accelerate humanity's uplifting speed. In this way, even if the Hidden Emperors manage to kill me, or if I have to leave for any reason, humanity will remain stable and capable of protecting itself. Last time, when I fetched the Cube, I left humanity practically defenseless. I won't repeat that mistake again."

Belial purses her lips. "So... you're planning to rescue millions of humans for the sake of speeding up your distant future goals?"

"That's right." Jason says. "Like how in strategy games, you can choose a combat start, or an economy start. I'm going full economy because in the interim, I alone am capable of

providing the combat support to protect the economy supply lines. But once the economy reaches a certain level, it will vastly outperform me on all levels. Then I can switch to a support role, boosting the economy further while my well-oiled war machine steamrolls humanity's enemies."

Belial stares at Jason intently.

"I have literally no idea what you just said."

"Sorry. It's nerd stuff." Jason says with a shrug. "Now let's get back to Tarus II. When I summon all the humans, some of them will probably have critical health issues. I want you and your medical associates to attend to them and check for people who are wounded and sick. Make sure you assume a human form so they don't know who you are. Blend into the masses and do your best to make sure nobody dies during the transition."

"I still don't think this is a good idea..." Belial mutters. "But I'll do what I can to smooth the transition."

"Atta girl." Jason says with a grin.

He teleports himself and Belial back to Tarus II, leaving the Core to return to green alert level on their own.

Even without the Wordsmith around, the humans in the Core do their jobs smoothly and efficiently.

Exactly as expected.

A little over an hour later, Jason and Phoebe once again stand inside the Lazarus Tower, this time watching with high anxiety levels as Fiona's movements become faster and more focused. She expertly continues to adjust all sorts of temporal and spatial settings, seeking out every human soul in the Milky Way, no matter where they might be.

A spiritually-projects screen hovers in front of Fiona, displaying statistics regarding the number of humans she's detected. To Jason's surprise, the number already exceeds thirty-five million people.

"It seems just under two million of them are errant souls." Phoebe whispers. "The other thirty-three million are humans living in captivity. I am a little worried, Jason. Don't you think it's a bad idea to bring so many people here all at once? They're going to

be scared, worried, and maybe even hostile. Plus, they outnumber all of our current forces *ten to one!*"

"I know you're scared, but don't let the numbers fool you." Jason says. "We're putting all the newcomers on the other side of the planet. Humans can't teleport around or travel quickly without vehicles. I've already erected a large underground installation for their accommodations, meager though it might be. There's an environmental shield above the landing location, and we'll have a few thousand soldiers in the area to suppress riots. Don't forget how much stronger T-REX's make our men and women. A single soldier can hold off an army of unarmed humans with relative ease. Actually killing him would take some seriously good luck on the attackers' part."

Phoebe chews her lip. She activates a holographic image of the rescue area, showing hundreds of simple, utilitarian buildings designed to maximize bed-space over anything else. Ten surveillance towers two hundred feet tall overlook the facilities, allowing soldiers to camp out and keep an eye on the rescued humans. Additionally, plenty of incidental but important infrastructure, such as toilets and gardens, line the area, having been created in only the last two days. Hovering drones float about, continuing to build new structures in accordance with Jason's requirements by 'beaming' materials into existence.

"I hope you're right." Phoebe says.

Minutes pass. When Fiona reaches the ideal time, she turns to Jason and gives him a thumbs-up.

"Calibrated and ready."

Jason nods. He teleports two thousand already-prepared soldiers across the planet into their designated positions atop buildings, hills, and the surveillance towers. He teleports Belial and her hospital staff there as well, followed by a contingent of heavily armed monsters and humans to deter rioters and ne'er-do-well's.

Finally, Jason teleports himself and Phoebe across the planet, leaving Fiona behind to activate the Lazarus Tower's functions. When they arrive, the husband and wife duo activate their T-REX's to protect themselves. Then, Jason sends a message to Fiona.

"Do it."

A few moments later, a strange tingling sensation runs across Jason's skin as a huge wave of active mana washes across Tarus II's surface. All at once, hundreds and thousands and millions of beams of light fall upon the ten-by-ten mile plot of land, slamming into the ground and materializing one human after another. As per Fiona's programmed instructions, these humans tend to stick together according to where they originated from, while maintaining a surprisingly even spread with plenty of room between all the new arrivals.

At the same time, two million invisible souls rush across the Milky Way and travel into the storage space of the Lazarus Tower, entering a state of limbo where they will wait until the right time in the future to be resurrected, when Jason and Fiona have completed a method to achieve their ultimate goal.

As the minutes pass, more and more bewildered humans materialize inside the facility. Confused slaves, frightened miners, and even the more free-spirited humans living amidst the Hells of Lust and Isolation appear, all of them completely in the dark about what has just happened. Choruses of crying children, screaming women, and angry men fill the air. People look to one another, demanding to know what just happened, but no matter who they turn to, nobody seems to have any answers.

After more than fifteen minutes, Fiona transmits a message to Jason.

"Done."

She instantly materializes beside her husband, using the Pylons Jason built to instantly travel anywhere on Tarus II as required. When she appears, Jason nods, his nerves stretching taut.

"The moment of truth. We've actually done it!"

With so many people around, Jason becomes visibly excited at the thought of possibly discovering people he's been hoping to find for well over a week now.

"Daisy's soul must be in the Lazarus Tower..." Jason murmurs. "And if we're lucky, Neil should be here too."

"Don't expect too much." Fiona warns her husband. "The method I used to find these people and the errant souls isn't much different from how your Wordsmithing would do it. If you couldn't find someone... the Lazarus Tower probably couldn't, either."

"I don't care." Jason says. "I just have to hope for the best, hope we have some way to save our little girl... and hope her soul hasn't been..."

Phoebe and Fiona both fall silent, descending into momentary melancholy as they experience similar emotions to their husband.

Soon, he will address these rescued people to alleviate their concerns.

Soon, the next phase of his master plan will come into action.

* * *

Meanwhile, inside the vast and sprawling camp, some of the rescuees don't appear quite as terrified as those around them.

A Japanese man plops to the ground and crosses his legs, while sitting inside a building filled with screaming and ranting people. He surveys those around him with a sense of eerie calmness, as if these new circumstances have nothing to do with him.

"Hoho. How interesting. I didn't expect the Wordsmith to pull off something like this. But... will it be enough? His Karma is filled with signs of trouble. He will have to struggle with all his might if he hopes to free himself from his fate."

And, in another building, a dark-skinned man and his daughter stick together while warily keeping their eyes on the people around them.

"Daddy. Daddy, I'm scared..." The young woman, perhaps twenty years old, whispers. "What's going on? How did we get here? Where are we?"

The man shields his daughter with his body, protecting her from any possible threats. He keeps an eye on the many nearby men and women, his cybernetic eye scoping out threats in the vicinity.

"Don't worry, Lily. Our circumstances are... not necessarily unfortunate. I have a feeling a certain 'Hero' is responsible for accosting us."

"There's so many people." Lily whispers to her father, Benjamin Brown. "What if they attack us?"

"Then I'll kill them all." Benjamin answers. "Nobody will hurt my little girl. Not even a hair on your head."

In dozens of buildings on the easternmost side of the rescue location, a massive wall of humans equipped with T-REX's appear, all of them only a little confused by their

circumstances. They quickly activate their T-REX's, then look at the million or so people around them.

"What the heck are we doing here?"

"Isn't this just another place on Tarus II? Did the Wordsmith bring us here?"

"That's what my suit says."

Jason, watching from above, quickly notices the anomaly.

"Uhh... Fiona. You *did* exclude the humans on Tarus II and in the Core... right?"

Fiona turns red with embarrassment. "Oh, drat! I totally forgot! I was in such a rush..."

"Haha..." Phoebe laughs awkwardly. "At least it's only a minor oversight. We still have allied monsters and demons to protect the Core, and it won't take Jason long to move our people back there."

"Yeah." Jason grumps. "But it's a waste of even more primordial energy."

"Oopsie!" Fiona laughs, sticking out her tongue. "Sorry, honey!"

Part 353: Jason's Speech

Jason and Phoebe take control of the million or so humans they accidentally teleported to the Tarus II Human Relocation Zone from the rest of Tarus II and the Core. The 'HRZ' acts as a population buffer, allowing them to figure out who all the humans they transferred to their capitol world are, what their allegiances might be, and how exactly they can classify these refugees for their own safety.

With Fiona having already messed up, Jason decides to salvage the Tarus native situation by first sending away the children, then assigning the adults in large groups to take control of all the large quadrants. With their distinctive T-REX's made visible, they manage to quickly pacify the humans teleported to Tarus II across all the galaxy.

It only takes thirty minutes to calm the crowds. Once Jason gets a firm grasp on the situation, he checks the numbers.

"Damn. So there are now about forty-seven million humans on Tarus II. That number is both huge and small at the same time."

Fiona nods. "We only had a million human survivors of Stormbringer. The newcomers we've brought to Tarus II outnumber the existing rebels forty-six to one. But at the same time, forty-seven million humans is still nothing compared to the demon population."

"In my era," Jason says, "Forty-seven million people was maybe the size of two or three large metropolitan cities. We're still a long way from humanity's former glory."

"It's a lot better than we've ever had before." Phoebe comments, as the two of them stand atop one of the towers overlooking the entire HRZ. "Now we just have to make sure these people are on the same page as us."

"Alright! It's your turn, Jason!" Fiona says, giving her husband a thumbs-up. "Go get 'em."

Jason nods. He utters a few words of power, causing angelic wings to sprout from his back. Then, he leaps off the tower and flies to a position right in the middle of the compound, more than three hundred feet above the ground.

The Wordsmith conjures a giant astral body of himself, one with a heavy and rich spiritual presence to draw as much attention to himself as possible, while also allowing

those with bad vision to look up and make out his facial features.

"Hello, everyone." Jason says, his words magically translating into any languages the rescued humans might speak that differ from his own. "My name is Jason Hiro. I am the Wordsmith, and this generation's Hero."

His speech draws the attention of the crowd, causing hundreds and thousands and millions of people to look up into the sky and gasp audibly. Never have they seen such a spectacle before!

"What is a 'Hero,' you may ask?" Jason posits. "To put it simply, I am a human who was chosen by divine powers to restore the balance of our galaxy, to bring dignity to our people, and to ensure we no longer suffer under the heels of demonic oppressors. My unique powers allow me to stand up to even the scariest Demon Emperor and put them in their place. Even so, I am not omnipotent. I am not able to defeat all of demonkind by myself, nor should I. I am merely the one person capable of allowing all of *you* to seize back that which should be yours."

Jason continues speaking. He spends several minutes explaining his plans and his goals, telling all of the people below him, both the Tarus natives, and the 46 million newcomers, what their role will be moving forward.

"I have brought you all here from bondage and slavery. No longer will any demons or monsters tell you what to do, hurt you, or mistreat you. If you choose to assist me, I will ensure you obtain the strength necessary to rid yourself of your shackles and become a warrior, a scientist, or even just a commoner living a decent life."

"In my ideal future, humans and demons will either learn to coexist, or we will live separately, no longer fighting among each other. Only in the worst case scenario will one of our species eradicate the other. I do not wish to spread genocide throughout the galaxy."

Every human watches and listens as Jason speaks. Even the slave children, saved through his magic, gaze at the mysterious and powerful figure in the sky with watery eyes, unsure what exactly is going on, but finding comfort in his strong words.

However, many of the newcomers don't look at Jason with appreciation or respect, but annoyance and agitation.

One of those people breaks the silence around him by shouting at the sky. "Liar! I was living just fine until you came along! I don't wanna be a part of your stinking war! The demons treated me just fine!"

Despite the man standing far away from Jason, amidst the vast crowd of people, and his voice not particularly standing out, Jason still turns to look in his general direction.

"Who spoke just now?" Jason asks.

Despite the man's anger, he falls silent, suddenly realizing that raising his voice may have painted a target on his back.

Jason realizes the man's awkward predicament. "There is no need to fear me. I will not hurt my fellow humans. I merely wish to know why you object to my words, and if I can clarify your doubts."

Mildly mollified by Jason's proclamation, the man raises his hand. "I-I said that! It was me!"

Jason nods. He hovers downward a little, bringing himself closer to the man, but making sure not to make brash or intimidating movements while his spiritual body still towers a hundred feet tall.

"What is your name, sir?" Jason asks.

"It's... it's Isaiah." The man says, his balding head and middle-aged appearance giving him the most ordinary of looks. "I don't... I don't want to fight in your war!"

Jason nods. "I understand. Let me ask, where did you live prior to arriving here, on this distant world?"

Isaiah presses his teeth together, feeling a little nervous about the questioning. "Th-the world of Sharmur, my lord."

"Sharmur." Jason repeats. He waits for a moment before nodding. "I see. That world belongs to the Hell of Isolation?"

Isaiah nods, but otherwise says nothing.

Jason glances around at the many thousands of other people in Isaiah's vicinity.

"Are all of you from Sharmur too? Raise your hands if you are."

In unison, more than two million people raise their hands, making Jason nod along once again.

"Thank you for speaking from your heart, Isaiah. That was courageous of you."

Jason levitates back into the sky, to the center of the HRZ.

"To Isaiah and the other people from the Hell of Isolation. If you truly wish to return to Sharmur, I will not stop you. According to my understanding, the Hells of Lust and Isolation treat the humans living among them decently. It makes sense you would not want to join my war, especially when you did quite well for yourselves as you were."

The Wordsmith shakes his head.

"But. You were not free. You are not free. You are still human chattel, in the end. Whether the Emperors of Isolation whipped or beat you, or if they did not, that does not determine your freedom. Look not at your bodies, but your minds. You are not allowed to advance in any meaningful way on Sharmur. You are not allowed to exercise your innate Terran creativity. You are not allowed to innovate technologies which would benefit you. You have to live stagnant, boring lives."

"Debauchery and sexuality are what drives the humans living among Lust and Isolation." Jason continues. "Those are not inherently bad pursuits. However, while you live decent lives of moderation, other humans wallow in agony. Demons beat and whip your fellow man. They tie humans to tables and cut off limbs, or maim them, burn them, poison them... they cause horrific injuries to other humans, all while you live lives they can only dream of pursuing."

"It's sad." Jason murmurs. "Humans once ruled an entire world of our own. Demons feared us. They knew better than to do anything that would incur our wrath. Certainly, we fought, but we were relative equals who did not commit genocide against one or the other on a regular basis. We never enslaved the demons on a mass scale. We didn't commit mass war crimes just to amuse ourselves. And if we did, then I'll condemn anyone who joined in on those acts!"

"The point is," Jason concludes, "you are all a part of this war, whether you want to be or not. If you insist on returning to your worlds, I'll send you back. But know this: Your inaction will cost the lives of countless fellow men, women, and children. I would know. I lost my daughter because I tried to sit on the sidelines. If you make the same mistakes as me, how many of your children will perish?"

Jason shoots a pointed glance not only at Isaiah, but the woman beside him, and their two little boys. The family of four huddles together, listening with rapt attention to the

Wordsmith's speech. Isaiah lowers his head in shame, feeling somewhat 'small' after hearing the Wordsmith's proclamation.

The Wordsmith turns a little in midair to look at a different section of the refugees, continuing to hover through the magical energy of his angelic wings.

"My people will go through and take a voting tally among all of you. If you don't want to participate in this war, then so be it. I will return you to wherever you came from. If you do, however, you will receive accommodations, a decent house to live in, food, and a life without abuse. You will learn of the magic humanity commands, and the methods we will eventually use to crush the demons and make them fear us as they once did."

"Humans are not weak. You have all grown up and lived lives believing the opposite, but look around you! Look at my fearsome warriors with their powerful suits of armor! Any one of them can match a Demon Lord. United, a hundred can match a Baron! Even a thousand can match a Duke! And while no number can currently match an Emperor... hehehe. That will not be the case forever."

Jason crooks a smile.

"The demons fear you. They fear me. They fear all of us. And they should! Humans are not weaklings. We are the most fearsome species in the whole galaxy! That is why they use our souls as food and our bodies as labor! They seek to humiliate us and break our spirits. But so long as we unite, we can force them to bow their heads and fear us once more!"

"Not for the sake of genocide." Jason explains. "But for a better future where humans and demons can stand together. One where we respect each other as equals, and perhaps even collaborate to improve each other's lots in life."

The Wordsmith raises his eyes to the shining sky above.

"Besides. If we do not someday learn to work together... the great Threat will come for all of us. It will kill us all, and no amount of regrets will save us."

A long pause follows as Jason allows the people beneath him to ruminate on his words.

He sweeps his eyes across the masses, causing them to lower their heads and close their eyes.

The countless rescued slaves eagerly look forward to any scraps he might give them. Compared to slaving under the demons, any improvement from their lot in life is desirable.

Some of the better treated slaves, or those who didn't suffer as badly, still look forward to joining the Wordsmith's cause.

And even among the humans from the Hell of Isolation and Lust, those who lived decent lives and who have better developed brains, they still follow along with Jason's logic, making them realize they could be doing so much better under him than under their former demon comrades.

Isaiah raises his head once more.

"My lord! I wish... I wish to join your cause! But first, I have a question."

Jason nods. "Go on."

"You state that we must face the demons in battle. I believe under your leadership, we may ultimately prevail. However! I have no animosity toward my friends from the Hell of Isolation. Will you force me to strike at them? If so, I cannot join you."

"That is an excellent question." Jason says, with a smile. "My understanding of the Hell of Isolation is that it doesn't involve itself in the matters of other demons. Therefore, if they remain neutral and do not join in on the attacks against humans, I promise not to hurt them. I seek the unification of humans and demons. But also, I intend to *purge* the evil leaders corrupting demon society, as well. It will be up to you to decide whether you think your friends from the Hell of Isolation will stand against us."

"But." Jason adds. "If they do join in to attack us, I will not show them mercy. I can only hope they will take the path of peace and remember their friendship with people like you."

Isaiah nods slowly. His courage in speaking up causes others nearby to look at him with appreciation as he takes the risks onto himself.

"I see. Then in that case, I will pledge myself to your cause!"

Isaiah raises his fist in support of the Wordsmith!

Not long after, another man from the Hell of Isolation raises his fist.

"As will I!"

"And me, too!"

"So shall I!"

Men and women alike join in the chorus, their voices gradually increasing in numbers. As Jason watches, the vast majority of people he rescued raise their fists in support of joining his resistance. He smiles faintly, listening to the roar of humanity rising up to join his cause.

Only a small fraction don't end up joining in. Jason makes a note of these people, but does not blame them for their decision.

"Thank you, everyone. It takes courage to fight against the status quo. For too long, the demons have trampled on your lives, and your dignity. Some of you have chosen not to join me, and that is acceptable. I will send you back to your homes in a short time, and you may return to your lives. But, I would still ask you one last time to consider my offer. I will grant all those who return special magical artifacts. If you should choose to accept the call of your people, you will only need to activate your medallions to alert my people to your change of heart. We will welcome all humans with open arms!"

Jason concludes his speech shortly thereafter, flying away and diminishing his presence before landing atop the tower where his wives stand.

"That Isaiah fellow is interesting." Jason mutters. "Let's keep an eye on him. I bet he'd make for good officer material."

Phoebe nods. "Great speech, honey."

"I almost couldn't tell you improvised the whole thing." Fiona snarks. "Are you just a natural at speech-crafting?"

The Wordsmith shrugs. "I only spoke from the heart. More importantly, let's figure out how we can deal with all these people."

"I have a suggestion." Phoebe says. "Currently, a little under nine percent of the refugees seem to wish to return home. Let's detain them for a while for processing, while allowing them to roam in the main cities. Perhaps after seeing the marvels of our lifestyle, they'll change their minds and want to stay."

"Good idea." Jason says, smiling at his wife. He leans in to give her a kiss before noticing Fiona's look of annoyance. "You want a kiss too, honey?"

"Pft. Obviously." Fiona pouts. "Hurry up and make me a body. I'm tired of missing out!"

"Soon, I promise." Jason says, smiling lovingly at her.

He turns away to look back at the crowds below.

"Alright. Our people are more than capable of rounding up these newcomers. I'll leave it in the capable hands of our subordinates. Let's hurry up and get some soldiers back to reinforce the Core. Then... we can check the souls inside the Lazarus Tower."

Jason's voice raises an octave at the mention of the souls he stole from Mephisto.

"...She HAS to be there! I won't accept it otherwise!"

Phoebe nods solemnly. "We'll find Daisy, Jason. All souls have to pass through the River Styx before reaching the Great Beyond. There are only two reasons she wouldn't be there..."

A flicker of hatred passes across Jason's face.

"Either Beelzebub's attack annihilated her soul... or Mephisto already put her inside an undead body. If the latter, we won't be able to recover her with the Lazarus Tower. I'll have to scour all of the Seven Hells to find our little girl."

"She's alive." Fiona mutters. "I know she is. Our daughter is too strong to simply..."

Fiona trails off, leaving the implication to hang.

After a few minutes, Jason, Phoebe, and Fiona take their leave. They travel back to the Lazarus tower to search its two million souls not only for their daughter, but for the souls of other people they pray they will find.

At the same time, back inside the HRZ compounds, tens of thousands of experienced soldiers round up all the human refugees to conduct examinations and surveys of the people they've rescued.

Among them are two high ranking personnel: Corporal Hurent and Lieutenant Samuel.

The female Corporal sits at a table, with Samuel beside her. Five chairs sit across from them, allowing up to a family of five to take seats for their interviews.

"Names?" Hurent asks, directing her attention to a man, a woman, and their five year old daughter.

"My name is Richard." The man says. "This is my wife, Kathy, and our child, Stacy."

Hurent continues jotting down their information over the next several minutes, taking their words at face value. A more thorough investigation of all the people will come later, after every single refugee has had their identities uploaded into Centurion's databases.

Once she finishes with that family and they walk away, she turns to Samuel.

"Thoughts?"

"They seem clean." Samuel says. "The father was a little nervous, but I picked up a lot of excitement, too."

"Jason's speech was quite uplifting." Hurent says, with a smile. "It really warmed my heart."

"Yeah. It was a good line of bullshit." Samuel mutters. "Christ, do I hate speeches. They put me right to sleep."

Hurent gestures to a nearby trooper. "Next."

She and Samuel watch as a dark-skinned man, appearing to be about fifty years old, and his daughter, perhaps twenty, take a seat before them.

Samuel's eyes flicker as he examines the man's finely tailored suit, his muscular body, and his calm, collected eyes. Even the daughter appears lovely and well-taken care of. Her bright pink hair stands out from the people around her, making Samuel postulate several interesting possibilities.

"Names?" Hurent asks.

The father smiles, exposing his teeth.

"Benjamin Brown. And this is my daughter, Lily."

Hurent doesn't give the name much thought, and neither does Samuel, but he does keep a close watch on Benjamin's face as he talks.

"Place of origin?" Hurent asks.

Benjamin stares at her for a moment before slightly nodding.

"Hell Harbor."

Hurent, previously jotting down his information on a tablet in her hand, raises her head to meet his gaze.

"Oh? Hell Harbor?"

"That's right." Benjamin Brown says. "I have been... looking forward to meeting Jason Hiro."

"You know the Wordsmith?" Samuel asks.

"Where I come from, everyone knows Jason Hiro's illustrious name." Benjamin coolly says. "I'll cut straight to the point. Since I'm here, I want you to set up a meeting with the Wordsmith. Tell him... I know Ose's grand plan."

"You... know Ose?" Hurent asks.

"What sort of relationship do you have with our most hated enemy?" Samuel asks, narrowing his eyes to slits.

"Like most humans, I have been a prisoner of the demons for almost my entire life." Benjamin slowly explains. "But this is a unique opportunity. I can finally help my people break free of their shackles. It would be wonderful if we can unite to stop the demonic menace, once and for all."

"Well said!" Hurent exclaims, immediately warming up to Benjamin. "That's the line of thought that'll make you one of my comrades!"

Samuel smiles too, though his expression is noticeably less warm than Hurent's.

"I see. So it's like that. Then, by all means. I'll make sure the Wordsmith speaks to you as soon as possible, Sir Benjamin Brown. I do hope you're not lying, or the consequences would be... severe."

"No, no." Benjamin says, raising his palm. "I would never lie about such an important matter. Believe me, I want humanity to return to its rightful place in the galaxy just as much as you."

He laughs.

"Haha. Why, at one point, when I was much younger, I even fought against the demons! It would be nice if I could still do that, but I'm getting quite old. My body just isn't what it used to be."

"You fought against the demons?" Hurent repeats. "But... but how? When?"

"I'm much older than I look." Benjamin says. "Much, *much* older."

He continues talking with the two officers for more than fifteen minutes. Eventually, Samuel waves over a subordinate.

"Take these two to the VIP area."

"Yes, sir!"

Benjamin and Lily stand up. As they turn to follow the trooper, Benjamin smiles at the two officers.

"Miss Hurent. Lovely speaking to you. And you as well, Mister Samuel."

"Have a great day!" Lily exclaims, waving cheerfully at them.

The father and daughter walk away, led by the soldier.

After they leave, Hurent leans back in her seat and sighs.

"Wow. I can't believe it. That Benjamin fellow is a cyborg, well over 100,000 years old. He actually fought against demonkind during the Energy Wars!"

Samuel purses his lips. "Yes. Impressive."

"Hm? Is something the matter?" Hurent asks, turning to scrutinize Samuel's face. "You seem upset."

"Not upset." Samuel says, slowly crossing his arms. "But concerned. That Benjamin... he's not as simple as he seems."

"Oh?" Hurent asks. "In what way?"

"Don't you think it's odd?" Samuel asks. "If we take Benjamin's words at face value, he killed Demon Emperors when he was younger. Yet, despite all of that, once demons pacified humanity, they not only let him live, but put him on their homeworld and let him live a luxurious life."

"He has a fighter's spirit." Hurent says. "Benjamin still hates the demons for what they did to humanity."

Samuel turns to look at her. His expression becomes indescribable.

"...I wonder about that."

Part 354: Benjamin's Backstory

Inside the Lazarus Tower.

Jason and Phoebe stand behind Fiona while she manipulates a custom-designed spiritual projection of data relating to the errant souls now 'swimming' within the Lazarus Tower's confines. With nothing to protect their souls, all their memories open up to Fiona, allowing her to visualize their entire lives as she pleases. She gains full access to every drop of knowledge they possess, allowing her to easily figure out the identities of every rescued human soul under her control.

Minutes stretch out into an hour. Jason and Phoebe watch silently as Fiona does her thing, combing through each of the one million souls one by one, until finally, Jason becomes too antsy to keep silent.

"This is taking forever." He mutters.

"I'm sorry." Fiona says, turning her head to smile apologetically at Jason. "I can't go any faster. There are more than a million souls here. I don't have an AI capable of reading and interpreting spiritual information, nor any way to 'filter' which souls I can look at first. I have to check them one by one to find Daisy."

Jason chews his lip. "How many have you checked so far?"

After a long, awkward pause, Fiona looks away and blushes.

"...Seventy-two."

The Wordsmith's brain practically implodes. He spins on his heel and sighs deeply. "That's not even remotely good enough! Seventy-two souls! At this rate it'll take you like, what, a million more minutes to search all the souls? What does that even come out to, like... like five months?"

"1 year, 10 months, 3 weeks, 8 days, and 40 minutes." Phoebe answers immediately, without batting an eye. When Jason looks at her in astonishment, she snorts. "*Roughly.*"

"There HAS to be a way to speed this process up!" Jason complains, louder than before. "We need to know if Daisy is in there!"

Both women fall silent, nodding along to Jason's words. Their joking attitude fades, replaced instead with grim seriousness.

"Yeah. We do." Fiona mutters. "But I really don't have a way to speed this process up. Unless..."

"Unless?" Jason asks, turning to face her. "Unless what?"

For nearly a full minute, nobody says anything. Fiona stops her work to rub her chin. She hems and haws, shifting her gaze to look at the ten orbs floating above her. After a while, she smacks her forehead.

"Aha!"

"Aha?" Jason repeats.

She nods. "Ah-ha! I'm an errant soul, you see. So I can fly inside the tower's Soul Storage and question the other souls in groups. It's less reliable than searching their memories, but I can interview them all a hundred times quicker than if I manually searched their memories. Until they return to physical bodies, they won't lie to me, either, as their sense of 'person' won't return until they step back into the material world."

"That makes sense." Phoebe says with a nod. She looks at Jason. "But it will still take Fiona a while. We might as well get back to work until she finishes. We're wasting too much time standing here, when the demons could attack at any moment."

Jason hesitates for quite a while before groaning.

"Alright. Alright! I do have things I need to be doing. Fiona, just... you know, tell me when you're done."

His mind-wife nods. "I will. If Daisy's in here, I'll find her, Jason. I will."

Jason turns to leave, but pauses.

"Say, if you can go in there, what about Lorent and Shana?"

"Oh! That's a great point!" Fiona says, her eyes immediately sparkling. "Lorent is probably still walking with Shana off near the north side of the Fortress. Can you let him know what I'm doing and ask if he'll help? You can take care of Shana while we work, right?"

"I can." Jason says, flashing her a thumbs-up. "See you later, alligator."

"See you in a while, crocodile." Fiona laughs, before turning into a ball of light and flying into the Lazarus Tower's Soul Storage.

After she leaves, Jason momentarily becomes gloomy.

"Crocodile, huh..."

He shakes his head, turns around, and leaves with Phoebe on his arm.

After Jason and Phoebe leave, they give each other a kiss and split off, with Phoebe heading over to one of her workshops to manage the prototypes of the Power Glove, while Jason contacts Lorent and sends him to assist Fiona. After Lorent leaves, Jason turns to Shana's spirit-body, standing beside him, next to his knee.

"Hey, Shana! You wanna hang out with uncle Jason?"

[Yeah!] She exclaims.

Jason picks up the little girl and hoists her onto his shoulders, piggyback-style, just like he used to do with Daisy. Despite Shana's body being incorporeal and therefore weightless, the faint presence of her soul still makes her vaguely touchable, and thus, the Wordsmith can barely make out the sensation of her sitting on his shoulders if he concentrates his attention.

[Where we go? What we do?] Shana asks excitedly, while Jason hops around and bobs her on his shoulders.

"We are going to go talk to some friends!" Jason says, keeping his tone chipper. "I need to get some work done on-"

Before Jason can finish his sentence, a transmission beams into an earpiece lodged in his right ear, interrupting him.

He pauses, then frowns as a trooper in the HRZ communicates with him.

"What? Benjamin Brown? Why does that name sound familiar..."

It doesn't take Jason long before a memory flashes through his mind.

"Right. Tucker, that Hero in the revolver. Didn't he work with a guy named Benjamin Brown? But that was during the Energy Wars. There's no way he could still be alive..."

Remembering Marie's continued survival, Jason cocks his head.

"Well, I mean, there's not 'no' way, I suppose."

Jason shrugs, then teleports himself and Shana to a designated meeting location at the edge of the HRZ, arriving atop a small building with a flat roof. At this position, no other humans would be in his way, and thus, he doesn't worry about accidentally teleporting inside someone, along with the gruesome implications.

He continues to allow Shana to ride piggyback while jumping off the roof. He walks through a doorway, and her head passes through the door's frame above, thanks to her spiritual body. If she were a real child, she'd have banged her head and started to cry, but luckily that doesn't happen.

The Wordsmith walks into the building to find a half dozen troopers in exosuits scattered around the room, standing guard, yet also at ease. They leave their guns slung over their backs, and only stay inside as a matter of ceremony, rather than due to any specific security concerns.

In the center of the room, a small rectangular table sits, along with ten chairs, two of them occupied by a dark-skinned man and woman. The man, Benjamin Brown, leans back in his chair and smiles at Jason, while the woman, Lily, eyes him curiously.

"So." Benjamin says, rising to his feet. "You are the Wordsmith. I have heard so much about you."

Jason pauses for half a second, eying Benjamin with surprise.

What the hell? It really is the same guy! Benjamin looks quite a bit older, but not so much 100,000 years as maybe 50 or 60...

Jason walks over to Benjamin Brown and shakes his hand. "I'm Jason Hiro. This cute girl on my shoulders is Shana."

Benjamin glances at the girl and nods. "An errant soul?"

"Something like that." Jason replies, not elaborating further.

Perhaps, if Benjamin were to know the child was actually an ancient Hero, he might be shocked and more than a little suspicious regarding her origins.

"This is my daughter, Lily." Ben says, gesturing to the pink-haired woman beside him.

When Jason hears her name and turns his attention away from Benjamin, his heart nearly stops.

Holy shit! Lily? She's that woman Fiona made out with while possessing my body! She's actually the daughter of Benjamin Brown, too! How many coincidences can there be in this world??

The Wordsmith forces a pained smile. "Pleasure to meet you, Lily. Um. Samantha... talks about you."

"Samantha?" Lily asks, cocking her head. "Do I know a Samantha?"

"Belial." Jason explains. "She calls herself Samantha, these days."

"OH! Beli! Yes, I saw her not too long ago!" Lily exclaims, her expression brightening. "She and I got all cozy and- ulp!"

Lily swallows her words when her father turns to look at her with an annoyed expression.

"I thought I told you to keep away from that seductress." Benjamin snaps. "You never do as I say!"

"But daddyyy!" Lily pouts. "I love Beli! She and I are such good... ahem, friends! We're *such good friends!*"

"Friends don't shove their tongues inside each other's cheeks." Benjamin grumbles.

With that out of the way, Jason takes a seat at the table directly across from Benjamin. Shana continues to sit on his shoulders, but also lazily flops across the top of his head and lets her arms hang down. Given her weightless body, the Wordsmith doesn't even notice her movements unless he pays close attention.

"So. Why did you want to see me?" Jason asks. "To be honest, I didn't know you were still alive. You specifically, I mean. I thought you would have died ages ago, given you're from the Energy Wars, and all that."

Benjamin's expression remains neutral. "Oh? You know about my involvement in the Energy Wars? I guess the rumors are true. You must have spoken to Marie."

Jason mentally facepalms. "Ah, yeah. Cat's out of the bag, I suppose."

"Haha. Me and Marie go way back..." Benjamin muses. "We're both more machine than human, these days. But back during those old wars... well, she and I were an item for a while. It's too bad about what happened to her. We drifted apart after the incident."

"What do you mean?" Jason asks. "What incident?"

"You should know perfectly well." Benjamin counters. "She was a human, once. Now she is a machine. She even keeps her former brain on her desk, as if it were a trophy she conquered. Once she made the transition from mortal to immortal she... changed."

Benjamin releases a long, soft sigh.

"She was never a particularly lovable woman, mind you. But after she cast aside her fleshly body, she lost all traces of humanity. Compassion, love, all of it. She became a cold and calculating genius, able to think tens of thousands of times faster and more intensely than ever before. Even today, she's nothing more than a ball of schemes. I broke our relationship off when I realized she had lost all romantic interest in me."

Jason pokes his chin thoughtfully. "That can't be right. I saw with my own eyes that Marie still cares for her crocodiles and alligators. She treats the lizardmen like beloved pets, heaping adoration upon them."

"Oh? For some reason, she still loves them, yes." Benjamin affirms, as if remembering that one detail. "But to be fair, she's always loved lizards and reptiles. It's because of her grandfather, you see."

Benjamin pauses before continuing.

"Her grandfather adored her. I never met the fellow, he was long dead before I ever came into the picture, but the way Marie talked about him, she acted as if he was the kindest and most doting man she had ever known."

Benjamin glances at Jason. "You were cryogenically frozen, right? You lived around the time of the Energy Wars, if I remember correctly."

"I did, yes." Jason says with a nod. "Bit before, I think. I went into cryo-stasis in the year 2020."

"Oh, that was quite a while before the war itself broke out." Benjamin mutters. "Well, Marie's grandfather, apparently he fought in World War II. I have to respect veterans of the Two Great Wars. What was his name? Harold, I think? Hmm. You should ask her about him sometime. If she still has any humanity left in her, she'll absolutely break into starry-eyed smiles talking about old Harold."

Jason nods, but the topic of Marie's lineage doesn't interest him much. "Right. Well, regarding your arrival here...?"

"Sorry. I lost my train of thought." Benjamin chuckles. "I decided I want to join your resistance. The demons have harmed humanity for too long, and it's about time someone fought back. Having a Hero, versus not having a Hero, those two things are very different scenarios."

He continues. "Frankly, I wanted to join you sooner, but I was in an untenable position, living on Hell Harbor. I couldn't have possibly gotten my daughter and the rest of our family out alive, not while escaping the demons, so you saved me a great deal of trouble."

"I'm glad to help." Jason says. "Though I am curious. According to the files Lieutenant Samuel sent me, you lived a pretty good life on Hell Harbor. Heck, you even lived in the Slithering Spire, which is the place Beelzebub ran. Beelzebub... the same demon who detonated his body and killed over a million people, including my daughter. How do you explain... all of that situation?"

As if connecting the dots, Benjamin looks up at Shana and sighs.

"I'm... sorry about your child."

"Shana isn't my daughter." Jason answers, his expression turning cold. "Not the one who died, anyway. I might adopt Shana at some point, but don't misunderstand."

"Ah. I see. I thought, given her spirit-body... never mind."

Benjamin Brown shakes his head.

"That Beelzebub. He was quite the monster. Nobody liked him. Why, I even fought him, once. He nearly killed me."

"You did?" Jason asks, visibly surprised. "With your robotic body, you were able to face a Duke?"

"I didn't say I won. I lost, and quite badly." Benjamin mutters. "If he were a Baron, I'd have likely crushed him. But as a Duke, Beelzebub was simply too formidable. Oh, yes, and his servant girl attacked my sweet Lily, as well. Psh. Compared to Master Agares, that Beelzebub was nothing but trouble."

Lily scowls. "That fat b-word! Jeez! She was so infuriating."

"Anyway," Benjamin continues, "I am here now, and that's what matters. I hope you will accept my help in fighting the demons. I was once a feared enemy of their kind. I killed more than a dozen Dukes, but never managed to slay a genuine Emperor."

Jason gazes at the man across from him, as if trying to pierce through Ben's skin with his eyes.

"What are you, exactly? Are you like Marie?"

"No, no, heavens, no." Benjamin says. "Marie placed her soul and memories into a robotic body. My body, however, is still about fifty percent organic. I am a cyborg. A Vanguard, to be more specific. During the Energy Wars, super soldiers like me were created by the world governments to stand up to our demon and Volgrim enemies."

Benjamin slaps his left bicep.

"Plenty of my skin and muscles are still 100% grade-A human. My internal organs, though, those were replaced ages ago. It's why I can't die of old age. I have the unique ability to repair my fleshy-parts through the process of absorption."

Jason narrows his eyes in concentration. "I don't follow. You can, what? Absorb flesh to restore flesh?"

"Not flesh. Energy. Mana, in particular." Benjamin says. "Since my enemies were primarily demons, Marie made systems capable of ripping the mana out of other life forms to rapidly regenerate my body in the event I took too much damage. This ability was also quite useful against Psions, but not against humans or other entities of a non-magical nature, such as Technopaths, Changelings, and so on. Not only did I have this ability, but so did all the other Vanguards. Sadly, they all died during the final battle. I am the only one remaining."

Benjamin lowers his eyes. He exhales deeply.

"Tsk... I lost my brother to the Volgrim. Darnell Brown. He was a good man, and an excellent soldier. But the higher-ups used him as a sacrifice to save lives. I'm sure he was happy to go out a hero if it meant fewer civilian casualties."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Jason mutters. "That can't have been easy to deal with."

"Losing family never is." Benjamin answers, shooting a pointed look at the Wordsmith. "I'm sure you'd know."

"Mmm."

Jason and Benjamin both remain quiet for a few seconds, allowing the atmosphere to tense up.

"Regarding my joining you." Benjamin eventually says. "I am old now. I can still fight like hell, if necessary, but I am also an accomplished war veteran and tactician. If I can help you fend off the demonic hordes, I will happily lend my assistance."

"That's... an awfully generous offers." Jason says slowly. "But letting a newcomer into the command structure, especially someone who's lived among demons... I'm sure you can understand my hesitation."

"I am no friend of demonkind." Benjamin says.

"I would never say as much." Jason replies. "But that doesn't mean others will believe you. I can't personally vouch for you. I could simply force everyone to accept my decision, but I would prefer not to rely on such means. It's better if everyone accepts you themselves, for the sake of top-level cohesion."

"Haha. I completely understand." Ben says, holding his open palms outward in a show of good faith. "I would be alarmed if I were in your position, too. What if I am actually a demonic sympathizer? It would not be a wise choice to grant me access to any classified information. Perhaps we should shelve my joining for a time. I'm in no rush, though given the movements I've heard about from the demon higher-ups, they certainly are."

"What movements?" Jason asks. His gaze shows a trace of suspicion. "And... how do you know about what the demon higher-ups are planning?"

"Ose and the rest have held me hostage for tens of millennia," Benjamin says, raising his chin and sighing helplessly toward the ceiling. "They used my daughters, my sons, and my wives as collateral to keep me in check. On the surface, I was a free man living in the Slithering Spire. But in reality, I was a pawn they yanked around to try and deduce the thoughts of their human enemies. That means you."

"I was under the impression Ose was an expert in human psychological warfare." Jason says, continuing to stare with suspicion at Benjamin. "Why would she need your opinion?"

"Ose might have attended human universities and absorbed much of our literature, but she is not a human herself." Benjamin explains. "If you were in her position, would you not seek a second opinion? Just to ensure the smoothness of your plans. Even now, do you not ask Belial for help when dealing with demons?"

"Ah. That does make sense." Jason mutters, loosening his gaze and leaning back in his chair. "Hmm. I can see how all of those millennia would be a real problem for you. Well, if nothing else, I am an advocate for second chances. Forgive and forget, and all of that."

"That is a noble ideal." Benjamin says, smiling. "Forgiveness is the virtue closest to the Creator, while greed is the sin he hates most."

"I didn't take you for a religious man." Jason says, his tone more casual than at the start of their conversation.

"Oh, I'm not religious in the least." Benjamin retorts. "But... I've had a few out of body experiences. I once dreamed that I spoke to the Creator. It didn't go quite the way I imagined. He was... surprisingly casual. Less lofty than I expected."

"Dreams can be strange, indeed." Jason concludes.

The Wordsmith and Benjamin continue talking idly for a while.

Eventually, Jason rests his hands on his lap.

"I'll take your request under consideration, Benjamin. After losing Neil, we've been needing someone with strategic large-scale warfare knowledge. My future plans require that I shore up my mental weaknesses with someone more proficient in these matters, though such candidates are, as you might expect, difficult to find."

"And what exactly are your future plans?" Benjamin casually asks.

Jason quietly raps his fingers against his thighs, thinking carefully about whether or not he should trust Benjamin with any specific information.

"...I'm developing powerful new weapons to deal with the demons." Jason slowly says. "One of them might even be compatible with your physiology. It would let humans, demons, and monsters transform their bodies into other species. I call it the Power Glove. Once I finish work on it, it will allow my armies to fight at levels not seen even in the Energy Wars."

Benjamin's eyes glint with interest. "That sounds exciting. I won't lie, such a device interests me greatly. I'm something of a battle-maniac myself. Or at least, I was in my youth. Still, my old servos sometimes ache for a chance to crush some skulls."

"Maybe you'll get a shot at that, and soon." Jason replies.

After a while, Jason stands up. Benjamin and Lily do as well, giving the Hero a farewell as he turns to leave the room.

"This conversation has been pretty interesting." Jason says. "Thank you for your unique insights. I'll keep in touch."

"I'll be here if you need me." Benjamin answers, bowing his head.

The Wordsmith nods. He shakes Benjamin's hand, then leaves the man and his daughter alone in the room.

After the Wordsmith departs, Benjamin casually sits back down. He requests a cup of coffee from one of the nearby guards, then smiles at his daughter.

"There's nothing to be worried about, Lily. It seems we'll be able to make a... *bigger impact* here than we could before."

Lily blinks twice at her father's cryptic words.

"Hmm? Daddy?"

"Ahaha..." Benjamin chuckles lightly. A strange gleam shimmers in his eyes. "Fate likes to play tricks on people. Who would have thought I'd end up here... right in the *heart* of the human resistance."

Part 355: Karma and Fate

After Jason leaves Benjamin Brown behind, he stops outside the building and casually glances around, looking at all of the people milling about the Human Relocation Zone. With tens of millions of people in one location, it might ordinarily become an absolute clusterfuck, with people scared and afraid and uncertain of where to go. However, thanks to the smooth direction of carefully placed troopers wearing exosuits, most of the refugees don't descend into chaos. Instead, they treat the soldiers like signposts, asking where the bathrooms are, where to obtain food, where to sleep, and so on.

As Jason watches, families with children repeatedly walk up to troopers scattered about, asking for directions. The men and women of Jason's army politely explain where to go, even offering additional details to ensure no accidents happen along the way.

But Jason doesn't pay much attention to them.

Instead, he dwells on his conversation with Benjamin Brown. He thinks about the words the man uttered, and the hidden implications lurking under the surface.

"That Benjamin..." Jason mutters. He touches his finger, casually intending to rub Gabriel's ring, only to remember he gave it to Uriel. After blanking out for a moment, he sighs.

"Shana. What did you think about Benjamin Brown?"

The little girl, still sitting on his shoulders while flopped over top of his head, shrugs casually.

[Don't know. He not good.]

"Oh?" Jason asks. "You didn't like him?"

[No. He bad man.]

The Wordsmith purses his lips. "He lived in the Slithering Spire. He knew Beelzebub personally. I doubt he had something to do with Daisy's death... but in my heart, I can't trust him easily. Plus, there were those *tidbits* he knew. He seems to be awfully well-acquainted with Ose. I can't just let him waltz into my command structure."

Despite his strong words, Jason sighs. "Haah... but then again, without Neil around, Phoebe has to do all the heavy lifting. I can't keep foisting all the work onto my gal. I'm

not much of a tactician, though... I really need a second opinion. Raphael's advice would likely prove bloodthirsty beyond all reason, and Neil isn't around anymore. What to do... what to do... should I invite Ben into the fold?"

The Wordsmith chews his lip.

"So many things could go wrong. He's a cyborg. What if he has some advanced hacking implants? What if he's strong enough to overpower my commandos? He could rush over and hurt, capture, or even kill Phoebe before anyone could stop him. That's not a risk I can afford to take."

Jason glances to the west, in the vague, general direction of the Warpgate.

"...Maybe I could talk to Marie, again. She knows about Vanguards. But do I trust that woman? That robot-husk of a human? Not particularly. The last time we saw each other, I 'borrowed' some artifacts and ran away, leaving her in the lurch. Still, a genius like her, she could absolutely find a way to travel to Tarus II, or send one of her goons, yet she hasn't. What are her actions telling me?"

Frustrated, Jason teleports himself atop a nearby rooftop, gaining a bird's eye view of the compound. He absentmindedly allows his eyes to wander while he continues thinking out loud.

"The Power Gloves aren't ready. If the demons attack, I'll have to fight them myself. What measures can I take to protect everyone before they get here? Visiting Marie can come *after* I make the demons piss themselves in fear."

As Jason continues to muse, his eyes randomly notice an anomaly in the crowd. While thousands of people walk about below him, one figure stands, unmoving, looking directly up at Jason with his hands folded behind his back. This single unmoving person catches the Wordsmith's attention, making him pause his thoughts to look more closely.

"What the heck? Makoto Ueda?!"

Jason blinks his eyes several times to make sure he isn't hallucinating. A huge smile spreads across his face.

"Makoto! It's really him! Holy shit, and here I thought he might have died!"

The Wordsmith teleports to the ground, just a few feet in front of Makoto.

"Hey! Where have you been?" Jason asks. "I was worried a demon might have assassinated you or something!"

Makoto politely smiles at the Wordsmith, his eyes curving into crescent moons.

"Jason. It is good to see you. And Shana, as well. Such a cute child."

Jason continues smiling, but a flicker of confusion passes across his eyes.

"Eh? You know Shana? I don't remember introducing you to her."

"Haha. Such a sweet young girl. Of course I know her name." Makoto says nonchalantly. "Come, come. Let us go and have a seat, Jason. I've been wanting to talk to you for a while."

Jason nods, but the more 'Makoto' talks, the more alien he sounds.

Since when did Makoto stop calling me 'Jason-san'? The Wordsmith wonders.

A moment later, a second realization hits him.

I couldn't locate Makoto previously, but now he suddenly appears before me. Isn't this a little too... coincidental? And he's acting so differently. Could he be...

An instant later, Jason jumps back from Makoto and holds out his hand.

"**Conjure.**" The Wordsmith says, summoning a rifle from a storage somewhere on Tarus II, a predetermined location he made explicitly for this purpose. "You're not Makoto. You're a Changeling!"

Makoto continues to smile, ignoring the weapon aimed at his chest. All around him, several troopers take notice of Jason's movements and draw their own guns, converging on the Hero's location.

"Haha. Indeed, I am not Makoto Ueda." The man says. "But neither am I not *not* Makoto Ueda. You have good eyes, Wordsmith. Fortunately, I am not a Volgrim Changeling either. You have misunderstood my identity."

"Who the fuck are you, then?" Jason asks, his tone turning menacing. "Speak!"

Ten soldiers in T-REX's surround Makoto, while others quickly pull the civilians away to clear the vicinity. Even with a dozen guns aimed at him from all directions, Makoto continues to smile, unmoved.

"Who am I? That is a difficult question to answer. The answer itself is simple, but the reason and methods, not so much."

Makoto pauses to open his eyes and glance at Shana.

"Why not ask the little girl? She knows. Shana's spiritual senses are much more attuned than yours, Wordsmith."

Shana sighs. [Is good man. Not bad.]

Jason frowns. "You like to speak in riddles. That's cute, but it won't stop me from throwing you in a jail cell and torturing the answer out of you. Say the truth, imposter!"

Makoto's smile fades away.

"Very well. You are not much fun, not like Arthur was, or little Joan. I will say my name, but it will be up to you to believe me."

He presses his palm against his chest.

"My name is Siddhartha Gautama. I have reincarnated into Makoto Ueda's body through a fortunate coincidence. A stroke of fate, if you will. But most foreigners find my full name to be 'clunky.' You may call me 'Buddha.'"

Jason stares at the man before him with a look of growing confusion.

"Huh? Reincarnated? Buddha? What are you even..."

"Come now." Buddha says, chuckling lightly. "In all your years speaking to Solomon, did he never once mention me? We were acquaintances, after all."

Jason shakes his head.

"He never mentioned you, no."

Buddha's expression freezes.

"What, *seriously*? That unfilial little brat! Hmph. Some seeker of knowledge indeed. Doesn't even think to mention the man who trained him in hand-to-hand combat... grumble grumble..."

Jason glances upward in Shana's general direction.

"Uh. Is he...?"

Shana nods. [Good man. Tells truth.]

The Wordsmith's expression droops.

"You're kidding."

* * *

Not long afterward, once Buddha has cleared up the misunderstanding, he and Jason take a seat at a bench-table Jason summons atop a nearby rooftop, for privacy. Siddhartha Gautama sips tea from a China cup, one Jason also summoned through a Word of Power, while meeting the Wordsmith's gaze.

"You have many questions." Buddha observes. "I will answer them."

"You're, like, actually Buddha?" Jason asks. "As in, *Buddha*, Buddha? From Chinese mythology?"

"Hmph. Ignorant American." Buddha grumbles. "Why do people from that continent always get my origins wrong? I am Indian. That was my first birthplace."

"Oops. Sorry. I don't really know much about... you." Jason mumbles in embarrassment. "I didn't even know Buddha was a Hero. You were, I mean. I didn't know you were a Hero."

"Many noteworthy historical figures were Heroes." Buddha says, while calmly sipping his tea. "I am not all that impressive."

"But you're sitting right here, before me, *alive*." Jason says. "Are you immortal?"

"No. It is due to my last remaining Heroic Aspect." Buddha says. "When I first walked the Earth, I possessed many powers, some direct, and others more spiritual in nature. Of those, the most nebulous was my ability to 'Fateweave,' or to change the course of Karma. Upon my death, my soul did not transfer to an artifact, like Solomon's did, but instead, I reincarnated into a new body and lived a second life. This was my process of reincarnation."

Buddha spends several minutes talking to Jason, telling him about a few of the lives he's lived. The more he explains, the better Jason gets a grasp on his powers.

"That's incredible! So you've met all sorts of Heroes throughout history?"

"Hoho." Buddha chuckles. "Met them all, I have. Every last one. Yes, even cute little Shana here. Sometimes, I spoke to them at length. Sometimes, I only exchanged a few words. But in the end, I made it my mission to meet each Hero, to guide and influence them."

Buddha's expression flickers.

"Of course... there was one Hero I met. There was that... that *one* man. Tsk. I never should have tried to 'fix' him. That was a terrible mistake. I still have not forgiven myself

for such a blunder."

Jason cocks his head. "Who?"

"Oh, I think I need not speak his name." Buddha says, his expression turning ugly. "If you have spoken to Raphael, you already know it."

The Wordsmith falls silent. He ruminates for twenty long seconds before his own expression turns grim.

"Don't tell me... Dracula?"

"Indeed. Alucard himself." Buddha mutters. "I saw in his Karma a great deviation approaching. I wished to ensure he would walk on the path of righteousness. Instead, I inadvertently pushed him to become a monster. A Dark Hero. He was one of my greatest shames."

Buddha leans back and shakes his head.

"Let us not speak of the Vampire King any longer. That bastard singlehandedly built the Hell of Blood. Were it not for him, there would have only been Six Hells. Who knows how the war might have ended?"

Jason nods. "Fair enough. I have a more pressing question, actually. Um... regarding Makoto... is he... is he *dead*?"

"Ah. Your friend, Makoto." Buddha says, returning to a calm and collected mental state. "I can see why my situation would confuse you. No. Makoto is not dead. He and I have become 'one.' Our souls have merged through my reincarnation."

"I don't understand." Jason says. "How can your souls 'merge'. You don't sound or act like Makoto at all. You're basically a foreign entity who has taken over his body."

"Many have thought the same as you." Buddha says, smiling gently. "But, my power of reincarnation is not a controlled ability. Rather, it seeks out those who lack attachments. Those lacking friends, families, desires... those who have little to gain, and nothing to lose. I possess their bodies, and we become 'one.' In this way, I am not One, but Many. I am the combination of hundreds of people who once Were, and who someday will Be."

"Take, for example, the first body I ever reincarnated into." Buddha continues explaining. "Little Ishmael, a young boy, crippled and sick. An orphan. Someone with no living family. He was dying, mentally, and so, Karma found him to be a fit vessel for my

purposes. Even so, Ishmael did have one attachment, the village girl who healed him and cared for the sick. I, thusly, inherited his attachments."

Buddha falls silent. His expression dims as he reminisces on those memories.

"Sigh... Tamael..."

Jason blinks. "Tamael?"

Siddhartha Gautama does not immediately answer. Instead, his eyes become unfocused as a familiar pain swells in his chest. It takes him a minute to stabilize his emotions and return to his senses.

"Ah. Yes... Tamael. My first, and only, love. She is dead, now. She has passed onto the Great Beyond."

Jason swallows heavily. "...Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't know."

"You have lost someone precious to you, as well." Buddha says, glancing at Jason with a knowing glint in his eye. "Your child, Daisy. Like my Tamael, nothing remains of her here."

"What are you saying?" Jason asks, frowning. "You don't know that. As we speak, Fiona is searching for Daisy's soul. She should have ended up inside the Lazarus Tower, or perhaps even inside one of Mephisto's undead monsters. But she definitely isn't dead! She can't be!"

Buddha eyes the young man for a bit before averting his gaze.

"Denial. Yes. I once denied reality, too. But you know, Jason... *the truth will set you free*. Someday, when you realize the 'truth' of the matter, the pain will disappear. In one regard, you are much luckier than me, for no matter what I wish, I will never again see Tamael."

Dismayed by Buddha's words, Jason can only click his tongue and sigh.

"My Daisy isn't dead. She can't be..."

Some time passes. The two men continue their conversation, and gradually, the topic shifts.

"I don't know whether to trust him." Jason says. "Benjamin Brown has lived among demons, specifically their leaders. He claims to hate demons, and he says he's killed many of them, but I don't feel much sincerity in his gaze."

"That man has lived a troubled life." Buddha says. "He fought and bled for humanity, but in the end, his efforts came to naught. After everything he gave up, he became embittered. Do you think such a person can be corrupted easily? I don't. I believe all humans have an innate nature, one which they will always fall back on, if given time."

He gestures toward the Wordsmith.

"Take yourself, for instance. You have hardened your heart as a result of the events of Stormbringer. You hate the demons. You want to rip them apart. Even so, your innate nature is one of trusting others and giving them second chances. Can you really become a bloodthirsty monster? Can you really slaughter your enemies wantonly?"

Jason chews his lip. "Hope can. He did. And he's a copy of myself."

"Hahaha!" Buddha laughs. "Yes, you think your clone is a murderous person with blood staining his palms, but just because you think such thoughts, does that make them real? From my perspective, Hope is merely a lost and confused boy. He is frustrated. He is alone. You cast him aside, and in response, he tried to forcibly change his nature to meet the troubles he faced. But he is not so different from you. Neither of you are ruthless, and in the same way, neither is Benjamin Brown. He is a soldier. He follows orders. And when he realized there was nothing he could do to change his fate, he quietly accepted it."

Buddha pauses.

"In a way, Benjamin is like a dog who has been beaten into submission by the vicissitudes of life. What you seek is a strategic leader, but even if that is what you want, that is not who he is. He is a follower, not a leader. He is someone who accepts his fate, not someone who changes it. He is unsuitable to add to your command structure for this reason."

Jason's eyes brighten. "I see. I hadn't thought about him in that way."

"Benjamin Brown is far from trustworthy." Buddha continues. "But who knows? Perhaps, in a roundabout way, you might find him to be useful, in a manner of speaking. His daughter, for instance."

"Huh?" Jason grunts, shooting a skeptical glance at Siddhartha Gautama. "Lily? You think she'll be useful?"

"In a manner of speaking." Buddha repeats, keeping his words cryptic. "Lily is not like her father. She is also his weakness. He cares deeply for her. He cares for all of his

children, but especially her, as she was the last daughter given to him by the woman he loved. Unfortunately, that woman has passed on to the Great Beyond. She cannot be resurrected through Mephisto's magic, nor your Lazarus Tower."

"That's too bad." Jason mutters. "Losing loved ones is never fun."

After a slight pause, he looks at Buddha suspiciously.

"Say... how do you know all this stuff, anyway? I thought you only just reincarnated and you don't even possess your Heroic Aspects anymore."

"I have lived many lives." Buddha answers. "I possess deep insight into the nature of existence. Also, I spoke to a demon friend of mine, not long ago. He told me all sorts of fun tidbits!"

"A demon friend?" Jason asks.

"Indeed. You might even be familiar with him, haha!" Buddha laughs. "But for now, why don't we keep his name a surprise? He won't cause you any problems. He is only a confused child who has yet to find his way. And he is not the only one."

Buddha raps his fingers on the table.

"Blood Reaper."

"Hmm? You know about Cassiel, too?" Jason asks, bewildered.

"The Child of Light. Yes. I have met her on many occasions, wearing many different faces." Buddha answers. "She is a kind girl, but she is also filled with hatred. More so now than before the Energy Wars, mind you. Now, her attachments have become like tar, adhering to her and holding her back from recovery. What a pitiful child, she is."

"Do you know her real name?" The Wordsmith asks, pressing Buddha for more information.

"I do. I know plenty about that sweet summer child. Ah, but if she will not tell you, than neither should I. What a sad life she has lived, dying at such a young age and leaving her family behind, only to become a mighty Lazarite, fighting for the Archangels. A sad end, a great rise, and a terrible fall. Her Karma is twisted. None can say whether she will remain at the bottom, wallowing in misery, or whether she will someday spread her wings and soar past the reach of the Heavens. Not even I would dare make such a guess."

Jason groans. He rubs his forehead as a migraine assaults his brain.

"...Yeah, there's definitely still some Makoto in you. You and him both speak in riddles. It's exhausting."

"What can I say?" Buddha asks, finishing off the tea in his cup. "Birds of a feather flock together."

At some point, Jason stands up and prepares to leave.

"Since you're a Hero and all, I'll make sure you can go wherever you need." Jason tells Buddha. "If you really do know Cassiel, maybe you could try talking to her? She could use some cheering up."

Buddha smiles. "The time is not yet right. My words might offer her some comfort, but comfort is not what that child needs."

"What *does* she need, then?" Jason asks.

"Time. Space. Motivation." Buddha answers. "Her heart is like a black hole. All the misery she has ever felt, the loss of those around her, the pain suffered by the angels... she has swallowed it up over the years and let it consume her. Until she resolves this hopelessness, she will never free herself and spread her wings. My words will only lead to a deleterious effect."

"Alright. If you say so. Feel free to pay her a visit if you change your mind, then. I'll keep in touch." Jason says, before uttering a Word of Power to travel back to the Fortress of Retribution.

Unspoken by Buddha, however, are a few implications that the Wordsmith could never possibly imagine.

Should the Daughter of Heaven ever cast aside her shackles... should the last angel ever free herself of her earthly burdens, she will become an unstoppable force, one that will shake the whole galaxy.

But of course, those words will not necessarily come to pass.

After all...

Who knows what the future holds?

Buddha chuckles.

"Hehe. Certainly not I. And Karma is so, so *difficult* to unravel."

Part 356: A Quiet Lull

Days pass. The Wordsmith and his allies hurry to prepare themselves for the likely and imminent arrival of the Hidden Emperors. Not knowing exactly when their enemies will arrive causes humanity's people to feel a great pressure pushing down on them.

However, one person doesn't feel much worry at all, his name being Jason.

The Wordsmith finds himself in a strange position, where even the imminent arrival of a dozen Emperors and who-knows-how-many Dukes and Barons and whoever else might show from the Hidden Hells don't cause him the slightest bit of anxiety.

Instead, Jason reflects on the events of the past few days.

Despite his deepest hopes and prayers, Fiona never found Daisy's soul inside the Lazarus Tower. This news, for some reason, did not cause him to feel a deep anguish within his soul, but only hardened his heart. The only chance he has to find his daughter now is through one of Mephisto's summons. Otherwise, her soul may have already been consumed by a demon, or otherwise scattered and sent to the Great Beyond, never to return.

"This is my punishment." The Wordsmith mutters at one point. "It is because I tried to please my enemies and make amends with them. But I will not do that again."

After realizing that his daughter is, almost certainly, dead and never to return, the Wordsmith throws himself back into his work. He crafts several spiritual and physical weapons, defensive measures, and other such devices to assist humanity moving forward.

The Wordsmith's efforts don't go unrewarded. While he continues to add defensive measures to Tarus II and the Core, Phoebe arrives before him a few days after the relocation of every human in the galaxy. She holds a piece of technology in her hands, smiling lightly.

"Fiona and I did it, Jason. We completed the first Power Glove prototype."

The Wordsmith glances at the device in her hands with a look of surprise.

"You did?"

"Mhm. It's a work in progress, though. Don't get your hopes up. It can't replicate spiritual energy yet, but it *can* change someone's biological identity. Watch!"

Phoebe slides the gauntlet onto her right hand. It clamps down securely onto her wrist and arm, adjusting its size to perfectly fit her. Once the Power Glove completes its work, Phoebe reaches for the dial, a simple mechanical implement with ten numbers around its diameter.

The dial currently rests on the number 0, with the other numbers reaching 9. Phoebe moves the dial a click to the right, to the position of 1. As soon as she does, a burst of magical energy floods out of the gauntlet, wraps around her body, and rapidly transforms her figure. Her skin changes color to red, a pair of huge horns sprout from just above her ears, and a sassy little succubus tail appears too.

After the transformation concludes, Phoebe ends up looking like a perfect recreation of Belial! Jason's wife snorts and giggles, trying not to laugh hysterically while Jason raises his eyebrows.

"Is something funny?"

"Hahahaha! No, no, hahah! It's just, ehehe! The transformation, it's still a little, *snort*, buggy! There's no pain when transforming, but it tickles like crazy!"

Jason smiles. "Heh. The ultimate tickle-weapon. I notice too that you stayed your original height, so you're a bit shorter than the actual Belial. Is that a bug, too?"

Phoebe quickly recovers from the ticklish sensations poking at her armpits and other sensitive areas. After she wipes a few tears of laughter away, she nods.

"This isn't supposed to be an infiltration device, remember? I don't need to look exactly like Samantha, after all. But currently, no matter what you transform into, you still maintain your original height."

"Considering the point was to allow humans to transform into huge, powerful Orcs and Trolls, we'll definitely need to get that flaw ironed out. Oh, and the whole tickle thing, too." Jason says.

Phoebe reverts back to her original self, and after once again bursting into a round of furious giggles, gives her husband a kiss and skips away, clearly happy due to the Power Glove's relative success.

Jason purses his lips after she leaves.

"The gauntlets won't be ready in time. But that's fine. I've made plenty of preparations. I'll just keep making more."

* * *

A few days later, Jason steps into the Core, only to blink in surprise when he finds Hope and Annette there, overseeing the reinforcement of the Core's internal structure.

"Hope! You're... you're up and about?" Jason asks, shooting curious looks at his clone.

The second Wordsmith barely glances at his original body before turning away.

"I am."

"Ah. I thought you'd need some more time for yourself." Jason says. "But it's good to see you walking-"

"I'm not here to chit-chat." Hope snaps, interrupting Jason. "Since I *know* you're wondering, I'll just say that my nightmares haven't gone away, and neither have those terrible cold sweats. Every night, I can feel the sensation of a hacksaw cutting through my flesh and bone. It's honestly fucking horrifying and I hate it, but I'm not a soft little pansy like you, so here I am."

Hope gestures broadly to the Core.

"Maybe *you* would be the kind of guy to lay in bed all goddamn day, feeling sorry for yourself, but I'm just *pissed*. I'm going to make sure nobody else suffers and dies. I've already started reinforcing the walls of the Core to ensure no other friends of mine get buried alive in a collapse. I've also placed dozens of soul restrictions on the area so Ose and Mephisto can't just fuck about in here whenever they want."

Jason's eyes twitch at his clone's words.

"I already did all of that, though. I reinforced the Core's walls and put soul-restriction-"
"

"Well it wasn't enough!" Hope yells, turning to face Jason. "It's never enough! But thank the Creator I'm here! I'll make sure to clean up after you, like I always do. And when the demons come and you chicken out, I'll kill them all myself!"

Jason sighs. "Right. Well, you can rest assured, Hope. I won't be letting the demons off easy, this time."

"Liar." Hope mutters. "You think you're different, but you're not. You already want to recruit the Hell of Lust to work with us. I hear they'll arrive tomorrow. What, Phoebe isn't enough for you, so now you want to chase some succubi tail, too? You disgust me."

"I am different." Jason acknowledges. "But so are you. You've become even more extreme. If we piss off the demons and they launch an all-out attack, I can probably defeat them, kill their leaders, and so on. But it would weaken humanity greatly. You're not looking at the bigger picture, Hope. Once we send the demons scattering, we still have two massive, unresolved alien threats on our horizon. Don't be so short-sighted!"

"Short-sighted?!" Hope yells. "The demons killed your daughter, they killed Kar, and they killed millions of our people! I'm not being short-sighted, you're just being soft, as usual."

With that, the two Wordsmiths can only glare at each other and split apart, ultimately leaving their conflict unresolved.

After Jason walks away from Hope, he sighs.

"I want to argue my points, but every time I look at Hope, I feel so terrible, and so guilty about what happened. He's wrong, but how can I say that to him? The man got tortured until his mind almost snapped. I can hardly blame him for his pent-up rage and fear."

Shana materializes beside Jason.

[He not angry. He very sad.]

"Hope is?" Jason asks.

Shana nods. [Hope sad. Want cry. Can't cry. Too much hurt.]

Jason nods slowly.

"Yeah... that's about what I expected."

* * *

Even more time passes.

While Jason, Phoebe, Hope, and so many others hurry to build up humanity's defenses, Belial continues dealing with the sick and infirm. As part of her daily rituals, she heaves a great sigh, then transforms into a pretty, dark-skinned human girl with black hair.

"Ugh." Belial groans. "Now that Lily has arrived on Tarus II, this transformation is so awkward. Hopefully, she won't see me like this. My appearance is different enough from hers, but I know she's seen me in this form before."

The succubus smiles, in spite of her embarrassment.

"Hee-hee! I haven't seen Lily in a couple of years. I bet she's cuter now than ever before. I should pay her a visit at some point."

Belial dons a white vest and slacks, then sashays over to a small, simple, but comfortable looking house on the northern side of the Fortress of Retribution. Along the way, she passes many newly constructed buildings, all of them possessing slightly different yet mostly similar aesthetics.

These houses, industrial complexes, stores, and other such facilities all appear surprisingly high-tech, with sleek steel exteriors, large glass windows reinforced to withstand bomb blasts, and flashy paint-jobs designed to give the upcoming city a unique, never before seen identity.

Many of the buildings still have a utilitarian and cube-like appearance, but with the way the city's chief architects arrange the cubes, sometimes stacking them on top of each other, while other times offsetting them to leave gaps between buildings, this gives the city a largely interconnected feeling. Large busses travel around at set intervals, transporting people while leaving plenty of room for foot traffic. An elevated train conduit allows for future expansion, so that people can quickly ship goods to and from the Warpgate, far to the west.

Of course, the Fortress of Retribution is only the first planned city for Tarus II. Once it has reached a certain population saturation, smaller towns will spring up around its outskirts, along with farms, manufacturing plants, and other such facilities suitable for more rural areas.

Unique to Tarus II's urban design, hundreds of drones quietly fly about in the skies, traveling to and from construction projects. Thanks to these drones, the humans are able to quickly and efficiently erect new structures, building their way toward housing for all, from the weak to the strong.

Belial passes several daycares, where people send their children to play around and frolic while their parents work on the rebuilding efforts. Once the city reaches a certain point, schools will become more omnipresent, though that won't be for several more months.

"Huh. It's really all coming together." Belial mutters, as she walks beneath the awning of a neighborhood store.

Unlike the world Jason grew up on, food scarcity is not an issue on Tarus II. Thanks to several magical devices capable of rapidly growing edible plants, along with breeding grounds for fat pig-like beasts, there is more than enough food for everyone. And since money isn't a thing either, the only worry is how to distribute the food to people properly. Phoebe solves the problem through the use of mechanized grocery 'stores' where anyone can walk in, take the food they need for free, and leave.

Belial observes these societal shifts and chuckles.

"These advancements are only possible because of the Wordsmith. Even when humanity advanced rapidly during the Energy Wars, they still faced countless food and supply shortages. Perhaps, if Jason hadn't frozen himself back then... no, not 'perhaps, but 'for sure.' I think it would have been a guaranteed victory for humanity if he had fought on their side. Once Jason realized his full potential, humanity would have exploded in power. Neither the demons nor the Volgrim could have stopped him."

Belial continues traveling north. Ultimately, she reaches the outside of a small stone house, decorated with plants, vines, and other greenery to make it feel warm and cozy.

She pauses outside the door. After taking a deep breath, she pushes it open and steps inside.

"Hi-hi!" Belial exclaims, putting on a smile and a cheerful personality. "Cassy-cas! Are you in here? It's me, Lily!"

Belial enters the house to find it as dark as always, with the blinds closed tightly. This time, though, Cassiel sits on the bed, instead of in the corner of the room. She rests her chin on her knees, while gloomily staring at a figurine of a ballerina, spinning around slowly on a wooden platform.

In the darkness of the room, a faint, reddish glow emanates from Cassiel's body. Having recovered some of her angelic power, the energy inside her, forcefully shoved inside her soul over millennia by Gressil, appears a bit less vivid than before, yet still visibly demonic.

The angel girl doesn't clutch her legs as tightly as she did two weeks ago. Instead, her arms casually rest at her side, as if having lost their strength. When Belial approaches, Cassiel's eyes only flick to look at her for a moment, before returning to the spinning ballerina-toy.

"Hm? Raphael, Michael, Gabriel, and Uriel aren't here today?" Belial asks out loud, momentarily confused. Inwardly, she sighs in annoyance. *We agreed someone would always stay with Cassiel to keep her company!*

Belial takes note of Soleil sitting in a chair beside Cassiel's bed, but the construct-angel only smiles at Belial, yet doesn't say anything.

To Belial's surprise, Cassiel very slightly shakes her head, in response to Belial's question. She doesn't say anything, but then again, since her rescue, she never has.

The fact she actually makes an effort to reply, even in such a minute way, makes a pretty smile spread across the succubi's face.

"Well, that's great!" Belial chirps. "Now we get to spend some time alone, just you, me, and Soleil! It sure is pesky, always having someone else around, don't you think?"

The moment Belial posits that random hypothetical question, her heart lurches.

Shit! How insensitive! Why would I say something like that? This poor girl has been living the most lonely of existences for over a hundred thousand years! I shouldn't just run my mouth flippantly!

Feeling momentarily guilty, Belial starts to open her mouth to say something else, but to her surprise, Cassiel speaks instead, her voice barely a whisper.

"...Yes."

The angel doesn't say anything else. Neither does she look at Belial, instead keeping her eyes fixed on the toy ballerina. Even so, Belial feels a momentary thrill.

"Oh! You talked! That's great!"

She walks over and gently sits down on the far corner of the bed, while flashing a big smile at Cassiel.

"Your voice is so pretty. I love to hear it! Want to hear about my day, so far? I was over at the hospital, taking care of patients, when this funny old man played a trick on me!"

Belial starts regaling Cassiel with a story involving her patients, then follows up with another, and another.

The whole time, Cassiel doesn't say a word, nor does she look at the 'human' girl babbling to her. Belial single-handedly sucks up all the conversational momentum, which seems to suit Cassiel just fine, as she never speaks anyway.

Hours pass.

Belial continues talking, but at some point, her throat starts to turn raw from her nonstop babbling. Eventually, she falls silent, having run out of mundane topics.

"Hoooo... my jaw is starting to hurt..." Belial mutters, before standing up and walking over to a sink. She pours herself a cup of water and chugs it quickly, enjoying the cool sensation soothing her throat.

She walks back over and sits on the bed. This time, she doesn't say anything, and neither does Cassiel.

The two of them remain like that for a surprisingly long time, neither speaking up to break the silence.

After thirty full minutes, Belial clears her throat.

"Hey... have you been doing alright?"

She stares at Cassiel only for a few moments at a time before looking away, taking care not to make her uncomfortable. Even so, Cassiel doesn't meet her gaze, or reply.

"I know it's been... hard on you." Belial mutters. "But I just want you to know I'm here for you, okay? You can tell me anything. No matter if it hurts or not."

For a brief moment, Cassiel flicks her eyes in Belial's general direction. She quickly looks away again, saying nothing.

Belial chews her lip. She slides a little closer to Cassiel on the bed and reaches out her hand.

"Cassiel, if you don't speak, you'll never be able to let out the hurt in your heart. I know it's scary to do, but..."

The succubus stretches out her arm. She extends one finger and gently presses on Cassiel's knee.

The moment Belial's makes contact, Cassiel tenses up.

An instant later, the angel girl violently pulls back, shoving herself backward on the bed with her feet. Her eyes flash with panic, and she opens her mouth.

"AaAAaEEeiiIiiiiiee!!"

A horrible, high-pitched shriek erupts from the depths of her throat, jarring Belial's senses and scaring her silly. The succubus also pulls away, while her eyes widen in fear.

"Hreeen!!! Haaaahhiiiiee!!"

Incomprehensible cries of fear and panic leave Cassiel's mouth. In her mind, the slight touch of her leg sparks countless horrifying memories of when Gressil also 'touched' her, violated her, and hurt her in ways no person should ever have to endure.

Belial falls off the bed. Her butt hits the floor. She quickly jumps up, panicking at Cassiel's unexpected reaction.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean-"

"AaaEEghllaa!"

Cassiel hastily jumps off the bed and dives to the corner of the room, wrapping herself in her wings. She shivers and shakes, while nonstop screaming in terror.

"Nnnaaaauughh!"

"Aaaah!"

"Aaeiuhh!"

Seeing Cassiel scream and panic, Belial practically loses her mind. Waves of guilt and panic sweep across her face, making her freeze up, not knowing what to do.

"Ah! Ah! C-calm down, Cassy! It's okay! Nobody's hurting you! It's just me here, just me!"

While Belial struggles to deal with Cassiel's outbursts of terror, Soleil calmly stands up from her chair. She steps on the bed, walks across it, and hops off to the other side. She drops down to Cassiel's level, and without saying a word, gently strokes the angel's head.

Cassiel's cries grow quieter and quieter, until Soleil gently embraces Cassiel. She pulls the angel in close and hugs her, rocking Cassiel back and forth while remaining perfectly silent.

Not long after, Cassiel stops screaming. Her eyes shut, and she seemingly falls asleep in Soleil's arms.

With the patience of a loving mother, Soleil continues to rock Cassiel from side to side. She turns her head to smile at Belial, then nods.

"Please leave."

The construct's words stab into Belial's heart, but all she can do is dumbly nod, turn around, and step outside.

Once she closes the door, Belial staggers a few feet away, then drops to the ground, collapsing as her legs lose their strength. She tries to stifle her tears, but ultimately fails, breaking out into quiet sobs.

"Uuuu... stupid, stupid... useless Belial... you always mess things up... uuuuu..."

Guilt wracks her mind. She replays the moment where she touched Cassiel's leg, mentally berating her own stupidity for pushing the angel too quickly.

While Soleil takes care of Cassiel and Belial bursts into uncontrollable sobbing, unbeknownst to either of them, a legion of demons approaches the Labyrinth Core, their numbers endless and overwhelming.

Soon, the Battle for the Core will begin.

Part 357: Wordsmith's Surprise

A commotion occurs in the Core, not many hours after Jason and Hope have their fight in public. Human, monster, and demon soldiers quickly run to their prepared defensive positions as Centurion once again blares the alarms, warning them of tens of thousands of approaching demons.

Jason teleports to the Core, while Hope is already there, waiting. While Centurion continues to warn everyone of the impending catastrophe and soldiers take up defensive positions, Hope merely stands in front of the Core's double doors, shooting an ugly look at his original body.

"The Hell of Lust?" Jason asks.

"Yes. Your new best friends." Hope replies, his tone dripping with acid. "The pretty-boys and demon sluts."

"I understand you hate demons." Jason says. "But succubi and incubi aren't among the ones who attacked us. You shouldn't blame them for the actions of their peers."

"Demons are demons." Hope retorts. "Neil taught me that. Do you remember Neil? The man you left to die? My best friend? Bah. What would you know about protecting best friends?"

Without letting Jason retort, Hope teleports back to Tarus II, leaving Jason to sort out the situation with the Hell of Lust himself.

The First Wordsmith sighs deeply, his thoughts a mess. "There has to be some way I can get through to Hope. But how?"

He steps through the Core's double-doors and walks out to meet the Hell of Lust's members. When he sees the army of scantily clad male and female demons, his eyes nearly bug out of his head.

*Holy shit. Remember, Jason. You're married. You're married, and... god damn, why are all of them so freaking **HOT?!***

The Wordsmith really can't help but feel a sense of awe at how supermodel-esque the vast majority of the Hell of Lust's members appear. Between their chiseled abs, their well-maintained skin, or their soft and luscious hair stylings, it becomes abundantly clear they

were almost all sculpted by ancient gods to look as sexually appealing as possible. Only a few of them appear less than physically perfect, chief among them being Maia, with her rail-thin body and visible ribs. The exceptions mostly find themselves among the Dukes, though, likely due to the backlash of becoming a Duke-level existence.

The demons approaching the Wordsmith slow to a halt, letting only their fifty-plus Dukes advance toward him. Among them is the Hell of Lust's current leader, Maia, the Duke of Empathy, along with all the others Jason met previously. Maia steps forward and rests her hand on her hip.

"Hello, Jason Hiro." She says, cracking a weak smile. "We came as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to gather all of the succubi and incubi from all across the Seven Hells. There simply wasn't enough time... and Ose will march on the Core this very day."

"She's already started the invasion?" Jason asks, frowning.

"Yes. She specifically requested my Dukes, Barons, and Lords assist her. I told her I would join her once I gathered my people, but that was only a pretext. I am hoping we can merge with you at once so we don't have to be a part of this bloodshed."

Titania, towering behind Maia, meekly raises her hand.

"B-but... the friends we left... behind... they'll be hurt..."

Maia grimaces. "Yes. In total, we have brought 250,000 succubi and incubi. However, our Hell numbers more than fifty million at our core, with another few dozen million scattered about haphazardly. Gathering them all on such short notice would bring about a huge commotion. The best I could do was gather all of our strongest members. The loss of tens of millions of grunt-level subordinates will leave my heart in pain."

Jason frowns. "What do you mean? Are you saying if you leave your weakest subordinates behind, Ose will...?"

"She'll exterminate them, yes." Maia affirms, her lower lip quivering. "That isn't something I wish to see. But if I were to gather even more of my people, the commotion would draw Ose's ire before we even make it here."

"I can't just let tens of millions of innocents die." Jason says. "Even if they are demons, the succubi and incubi are blameless in all this."

"Well, it will take some time for Ose to issue a kill-order." Maia says. "I'm sure at least a portion of my people will find their way here. I've left messages in our hidden channels. But if the forces of the other six Hells move in unison, they can swarm and capture my comrades. We're outnumbered ten thousand to one. Escape is all but impossible."

"You've taken a huge risk in coming here." Jason says, smiling gently. "Sorry it's come to this. I promise I'll do what I can to assist you, moving forward."

After Jason and Maia work out the details, he sends her and the other demons into the Core, where their army of deviants spends a few hours filing through a Warpgate to take refuge on Tarus II.

Having already made preparations for the Hell of Lust's arrival, Jason and his people welcome them with open arms, leading them to a basic but comfortable encampment outside the Fortress of Retribution's main city, but still within its protective crystalline walls. The fortress's spherical shield envelops the city from top to bottom, making burrowing beneath it or infiltrating from overhead an impossibility. Only by attacking the heavily reinforced crystals can an enemy hope to break through, but even then, thanks to the Wordsmith's magic, actually gaining entry will prove an exceptionally difficult task.

This encampment features the same steel-clad utilitarian structures as inside the main city, but thanks to some local bored artists, colorful graffiti lines the walls, depicting cute and smiling succubi and incubi demons, making flirty poses or blowing kisses at anyone viewing the art.

As for who drew the art, none seem to know, but the Wordsmith's best guess is that some local teenagers did so. Regarding what their goals might have been, he can only guess it had to involve them thinking with their 'lower members.'

After Jason gets the 250,000 sex-demons rounded up, he sighs.

"Only this many... at least they're all elites of their Hell. I hope we can gather even more in due time, before Ose arrives. Better yet, I hope Ose gives up. Terms of surrender would be fantastic..."

Sadly, as the Wordsmith knows well, Ose is not one to give up, not when she has a shot at obtaining more gains for herself.

Ten thousand demons march through the halls of the First Hell. These grunts move through the Labyrinth in triple-file ranks, squeezing against the oftentimes narrow walls while moving with determination. At different junctions, they meet up with other contingents of demons, eventually arriving inside massive, arena-sized rooms with tens of Warpers standing at the ready.

All across Hell's confines, this same situation plays out over and over. Hastily organized and lightly armed demons, monsters, and other sorts of unfriendlies merge into vast, predetermined spaces, allowing up to 500,000 troops to wait in a safe location for the signal to attack humanity.

At the same time, a core group of just five thousand demons, led by Ose and the Hidden Emperors, marches slowly and with purpose, their footsteps thumping in the darkness of the Labyrinth's hallways.

Ose, Mephisto, Zamiel, Lupus, Gorn, and so many other Emperors walk along with their Dukes toward the Labyrinth Core, deliberately keeping the same pace to synchronize their footsteps and spread fear in the hearts of their soon-to-be-defeated enemies.

Despite the surging morale of the underling demons, the majority of whom can't wait to take down the humans and chew their skin and bones into pulp, the Emperors themselves appear remarkably less enthusiastic.

Ose, in particular, gnashes her teeth as she walks, fuming from the ears at the bad news she's received several times in a row today.

"The Hell of Isolation dared to drop out at a moment like this. Hmph. Oh, I'll show them what it means to cross me... but to think the sluts from the Hell of Lust would turn their backs on their own species, too! I always knew those human lovers were going to turn on me!"

While she rages, Mephisto seethes beside her, his own rage barely contained.

"...Ssstole my sssoulsss... MY sssoulsss... all the ssslavesss, too. That damned Wordsssmith... all I have left now are sssome measssly monsssterssss and demonsssss..."

"Just don't forget," Zamiel says from behind them. "That fairy-bitch is mine, you hear? She helped kill my little bro! I'm gonna squeeze her into a bloody pulp!"

Another Demon Emperor, Yardrat, flickers forward to arrive beside Ose.

"Have you been able to gather any intelligence from the Core? I need to know what I'm walking into. None of the Warpers can teleport to Tarus II's surface with the Wordsmith's temporal restrictions in place. We have to take the planet's defenses down if you expect the main army to make planetfall."

"I know!" Ose roars, visibly agitated. "Do you think it's easy, getting past the humans' defenses? That bloody Wordsmith has the Core locked down so tightly that my Astral Body can't slip inside! Even Mephisto can't phase through the walls. I've been going out of my mind, especially since he stole all our slaves right out from under our noses! I have no idea what he's planning, and it has me ready to snap at any moment!"

Yardrat frowns. "Your Astral Body can't get inside the Core? Why not?"

"The best I can tell," Ose answers, "is that Jason put some sort of spiritual barrier in place that hardens the walls and stops spiritual forms and souls from stepping within a one-mile radius of the Core. I can't even get close enough to listen in on conversations."

"So we don't know anything about his preparations?" Yardrat probes. "For all you know, we could be walking into a deathtrap?"

"Yes! A deathtrap!" Ose says. "It's only been three weeks since Stormbringer. The Wordsmith can't possibly have made too many preparations for our arrival. He lacks the mana required for massive overhauls in his society or giant construction projects. However, if we wait long enough, he could definitely change this dynamic, so we have to move quickly."

The Emperor of the Void starts to complain, but Ose interrupts him. "Before you say anything else, don't waste your breath! I will take the lead on this mission! I'll go first and see what surprises the humans have cooked up before waving the rest of you in. Since I have Bael's body now, nothing will stop me from wreaking havoc."

Feeling somewhat assured, Yardrat nods. "I hope to hear good news, then."

A few hours later, Ose and the other five thousand Emperors, Dukes, Barons, and Lords from their Five Hells arrive within half a mile of the Labyrinth Core. Even at this distance, they can easily make out the distant sound of an alarm blaring inside the Core, along with a masculine robot voice warning the Core's personnel of their imminent catastrophe.

**"LARGE QUANTITY OF DEMON ENERGY SIGNATURES DETECTED
MOVING TOWARD THE CORE. RED ALERT STATUS DECLARED!"**

"DEMONIC SIGNATURES HAVE CROSSED DEFENSIVE LINE BETA."

"DEMONIC SIGNATURES HAVE CROSSED DEFENSIVE LINE ALPHA."

Ose snorts when she hears Centurion's warnings.

"Give me a few minutes. I'll mop up the small fry."

Emperor Gorn, 'controlled' by Mephisto, steps forward. "We can go with you."

"No need." Ose says, casually raising a palm. "I may not have successfully elevated myself to the rank of an Emperor, but in terms of strength... heh... you are all far beneath me."

Her words irritate the other Emperors, but none of them try to refute those claims. After all, if any Emperor had to fight her one-on-one, they would almost certainly suffer a terrible and embarrassing defeat.

Gorn steps back. "Have it your way."

Like the other Emperors, he feels more than a little annoyed about Ose's pushiness and her insistence on fighting the humans. In fact, Gorn isn't in the minority with his opinions. He believes that attacking the humans is a waste of time and energy and could backfire badly. Similarly, the other Emperors think identical thoughts.

But what choice do they have? Under Ose's demonstrable power, they can only follow along and obey her orders.

Without any fanfare, Ose takes a step forward.

An instant later, her body vanishes. She explodes with both speed and power, racing straight forward at twenty times the speed of sound toward the fully-closed dual doors of the Labyrinth Core. Using the power of her Lightspeed Rush, she transforms her body into a living railgun, just the same as she did when fighting the Cherubim.

Ose crashes into the Labyrinth's sealed double-doors, blasting them open with an unstoppable force. The thousand-ton steel barriers rip off their hinges, tear out of the frames, and hurtle through the air, crashing against the opposite walls with two terrific *bangs*, sending shockwaves blasting out of the Core all the way down the hallway where she just came from. At the same time, the reinforced demonstone pillars that had been

previously placed against the doors to ensure they wouldn't open easily instead snap like twigs, failing their purpose with Ose's single move.

As soon as Ose arrives, she bursts into laughter.

"AHAHAHA! Filthy humans! Your tricks won't save you anymore! Today, you will face the WRATH of...!!"

Ose's words catch in her throat.

For several seconds, she stares in stunned silence, swiveling her head from side to side. All the while, Centurion continues sounding the alarm, warning all the Core personnel of the catastrophe that has arrived at their doorstep.

"DEMON DUKE SIGNATURE, BAE, HAS ENTERED THE CORE! ALL PERSONNEL, DO NOT ENGAGE IN BATTLE!"

Ose swallows her words as she looks around a completely empty, barren Core, lacking even a single human, monster, or demon. Even while Centurion warns the Core's soldiers not to engage Ose directly, it seems they have already long ago taken his advice and left the Core defenseless, stripping out all useful technology.

"...Eh?"

Ose's unblinking gaze sweeps across the room several times, as if waiting for a contingent of cloaked enemies to fire upon her position. However, while she dumbly stands in place, not a single thing happens to her.

The Core is abandoned.

"Is... is this some kind of a sick joke?!" Ose asks, visibly befuddled. "Why the devil aren't there any humans here?!"

Minutes later, the other Emperors arrive inside the Core. They glance around questioningly, with some of the more cautious ones using their methods to search for hidden traps, explosives, and anything else that might cause them harm. However, they find nothing, except for a single one of the seven Warpgates still active, with a portal leading to an unknown world.

Ose walks up to the Warpgate and examines it. After a moment, she frowns deeply.

"...Tarus II. This gate leads to the Warpgate Encampment on Tarus II."

Her words come slowly, as if she is having trouble understanding just what exactly is going on. In the back of her mind, a buzzing sensation tingles, leaving her flustered.

"How strange." Gorn says, walking up to Ose's side. "This doesn't seem to be the Wordsmith's style. Why did he abandon the Core?"

"Hahaha!" Emperor Fae cackles, laughing uproariously as she slaps Gorn's back. "Jesus Christ, isn't it obvious? Look at you losers, getting all shaken up. The Hero's scared of us! He knew we were coming, so he abandoned the Core to take up refuge on his precious homeworld! He knows he doesn't have the strength to protect this place, so he's hoping he can defend passively on that little piss-ass piece of shit planet!"

Neither Gorn nor Ose laugh. Ose gestures to the quietly humming opaque Warpgate. "Then why did he leave this portal open?"

"To intimidate us, of course! It's all mindgames!" Fae snorts. "Look at you two. You're both about to piss your fuckin' panties! Man, if it was Bael, he'd just walk through, no problem! Don't tell me you're *scared*, little Ose?"

"Not scared... but suddenly not confident either..." Ose confesses, her voice low. "Something about this arrangement... it has me worried."

Yardrat flickers over to the small gathering. "And me, as well. This smells like a trap. The Wordsmith might not have the power to defeat us here, but he almost certainly has plenty of defenses on Tarus II. Abandoning the Core like this either tells us he has no confidence in beating us, or far too *much* confidence. Don't forget, he can teleport back to the Core at any moment. Protecting his people from our first strike was likely his reason for leaving the Core unprotected."

"Unless..." Gorn mutters, "he wanted to remove his people from here specifically because he had some special weapon he could use to kill us all, but it would self-harm his people too?"

Ose's blood turns to ice. "Trifrancium!"

"Huh?" The others ask.

"Trifrancium!" She repeats, flicking her eyes around. "I know for a fact the humans have at least a few kilograms of it! If they detonated the material here, it would absolutely obliterate all of you, and perhaps even me! It would annihilate hundreds of kilometers of

the Labyrinth in a huge radius, plus it would spread so much radiation that for thousands of kilometers further, the Labyrinth would also become unlivable... even for demons!"

She pauses, noticing the lack of comprehension on the other Emperors' faces. None of them have any idea what Trifrancium is, so her words only confuse them.

Ose sighs. "But, since the Wordsmith left this portal active, that isn't likely to be his aim. I suspect he wouldn't want to use the nuclear option unless it was the last available choice. Come. We'll enter the portal and see what awaits us on the other side."

Fae laughs, while rearing back and violently slapping Ose's ass. "Ahaha! Lead the way, sister! I'll be right behind ya!"

The impact of hand against butt-cheek doesn't affect Ose at all, as she barely even feels it. She merely rolls her eyes and nods.

"Fine. I'll lead. Let me step through the portal first. If there aren't any complications, I'll return in a few minutes and let you know."

The other Emperors nod, completely okay with Ose's idea to risk her own neck instead of theirs. As they watch, Ose confidently strolls through the Warpgate, vanishing past its opaque window and leaving them to wonder what will happen next.

A minute passes. Two minutes. Three.

"It seems the situation on the other side isn't good." Gorn says, frowning.

"The portal didn't close." Yadrat points out. "I half expected it to shut off the moment Ose walked through, trapping her alone. But it didn't, so..."

Just as the Emperors start to feel antsy, Ose walks back through the portal, confusion visible on her face. She frowns deeply, as if utterly baffled by what she saw on Tarus II.

"It's... it's empty." Ose says, glancing at Gorn. "The Warpgate Encampment is empty. No soldiers. No civilians. Not even a Wordsmith."

The Emperors exchange glances. This time, even Fae appears befuddled.

"Alright." Fae says. "That's definitely weird."

"I suppose the coast is clear, then?" Gorn asks.

Ose nods. "See for yourself."

She and the other five thousand demons file through the Warpgate, one after the other. They arrive on the Warpgate Platform, slightly elevated compared to ground level,

with all the Warpgate Encampment's reconstructed buildings laid out before them.

However, aside from the distant chirping of birds, not a sound stirs in the air. Tarus II's midday sun shines down on them, revealing the Fortress of Retribution in the distance, but not a single enemy blocks their way.

"What the hell...?" Fae mutters.

"Where are all the humans?" Emperor Kristoff asks, walking up to Ose, Gorn, and the rest. "I don't smell even a trace of blood energy within a kilometer."

Ose shrugs. "I don't know. This is not what I was expecting, though. That much is for sure."

As she and the other Emperors quietly debate their current situation, a flicker of holy energy appears in the sky, immediately drawing their attention. Ose raises her head and shields her eyes, spotting a figure silhouetted against the sun, with angelic wings expanding from his back.

Not an angel, but Jason Hiro himself, the Wordsmith levitates in the air, looking down upon the Demon Emperors while clad in his signature T-REX.

A moment later, another winged figure appears beside him. Hope Hiro, the second Wordsmith, doesn't even bother wearing his exosuit. He smirks deeply at the demons, while chuckling to himself.

At the same time, several other figures materialize in the sky!

Uriel. Raphael. Michael. Gabriel. All four Archangels appear, their soul pressure pushing down against the demons and making them sweat bricks.

Blinker shows up as well, but this time in a human-sized form, with a look of rage on her face. She gazes at two individuals specifically, their identities being Mephisto and Zamiel.

Once humanity's protectors finish appearing, Jason Hiro breaks the silence.

"I'll give you one chance to surrender. If you refuse, don't blame me for what happens next."

Part 358: Wordsmith's Cunning

Upon witnessing the appearance of seven strong opponents, all levitating in the sky, Ose lifts her chin up to evaluate them.

"There you are, Wordsmiths." Ose says, glancing at Hope suspiciously. "Even Gabriel is here. I'm surprised he didn't join his brothers and sister when they came knocking at Hell Harbor. And speaking of which, hello, Uriel. I see you've put on a little makeup."

With Barbatos's body now transformed to regain Uriel's original appearance, Ose can't help but notice this distinct difference from the last time they interacted. Additionally, Ose's eyes linger on Hope for a few seconds longer than the rest while wondering why he wasn't around to help defend Tarus II during Stormbringer.

Having lacked the time to interrogate her brother, Ose has no idea what Gressil did to Hope, nor that he managed to successfully capture and torture the Wordsmith's clone. If she knew, who could say what sort of expression she might reveal?

Jason continues to hover in the sky, his T-REX obscuring his face and body. His arms remain crossed while he projects an aura of authority.

"Don't beat around the bush, Ose." Jason says, his voice calm. "Surrender while you still can. If you do, I will make sure the people who hate you, including myself, don't rip you to pieces."

"Because of you!" Blinker screams. "My husband DIED! Not only you, but Mephisto too! How dare you turn Kar into your puppet!"

Tears stream from Blinker's eyes as her gaze fixates on 'Kar,' standing next to Mephisto, just behind Ose. She does not know that Kar's soul isn't in his body, but that mystery doesn't remain hidden for long.

"Hahaha!" Zamiel tilts his chin up and cackles uproariously. "That's right, fairy-bitch! You killed my brother, and I killed your favorite piece of croc-meat! Now I own his body! What will you do about it? Attack me?! Maybe if you get down on your knees and beg, my boss will give you back your hubby's body and soul... but I wouldn't count on it! BAHABA!!!"

Ose sneers.

"Seven versus five thousand. This won't go like Stormbringer did, Jason. I'll admit, I was too hasty, before. Too greedy. But the times have changed. I held back the Hidden Emperors, wanting to take the spoils for myself, but this time, I have magnanimously chosen to spread the spoils of war to the other Hells! At least, those who didn't *betray* me. Not the Hell of Lust, to be certain."

She leans her head forward. "What will you do? Summon the Cherubiim? Throw a few piddly spells at me? I'm not an idiot like Bael. I already beat those Archangels, and now that I've obtained an invincible body, you won't catch me turning into the Balrog to grant you a free kill. I think it's high time YOU surrender! Kill yourself and spare me the effort!"

With the leaders of both sides having thrown a few verbal barbs back and forth, the followers behind them inhale deeply, readying themselves for anything to happen.

While Blinker wrestles with the realization that Zamiel has possessed her husband's body, Hope grits his teeth. He repeatedly clenches his fists, feeling a smoldering fury build in his chest as he struggles to hold himself back from lunging directly at Ose.

Jason remains perfectly calm. He hovers a few feet forward, but otherwise maintains his aloof posture.

"Times have changed, Ose. The Tarus II of a few weeks ago is not the same one that exists today. I'm surprised you came back so quickly, even after you sensed the aura of my new superweapon. But I know why you did. You thought I deceived you. You thought I had somehow obtained Excalibur, but then your Volgrim friends informed you otherwise. You're right to believe that I don't possess Excalibur, because I don't."

The Wordsmith pauses.

"...I have something of equal power. An artifact that will allow me to obliterate every single one of you in an instant. I'm only holding back because, despite how you've wronged me, I really would prefer not to walk the path of genocide. My hatred is not broad, but personal. Beelzebub killed my daughter. Mephisto killed my best friend. Both of them came here under your orders. That makes the two of them, plus the Battle Brothers, and you, war criminals."

"So long as you surrender," Jason concludes, "I'll let these other Emperors leave."

Hope glances to the side. "What?! That wasn't the plan! You said three days ago-"

"Plans change." Jason says, turning his helmet to look at Hope. "I decided to make a... last minute adjustment."

"Without telling me?" Hope asks.

"Well. It *was* last minute." Jason repeats, shrugging slightly. "Don't worry. I won't wrong you. You'll get your revenge, and I'll get mine."

Caught somewhat off guard by Jason's eerily confident attitude, Hope can only glare daggers at Mephisto.

"As long as I can get my hands on *you*, necromancer..."

Mephisto doesn't shrink back, but Zamiel does, just a little, due to the outright hostility aimed at him by Hope and Blinker.

"Honestly," Jason says, turning his attention back to Ose. "I'm impressed. After I suddenly yanked the rug out from under you, right before your ascension ceremony, I'm surprised you managed to stay on target, keep calm, and attack at the originally planned time. A lesser demoness would have blown her top after I stole away every human and soul from the Seven Hells."

"Thanks for the compliment." Ose snarks. "But I didn't come here to chit-chat. It's clear neither of us are going to surrender. So, if you and your friends won't back down, then..."

She turns her head slightly to smile at the army of high ranking demons behind her.

"...I guess you're all about to die."

Fae snorts. "After you, sister. Lead the way. Show us how it's done!"

To Ose's surprise, the other Emperors, and their legions, don't immediately move. They remain in place, their gazes fixed on her back.

"Before we fight," Emperor Yardrat says, "I have a few questions."

"I thought you might." Jason says. "Ask away."

Ose frowns, while listening to this seemingly random exchange.

Fae and Yardrat seem awfully chatty today. Is Auger plotting against me? Something doesn't feel right.

Just like after she first stepped through the Warpgate and returned to the Core, a buzzing sensation tingles in the back of Ose's mind. Her sharp intellect and years of

behavioral and psychological studies of humanity and her fellow demons make her narrow her eyes as she listens to Yardrat's exchange.

"As it happens, Ose mentioned an interesting tidbit, not long ago." Yardrat says, taking care to raise his voice so all the other Emperors can hear. Even if he were to whisper, their sharp senses would pick up his words, so this deliberate increase in volume raises even more warning bells in the back of Ose's mind. "Now that you've found a way to capture and re-route souls away from the River Styx, we demons won't have any way to evolve our bodies. We've always relied on souls, primarily those of humans and Titans, to empower ourselves. But Ose... she mentioned that you might have a method to empower demons without the use of souls."

Yardrat pauses, allowing his words to linger in the air.

"Is that rumor true?" Yardrat asks, flicking his gaze around to the other Emperors.

Emperor Kristoff allows his arms to hang loosely at his sides. "The Hell of Blood has ways to empower demons through our vampiric arts, but only their bodies, not their souls."

"The Hell of Lust can raise any demon to the Rank of Duke through copulation." Fae adds, pointing out the obvious. "But you know, if the Wordsmith has another method, perhaps even a superior method, it could prove useful to all our Hells."

"Indeed." Emperor Gorn says, adding to the array of interested voices. "Imagine all the energy we'd save if there was another way to empower our bodies. I've long sought a method to push past the barrier of Emperor."

The more the demons speak, the more Ose's sixth sense acts up, making her eyes twitch. She half-turns her body to gaze meaningfully at the demons behind her, while a look of incredulity passes across her eyes.

"You lot..."

Before Ose can say anything else, Jason speaks up, interrupting her.

"Ah, yes. As it happens, I did make such an offer to Ose, at one point. Not long before Stormbringer, come to think of it. Obviously, I need not sing praises of my Wordsmithing. It's a versatile power I've barely begun to tap into. But elevating demons through the ranks without needing souls, that does seem to be within my capabilities. It would save countless lives, ease tensions between humans and demons, and allow us all to slowly but

surely set aside the issues of the past. But too bad... Ose seemed to think that none of you were interested."

"I don't remember being consulted." Gorn harrumphs, looking at Ose with deep meaning. "The Wordsmith's method might have made me protest the events of Stormbringer entirely!"

Emperor Fae exposes a toothy smile. "Yeah. I think I might have lodged a few complaints myself."

Hearing the 'concern' echoed by all these different Emperors, Ose puts two and two together.

"You... you all! What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to backstab me?! We agreed to come here and wipe out the human resistance, not... not step back and entertain the Wordsmith's delusions!"

Hope's rage subsides, ever so slightly, as he witnesses this strange change in scenery. He glances at Jason with confusion in his eyes, yet neither of the Wordsmiths say anything.

At the same time, Mephisto and Zamiel take a few steps toward Ose and turn around to face the other Emperors. They, too, feel that something about this situation is much too coordinated.

"What isss the meaning of thisss...?" Mephisto hisses. "Don't tell me you are all planning to..."

"We're not going to *do* anything." Yardrat says, while taking a step backward and shrugging deeply, as if having no control of the situation. "Come on, Ose, Mephisto. Did you two really think we were going to go along with whatever you ordered?"

"You're a smart bitch." Fae laughs. "But not smart enough, it seems."

Ose inhales deeply.

"Good. Very good. I see why all of you kept up the act until now. You don't want to cross my bottom line, not just yet. You're not sure if, despite me defeating the Cherubiim, I have what it takes to tear down the Wordsmiths, too. You're not going to plunge the knife into my back, but you're more than happy to watch someone else do it."

"It's about benefits and survival." Kristoff counters, his tone cold. "While you piss off the Wordsmith, a terrifying alien enemy is soon to defeat the Volgrim. After them, we're

next. Why should we spend our time fighting the Wordsmith when we could ally with him? Especially when he can solve our biggest problem?"

"Not one of us has the power to kill you." Yadrat freely admits. "You alone can tear apart all of us at the same time. We're nothing but meat on your chopping block. So we had to do everything we could to get you *here*. Frankly, we don't like you. We can't *stand* you."

"My wife died because of you," Kristoff says. "And Lupus's husband, Wolfram. But why should you care? My Hell suffered all the losses, while yours reaped all the gains."

One by one, each of the Emperors chimes in, berating Ose and pointing out her flaws.

She is the one who brought the Cherubim to Hell Harbor.

She is the one who pissed off the Wordsmith.

She is the one who summoned the Volgrim's attention, something nobody wanted.

"Enough!" Ose roars, interrupting the voices. "Traitors! You're letting the Wordsmith tear us apart! If we all attack, the Wordsmith won't survive! We can kill him! We can even take his powers for ourselves!"

"I don't think we can!" Fae counters. "Newsflash, Ose! It was me and Yadrat who came here to talk to him, yesterday! We had our misgivings, but we also thought we had a chance against him! That was before the Wordsmith revealed his trump card! You can't beat him, I guarantee it!"

"Trump card?" Ose repeats. "What trump card? Bullshit! You're falling for his lies! But you've opened your mouths too quickly, pawns of Auger! Now I know who the snitches are! I'll kill you two first before killing the rest!"

Ose takes a menacing step toward the other Emperors, before a powerful suppressive force locks onto her body and pins her in place.

As if held fast by a stasis field of incomparable power, Ose's figure freezes. She grits her teeth, only to scowl when she realizes what has trapped her.

"Wordsmith!"

Jason continues levitating in the sky, as calm as ever.

"I can't let you hurt the other Emperors, Ose. I already promised that if they handed you and Mephisto over, I would keep in mind that none of them were directly involved in

the attack on Tarus II."

"However." Jason continues. "I am not interested in letting you have a fair trial. I gave you one chance to surrender, but you refused it. Therefore, as punishment, you can face my 'champion.'"

The suppressive effect releases Ose, causing her to stumble slightly. She glares with hate-filled eyes at Emperors Fae and Yardrat, gnashing her teeth and readying herself to attack, when a burst of shock jolts her heart.

Horror surges through Ose's veins. She whips around as a powerful aura of mana draws her attention, causing her to gasp.

"What! King Arthur?!"

Not just Ose, but Zamiel, Mephisto, and all the other Emperors, Dukes, Barons, and Lords gasp in alarm, everyone except for Yardrat and Fae.

Having come to speak to Jason in person not twelve hours before, both of them know the truth of Jason's power. Shortly after the Hell of Lust met up with him, Auger dispatched these two to probe Jason's intentions.

It was when Jason revealed his trump card that they realized there was another option besides following Ose's orders.

As for the demoness herself, Ose can only stare with shrunken pupils while the figure of the Hero-King himself stands a hundred yards away, mana rippling off his body.

King Arthur. The man who once killed three Demon Emperors in a single day. The man who, even as a soulless husk, still managed to slaughter the Archdemon.

Mephisto levitates backward. Zamiel follows after him, terror gripping his throat.

"N-no way! Boss! You said his body was destroyed on Polaris!"

"It wasss..." Mephisto hisses. "That isss not the real Arthur. It isss a fake!"

King Arthur holds up his hand. A moment later, a sword materializes in his grip, the very image of which causes every demon on the scene to jump in fright.

"Excalibur?! That's definitely a fake!" Ose shrieks, only for the claim to fall flat a moment later. "But why does its mana signature feel identical! Even its soul pressure! Don't tell me the Founders were deceived?!"

"Hah, hah, hah..." Jason laughs quietly. "You want to know the truth, Ose? Mephisto? You're both right. This isn't really Arthur. And like I said before, neither is his sword the authentic Excalibur. They're both recreations I made through my Wordsmithing."

Jason cocks his head.

"But I must warn you. His strength is real. His swordsmanship is flawless. And most alarmingly, one Arthur is not my limit. I can make ten of him, or a hundred, or a thousand, or even a million. I can create an army of Arthurs that will rain down upon Hell and exterminate the demons with impunity."

The Wordsmith lifts up his palm dramatically, holding it face-up before his chest.

"This is the truth of the matter. I can kill every demon in existence, even if it takes me a while. I can slaughter you, butcher you, torture you, and maim you, just as you did to my friends and family. But I don't want to do that. I want to give peace a chance. The difference is, unlike before, I'm not extending my kindness to *you*, Ose. Nor your necromancer lackey, nor any of the other monsters who attacked Tarus II. As for the other demons, I will punish them for their longstanding crimes against humanity, but I shall also show them some level of mercy."

Jason gestures to Arthur.

"Now then. To entertain myself, and to give you a fair fighting chance, I'll let you fight Arthur. You can see for yourself if he stacks up to the 'real' Hero-King. Of course, he won't spare you, and you won't be able to escape, so this is also my form of revenge. I can't wait to watch him *cut you to pieces*."

The Wordsmith hisses out those last words, his expression unreadable behind his helmet. Hope looks at him, a strange, unreadable expression clouding his face. For once, the clone appears stumped by his original body's machinations.

"You think your summoned toy can kill me...?" Ose whispers. "We'll see about THAT!"

Ose stomps her right foot against the dirt. At the same time, the legendary weapon, Mjolnir, materializes in her grasp, but in its flail form, the same as what Bael uses.

"AHHHH!!!"

Ose howls a war-cry before activating her lightspeed dash.

An instant later, she rockets forward at the speed of light. Not toward Arthur, but into the sky, directly at the Wordsmith!

BOOM!!

Ose crashes against an energy barrier just a body's length from the Wordsmith, ricochets backward, and hurtles toward the direction she first left.

Crash!

The demoness who stole Bael's body slams into the dirt, stunned more by the unexpected protection in front of the Wordsmith than by the impact itself. Instantly, she jumps to her feet and snarls.

"Uriel!"

Thinking that the Archangel of Retribution must have shielded Jason, she turns her wrath on Uriel, only for the supposed offender to shake her head.

"T'was not I. Foolish bloodskin."

"Liar!" Ose screams. She lifts her palm up and fires a massive bolt of lightning at the Wordsmith, waiting for Uriel to intercept her attack again.

However, Uriel doesn't make a move. When Ose's lightning strikes the Wordsmith, it explodes against a massive, previously transparent energy shield in front of Jason, Hope, the Archangels, and Blinker, too. The shield crackles for a moment before becoming invisible, but in that split-second, Ose's heart skips a beat.

"It wasn't Uriel?"

Alarmed, she realizes that instead of a flat, square barrier, like what Uriel always summons, a spherical shield has engulfed not the Wordsmith and his allies, but Mephisto, Ose, and Zamiel, even going so far as to cut them off from the other Emperors!

"This... this isn't a normal energy shield." Ose realizes. "It's a magical one. And it appears to make use of... formation magic! Fairy formation magic!"

"That's right." Blinker says. The Monster Queen's eyes twitch with barely controlled hatred. "Arthur's going to rip you apart, Ose. But I will PERSONALLY kill Mephisto myself!"

At this moment, Ose realizes just how deeply she was plotted against. The other Emperors only went along with her plans, but secretly, they plotted against her, tricked her into traveling to Tarus II, and helped ensnare her in the Wordsmith's trap.

Ose turns her head to shoot an incredulous look at Yardrat and Fae.

"Do you even realize what you've done?" Ose asks, her voice calming down, as a cold chill descends her spine. "The Wordsmith won't let you off. Without me, you will never be able to defend yourselves. We're all demons, the same species. How could you turn on me like this?"

Yardrat snorts. "We've already lost the war. Now, we're just looking to repair all the damage you've caused."

"You play up your 'genius' ego way too much." Fae adds. "That's why you failed your little Stormbringer attack. It's also why we easily deceived you. You're just not as smart as you think you are, Ose."

Ose lowers her head. She exhales deeply.

"**...Fine.** After I smash the Wordsmith's puppet, kill the Archangels, rip the fairy's wings off, and eviscerate Jason and Hope, I'll annihilate every last one of you. You'll regret making an enemy of me."

Ose no longer pays any mind to the other demons. She turns around to face Arthur while clutching Mjolnir in her right hand.

Arthur teleports past the translucent barrier, the arena limits that will prevent Ose from escaping.

At the same time, Mephisto and Zamiel glance at one another. The Emperor of Legions doesn't appear nearly as angry or frightened as Ose.

Instead, he appears eerily calm, just like the Wordsmith.

"Ksss. Thisss plot runsss deep. Good thing I made... preparationsss..."

"Don't think you'll be going anywhere." Jason says from above. "I've hardened the spatial compression of this whole planet, and taken multiple precautions to ensure you can't just phase through the ground, Mephisto. You're trapped here. Also, I advise you stay out of Ose's fight. Blinker wants to beat the shit out of you herself, and I just can't bring myself to tell her 'no.'"

Mephisto calmly folds his hands together. He hovers over to the edge of the arena.

"Ksss. I alwayssss did want to sssee Ossse sssuffer. Asss you wisssh, Wordsssmith. It ssseemsss I have no choiccce."

Zamiel frowns. He walks over to Mephisto's side to watch Ose fight Arthur, while also sweating metaphorical bullets.

"Eh, boss? Boss, you're kidding, right? You've got some fancy way to save us both, right? Right?"

Mephisto hisses. "Sssuch an interesssting sssituation. I mussst praisse the Wordsssmith'sss thinking."

"B-boss?" Zamiel whispers. "You *do* have some way out of this, right?"

All at once, chaos erupts!

Ose and Arthur launch themselves at one another.

The former Emperor of Infiltration, now something of a half-Emperor, half-Duke, engages in battle with a silent clone of King Arthur, ruler of Camelot, once known as the mightiest Hero to ever exist.

His divine sword, recreated by the Wordsmith, clangs against Mjolnir as the two weapons collide. The black-hole construct smashes the flat of its blade against the one-ton spiked ball as if Excalibur were a baseball bat.

The instant Arthur smacks aside Mjolnir, his body blurs as he executes multiple fighting forms at once, slashing the sword at the speed of sound. Attacking from the right and left, right and left, his divine blade chops and slices at Ose so fast nobody can follow the movements with their eyes except for Ose and the Archangel, Michael.

Ose, a speedster herself, ducks, dodges, and weaves, allowing the sword to swish past her body's afterimages as she keeps up with Arthur's movements.

In between her dodging, Ose rears back her fist to go for a powerful jab attack.

In order to give her punch its maximum striking power, Ose waits until the millisecond when Arthur's blade swings at her left side. She lifts her indestructible left arm to block the blade while stepping forward and swinging her right fist.

In that instant, a sharp spike of agony surges through her left arm.

Ose's heart jolts.

Her eyes flick to the left just in time to see that, instead of easily deflecting Arthur's blade with her arm, his weapon slices through her skin and bones as if they were made of mushy tofu.

Bael's body, previously thought all but indestructible, doesn't offer even the slightest resistance to the Excalibur created by Jason.

"Aaaaargh!" Ose screams, her momentum utterly thrown off.

Before she can even fully register the severing of her left arm and beat a hasty retreat, Ose suffers another series of blows as Arthur pushes his advantage.

Slash-slash-slash!

Even as Ose tries to pull back, Arthur slashes vertically and horizontally, drawing deep cuts down from Ose's face to her torso, slicing across her stomach, and severing the skin and muscle above both her knees!

Abruptly, Ose loses all the strength in her legs as her muscles turn to sashimi. She crumbles backward and flops onto her ass, watching with horror stricken eyes as Arthur's final sword strike races toward the top of her head.

"Nooooo!!" Ose screams.

At the last instant, Arthur stops.

His blade abruptly ceases its motion less than a millimeter from the top of her skull.

Were he to continue, he would have cut straight down her body, splitting her in half and instantly killing her.

Ose staggers backward as blood spews from her face and chest, her stomach's contents spill out, and her legs flop around uselessly.

"Ahh! Ahh! How?! How could he- aaargh!"

Ose, the previously unstoppable goddess of combat, someone who easily defeated the Cherubiim in a truly epic display of power, finds herself defeated within seconds at the hands of Jason's singular blackhole construct.

The Hidden Emperors shrink back at the sight of Ose's gruesome injuries. Those who had their doubts the Wordsmith's copy of Arthur could prevail immediately feel their reality shatter when they realize how quickly and efficiently Arthur took her apart.

"Holy shit." Fae whispers. "I thought she'd at least put up a fight."

"I wasn't sure she'd actually lose." Yadratt mutters. "I even thought when the Wordsmith showed us Arthur, he was bluffing."

"Clearly, he wasn't." Gorn concludes.

Jason watches from afar.

"Sorry, Ose. I probably should have warned you. While my rendition of Excalibur isn't exactly like the original, and is probably weaker in some ways, it does have its own unique strengths. I can stack the sharpness and durability attributes seemingly infinitely, so no matter how resilient something or someone's defenses might seem, that sword will still cut right through them. You went into the battle thinking Bael's body was invincible, but as it turns out, it never was. It always had a limit."

He chuckles softly.

"Hehe. Miserable way to die, isn't it? I'm sure you'd prefer to perish in a long, dragged out battle, but that's just not how your death will come today. Frankly, a quick end is too good for you. I'd rather let the vultures pick you apart while the people you hurt take turns beating the shit out of you. But, in a way, this seems a lot more humiliating. And what could hurt you more than stomping on your sense of pride?"

Ose shudders. For the first time ever, she gazes at the distant Wordsmith with a look Gressil's victims might give him.

"You...cough... you think I'll just-"

Before Ose can finish her sentence, Arthur's arm moves.

Swish.

Excalibur draws a horizontal arc through the air, cutting across Ose's neck.

Her head departs her body with a slow, quiet, *plop*.

Jason doesn't even give Ose the dignity of uttering any last words.

The moment Ose's life-force ebbs, Bael's necromantically-revived corpse withers away, turning to ash and falling apart in the dirt.

The Hidden Emperors watch silently as Ose, the strongest of all demons, perishes to Jason's summoned warrior.

For several long seconds, nobody says anything.

Even the demons who hated Ose, those who worked against her to get her to this point, feel an indescribable lump well up in their throats.

Emperor Fae, usually a quippy woman, merely swallows dryly while staring at the ash scattering from Ose's corpse.

Yardrat, similarly, closes his eyes.

Despite their differences, many of the Hidden Emperors feel a sense of respect for Ose's achievements, in particular her overpowering of the Cherubiim.

Ose wasn't only a powerful warrior, but also a cunning strategist, the woman who oversaw the Humanity Containment Project following the end of the Energy Wars. She alone took down several major human installations as a mere Baron. She battled and defeated an Archangel in one-on-one combat immediately after her first ascension to Emperor.

Despite Ose's personal failings, the other Emperors still afford her several moments of silence as a form of respect.

While they mourn her death, Hope frowns.

"Jason. Where did Zamiel go?"

The other Wordsmith blinks. He quickly turns his head to look at Mephisto, only to see that while the Emperor of Legions continues to stand in place, his crocodilian puppet is nowhere to be seen.

"What?" Jason mutters, momentarily dazed. "I only looked away for a second. Is this a trick?"

In the moments everyone had their attention focused on Arthur and Ose, right beneath their noses, Mephisto pulled off a sleight of hand.

"Kekeke..." Mephisto chuckles, slowly turning his head to look at the Wordsmiths. "Everyone... always... underestimates... the necromancer."

An instant later, Mephisto explodes.

Poof!

His body detonates like a confetti balloon, spraying a small ash cloud in all directions.

"What?!" Jason shouts. "**Locate!**"

He and Hope quickly speak multiple Words of Power, but no matter what they try, they fail to uncover the Emperor of Legions' hiding place.

Despite savoring Ose's death only moments earlier, they don't manage to stop their other, equally important prey from escaping!

As the Wordsmiths and Blinker panic, trying to figure out how Mephisto tricked them, the necromancer's voice whispers in the wind, just as he once did during the Stormbringer attack, communicating to them remotely.

"Foolisssh humansss. You have turned me into a pariah. My people will hunt me down. But that isss fine. You may enjoy thisss win, today. You failed to take into account my new powersss ass an Emperor. That missstake will cosst you dearly! KE-KE-KE-KE!"

Mephisto's maniacal laughter vanishes into the wind, leaving Jason, Hope, and Blinker all equally enraged.

"No!" Jason roars. "We had him!"

"You let him get away!" Hope screams, pointing the finger at Jason. "He was in the palm of our hand!"

"Kaaar!" Blinker cries, as her heart tears in half. "No... no... no..."

After several long minutes, Jason and Hope have no choice but to stop yelling at each other. Hope comforts Blinker, forcing himself not to fly over and beat the crap out of his original self.

Jason, on the other hand, suffers a heavy mental blow. Not knowing what method Mephisto used to escape squeezes his brain, making him sigh repeatedly while he tries to think of ways to fix the situation.

Eventually, he gives up, lowers his helmet, and turns to face the 5,000 demon elites standing next to the Warpgate.

"I had better not find out any of you gave Mephisto advance warning!" Jason roars. "If I do, our deal is OFF!"

The Emperors shudder. Without Ose, their united strength absolutely pales in comparison to the Wordsmiths.

"No, no, I swear I didn't say anything!"

"It wasn't me!"

"I would never take such a risk!"

They all publicly deny their involvement, leaving Jason to gnash his teeth until he nearly spits blood.

"Well, I don't care WHOSE fault it is! I'll find out one way or the other."

He fumes for a minute or two before calming down.

"In any case. It seems like you all kept up your end of the deal. Whether Mephisto's escape was an unfortunate accident or something you planned, I'll be looking into it very carefully. For now though, we have other matters to discuss."

Jason flies down to the ground level, landing beside Arthur. He folds his hands behind his back and begins slowly approaching the demon elites.

"Giving up Ose and Mephisto on a silver platter was nothing more than your way of showing me some sincerity. Let's next hammer out the details of our potential... *alliance*."

Part 359: I've Come to Bargain

After witnessing Jason's complete toppling of Ose, and Arthur's unstoppable power, not a single one of the demons present holds even the slightest thought they stand a chance against the Wordsmith. Perhaps, if they all unite their powers, they might be able to kill him and Hope, but capturing the Wordsmiths alive to use their powers will absolutely not succeed. And even if they did manage to kill the Wordsmiths, they would all perish during False Arthur's onslaught.

Indeed, despite Jason's construct seeming weaker than the actual Arthur, due to an inability to wield holy energy or release the true Excalibur's magical power, in terms of simple, raw combat ability, its indestructible blade, overwhelming speed, and mountain-sundering power make the Blackhole Construct completely undefeatable. Only if the Emperors prepare for a long time, they might succeed in catching it in a trap, but on this particular day, that prayer will never be answered.

As the two Emperors who brought Jason to the bargaining table, Yadrat and Fae hold their chins the highest, knowing the Wordsmith will show them more sincerity than the others. It was due to their plotting that Ose fell so easily, without causing a ruckus, and that Jason was able to display his formidable might to cow the other Hidden Emperors.

As for the rest, they have no choice but to firm up their hearts, particularly when the Wordsmith's next words will decide their fates, as well as the fates of all other demons in the universe.

Jason Hiro begins to pace back and forth before the 5,000 assembled demon elites. With his helmet dissipated, they can all look him in the eye, and vice versa, he can also meet their gazes.

"...An alliance." Jason repeats. "It would benefit all of us greatly. Genocide is not a path I want to pursue. But make no mistake. If I wish to exterminate all of you, and the rest of your Hells, I hold the absolute advantage. You live or die at my whim."

He continues. "While these statements are true, it does not mean I wish to bully you. But I must speak these words so that you fully grasp your situation. You have stomped humanity into the mud. You have beaten, raped, maimed, tortured, and killed humans for your own sick pleasure, or to obtain benefits for yourselves, for well over 100,000 years.

Simply put, you are currently unworthy of an alliance with me! Every single one of you deserves agonizing deaths! You deserve to suffer the same fate as all my brothers and sister before me!"

Jason peers into the eyes of several Emperors.

He pauses his speech to stop before one of them in particular.

"You. You are an undead demon! Gorn, if I remember correctly."

Emperor Gorn stands up a little straighter. Despite his immense body and height, his forehead barely reaches Jason's nose.

"I am Gorn, the Emperor of Many Faces." Gorn affirms. "And yes, I am undead. Mephisto revived me, following the Cherubiim's attack."

Gorn flicks his eyes toward the four Archangels in the distance, behind Jason. He snorts quietly, then returns his attention to Jason.

"I already know what you're thinking, Wordsmith. You're wondering if I'm one of Mephisto's pawns; if I'm preparing to attack you when your back is turned."

"Mephisto can control all his undead. He can use them as spies, or as suicidal attackers." Jason says with a nod. "But... there have already been two exceptions. Ose and Bael."

"And I am the third." Gorn says, drawing several looks of surprise from the other Emperors. "Mephisto made a mistake. He... didn't fully assume control of my soul, and so, I escaped his grasp. When he left, he took Zamiel with him, but left me behind, because he intends to collect my memories when we meet up again. Since you were about to capture Zamiel, Mephisto knew leaving him here was foolish, but he also knew I was not one of your targets."

Gorn doesn't tell the whole truth. He leaves out the fact that he broke free of Mephisto's control by simply switching the 'frequency' of his soul, but even so, his words explain ninety-five percent of the facts.

"Interesting." Jason says, examining Gorn's face. He stares at the masculine Emperor for a few moments before continuing his pacing. Without bothering to question Gorn further, Jason returns to his previous topic.

"All of you deserve to die, but I don't think that will help anyone at all, not in the short nor long term." Jason says. "Therefore! Before we can form an alliance, you will have to

demonstrate true sincerity to me, the Archangels, and all the rest of humanity."

Emperor Kristoff maintains a neutral expression. "Whatever you request, Wordsmith... we will do our best to give you what you need. We all want to maintain a healthy relationship, in light of humanity's new trajectory."

"That's good to hear." Jason says with a cold smile. "Let's talk about Stormbringer. Ose is dead, and it goes without saying that all of you, every single one, will go out and pursue Mephisto to the ends of every Hell. You will catch him. You will kill him, or you will capture him. You will also bring his Lantern to me, as well as Kar's body. But this is only the start."

Jason continues. "It's entirely possible Mephisto will continue to evade you. If you can't catch him, no matter. I will do it myself. But there is one thing I know you can all do. You will track down *every* single demon and monster involved in the Stormbringer attack. Any who personally killed a single person or creature on my side during that dark day, you will bring them to me. Dead or alive, I don't care."

This demand causes several of the Emperors to frown.

"Wordsmith." Yardrat says, choosing his words carefully. "Ah... regarding the attackers... I suppose this goes without saying, but we demons don't exactly maintain accurate records. We know the Lords and some key members of our lower-ranks, but... there were so many involved in the Stormbringer attack, I don't see how we can possibly identify them all, let alone find them. Hell is quite *big*, you know."

"Oh, that's *not* a problem you need to worry about." Jason says quietly. "Every person who died during Stormbringer wore a Transforming Replicant Exosuit. All the footage of that day has been saved and backed up. My wife will create a vast and detailed compilation of those confirmed to have killed humans, monsters, and demons on our side. With their faces, you will find them all and bring them to me to await trial."

"Ah. Then... we'll do that." Yardrat says, lowering his head.

"Speaking of those involved in the attack on Tarus II," Jason says, turning his body to face the demon elites, "a certain 'someone' appears to be missing. Where, pray tell, is Emperor Yama? His Shades personally murdered an entire hospital's worth of wounded soldiers and civilians. As far as war crimes go, it was one of the worst parts of that day, barring... Beelzebub's detonation."

Fae snorts. "The sun is up. Naturally, Yama won't come here, nor will his Shades or Shadow-walkers. He stayed inside Hell, awaiting our signal to attack. Like the thousands of legions ready and waiting to attack, his shadow division will remain in place for a while longer."

Fae can't help but smile with glee when she hears the anger in Jason's voice. Not only did Yama nearly capture Jason's little girl, he also tried to kill Belial. And, more importantly, he tried to capture Fae and Bael during the Cherubiim attack to forcibly convert them into his own personal Shade attendants.

Heh heh heh... oh, Yama. Your reckoning is near. You and Mephisto both. Hell will rid itself of two nasty infestations, Fae thinks.

Jason nods. "Is that so? In that case, I'll take care of him myself."

"No need." Hope says, from behind Jason. He projects his voice with Wordsmithing to ensure everyone can properly hear him. "Leave the Shadow Emperor to me."

Jason glances back at Hope. When he sees a look of firm determination in his clone's eyes, all he can do is nod.

"...Alright. Yama is yours to do with as you please, Hope. Just wait until I finish here, and you can go kick him around, burn him to nothingness, or otherwise do as you please."

"I don't feel like waiting." Hope retorts.

Before Jason can interject, the Second Wordsmith utters a Word of Power and vanishes from the spot, disappearing into the depths of Hell.

"Hope..." Jason grumbles, before shaking his head.

No. It's better this way. I keep stifling him, but that isn't my intention. I can hardly blame him for being so pissed off, especially after what Gressil did to him.

Suddenly remembering Gressil's existence, Jason turns to Arthur, beside him.

"Arthur. Find Hope. Follow him. Only assist him if he needs help. Don't kill any demons unless you absolutely must. Contact me if you come across any conflicts in my commands."

The construct nods.

An instant later, his body flickers and vanishes. All the Emperors manage to see is a lightning-fast blur rush past them and race through the Warpgate into the Core.

So fast! Gorn thinks, just as shocked as he was when Arthur diced Ose to pieces. *Imagine an army of False Arthurs. Nothing could stand in their way.*

"Alright." Jason says, continuing his previous conversation. "I've laid out my starting demands. You will all hunt down Mephisto, Yama, and the others who attacked my people. But those demands don't actually hurt you. If anything, they eliminate some competition, giving you all a bit more of the 'Hell pie' to devour for yourselves. Now comes the actual hard part, where you have to make some sacrifices."

Jason resumes his back and forth pacing. "First off. Demons trashed my planet. I expect you to fix it up. Even though the majority of you weren't responsible for any damage to Tarus II, you've still committed unthinkable, heinous crimes against humanity. You will bring your hordes here to build homes, manufacturing facilities, recreational facilities, and defenses for my planet. You will fertilize the ground and till the soil. You will help me by using your various magical abilities for the sake of good, giving humans a world we can safely call home."

"This is not just to make up for your past sins, of which I'm sure you elites know are as numerous as the stars," Jason adds, "but to personally demonstrate your sincerity to humanity, build relations with us, and work alongside us. I know your history, perhaps better than most of you do. I know the convoluted details of how you ended up fighting the angels, and the Titans, and then, even the humans. While it is true that demons did not start the ancient wars, you did continue them, and you magnified their scale, ultimately slaughtering the angels and Titans while enslaving my people."

Jason spins on his heel. He turns to face the Emperors once again, but this time, reveals a visible smile.

"Once you have done all that, our mutually beneficial alliance will formally begin. The castigation of your war criminals, and the rebuilding of humanity's new homeworld will, in my humble estimation, decently make up for your bloody history. Today, I intend to reveal to you all the first of many devices that can bring about a new age of prosperity for demonkind!"

After listening to so many bleak demands for war crime reparations, the demon elites immediately perk up their ears at the thought of actually receiving benefits from the Wordsmith. More than their fear of the Wordsmith, the thought that he might improve

their lots and even take care of the Threat they face, this is what most heavily motivated them to turn against Ose and give her up as a sacrificial lamb.

If Jason had no benefits to offer them, they would rather go down in flames and die fighting, just as they once did to the angels. In the minds of the demon elites, a life spent in slavery or suffering would be ten million times worse than a quick and brutal self-immolation.

As for Jason, seeing the looks of anticipation on their faces, he can't help but chuckle inwardly.

It's like the Wisdom Seeker always said. The carrot and the stick works best for manipulating others. If I give out too many benefits, others will see me as easy prey. But if I punish the demons too harshly, they will turn on me and fight to the last breath. Only by mixing benefits and punishments can I incentivize them to change their behavior. I wonder how many of them are truly cognizant that they've actually fallen for the schemes of Sun Tzu and Solomon?

The Wordsmith turns and gestures toward the titanic crystal wall enveloping the Fortress of Retribution. He moves his hand slowly, to add a dramatic flair.

"I will prove that my methods are not false. Come. All of you, follow me."

While the demon elites have no choice but to follow him, considering the potential benefits they will receive, none of them hold the slightest intention of dragging their feet. They eagerly pursue the Wordsmith, Blinker, and the Archangels as they take to their air and fly back to the impenetrable barrier protecting the Fortress of Retribution.

When the Emperors draw near, many of them knock lightly on the almost completely translucent crystal, only to punch it harder and wince when their fists buckle instead of the wall.

"What incredible defensive properties..." Gorn mutters, his eyes shining with a gloomy light. "I wonder if even Ose could have broken through it. It's far tougher than demonstone. The Wordsmith must have used his unique methods to reinforce it."

The Wordsmith opens up a passage in the wall, and the Emperors step through. On the other side, hundreds of human commandos and monsters stand at attention, having been forewarned by Jason regarding the bare details of his discussions with the demons.

Men and women alike gaze with shocked expressions through their T-REX visors as the 5,000 strong contingent of demons travels past them.

"Is it true? The Wordsmith actually killed Ose?"

"He even said he had forged an alliance with the demons. Or at least, he's working on it."

"Damn! Why couldn't he have done this before Stormbringer? Now I have to smile cheerfully at these demon bastards, after losing my little brother?!"

"My wife burned to death during the last stages of the demon's attack. I know what you're feeling... but we have to assume Commander Hiro has his reasons."

The soldiers whisper and chatter to each other through their mics. Naturally, these conversations will be stored in the Centurion database, but not even the hardest-hearted person would fault them for disliking the Wordsmith's actions.

And, even if they disagree, they know that Jason himself lost a daughter during the war, so he wouldn't forgive the demons so easily. He must have a reason for his decisions.

Jason leads the Hidden Emperors to a facility not far from the edge of the wall, a simple, nondescript building the size of a warehouse. When everyone enters and Jason turns on the lights, the demon elites remain silent as they try to understand just what, exactly, they're looking at.

Inside the warehouse, hundreds of tubes and wires criss-cross the ceiling. They travel from dozens of mini-nuclear generators on the walls, power converters, and other devices of unknown origin to a pair of twenty-foot-tall tube-like pods in the center of the room, connecting the former and latter through the network of tubes in a sublime fashion.

Sadly, none of the demons have any sort of technical background. Human technology is to them what their magic is to humans; a complete bunch of gobbledy-gook.

"What are we looking at?" Yardrat asks, examining the two 'pods' in the center of the room, neither of which seem to contain anything of note. They both have glassy windows, allowing the demons to see into their interiors, but they also appear empty, with no contents visible from the outside.

"These two pods might not look like much," Jason says, while casually walking toward the two devices, "but they hold the power to completely transform and reshape demon

society. I haven't officially given them a name, but I find it kind of funny to call them... Belial Boosters!"

At the mention of the former Second Emperor, the demon elites quiet down, feeling a sense of awkwardness when they realize that keeping her as an outcast will probably not reflect well on the 'sincerity' the Wordsmith has repeatedly mentioned.

Even so, Fae finds the strength within herself to ask the question on everyone else's mind.

"Belial Booster? Why, ah, why do you call it... *that*?"

Jason chuckles. "Well. Because originally, I figured that in the event humanity fought demonkind and our peace talks fell through, I'd be mostly relying on Belial to power it. Now, that no longer has to be the case. Here, I'll demonstrate what exactly it does."

Jason points at Fae, then at a random Demon Baron in the back row.

"You two. Step forward."

Fae frowns at being singled out, but, upon quickly communicating with Auger through their innate telepathic link, shrugs and decides to obey Jason's command.

She steps forward, then turns her head to see, with mild surprise, that of all the Barons Jason could have chosen, he ended up picking Mara, the Baron of Games.

"Huh. So it's you." Fae muses. "Haven't seen you since..."

"Since the Yama incident." Mara says with a nod. "Mmm."

"Sorry about Yumagi's death," Fae says, through she can't help but crook a vicious smile. "Serves the cunt right for showing off in front of the Archangels. No offense, but I really couldn't stand that prick."

A strange look flashes across Mara's eyes as she recalls the secret realization that, despite everyone witnessing Yumagi's 'death,' he never actually perished. Only a clone of his younger self, made with his mystical Tarot Arts.

"Thank you. The Tarot Sect will continue to function, even without our leader." Mara says, keeping her words diplomatic. Considering Fae's reputation as the Emperor of Terror, she's done well to keep her violent tendencies in check, and Mara doesn't want to say anything that might set her off.

After the two women finish conversing, they turn to look at Jason with deep expectations.

"What next?" Fae asks.

Jason points to the two pods.

"Fae. Step into the pod on the left. Mara, you can go to the pod on the right."

"Why?" Fae asks, frowning slightly. "Come on, Wordsmith. I don't like surprises, and I get *real* claustrophobic. You don't want me to start throwing *bombs*, do ya?"

"No, no I don't," Jason says with a chuckle. "Alright. I'll tell it to you straight. This machine is one-of-a-kind. I can only create one per world I control. It uses a combination of Tarus II's magma core temperature, the planet's natural life energy, and the power of a Demon Emperor to elevate the strength of a low-ranking demon upwards."

"Simply put," Jason says, "it can fundamentally replace the need for demons to evolve from Grunt to Emperor via the use of souls."

Immediately, every low-ranking demon elite, particularly the Lords and Barons, gasps in shock. Even the Dukes and Emperors can't help but have their eyes bug out at this claim.

"Are you serious?!" Fae asks. "Does that mean it can raise Mara from a Baron to an Emperor?!"

"Not instantly." Jason says, while the other demons snort fire in anticipation of his next words. "If we're lucky, she will become a Duke within this first session. The Belial Booster will consume your energy to boost Mara's mind, body, and soul, and most importantly, it will not harm you in the long term! You will become fatigued, and you will not be able to use your magic for several weeks, but otherwise, you will recover normally while boosting Mara's strength!"

The demons roar with excitement.

"This is incredible!" Kristoff howls. "I never imagined such a wonderful machine could exist!"

"Only the Wordsmith could create something so profound!" Gorn praises. "Truly remarkable!"

While the demons laud him, Jason scratches his chin. "Hehe. I've already tested it once. Belial helped boost one of our Lords to the rank of Baron. Fae, Mara, why don't you two begin the procedure?"

Mara doesn't delay. She quickly runs forward and climbs into the energy transfer pod while looking at Fae with eager eyes.

"Come on, Fae! Let's go!"

Fae, however, hesitates.

"This machine is certainly incredible, but... why do *I* have to be the first to get my power sucked out? Use Yadrat. I'll bet he has more juice than me."

"Stop your bitchin'!" Emperor Lupus yells from behind the other Emperors. "Hurry up and get in the damn thing! I wanna see how this gizmo works!"

Fae grumbles a few more times, but ultimately relents. Since none of the other Emperors want to be the first to step inside, she reluctantly accepts her task.

After warily shuffling into the first containment pod, Fae flinches when its glass door swishes shut, sealing her inside. She taps the glass and discovers that while it is somewhat reinforced, she can easily smash it to pieces and escape if the situation turns dire.

"This had better not be a trick, Wordsmith." Fae growls, eying him suspiciously.

"If I wanted to kill or hurt you, I'd just do it." Jason says. "Could you even stop me?"

She continues to grumble, but lowers the frequency of her protests. "Tsk. Whatever. Just get this over with."

Jason grins. "You asked for it, sister. Don't worry! This procedure doesn't hurt at all!"

Without any fanfare, Jason taps on the control panel, keying in a unique one-time access code. The Belial Booster activates, summoning life energy from Tarus II's surface, planetary energy from the core, and electrical energy from the mini-nuclear reactors, all of which surge into a conduit located directly between Fae and Mara's pods.

At the same time, Fae's eyes begin to droop. An intense sensation of weakness swallows her mind, making her sag down in the pod with shaky knees, slumping into a position of absolute exhaustion. Her face presses against the glass, and her breath causes fog to build up on its surface.

"Uhh... uhhhh... so... so tired..."

Like a human who has run a marathon, then performed one hundred consecutive pullups, Fae's arms and legs lose all of their strength, making her unable to keep herself in a standing position.

At the same time, Mara's eyes widen. She howls with delight as a pleasurable sensation unlike anything she's ever experienced in her life fills up her mind, body and soul.

Better than sex. Better than the most delicious food, or the most fun hobby, or any other activity she has enjoyed partaking in, Mara moans seductively, feeling her entire body tremble and spasm as the electrical currents fill her with overwhelming power!

Her demonic aura surges! Before the spectator's eyes, her Baron-level aura races upward, reaching the peak of her rank before immediately crashing through with a muffled *BOOM* and continuing to rise past the bottom level of a Duke!

Minutes later, the procedure stops. Fae helplessly lays with her face smushed against the glass, looking like a dainty fairy, unable to protect herself, while Mara appears exactly the opposite. She whoops and hollers in an uncharacteristic manner, clearly overjoyed by her transformation!

"Incredible! Amazing! I feel like I could shatter reality! I am the Baron of Games no longer! From this day forward, I shall be the Duke of Collection!"

Many Lords and Barons cheer wildly from the sidelines, not only excited and happy for Mara's well-deserved elevation of status, but also for the prospects of their own future rise to power!

Once the lower-ranking demons follow in Mara's footsteps, they will experience the same moment of ascension as her, stepping up through the ranks of demonkind into a world better than any they had ever hoped for!

While the low-ranking demons scream with excitement, the higher-ranked ones maintain their cool.

Gorn examines Fae from a distance, frowning.

"There aren't any permanent after-effects? Fae looks as if you drained her soul dry."

"No after-effects!" Jason declares resolutely. "Sure, she's completely dead inside and will enjoy the best sleep of her life, but in a few weeks, it will be as if she had never stepped foot in the chamber."

Jason opens both of the pods, then gestures to Mara.

"Help Fae out, would you? It's the least you can do."

"No problem! I owe her more than I can put into words!" Mara chirps. The usually cool and collected demoness radiates happiness, having obtained a powerup she never expected she would receive.

As Mara walks over to help carefully pull Fae out of the chamber, Jason turns to the other Emperors.

"The Belial Booster is still incomplete. In the future, it will allow Barons and Dukes to also boost low-ranking demons, particularly Grunts, en-masse. A single Duke could raise ten Grunts to the rank of Lord, for example. For right now, it has several limitations that cannot be overridden. Now that Mara has been boosted once, she will have to wait a long time before we can boost her again. Additionally, boosting her with the same demon, meaning Fae, won't work. Someone else will have to do so. Kristoff, Gorn, whoever, I don't care."

"But." Jason says, pausing to give his next words added weight. "It doesn't matter how incredible this device is. If you don't carry out my demands and fullheartedly support humanity, you can say goodbye to ever using the Belial Booster. Humanity will use it only for our current, longstanding demon allies. In time, we will raise an army of Dukes and Emperors, and you will all have to sit on the sidelines. Therefore, I advise that you hunt down everyone I mentioned before. As long as you complete those missions, you can begin to bolster your own Hells."

Jason's words burrow deeply into the ears of his listeners.

Hidden in them is a secret implication.

Yardrat flicks his eyes toward the other Emperors, noting the thoughtful expressions on their faces. He, too, thinks deeply about Jason's underlying threat.

The device can't be used repeatedly, or often. That means after each usage, it will have a substantial cooldown period. Not only does the planet need to recover its life energy, but the planet's core needs to 'reheat' itself. This means the choice of whose allies get boosted first will matter significantly! If the other Hells get access to the Belial Booster before mine, won't we suffer a loss?

And how, then, will the Wordsmith determine whose subordinates receive the boosts first?

Yardrat snorts.

It's obvious. Those who most 'sincerely' chase down and capture or kill the brutes who attacked Tarus II will earn the most favor with him. Those who drag their feet will end up at the back of the line!

Scarcity creates value.

If the Belial Booster were easy to use, its value would drop. If every Emperor could quickly boost their subordinates, its value would drop further.

But its limited and unique functionality, its position on the human homeworld, and its symbolic importance make it a defining feature of the upcoming generation!

Not only can the demons not use human souls to advance anymore, but the lone remaining method belongs to their former enemy, and it has even greater effect than the soul-improvement path they once used!

Even more so than humanity, greed rules the heart of demonkind. While the Hidden Emperors certainly won't be foolish enough as to attack Tarus II, Jason, or humanity, that doesn't mean their own internal disputes will cease as well!

Several Emperors shoot sly glances at one another, measuring up their future enemies.

The Hell of Isolation didn't attend this meeting. Yardrat thinks. They won't know about the Belial Booster. But then again, Jason probably holds a certain sympathy for them, along with the Hell of Lust. Their crimes against humanity are far less than the other five Hells. As such, they will likely get first pick regarding who to boost. Yama's Hell is finished. He won't ever get to touch this juicy morsel. That means my Hell only has three real opponents, and we're all going to fight for third place!

The Hells of Damnation, Blood, Punishment, and Calamity stand opposed to one another. While on occasion they might work together for the sake of demonkind itself, in general, they have never been allies beyond the species-relation level.

And since the Hell of Damnation has oppressed the other Six Hells by monopolizing the control of souls since the end of the Energy Wars, the rest will be all too happy to suppress it, if given the choice.

Emperor Yardrat sneers inwardly. *Ose is dead. Mephisto is a castaway. Bael is useless. Beelzebub is dead. The First Hell has no foundation to stand on! It lacks even a single Duke! Mara sometimes performed odd jobs for the Hell of Damnation's leaders,*

but she's actually a member of the Hell of Calamity! With the First Hell now having no worthwhile leaders, isn't this...

Hmm. Yardrat thinks, his thoughts slowing down. Come to think of it. The First Hell has a strong low-level foundation. If I weren't bound to Auger, couldn't I set out to become the new leader of the First Hell? If I have such a thought, then so, too, will the rest...

As the Emperor of the Void ponders to himself, Mara walks over with Fae's powerless body in her arms. Fae's usually boisterous demeanor, for once, gives way to a sort of cute and soft appearance as she sleeps in Mara's grasp.

At least, until she lets out a loud and obnoxious snore.

Then the effect vanishes.

"Here." Mara says. "You can warp her back to Diabolus, right?"

Yardrat nods. He takes Fae in his arms and grimaces at the sight of snot and drool dripping down her face.

"Lovely."

Jason claps his hands.

"I hope, then, that we can all work together to build our alliance. What do you think?"

The demon elites nod in unison.

Yardrat starts to voice his affirmation, but at that moment, a telepathic message beams into his mind.

Auger, the Emperor of Distribution, sends Yardrat a piece of information that shocks him to his core!

At the same time, several other Emperors receive the same news!

"Sharmur is under attack!" Kristoff exclaims, his eyes darkening. "Who would do such a thing?"

A chill descends down Gorn's spine.

"Impossible! The attacker! They're... they're actually...!"

When Gorn says the attacker's identity, Jason's soul plunges into an icy abyss.

"Oh my god. No... it can't be...!"

Part 360: Shattered Sharmur

On the planet 'Sharmur,' ruled by the Hell of Isolation.

Millions of demons and monsters live on this remote world, located in the southern part of the Milky Way galaxy. Only a week before, its population was much higher, but due to the Wordsmith's activation of the Lazarus Tower, every human in existence teleported to Tarus II, leaving Sharmur feeling far, far more empty than before.

The Hell of Isolation's leaders practice the arts of music, painting, dancing, cooking, and other such relatively pleasant activities. Even so, this world is not weak. Demons proficient in the Arts of Recreation can weaponize their music, conjure frightening painted monsters, and even turn food into a weapon.

Dorma, the Duke of Delicacies, sits in a shop on the outskirts of Sharmur's capitol city, Maotai Quo, named by one of the city's original founders, a demoness who was surprisingly appreciative of Earth's Chinese culture. This city features many such Chinese inspirations, relating not only to its name, but its architecture, its societal hierarchy, and even the way people address one another.

Inside his small but cozy shop, Dorma cooks up a storm. He throws boiled noodles and vegetables in a pot with beef and chicken stock, mixing them up expertly to create soups and stews, while using his innate demonic powers to roll eggs and rice together as well. With speed and efficiency, he finishes a mouth-watering order for a party of ten demons, all of whom give him a thumbs up.

"Damn good food, Dorma!"

"Awesome as always!"

These Grunts, as well as a pair of Lords, eagerly accept the craftsmanship offered to them by Dorma, who also flashes a hearty thumbs up back at them.

"Hahaha! It was just something I made in a rush! No need to thank me!"

After the small group takes their grub to-go and leaves, another demon in the room, a fellow Duke on the same level of Dorma, looks at him from the corner of her eye.

"Business seems slow." She says, glancing at the otherwise barren shop.

"Well. With all the humans gone, not many customers come by. Most demons don't even eat good, homecooked food." Dorma says. "But that's okay too. It means I can make each dish extra special for those who do decide to pay me a visit!"

The female Duke sighs. "There were these two cute kids, a boy and a girl. I liked to go over and paint with them... but now they're gone. That Wordsmith took them away."

"Perhaps it is better like this." Dorma says, with a shrug. "We did treat the humans well, but don't you think they should live with their own kind? Now they can come together, as one big family."

"What, and we weren't their family?" The demoness grumbles. "Don't be naïve. The Wordsmith is going to raise those kids to be warriors. They could have grown up with us here, happy and at peace. Instead, they've been pulled into the conflicts of the other Hells, and even worse, they won't know how good their lives could have been. They may even grow up to hate us."

"Mmm. You're probably right, Wei Lei." Dorma says, addressing the Duke of Colors. He picks up the half-empty pot of soup he just made, ladles out a large bowl of it, and slides it down the bar to her. "But in the end, humans are humans. We shouldn't interfere in them returning to their own kind. What we should do is continue to spread the word that demons and humans can live in peace."

"A worthless message." Wei Lei says, bitterly, while grabbing a pair of chopsticks from a nearby canister full of them and digging into her soup. She slurps several of the noodles and smiles reflexively, in large part due to the divine taste of Dorma's cooking. "As we speak, Ose is leading an army to humanity's doorstep. How am I supposed to feel knowing those two kids are standing right in the killzone?"

Dorma, still standing behind the bar, leans forward and rests his arms on its surface. He looks down its length at Wei Lei while she devours his soup.

"Maybe we should have persuaded Melody and the others to let us join the Wordsmith's cause?"

"That's no good either." Wei Lei says, while chewing a particularly juicy piece of pulled pork. "We are neutral. Always. That was what Shax would have wanted from us. We only fight if attacked. We do not ever seek out trouble with others, especially not our fellow demons."

"Is true neutrality possible?" Dorma wonders. "The other demons hate us. They coveted our human family, wanting to take them as slaves. The Overlords made it clear that only so many humans were allowed to remain among the living, so the only legitimate way to gain more slaves would be by stealing from us. Yet we were not pushovers and could stand up for ourselves. In that case, would one not say we were taking a stand for the humans?"

"I'm not interested in a philosophical debate." Wei Lei says, waving her hand flippantly at Dorma. "You should stick to cooking. It's what you do best."

Dorma snorts. "Ants specialize. Demons and humans generalize. Why can I not be both a scholar and a chef? I'll have you know-"

In the middle of Dorma talking, the door to his shop opens up, and a demon Grunt stumbles in, a Burner-type with fiery red hair.

"Hey! Wei Lei, Dorma! Come here! You've gotta see this!"

Dorma frowns. "We were right in the middle of a discussion. Must you be so rude?"

"Forget that!" The Grunt says, visibly agitated. "This is important! REALLY important!"

Dorma and Wei Lei glance at one another, then shrug in exasperation.

"Every time some problem comes up, it's always a Baron or a Duke who has to resolve the situation..." Wei Lei complains.

The two of them follow the Grunt outside, frowning as he starts to run toward the nearby wall enveloping the city of Maotai Quo. While the Hell of Isolation might be a Hell filled with peace-loving hippies, they still have to worry about infrequent attacks from the planet's wildlife, of which many thousands of apex predators exist, the majority of them more fearsome than the dinosaurs of Earth's history.

"Slow down." Dorma says, breaking into a light jog. "Why are you in such a rush?"

"Come on, hurry!" The Grunt says, frantically pointing at the gate to the city.

"At least tell us what this is about!" Wei Lei says, but her words fall on deaf ears.

Helplessly, she and Dorma simply continue to chase after the Grunt, who eventually screeches to a stop at the city gates, where a half dozen other Lords and Grunts hide

behind the walls, peeking through the gaps in the iron gates at something on the other side.

"Guys! I brought some Dukes!" The Grunt says, arriving beside the others. "Th-they can handle this... thing!"

Dorma and Wei Lei both slow to a stop in front of the gates. The criss-crossing iron bars allow them to see outside the city's borders, into the marshlands, where usually they might observe at least a few winged predators flying around, or other creatures migrating from the north to the south, especially at this time of year.

However, what they instead see is a sight most peculiar.

Recommended Listening

Outside the city gates, perhaps half a mile in the distance, a humanoid figure stands, its mottled green skin covered in warts and blisters, as if suffering from an infection. No hair rests on its head. Its frail-looking body shows plenty of rib bones, as if it hasn't eaten a meal in weeks. Lacking any clothes, it appears totally nude, yet curiously, it also seems to lack genitals.

But, the thing that most draws everyone's gaze is the creature's head.

It lacks a face.

No eyes.

No nose.

No mouth.

The faceless creature stands, unmoving, outside the gates, yet faces the city, as if debating whether or not to enter.

Wei Lei's eyes gaze expressionlessly at the creature.

"What... what the hell is that thing? Is it... a human?"

"It does sort of look like a human..." Dorma mutters. "But it also feels monster...ish."

"You see?" The Grunt whispers, keeping his voice low. "It's creepy! Look at it just standing there... menacingly! You guys have to take care of it! We're too scared."

"I'm not going anywhere near that thing." Another Grunt says.

"Me neither." Says a Demon Lord.

Wei Lei and Dorma look at each other.

For a brief moment, even they feel a brief tingle of fear.

Something about the creature... unnerves them. Its motionless stance, its faceless head...

For some reason, it feels...

Alien.

Dorma straightens his posture. He cracks his neck and grits his teeth.

"Goddammit. Why does all the weird shit always happen around me?"

"We can't look pathetic in front of our cute little subordinates." Wei Lei laughs nervously. "Come on. Let's investigate."

Neither of them wants to make a move, but neither do they feel they have a choice. Reluctantly, they order the others to raise the gate, and then, they step through.

Slowly but surely, the two Dukes begin to approach the creature. It remains in one place, not reacting to them, even as they close to distance.

Half a mile becomes a third of a mile. Then a quarter. A tenth.

The Dukes slow down drastically, growing more and more nervous as the creature doesn't react to them in the slightest.

"H-hey, you!" Dorma says, his voice cracking. "Who are you? *What* are you? Identify yourself!"

Still, the mottled-skin-man doesn't react.

Wei Lei shivers uncontrollably, feeling a truly deep-seated sense of unease.

"I don't like this. I don't like it one bit..." She whispers. "Why isn't it moving? Is it dead?"

"How should I know?!" Dorma hisses under his breath. "M-maybe we should just attack it. If it's not dead, we can kill it quick. Maybe the damn thing's infected with some nasty disease. Better to put it out of its misery."

Wei Lei nods. "Yeah. I'm not usually one to jump straight to violence, but... eugh."

The Duke of Colors motions with her hands, summoning a magical paintbrush. In an instant, her hands dance around, drawing the image of a massive Gate Troll, a huge creature that will soon materialize into the material world to follow her orders.

As she quickly speed-paints, Dorma's expression flickers.

"...A disease?"

In less than ten seconds, Wei Lei finishes her painting. She conjures a massive Gate Troll, towering more than twenty feet tall. The spiritual construct, similar to one that Uriel might summon, manifests in the world for only a limited time, yet possesses much of Wei Lei's demonic power.

"Go." She says, pointing to the creature up ahead.

The Gate Troll roars. It pounds its chest, then stomps forward, quickly clearing the gap as it charges at the faceless creature.

At that moment, a change happens.

Right as the Gate Troll raises its claws overhead, hellbent on slamming them down to pulverize the creature, it lifts its faceless gaze to look up at the troll.

Then...

It sucks into the ground.

As if falling into an empty pit, the creature disappears into the dirt, melting into the planet's crust with the same ease that Mephisto might, if he were to turn immaterial and dive underground.

The Gate Troll's claws smash into the dirt, but it misses the kill, leaving Wei Lei and Dorma to stare with fully-opened eyes.

"D-did you see that?!" Wei Lei squeaks. "What the hell?! That thing fused with the planet's soil! I can't detect it at all!"

"Neither can I!" Dorma exclaims. "It wasn't dead after all! But, what does this mean for-"

Behind the Dukes, a faint impression of danger manifests in their minds. Dorma abruptly stops speaking, spins around, and gasps in fright when he sees the monster less than two feet behind him! Not standing fully, but only its faceless head, poking out of the ground to look up at him!

"Aaah!" Dorma shrieks. "The monster!"

Wei Lei also turns to look, but before she can register its presence, her feet don't follow her commands. They adhere to the ground, as if she had stepped in glue without noticing.

Awkwardly, Wei Lei stumbles, lowering her gaze only to see the ground itself opening up beneath her feet.

"D-Dorma! It's got-"

Wei Lei doesn't get to finish her sentence. A pair of mottled green limbs burst out of the ground beneath her, grab onto her ankles, and pull downward with violent force.

"Aaaiee!"

Dorma doesn't have time to react. Wei Lei instantly ends up with half her body submerged in the dirt, and the rest of her figure follows soon afterward.

"Wei Lei!!" Dorma bellows. He activates his Duke powers, conjuring a massive enchanted cooking pot to fall upon the creature's exposed head, but it merely submerges back into the dirt, avoiding the attack.

Moments later, the creature's arms grab onto his ankles, pulling him under the planet's surface to join Wei Lei. Neither Duke manages to put up a fight, and soon after, they both vanish, leaving the world in a quiet, temporary lull.

The other Grunts and Lords at the gates scream in terror. They quickly run away, howling in fear and alerting the whole city.

However, some time after they leave, three pairs of arms emerge from the dirt.

Not only does the original faceless creature crawl out of Sharmur's bowels, but so do two other, similarly faceless creatures.

And these two new ones... look an awful lot like Dorma and Wei Lei.

"Escape to the Warpgate!"

"Make for the mountain! Hurry! Leave everything behind!"

"You can't find him? Then he's a goner! Just go! We don't have much time!"

Demon Barons and Dukes quickly gesture to the top of a large mountain, the only place on Sharmur with access to a Volgrim Warpgate. This gate offers them the sole

access point to the Labyrinth, though there are also a few scattered Warper demons who can burn their mana to open small portals for others to stream in one-by-one. That is, until their mana reserves give out.

Swarms of demons and monsters scream in terror while running toward that mountaintop. Unfortunately, the path which winds up its base is both cramped and narrow, drastically limiting the number of evacuees who can race to the top. Any demons without the ability to fly, those who cannot warp, and those who aren't Burrowers can only run up the three-man-wide pathway, praying they don't trip and fall off the side.

At the same time, atop the mountain's plateau, a pair of Dukes watches with fear in their eyes as the agonizingly slow procession of demons runs as fast as they can up the mountain, yet only a few thousand can fit on its pathway at once.

One of the Dukes flicks their eyes into the distance, where they spot, only a few miles away, a bright explosion of light. Emperor Melody unleashes powerful and flashy soundwaves, firing them down into the city indiscriminately, while levitating in the air.

The Duke's blood turns cold when he spots the ground inside the city moving, as a horde of freakish, faceless monsters swarm around, grabbing onto any biological entity and dragging it into the planet's depths, only for it to emerge shortly after and become one with the swarm.

"Oh, ancient devils... oh, ancient devils..."

As time passes, the swarm draws closer and closer. Melody continues bombarding it without stopping, but her attacks have little to no effect. She eventually screams in frustration and flies to the mountain at full speed.

"Where are Viola and Guura?!" Melody shouts. "Have they made it here yet?"

The Duke winces. "Emperor Melody, still no word from them! B-but I'm sure they'll be here soon!"

Tears bubble up in Melody's eyes. The usually loud, boisterous, and excitable demoness shrieks with pain as her heart crumbles.

"They're dead! DEAD! I wasn't fast enough! I, I couldn't stop these monsters!"

"They might show up soon!" The Duke says, trying to cheer her up. "How could Emperors fall to monsters like these?!"

Melody doesn't answer him. She merely turns around, gasping in fear as the flood of monstrous aliens devours the procession of demons from behind, having now caught up with them after chasing for so long.

Melody gnashes her teeth until they bleed.

"We... we can't keep the Warpgate open any longer! Whoever made it out, that's all! We cannot allow this swarm to reach the Labyrinth!"

"Do you know what these monsters are?" The Duke asks.

Melody nods, her expression shifting to hatred.

"They are the Plague. Somehow, our world attracted this calamity. We are the ones who must suffer, now."

Melody takes a few moments to sweep her eyes across the tens of thousands of demons at the mountain's base, all of whom have become terribly panicked at the realization they won't make it to the top in time.

Melody sucks in a sharp breath.

"Rather than let my people be consumed by this Plague, I'll consign them to oblivion! May their souls rest in peace!!"

Melody howls with white-hot anger, conjuring all of her demonic power into a soul-crushing soundwave. She fires it straight down into the crowd's densest part, instantly blasting them apart, and their souls, to slow the Plague's infection speed.

With a single attack, Melody kills more than a million demons, causing her tears to flow hotter than before.

"I am a failure of an Emperor! This Plague, it will be my lifelong enemy! FOREVER!"

She, the Dukes, and the other elites positioned on the mountaintop flee into the portal. After waiting just ten seconds, they shut the Warpgate off, locking all their friends, companions, brothers, and sisters on the world of Sharmur.

The last thing they hear are the screams of fear from those unlucky enough not to make it through the gate's aperture in time.

With a sudden *whoomph*, the portal disperses, closing off Sharmur from the Labyrinth.

In less than one day, the entire world has fallen. Of the tens of millions of demons who once roamed its surface, fewer than two million remain.

Melody slumps to the ground. She leans against the arm of the Warpgate, agony etched into every line of her face.

Viola, Guura, and Dorma, three of her closest friends, fell during the arrival of the Kolvaxians. Now, only one Emperor remains among the Hell of Isolation's elites.

Only Melody.

Elsewhere, in the Milky Way. On the world of Volgarius.

Commander Randis, an Ascended working in the First Finger of the Founder's Hand, stares at the report in his grasp with a look of utter bleakness.

The obsidian-skinned Volgarian reads not only its contents, but its implications, gritting his teeth as he quickly postulates on what events could have led to the fall of a demon-controlled world behind the battle lines of the Southern Galaxy.

After getting himself up to date, he turns and marches through the doorway to his office, toward the turbolift at the end of the hall. Before long, he arrives at Floor 345, the central floor of Founder Unarin's core command structure.

Randis storms down the hallway leading to the central office, while several high ranking leaders of the Volgrim make way for his arrival.

Eventually, he reaches Unarin's primary office, a darkened room with several holographic imaging systems constantly active. As expected, Unarin stands in the center of these feeds, monitoring the progress of several Kolvaxian battlefronts.

"Brother." Randis says, stepping forward. "There was an unexpected penetration event. A Kolvaxian outbreak struck the world of Sharmur."

"Sharmur?" Unarin repeats, turning his attention to the datapad in Randis's hand. "This name seems vaguely familiar."

"It was founded by one of the Seven Hells." Randis says. He quickly explains the world's origins, making Unarin frown deeply. "As you can see here, a Kolvaxian outbreak occurred on the third continent, just outside the capitol city. You couldn't have picked a better spot if you tried."

Randis transmits the datafiles to Unarin. The First Founder skims them quickly, his frown turning uglier by the minute.

"Sharmur isn't far from the southern battle-lines, but it isn't close either. There should have been a buffer of several dozen worlds before the Kolvaxians reached it. Why did they strike here? And how did they slip through the Sterilization Lines?"

"We're still investigating." Randis says. "But personally, I have a theory."

Unarin narrows his eyes. "Continue."

"There was an unexpected mass spatial variance event just seven cycles ago." Randis explains. "It occurred across numerous demon controlled worlds. Ultimately, we detected an inexplicable galaxy-class teleportation-transmission occurring on Tarus II. After contacting the Changelings on the Wordsmith's world, we verified what happened."

Randis pauses.

"...The Wordsmith teleported every human in existence to his planet. I believe that in doing so, since Sharmur was close to the border, its spatial instability attracted the Kolvaxians' attention."

"The Wordsmith... *caused* this?" Unarin asks, looking deeply into Randis's eyes. "You had best be sure, brother. I cannot seek a grievance with our one great hope of defeating the Plague based solely off your conjecture. We have no way of knowing if spatial variance events will attract Kolvaxian attention, anyway."

"You're right. We don't." Randis says with a nod. "As long as you don't discount the possibility, that's enough for me."

Unarin's brother hesitates for a moment.

"Permission to speak freely?"

"You don't need my permission for anything." Unarin simply replies. "Say what you wish."

"This Wordsmith is dangerous." Randis says. "I'm not referring to his threat toward us. I'm talking about his rash actions. He 'rescued' all those humans, but in doing so, most likely brought a calamity upon Sharmur. What if his next 'accidental' victim is one of our military installations?"

The First Founder folds his hands behind his back.

"You might be right. But for the moment, what choice do we have? We're soon to lose this war, one way or another. A single demon-controlled world is an unfortunate loss, but they were never going to put up much of a fight against the Plague, anyway. Only the humans can help us..."

Unarin sighs.

"...Only the humans."

Randis snorts. "Did you also hear? The Wordsmith managed to pacify the entirety of demonkind. Emperor Ose is dead. That means he now has full control of humanity, the monsters, and the demons. You had best keep a close eye on him, brother."

"I did hear about that." Unarin nods. "Humans. They move so quickly. They evolve at frightening speeds. Not like us, who have become slow, ponderous beasts."

With a shake of his head, Unarin returns his attention to the data streams.

"Inform me of any other changes."

"As you wish." Randis says, before turning and walking away.

Part 361: Fallen World

Outside one of the four warpgates positioned at the 'corners' of Hell, a massive group of monster and demon refugees lays, sits, or stands in one of the dozens of alcoves, hallways, and other adjacent areas to that part of the Labyrinth. These beings, the survivors of the Kolvaxian invasion, scream and cry while lamenting the fall of their world.

Not since the Energy Wars has the Hell of Isolation suffered such a devastating loss. Its members now amount to less than twenty percent of its original numbers, making them feel scattered, lost, and disorganized.

Emperor Melody, a muscular demoness with long black hair stretching down to her waist, gem-studded teeth, and plenty of additional piercings all over her body, sits despondently on the dirt floor. While other demons around her cry and sob, she instead becomes half-catatonic, dazed by the deaths of her fellow demons.

Not only does she not know what fate ultimately befell Emperors Guura and Viola, but she cannot mentally cope with having been forced to kill a million of her own people to save them from being assimilated into the Plague's biomass.

"Gone... they're all gone..." Melody mumbles incoherently, her thoughts a slurry of despair and bitterness. "I couldn't... save them..."

While Melody battles with feelings of inadequacy and uselessness, a portal opens up at the far side of the lone warpgate's nexus, amidst a hollow spot in the crowd of demons and monsters.

Through that portal, a Demon Emperor steps out.

Yardrat, Emperor of the Void, only glances at the Grunts and Lords closest to him before flickering forward to arrive at Melody's side.

"Melody. We came as soon as we heard. How is the situation?"

Yardrat's portal remains open. After he teleports over to Melody, dozens of other high-level Demon Emperors step through, including Fae, Gorn, and Kristoff. Once they emerge, so too does the Wordsmith, as well as Raphael. The Archangel of Wisdom insists on observing these happenings with his own eyes.

"You're too late." Melody hisses through her teeth. "You're too late! They're all gone. It's over. Those monsters got Viola, and Guura, and Dorma, and... and everybody!"

Yardrat flicks his eyes toward the disabled portal and shivers.

"I'm sorry. If you had warned me sooner, I could have opened dozens of portals to evacuate-"

"WELL I DIDN'T!" Melody bellows, raising her head to shriek at Yardrat. "I didn't, okay?? It all happened so fast! By the time I heard what was going on, half the planet had already been taken over! I was scared! I could barely even figure out what was happening before the Plague pushed us back to the Warpgate! Nobody told me it would go down like this! Nobody warned me!"

Yardrat flinches. He takes a step back and raises his palm.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to act pushy. It wasn't your fault... never mind."

While Yardrat gathers the details, the Wordsmith and Raphael exchange glances, having heard Melody's vague explanation even from a short distance away.

"The Kolvaxians..." Jason mutters. "This is so strange. Why did they attack Sharmur? And right when all the Emperors came to Tarus II?"

Raphael shakes his head. "I know not the answer, Wordsmith. Verily, this timing art coincidental. Couldst't one of the Emperors hath planted a Kolvaxian on Sharmur, somehow?"

"Doesn't seem likely." Jason mutters. "This is the first time any of the demons have even seen one. I'll have to ask the Volgrim. They might have some ideas."

The Hidden Emperors surround Melody and try to comfort her, but none of their words make her feel any better. Among them, Gorn crosses his arms and crooks a faint smile as he sees the devastation.

Good. Good... this will incentivize the different Hells to work together. Gorn thinks. Now the others will understand the Threat we face more viscerally. In these times, a capable leader will need to step up... and who better than me?

Confident in his chances of working his way up to seize control of all Seven Hells, Gorn says nothing to Melody, opting to allow his peers to offer their words of comfort.

At the same time, the Wordsmith utters a Word of Power, allowing him to look into the last 24 hours of memories of several nearby demons. He quickly obtains a massive amount of emotionally packed and fragmented information, but sifts through it with Fiona's help to look at how, exactly, the Plague spread.

"Hmm..." Jason mutters, keeping his voice low. "It seems the Plague started with only a handful of infected, then spread rapidly across the capitol city of Sharmur. There aren't any eyewitnesses here from those first few hours, though. They must have been... yeah. But how did the Plague spread across the whole planet so quickly?"

"'Tis beyond my understanding." Raphael replies. "If we could safely travel to Sharmur, we might be able to examine the infection's aftermath to postulate how it spread. Otherwise..."

"I don't want to go there myself. Not even in a soul-form." Jason says. "For all I know, the Plague might have some way of detecting souls. Especially as it just devoured multiple Demon Emperors."

After thirty minutes, Jason and the demons manage to console the survivors of the Sharmur attack. Jason courteously invites them all to live on Tarus II, a simple matter given the huge amount of free space on his world, and Melody accepts.

"I don't know!" Melody shouts, bitterness lingering in her voice. "What the hell is up with all of you? Why is the Wordsmith and an Archangel here? I thought you guys were going to war with each other today!"

Yardrat crosses his arms. "Yes. About that... remember Ose?"

He and the other Emperors bring Melody up to speed. She listens, dumbstruck, as they inform her that they successfully tricked Ose and got her killed. Now, they have to hunt down Mephisto, Yama, and the others who attacked Tarus II. The more they talk, the more tongue-tied Melody becomes.

"This is insanity." She mutters. "If only my Hell had gone with you. Then Guura, Viola, and the others wouldn't have..."

"It's better this way." Jason says. "Yes, you did lose several friends. But if all the elites from Sharmur had gone to Tarus II, there wouldn't have been anyone left to save those you did when the Kolvaxians attacked. In the end, you still managed to save a fifth of your people. That's worth something, right?"

"A fifth." Melody grunts. "What a relief."

Jason doesn't offer her any other words. Like how he struggles with the deaths of those who served under him during Stormbringer, Jason finds a certain amount of parallel thinking with Melody, now that the two of them have both suffered a massive loss of life under their watch.

"We can't change the past." Jason says. "But we can move toward a better future. What do you say? Do you want to set up a new life on Tarus II? I won't treat you badly."

"Sure..." Melody sighs. "Thanks. I owe you."

She leaves to talk to the surviving elites from her Hell, while Jason and the other Emperors mingle, wondering what to do next.

"Everything I said before still stands." Jason reiterates. "You guys need to track down Mephisto and the rest. I can handle the relocation of the demons and monsters from Sharmur. As for what comes after that, I'll start drawing up plans on how you can help humanity rebuild-"

Right in the middle of the Wordsmith talking, he receives a telepathic transmission. Not words, but images and mental impressions. The Wordsmith abruptly pauses to listen as his strongest Black Hole Construct, Arthur, transmits information to him.

The Wordsmith blinks slowly.

"...What? Yama did? And where is Hope now?"

The next transmission makes him wet his lips. He turns to the Emperors and shrugs.

"I, ah, have something to deal with. You know what to do. You can meet me on Tarus II, or in the Core. We'll talk again soon."

Without waiting for a response, the Wordsmith blinks away, leaving Raphael behind to stand awkwardly in the middle of countless former enemies.

The Archangel of Wisdom snorts. "Hmph. I shalt take my leave as well."

He opens a portal back to Tarus II, steps through, and vanishes.

After he disappears, Melody frowns.

"Say. Are we cool with Raphael now, or...? You know, since he and the other two Archangels killed most of the demons on Hell Harbor."

"To be honest," Kristoff replies, "it still isn't clear to me how we should treat the Archangels."

"Huh." Melody mutters. "Neat."

Some time earlier, in a distant part of the Labyrinth.

Yama and his Shades stand in a pitch-black room while awaiting a signal from the other Hidden Emperors to invade Tarus II. Among his Shades are several former Warpers, demonesses capable of opening portals to the soon-to-be-attacked planet ruled by humanity.

"It should not be much longer, now." Yama hisses, rubbing his shadowy claws together in anticipation. "Those other Emperors sure are dragging their feet! They always waste our time, as if we haven't many fun activities to participate in!"

Yama's mood is lower than it has been in tens of thousands of years. Thanks to Bael's summoning of Satan, he no longer has the ability to capture more females for his harem. Instead, he can only 'enjoy' those who already exist, a torturous notion to a greedy sex-fiend like himself.

"That devil-damned Satan..." Yama curses. "How could he return and do this to us? He was long dead! Whatever trick that Bael used, he really did bring him back! Bael is not as simple as he seems. He must have only been pretending to be a huge idiot, all this time! In actuality, he is a genius, waiting for the right moment to seize power over all Seven Hells!"

One of Yama's Shades leans toward him.

"Master. Surely, thou art wrong. Bael is far from intelligent. Everyone knows that! How could he hath changed his intellect in so short a time?"

The Emperor of Shadows turns to look at who spoke. When he sees the speaker is none other than the very first Shade he ever converted, he doesn't rebuke her. She, alone, holds the right to talk back to him.

"Hmph. Oh, Red, you still don't know how demons act, after all these years. Isn't it obvious? That Bael must have become smarter after swapping bodies with Ose! Her brain juices made him a genius! That's why he could use Satan to toy with us in the way he did! He-"

A flicker of light momentarily lights up the darkness of the room. Before Yama or the others can flinch or shrink back, the light vanishes, and in its place, a bipedal figure stands.

A blonde-haired human, lacking any armor on his body, with piercing blue eyes and a week's worth of scruff covering his face and chin, smirks when he appears.

"Surprise. It's me."

Yama jumps in alarm. "What! A human! No, not just any human, we sense the Heroic Aura! He's the Wordsmith!!"

"Wordsmith!" Countless Shades shriek in rage. "KILL!"

At once, a deluge of shadows plunges toward Hope Hiro, engulfing him from all directions to ensure an instant death.

However, the Shades encounter an impenetrable defense when they crash against a force field surrounding Hope's entire body. The Wordsmith chuckles coldly to himself.

"Haha... as if I would teleport here unprepared. Say goodbye, Yama. Your miserable life ends today."

Yama shrieks in rage. "Wordsmith!! Bastard, we'll capture you and make you our slave! Coming here alone will be the last mistake you ever make!"

Yama conjures his powers of darkness, firing off powerful shadow-lances to crash against Hope's mana barrier. The impacts cause his shield to crackle and hiss, but in the end, none of them pierce through.

Hope stands calmly and watches while Yama's forces lob shadow bombs at him, strike him with their fists and claws, and screech profanities, hoping to weaken his resolve and perhaps even frighten him.

The Wordsmith's cold laughter freezes the blackened hearts of Yama's minions. Realizing they can't even harm Hope, they instantly pivot and turn to flee, leaving without any parting words.

However, barely have Yama and his women made it a hundred yards before they crash against another mana barrier, one engulfing the entire area and locking them in place!

"No!" Yama exclaims, shock in the crafty old Emperor's heart. "Dammit! The Wordsmith caught us unprepared! Quickly, attack one spot! If we can make a small hole,

we can burrow through and escape!"

From behind Yama, Hope laughs. "Heh heh... are you sure about that? **Teleport.**"

Hope arrives directly behind Yama. He holds his hand up high, then utters another word of power.

"LIGHT!"

Instantly, a brilliantly glowing orb materializes in Hope's grasp, blasting sunlight in all directions, irradiating Yama's body and burning him alive.

"Aaaaaaiieeee!" Yama shrieks, his voice turning shrill as his body starts to rapidly evaporate. "Stop! Pleeaaaaase! You're killing us!"

"That is the idea." Hope retorts. "But don't worry. I'll make sure to drag out the pain a while longer. You killed a lot of soldiers in that hospital. They were good friends of mine. Your death will be one of torture and suffering."

Yama's Shades struggle and writhe. Many of them burn to ash under Hope's divine light, while others manage to hold on a while longer. Yama himself screams and pleads for mercy, yet no matter how he begs, Hope doesn't let up.

"Please! Aaaugh! It burns! We can help you! We will be your slave!"

"I'd rather put a bullet in my own head than work with a demon." Hope says. "There's no escaping your fate, shadow bastard."

Suddenly, as if through a moment of clarity, Yama remembers something.

"Wait! W-we have information! You want to learn about- aaargh! About Solomon's Crown, don't you?!"

Hope frowns.

"Solomon's Crown? I already know where it is. The Volgrim took it."

"No, please spare us! We know a secret! A secreet! If you kill us, you'll never know!"

The Wordsmith hesitates for a moment, then deliberately lowers the power of his light orb, giving Yama a delightful reprieve. The light continues to scorch and burn Yama's body, but compared to before, the difference is like night and day.

Yama gasps for breath. His tortured red eyes flick toward Hope, feeling a glimmer of a chance for survival.

"Speak." Hope says. "Tell me what you know about Solomon's Crown. If your answer doesn't absolutely knock my socks off, I'll kill you in the next instant!"

Yama nods repeatedly. "Yes, yes, of course, master! I-it's... it's Gressil! Gressil took the Crown! We saw it happen!"

Hope jerks in fright, causing his light magic to shatter in his grasp. He takes a step back from Yama and gasps.

"What? Gressil? You're lying!"

With Hope's divine energy no longer irradiating his whole body, Yama and the Shades regain their ability to breathe, even though the aftereffects of the light still leave their shadowy figures scarred and deformed.

"We would not dare!" Yama protests. "We saw it happen! Gressil captured you, then he threw the Crown aside. We would never touch a holy object, but we kept our eyes on it. Later, Gressil led the Changelings to the Crown so they could take it back to Volgarius. We swear this is all true!"

Hope's heart thumps erratically as he not only reflects on what Yama is saying, but mentally recalls the horrific torture Gressil unleashed on him. Without intending to, Hope's suffers multiple flashbacks of those dark days, making him grit his teeth and sweat as he envisions the saws cutting through his skin and bone to amputate his limbs.

"Nnn... it's not true..."

As if receiving a second chance at life, Yama furiously grabs onto the opportunity. "There's more! Spare us, and we'll tell you everything!"

Hope shakes away the thoughts plaguing his heart. His eyes flare with rage as he gazes at the hateful apparition of a shadow in the dark.

"You... you're trying to trick me!"

"We aren't! We pledge this to you!" Yama pleads. "We know the truth about you, Hope. You are nothing but a tool to Jason! He wishes to use you, but he doesn't care about you at all. With our help, you can overturn his rule! Here, another token of our sincerity..."

Yama pauses before continuing. "Satan... First Emperor Satan... he is alive. We saw him with our own eyes!"

"Satan?" Hope repeats. "How can I believe you? I killed- Jason killed Satan on Polaris! Belial saw him turn to ash in her arms!"

Yama takes a few long moments to collect himself. In the back of his mind, he sneers.

Got him.

"We speak the truth, Wordsmith." Yama says, crawling across the ground on his belly to bow at Hope's feet. "We saw Bael summon Satan from the Great Beyond. Somehow, Bael has gained Satan's full power! Not just him, but Emperor Shax as well. We are not certain how, or why, but Bael has unlocked new powers. He can revive dead demons where even Mephisto never could."

Hope narrows his eyes. He stares at the Emperor groveling at his feet, all while rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"You saw both of these things, then? You seem to be quite sneaky. Are you good at observing others without them noticing?"

"Oh, yes, yes of course we are, master!" Yama exclaims, cozying up to Hope like a beaten dog. "We do not want to die! We can spy for you! We can be your slave! We know all sorts of dirty secrets! With us helping you, you can take back humanity from the other Wordsmith!"

"I don't need your help for any of that." Hope snorts. "But I'll tell you what. If you can answer one question for me... I'll spare your life."

"One question?" Yama asks, feeling a hint of worry in his cold, lifeless heart. "We... we will do our best to answer, no matter what you ask."

Hope nods.

"Where is Neil? Neil Adams. The commander of humanity's military. Supposedly, he died during the Stormbringer Attack. Personally, I think he survived, and the demons captured him. If you can tell me where he is, I'll spare you."

Yama's eyes widen. A feeling of glee swallows his heart.

"Y-yes! Neil Adams! We know who he is! We know where to find him! Ose locked him away, and she hid him using her brother's magic, but we know everything that happens inside the Labyrinth!"

So excited is Yama at the prospect of surviving that he can't help it when his voice trembles. He quickly tells Hope the location where Neil is hiding, to which Hope nods.

"Good. You'd better pray you aren't lying. Since you've been useful to me, I will uphold my end of the bargain. You can go free... but you'll be on your own if Jason comes after you."

Hope turns to walk away. Right when he's about to teleport, Yama slithers forward.

"W-wait, master! If you leave us like this, the other Wordsmith will find and kill us! We can be so much more useful to you alive than dead! Why don't you protect us with your Wordsmithing magic? Hide us so the other Wordsmith can't find us. Then you can come to us whenever you need information. Our skills are hard to come by!"

Hope frowns.

"You want me to... protect you?"

"Yes! Yes!" Yama exclaims. "Just hide us so the Wordsmith can't Locate us. We know how that part of your magic works. We have seen Jason use it several times."

Hope falls silent. For several minutes, he mentally debates Yama's request, before nodding.

"Alright. **Shroud**. I've put a layer of protection on your soul. As long as Jason doesn't know it exists, he won't be able to find you and undo it. But since I know about it... hehe. You'll never be able to hide from me. Keep collecting information. If I ever need anything... I'll be in touch."

"Yes, master. Yes!" Yama hisses. "We were right to follow you! Thank you for your benevolence!"

"Alright, shut up." Hope snaps. "If you keep fawning, you'll make me vomit. Get out of my sight."

Without another word, Yama meekly nods, then slithers away, his surviving Shades following in hot pursuit.

After the Emperor of Shadows disappears, Hope snorts to himself. "Little rat. He thinks he can use me for protection? I'll use him instead. Then, when I don't need him anymore, I'll discard him like trash alongside the road. Yama's days are numbered."

Hope once again prepares to teleport away, but at that moment, Arthur appears.

Jason's Black Hole Construct flickers into existence before Hope, slightly startling the Wordsmith. The construct glances around, as if searching for Yama.

"Don't bother." Hope says, reading Arthur's intentions. "Yama got away. He's harder to track than I expected. Also, tell Jason I found Neil, and I'll bring him home, soon. As for you, you can go back to Tarus II ahead of me. I don't need your help."

Arthur doesn't speak. The construct merely nods at Hope before flickering away, traveling at close to the speed of light as it returns from the direction it came.

"...Stupid machine." Hope mutters. "**Teleport.**"

Part 362: Rescuing Neil

A massive makeshift prison facility lays hidden somewhere in the distant reaches of the Labyrinth. Unlike Faith's End, this prison is not ruled by Gressil, but his sister, Ose, who built it in secret. As part of her six-year plan to defeat humanity and take the Wordsmiths captive, a plan which ultimately failed, it stands as a testament to her long term planning skills.

Unlike the typical dirt walls comprising the rest of the Labyrinth, the entirety of this hidden segment has been carved out and filled with Demonstone, making it extremely durable and resistant to escape attempts. Without enough strength, no prisoner can dig their way out and break free to the rest of the Labyrinth.

However, what might surprise any casual onlooker is the fact that, despite there being more than 500 prison cells, only one of them actually holds a prisoner!

Neil Adams sits inside his surprisingly large and roomy cell near the furthest reaches of the facility's confines. Having already been here for three weeks, his face has developed quite a decent amount of scruff. As for his hard and uncomfortable bed, chair, and basic toilet/sink fittings, his room is utterly barren with little or nothing to do.

The Frenchman paces back and forth in his cell, counting the number of times he has completed a circuit that day.

"Four thousand, nine hundred and one. Four thousand, nine hundred and two. Four thousand, nine hundred and... and... where was I? And two... it must have been two. Or was it one?"

His head twitches on occasion. His eyes flicker. Sometimes, he sees things that aren't there. His rational mind tells him he's hallucinating, but his irrational mind continues to give him false mental signals, making him wonder if he's going crazy.

"How long has it been..." Neil mutters, while pausing to stare at one particular blemish on the wall that he's continually fixated on ever since a few days after his arrival. "Two... no, three months? Years? There's no sun... there should be a sun... it would make it easier to keep track of time. Time. Time waits for no man. Time flows forwards, but sometimes back. Like a backstabber. Backstabbers are bad. Very bad, yes."

His thoughts shift and change erratically, making him unable to properly focus his attention for longer than a few seconds at a time.

Neil's right eye spasms, making his whole head jerk a little to the side. He frowns, then hisses at an empty spot in the cell.

"Stop it! Stop poking me! I warned you last time! It irritates me when you do that!"

Neil swears and curses at the empty space beside himself, hurling obscenities that would make a nun blush with shame.

While Neil swears up and down the room, a figure materializes inside the prison's entryway. Hope Hiro teleports inside, but as soon as he arrives, a vaguely uncomfortable feeling presses against his brain. He stands in place, trying to adjust to the sensation, but as the seconds tick by, his expression becomes gloomier and more downcast.

He takes a step forward, but then pauses. A chill goes down his spine.

"...This feeling! It's Gressil's energy! It's his anti-magic field!"

Hope shivers fearfully, glancing around to look for Gressil. Having spent weeks suffering in the prison-warden's clutches, he knows the feeling of his Chaos Energy well, but no matter where he looks, he doesn't find Gressil anywhere.

After getting his bearings, Hope starts to walk around. Shortly after he traverses deeper into the prison, the anti-magic aura becomes stronger and stronger, with its weakest point at the door leading outside, where he first arrived. Torches line the walls, providing plenty of illumination, while interlocked demonstone bars block the entryways and exits to all of the cells.

Hope wanders left and right, looking into all the rooms, but he doesn't immediately find Neil. It's only when he gets deeper into the prison that he finally hears Neil's voice in the distance, ranting and yelling at someone unknown.

"Neil." Hope whispers, a feeling of euphoria in his veins. He walks faster down the hall, gritting his teeth as Gressil's anti-magic aura becomes stronger than ever. He tries uttering Words of Power, but none of them have any effect.

That must be why Jason and I couldn't find Neil. Hope realizes. Somehow, Ose duplicated her brother's anti-magic abilities. She made it impossible for us to Locate Neil.

Gressil's aura doesn't only prevent the usage of magic. It also wriggles into the brains of those susceptible to the influence of Chaos. As Hope runs toward Neil's cell in the distance, he becomes more and more uncomfortable in his skin, feeling as if innumerable eyes are watching him. Paranoid thoughts rise to the surface, making him question his senses.

But no matter what, Hope persists. Before long, he arrives in front of Neil's cell where his friend turns to look at him, having heard Hope's footsteps running toward him.

"Who are you?!" Neil snaps. "Hope? Jason? No! You're just an illusion. You're all illusions- STOP poking my face! It hurts when you do that!"

The commander of the Core's military forces yells at something unseen beside him, making Hope wonder if there's actually someone there, or if he's only seeing things.

"It's me, Neil." Hope says. "I've come to rescue you! I'm Hope, remember?"

Neil flinches. He listens to Hope's voice, but doesn't seem to believe his ears.

"Nonsense! This is the sixth time you've come! Stop tormenting me! You're a liar! You left me here to die! For three years I've waited! THREE YEARS!!!"

"...Three years?" Hope repeats. "No, no, Neil. You've been here maybe three *weeks*. At most. Wake up, you're not hallucinating. It's really me."

While Hope talks to Neil, he glances around the cell's entryway, but its solid demonstone bars don't appear breakable, even with his nanite-imbued body. Gressil's magic prevents Hope from Wordsmithing, so he can't use his abilities to rescue Neil, either.

Neil shakes his head. "No! You gave up on me! You left us all behind, Hope! It's your fault, it's all your fault!"

The Wordsmith winces. "Neil, I know Gressil's energy is corroding your thoughts, but I need you to get a grip. It wasn't entirely my fault Gressil got me. I left to find Solomon, Arthur, and Jephthah, three of the legendary heroes. They told me all sorts of things, like..."

While he fills Neil in on his happenings, gradually calming his friend down, Hope also takes the time to feel around the demonstone walls and bars, especially the points where they intersect. He pulls and tugs on the joints, hoping to loosen them up, but they don't

give way. They don't even shift a millimeter, showing that the prison hasn't been around long enough for its foundations to even minutely weaken.

Neil listens to Hope's words. Once Hope explains to him what happened following Neil's capture, the commander shows a bit more clarity in his thoughts.

"Really? So Beelzebub blew himself up?" Neil asks. "How is everyone? Are they all dead? Is anyone still alive?!"

"Lots of people are still alive." Hope says, before pausing to add, "And a lot more died. You just know Jason's incompetency was the biggest reason why so many suffered. Even his own daughter died to Beelzebub's detonation."

"Little Daisy?" Neil asks. "She's...?"

"Yeah."

Hope shakes his head. Despite Daisy not being his own daughter, he still feels a bitter emptiness in his heart. After all, in a different timeline, she might have been his daughter, and in this one, she was at least somewhat like his niece, even if he didn't interact with her much.

"How do I get this goddamned cell open?" Hope hisses, visibly stumped. "I can't use my magic, and my physical strength clearly isn't enough. Shit. I'll be right back, Neil."

"Don't leave me!" Neil exclaims, but Hope shakes his head and heads back to the entry.

I can still use my Wordsmithing at the entryway... Hope thinks to himself. I should make a tool that can break through the bars. Then I can free Neil.

Two minutes later, he arrives back at the start of the prison, where Gressil's energy is the weakest. However, after trying and failing several times to activate his Wordsmithing, Hope still fails.

This isn't good. Hope thinks. Gressil's energy is weakest here, but plenty of it still lingers on my body, strengthening the anti-magic effect. I need to step fully out of it for a bit to let the effect diminish until I can use my Wordsmithing again. But the only place I can go is outside the prison... and there are sure to be guards out there...

Momentarily hesitating, Hope ultimately relents. The effects of Gressil's Chaos Energy don't drop below a certain level in his body, making it impossible for him to use his Wordsmithing.

With much hesitation, Hope quietly pushes against the door, causing it to soundlessly open a crack.

The moment he starts to open the door, he hears voices. Not far outside, several Orcs, Goblins, and even a few demon Grunts shoot the shit, all of them positioned here to guard against anyone trying to enter the prison facility. These handpicked monsters and demons, working for Ose, have no idea of the changes demon society has undergone, nor that they've had a change in power.

Mentally, Hope curses.

Dammit. At least two dozen enemies. I rely on my Wordsmithing too much. I didn't even bring a weapon...

Hope glances at the bag of heavy marbles hanging on his waist, his signature weapon he's used for quite a long time against the demonic hordes. Thanks to the lingering effects of Gressil's Chaos Energy, he can't use them in combat at all.

From the depths of Hope's brain, Centurion's voice speaks.

[PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR. YOUR HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT CAPABILITIES ARE INSUFFICIENT TO DEAL WITH THE LARGE QUANTITY OF ENEMIES OUTSIDE. GIVE ME THE ORDER, AND I WILL TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR BODY TO INITIATE AUTO-COMBAT MODE.]

Hope blinks. *Auto-combat mode?*

[AFFIRMATIVE. I POSSESS EXTREMELY DETAILED COMBAT TRAINING FILES WHICH I CAN ADAPT TO YOUR BIOLOGICAL SIGNATURE. I ONLY REQUIRE YOUR PERMISSION TO INITIATE THE AUTO-COMBAT MODE. YOU MAY REVOKE PERMISSION AT ANY TIME.]

Hope slightly widens his eyes. *That would have been useful to... deal with Gressil.*

[MY COMBAT PARAMETERS ARE INSUFFICIENT TO ENGAGE IN MELEE COMBAT WITH THE MAJORITY OF HIGH-RANKING DEMONS.]

Hope nods. *Noted. Alright. Engage auto-combat mode.*

[AFFIRMATIVE.]

A moment later, the heavy metal door to the prison swings outward, kicked by Hope after a running jump. It crashes against the back of an Orc, making the big guy stumble

and trip over his own feet.

"Ow! What heck!"

At once, all of the demons and monsters turn their attention to the door, only to see a single unarmed human dive through the doorway and land in a roll. The single blonde-haired man jumps to his feet and delivers a brutal spin-kick to the Orc's head who he just knocked over.

CRACK!

The sheer power behind Hope's kick snaps the orc's neck, killing him on the spot.

"Spawn of a broodmother!" One of the demon Grunts shouts, while conjuring a fireball. "Kill that human!"

Even as a dozen enemies rush toward Hope and his adrenaline spikes, his body moves nimbly without his fears slowing him down. He snatches a curved scimitar attached to the fallen orc's back, yanks it out of its sheath, and starts rapidly spinning, cutting, twirling, and chopping at the enemies around him.

Fireballs swish past Hope's head, his body making minute movements to easily evade them. His physical parameters, long empowered by the nanites in his muscles, give him superhuman strength, agility, and stamina. He breathes evenly, not losing his breath, while his stolen sword cuts a horizontal arc across a goblin's neck, decapitating the monster instantly!

"Holy shit!" Hope yells, his excitement and glee palpable. "I'm like Batman! Or Arnold Schwarzenegger! This is sick!"

Hope cartwheels over an enemy, spins around, and plunges his scimitar into their heart. He yanks it out and flings a splattering of their blood into another enemy's eyes, blinding them and making them flinch. One moment later, his sword slashes across their nose, cuts several inches into their skull, and kills them instantly.

Despite all his past trauma, in this moment of life and death, Hope squeals with joy, bringing out his inner Jason. Even though he and his original self might have grown into different people, they still have the same likes and dislikes. They watched the same movies as kids. They consumed the same media and enjoyed the same nostalgia trips.

Hope's sword swings against a fireball, but the impact force snaps the blade in half. Undeterred, he dives toward the Burner Grunt and unleashes a volley of frighteningly

accurate fist strikes. Throat, stomach, jaw, eyes. Hope beats the Grunt black and blue in fewer than three seconds, sweeps his legs, and delivers one last downward punch while he falls, cracking the Burner's skull against the floor. The Grunt dies a pitiful death, never able to defend himself against the terrifying Terran.

Three minutes later, every single enemy in the guard area lays on the dirt, dead, leaving Hope antsy, hyped up, and ready for more.

"Fuck yeah!" Hope roars. "Oh, that kicked ASS! Holy shit, Centurion! You really should have told me you could do that! Come on, anyone else want some?! I've got some hands to throw but no takers ready for an ass-whooping!"

Centurion beeps in affirmation. **[PILOT ZERO-ZERO-FOUR. ALL ENEMIES HAVE BEEN NEUTRALIZED. I AM NOW RETURNING BODILY CONTROL BACK TO YOU.]**

Hope licks his lips. A look of bloodlust fills his eyes before he shakes his head.

"God, damn. Wow, that was a rush. Strange, though. I never really thought of myself as someone who *enjoyed* violence. Why did I find that whole fight so unbelievably thrilling?"

The Wordsmith frowns. He glances around at the brutally murdered demons and monsters around him. His eye twitches.

"No... this isn't me. I will kill, yes. I'll murder anyone if I must. But I've never been the sort of person to relish in killing. This feels like... like someone was manipulating me."

Several seconds pass. The Wordsmith's frown deepens.

"Could it be...? Gressil's energy? Maybe it was fucking with my head?"

He chews on his lower lip for a while before slowly nodding.

"Yeah. That must be it. Sorry, everyone. I shouldn't have enjoyed killing you all as much as I did. I'll take care not to get so excited in the future."

Without any further fanfare, Hope summons a few tools from Centurion's database, using the nanites as a buffer to enhance his Wordsmithing, then he returns to the prison's interior. He breaks Neil out of his cell, then leads him outside, back to the scene of the slaughter.

Neil pauses upon seeing the brutally murdered demons and monsters. His steel-clad willpower doesn't make him so much as flinch at the death before him, but the sudden decrease in Chaos Energy wracking his brain finally allows him to shake off the muddle-headedness that has plagued him for so long. Hope assists him with a few Words of Power, further clearing away the fog of Gressil's aura.

After a few minutes, Neil inhales deeply. He assumed a more dignified posture and smiles at Hope.

"Thank you. You saved my life. I was honestly starting to go crazy in that cell. Nobody talked to me. The guards only fed me two meals a day and never said a word. It was torture."

He pauses.

"Well. Relative torture... I suppose. I didn't hallucinate our conversation, did I?"

Hope lowers his eyes.

"You didn't, Neil. I... Gressil... he captured me. He did... he did awful things to me. I don't really want to talk about them."

Neil's nose twitches. "Demons. They're all the goddamned same. Every last one of them. Brutal, barbaric, bastards. You can see why now, more than ever, we have to oppose them."

Hope nods. "You don't know the half of it. Jason killed Ose, but he spared the rest of the Hidden Emperors, and now they've formed an 'alliance.'"

Hope continues to explain to Neil all the things his friend has missed over the past several weeks. When he finishes, Neil's expression turns ugly.

"Leave it to Jason. Only a complete idiot like him would spare the demons after they blew up our planet and killed the majority of our people. They even killed Kar! How can he, with any good conscience, spare them and even offer for them to live among the people they've tormented?"

"I don't know." Hope says, with a sigh. "I want to say something, to stand in his way, but I'm just not in the right headspace, Neil. Plus, Jason has this... this weapon. It's some sort of magical artifact, a weapon previously used by the Archangels. He's way more powerful than me, and I feel like I can't oppose him. Plus, he's become really good at giving speeches, so there are a lot of people on his side."

"Oh?" Neil says. "But judging from your tone of voice... you have an idea. You've thought of a way to seize control. Am I right?"

Hope shakes his head. "Not exactly. I could use your advice. See, the reason Gressil captured me was because I went into the Labyrinth at Solomon's behest. He took control of Jason's body for a bit, teleported the Crown to me, and wanted to give me his assistance. Then, he led me to a place in the Labyrinth where..."

Hope continues explaining to Neil the details of the El-Dorado room, filled with riches and gold beyond reason, along with the statues of the Three Kings.

"I see. So you might be able to obtain Excalibur, the Dominion Rod, and Solomon's Crown..." Neil says, tapping his lip. "That's not a bad idea. The Dominion Rod sounds like you could use it to turn the hearts of the people against Jason. Excalibur will give you a fighting chance against his Archangel Superweapon, and Solomon's Crown will give you a decisive mental advantage. With those three artifacts, you would have the god-given right to rule humanity."

"Yeah... maybe." Hope mutters, while scratching the back of his neck. "But... the Dominion Rod is kind of... morally wrong? It controls people's minds. I don't want to use a tool like that."

"Do you have a choice?" Neil posits. "Use your head, Hope. Mind control certainly sounds evil in theory, but what is the alternative? Are you going to let people follow Jason onto a path of self-destruction? What do you think will happen when Jason leaves the planet for a while to deal with some Volgrim business? He'll have so many demons living among his fellow humans that in a single night, once they bare their claws, millions upon millions will die! You absolutely cannot trust demons. Even the way they threw away Ose for their own benefits shows they're all backstabbers and opportunists."

Hope nods. "I know. But... well, I guess you're right. I have to do SOMETHING! Jason's leading humanity into extinction!"

"Let's take this one step at a time." Neil says. "First, you can't stand up to Jason as you are now. You need to acquire Solomon's Crown, Excalibur, and the Dominion Rod. Once you have all three, we can easily work out a plan to take Jason down. Once you seize control of humanity, we can slaughter the demons and bring balance back to the people."

The two men briefly fall silent.

"Say, uh, Neil?" Hope says, hesitantly. "What do you think I should... *do* with Jason? You aren't thinking I should... I should *kill* him, right?"

Neil gazes with deep intent at his friend.

"Stripping Jason of his powers should be enough. In fact, you could probably even do that right now. How would he block you? How would he counter if you suddenly sealed his magic? But we both know his power would return over time, so that's not a long-term solution. You'd have to build a device capable of sealing his magic permanently. In that way, you wouldn't have to kill him. But such a device would require Phoebe or Solomon's help. So..."

Hope nods. "You're right. I need all three artifacts to deal with Jason. Even if I took him down today, I wouldn't have any assurances of dealing with the Volgrim, or the Plague. I need power so I can become humanity's shining beacon!"

"Indeed." Neil says, smiling. "Now you're using your head."

Humanity's military Commander straightens his vest.

"Enough talk. Let's head back to the Core. Ah, but before we go, would you mind cleaning me up and giving me a shave? I want to make a good impression on everyone when I return."

"Sure thing, Neil." Hope answers. "We can iron out the specifics of this plan later."

Hope utters several Words of Power to clean up his friend's scruffy face, his sweaty, worn-out clothing, and even gives him a fresh and clean smile.

Neil touches his minty-flavored teeth. "That Wordsmithing ability... it sure is convenient."

"It is." Hope replies. "But it makes you a target, too. That's the part nobody tells you."

Shortly after, both men disappear, returning to the Core.

Part 363: Mephisto's Flight

Some time earlier, back on Tarus II.

The Mightiest Necromancer, Mephisto, watches as Ose and Jason trade barbs, with the demoness ready to pulverize him into mulch, while Jason merely summons forth his Black Hole Construct, Arthur.

[Boss.] Zamiel transmits telepathically through his undead soul-link. [Are we gonna make a move? The Wordsmith's got us trapped here, but I bet if we work with Ose...]

Mephisto glances quietly at the crocodilian subordinate beside him.

[There isss no need to fret. Thessse foolsss alwaysss overlook my greatnesss. If Ossse diesss, that isss fine. If ssshe doesssn't, then that isss alssso fine. My outlook after asscending to Emperor hasss... *broadened.*]

The Emperor of Legions chuckles to himself.

[Sssince my asscensssion, I have begun to think more carefully about my future planss. Ruling one Hell alongssside other Emperorsss isss... not my ssstyle. I wisssh to dominate all life. That can only happen if I sssllaughter thossse who opposse me, kekeke...]

A glimmer appears in Mephisto's eye. He watches as, within a short period of time, King Arthur absolutely decimates Ose, leaving her on the brink of death. So brutal is the construct's onslaught that every eye in the area focuses on their 'battle,' giving Mephisto a brief window of opportunity.

The moment not a single gaze falls on him, Mephisto casually flicks a finger. Zamiel's body fades away, traveling into Mephisto's portable Nether Realm, a secluded area of space where he has always stored his most powerful undead creatures, including the former fallen dragon, Leviathan. With his empowerment and evolution to the rank of Emperor, Mephisto's Nether Realm has increased in size a hundredfold, allowing him to store countless more creatures and pull them out when necessary.

By the time Arthur beheads Ose, Zamiel has fully disappeared, leaving Mephisto to stand alone.

When Jason notices Mephisto's lack of a companion, the necromancer chuckles.

"Everyone... alwaysss... underessstimatesss... the necromancer."

BOOM!

Mephisto explodes into a cloud of ash, startling everyone present!

The Wordsmiths go on the hunt, trying to locate Mephisto, but they fail to understand the ways in which his abilities have changed.

Previously known as the Duke of Mist for his mist-body form, Mephisto has, in actuality, elevated his signature ability to the next level, allowing him to transform into practically invisible particles floating in the wind. His soul also disperses, making it impossible for others to detect him.

The Wordsmiths fail to 'Locate' Mephisto, but what they don't realize is... he hasn't escaped!

Mephisto lingers on the battlefield, but tricks them into thinking he slipped through their shield and fled. When Jason lowers the barrier encapsulating Ose and Mephisto, the Emperor of Legions quietly flickers away, traveling against the wind with ease.

As Mephisto heads for the Warpgate, he shoots a glance at Emperors Gorn and Lupus, but opts to leave them behind. In time, he can come back and retrieve them. The Wordsmith isn't likely to kill them, and even if he does, so what?

Kekeke. Kill my minionsss if you wisssh, Wordsssmith. Mephisto thinks. You will find that my Corpssse Poisson isss quite effective when my Emperor pawnsss perisssh...

Mephisto travels into the Labyrinth. He passes through the Warpgate, zips out of the empty Core, and disappears into the furthest reaches of Hell.

Even so, Mephisto doesn't dilly-dally. His expression turns grave as he begins to quickly plot and plan.

"Ksss... that Wordsssmith isss going to be a troublessssome opponent. Luckily, I can hide from him, for now. Firsst order of busssinesss... I must ensure my sssubordinatesss don't get thrown to the chopping block! The Wordsssmith isss sure to target me, now that he hasss ssslaughtered Ossse."

After arriving at a secret alcove hidden within the Labyrinth, Mephisto levitates inside and momentarily disperses his Perfected Mist Body transformation.

"Legane! Come out!" Mephisto hisses. "I am in a russsh!"

Moments later, a large, dark-skinned demon with tiny horns steps out. He wears the traditional robes of the Warpers and holds a large staff with a glowing red orb placed atop its crest.

"Ah, Emperor Mephisto. Can I help you?"

"Yesss." Mephisto says. "Open a gate to Hell Harbor. The battle with the Wordsssmith isss not going well. I mussst quickly retrieve my reinforcementsss..."

Unaware of the specifics of what happened on Tarus II, Legane simply nods. As one of a small number of Keymaster Warpers, he possesses the rare ability to open gates through the barriers of temporal energy protecting Hell Harbor.

"Give me a moment, Emperor of Legions. I won't take long."

Mephisto falls silent, watching as Legane performs a series of motions with his hands, fingers, and body. The Keymaster executes an elaborate dance involving his entire self, where he steps from side to side, sways his arms, and conjures demonic energy in a highly specific pattern. Thanks to Raphael's intrusion in Hell Harbor's space, Ose had no choice but to strengthen the spatial blocking grid, which in turn added far more complications for the Keymasters and increased the time and effort needed to open a portal.

Ten minutes later, Legane gasps loudly and falls to his knees, summoning a portal to Hell Harbor as his last bit of mana depletes.

"Gasp... hoo... my apologies, Emperor of Legions. I... I was, whew... I was truly lacking for this- hm?"

Legane raises his head to look for Mephisto, but to his surprise, the necromancer is nowhere in sight.

"...Oh. He went through immediately without saying a word. Well, sheesh... the nerve of *some* demons! Not even a thank you or anything."

Meanwhile, on Hell Harbor, Mephisto races toward the continent's interior, turning himself into mist to disperse his aura and make tracking his position difficult, if not outright impossible for the Wordsmith. The last thing he wants is for the Wordsmith to intercept him and kill off his precious flunkies.

Before long, Mephisto arrives at his home base, the Hall of the Damned. A massive 500-foot-tall obelisk sticks out of the ground, providing a clear location of interest for observers to find the lair of demonkind's necromancers. However, no longer does the

obelisk reach its full height, as more than a third of its top was broken off and shattered during the Cherubiim's onslaught. Countless craters dot the land as well, demonstrating further evidence that the demons suffered immeasurably under the Archangels' attacks.

Mephisto dives into the dirt and heads deep underground, where he slows to a stop and waits.

After a short time, a pair of Demon Barons rush toward him, their boney feet *clinking* against the ground.

"Master Mephisto!" Ozzar, the Baron of Leprosy, says. His mottled black and red robes, as always, cling to his bones like a swimmer to a log in the middle of a turbulent river. "You have returned so quickly. Was your attack on the Wordsmith successful?"

Azuth, the Baron of Marshlands, clicks his teeth together in anticipation. "Have the fleshlings already fallen to your supreme might, Emperor of Legions?"

Mephisto snorts.

"No. Thossse humansss collaborated with the other Emperorsss. They betrayed Ossse. They alssso intended to betray me, but I essscaped. We must gather all of the necromancccerssss. Before long, the Hidden Emperorsss will come to ssslay you all."

"What! Those traitors!" Ozzar shouts. "How dare they plunge a knife into the back of our great leader! Do they not fear the wrath of a fully realized necromancer?"

"No. They do not..." Azuth says, a twinkle gleaming in his eye. "But perhaps this is for the best. Master had no good reason to act against the other Emperors. Now that the Wordsmith has seized control of all the human souls, master must change the way he gathers his forces."

"You ssspeak well." Mephisto says, giving Azuth a cold nod of approval. "I wasss already growing tired of thessse pathetic political ploysss. Why ssshould thiss glorioousss Emperor bargain for bitsss and ssscrapsss of power? The other Emperorsss have made a terrible misssake, turning againsst me. It isss no longer possssible for them to pin thiss necromancccer down! Kekeke..."

"With your new powers, we have nothing to fear!" Ozzar declares. "Will we be entering your fabled Land of Death, then?"

"Ksss. You will." Mephisto affirms. "My Nether Realm wasss sssuppossessed to be filled with human bodiesss, but now we will have to ssscrounge and ssscavenge for the

ssstrength we need. The coming era will not be easssy, but it will be full of richnesss and glory."

Mephisto motions with his hands. He conjures a massive Death Gate, identical to the one he summoned during Stormbringer, but instead of allowing random undead creatures to depart from his Land of Death, it allows those wavering on the boundaries of life and death to step inside!

"Come. Gather the acolytesss. Move with hassste. We haven't much time. If the Wordsssmith comesss, I will leave you all to die."

His minions nod hurriedly.

"Yes, master." Ozzar says, before turning and running out of the room.

"As you command!" Azuth adds.

The two of them leave to travel deeper into the underground lair. Mephisto turns himself into mist once more, just in case the Wordsmiths might strike at him. While he waits for Azuth and Ozzar to bring back all the low and high ranking necromancers, Mephisto closes his eyes and reaches out his senses to two of his undead slaves.

[Ksss. Gorn. What isss the sssituation? What measssuresss hasss the Wordsssmith taken againsst me?]

Mephisto waits. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty. Even a full minute.

However, even after sending multiple requests, he fails to detect Gorn.

Hmm. Did the Wordsmiths slay my minion, after all? He wonders.

[Lupusss! Ssspeak to your massster. What measssuresss have the Wordsssmithss taken toward me?]

This time, he receives an immediate answer.

[Hello, Mephisto.] Lupus answers, lacking any sort of love for him in her voice. Despite having to obey his orders and answer any questions he asks, she still possesses enough willpower to resist fawning at his feet like a beaten mutt. [Things are not looking good for you. The Wordsmith has issued a warrant for your capture or death to all the other Emperors. In particular, he seems hellbent on acquiring Monster King Kar's body and soul.]

She details the events of the last hour or so to Mephisto, even telling him the details about the Belial Booster. Finally, she informs Mephisto about the attack on Sharmur, and how the Kolvaxians ended up killing 80% of the planet's inhabitants.

[Kekeke!] Mephisto guffaws. [What good luck! The Wordsssmith won't have time to immediately hunt me down! I can gather all of my toolsss and make way to lurk inssside the Labyrinth!]

Mephisto pauses.

[And what of Gorn? Did sssomeone ssslay him? I have been unable to contact him sssincce I left.]

[No. Gorn is still alive and well.] Lupus says, without elaborating further.

[Then why iss he not resssponding to my sssummonsss?] Mephisto asks, pressing Lupus for more information. [Sssomething doessn't sssmell right.]

[Well, that's just too bad.] Lupus says, taunting Mephisto. [I guess you two never formed a 'real connection' after all. Maybe you should have treated him better.]

[Do not taunt me!] Mephisto growls. [Anssswer my quesstion, female! Why can I not contact Gorn?!]

For a few moments, Lupus struggles not to answer. However, ultimately, Mephisto's control forces her to speak.

[Gorn... has... he has... broken free. He no longer... follows your commands.] Lupus answers, through gritted teeth.

Mildly surprised, Mephisto frowns deeply.

Gorn broke free of my control? That makes him the third minion I've lost already! Why does this keep happening?

The Emperor of Legions doesn't immediately continue conversing with Lupus. He ponders on Gorn instead, debating what could have gone wrong, before slowly blinking his eyes.

Ksss. So that's it. Gorn's soul aura must have changed when he 'swapped faces.' So long as he does not don the Vermillion mask again, I will not be able to control him. Curses!

Mephisto trembles with rage. The realization that yet another valuable pawn has escaped his grasp makes him want to start smashing everything in sight! He shifts from side to side and starts to reach toward a decoration on the wall, only to eventually calm himself.

"No! I cannot lose my cool! That Gorn, kekeke... very clever. But in the end, I still possess Lupus. Two Emperor minions are better than none."

Mephisto summarily severs the connection between himself and Lupus, not deigning to reply to her last message. Before long, all his necromancer acolytes arrive before him, and he sends them through his gate to the Nether Realm.

After collecting his other resources and tools, Mephisto races away. The moment he leaves, he activates a special magical device located deep in the heart of the Hall of the Damned.

A massive explosion engulfs the entire region, collapsing the Hall of the Damned in on itself!

Mephisto sighs inwardly, knowing he has lost his place of prestige here on the demon's primary world. However, seeing the state of Hell Harbor, he doesn't feel too much grief, given its sad, sorry state. Considering how much damage the Archangels did to the entire world, it will take centuries for it to naturally heal all its scars.

The Emperor of Legions takes his leave, racing toward the distant Warpgate. However, unlike before, he's no longer in any specific rush to leave the planet. After all, in his Perfected Mist Body transformation, nobody can detect him unless he wishes for them to do so. Now that he has ensured the survival of his subordinates, he has no further ties to the Seven Hells, and as such, he can begin planning his next move.

Mephisto slows to a stop not far from the Warpgate. To his dismay, it currently remains inactive, but he doesn't worry. At some point, someone will have to activate the Warpgate, likely connecting it to the Labyrinth, and he can slip through without ringing any alarm bells.

The necromancer silently begins to mentally debate his future options.

The other Emperors will come to hunt me down, but they will not be able to find me. Once I reunite with Lupus, I will possess three Emperor-level powerhouses. With my ability to sneak anywhere, unseen, I can easily take out any lone Emperor in a flash! If I

kill them... kekeke... I can add them to my power! The only way to defend against me will be if the other Emperors stick together in groups of two or three. But that will concentrate their strength, leaving their Dukes vulnerable to attack!

Wicked thoughts flicker around inside the Emperor of Legions' mind.

I may not be able to collect human souls automatically anymore, but I can still stab and capture them individually, myself. So long as I immediately bind them to an undead body, that pesky Lazarus Tower won't stop my slow, gradual accumulation of power.

As Mephisto waits and plots, the Warpgate suddenly flickers with energy. Moments later, a connection opens, leading into the Labyrinth.

Success! I barely even had to wait at all! Mephisto snickers to himself. He starts to levitate toward the Labyrinth, only to pause when a familiar demon exits from the other side, stepping onto Hell Harbor's soil.

Bael, the Duke of Pain, swaggers out with the same enthusiasm as always.

"Sup, guys. Yeah, just me, good old Bael, hehe. Sup, Hubert? Sup, Malor? Yeah, haven't seen you in a while either."

Mephisto's eyes narrow as he gazes at Bael. Immediately, the urge to capture Bael and somehow force him into once again becoming Mephisto's undead slave comes to mind, but instead, the necromancer remains still. His anger cools, and in his eyes, a trace of pity appears.

Ksss... Bael. You were my good friend for so long. Even though you turned against me during Stormbringer, I can't fully blame you. You've always cared about your friends, no matter their position in the demonic hierarchy.

Mephisto gazes deeply at Bael, realizing the Duke of Pain has not yet realized the truth.

He doesn't know Ose died, and with her, his body has been lost as well.

Neither does he know the fate which befell Sharmur. He hasn't any idea that many of his friends among the Hell of Isolation were murdered by the Kolvaxians.

Mephisto glances at the Warpgate leading back to the Labyrinth. He hesitates, but ultimately decides not to head back, just yet.

Instead, he tails Bael in secret, lurking in the air around the Duke of Pain while Bael slowly and casually strolls past hundreds of other demons and monsters, all while saying 'hello' to every damn person in sight.

"Sup, Marlon? Sup, Janey? Ayo, how's it hangin', Luffy? What's good, Rollo!"

Despite Bael's idiocy, Mephisto notices for the first time just how many demon and monster names Bael has memorized. Even though he might be an idiot, Bael still puts plenty of effort into remembering the names of essentially every demon around him. Despite their differences, Mephisto admires this trait of his friend.

After Bael gets done saying hello to every demon in a five mile radius, he eventually arrives at a food shack not far from the Warpgate. Tired and worn-out, Bael pulls up a chair and orders his favorite dish, some juicy Blood Pie.

After sitting down, Bael's smile fades away. He leans his cheek against his wrist, and his elbow on the table. He sags into that position while waiting for his food to come.

"Man, oh man. What a day. Damn near pulled my string-o-ham tryin' ta climb that tree. This body's so weak..."

While Bael grumbles to himself, Mephisto silently reveals himself on the other side of the table. However, Bael doesn't even flinch.

"Oh. Hey, Mephisto. You here to get a piece of me too? Seems everyone wants a bite of my tight little butt today."

Mephisto blinks. "Ksss. No. I thought I would sssay goodbye, Bael. I'm guesssing you haven't heard. The Wordsssmith killed Ossse. Ssshe no longer exissstsss in our reality. Sssshe hasss been dissspatched to the Great Beyond."

Bael frowns. "Wait, really? Ose's dead?"

He sits up a little straighter. "And what about my body?"

Mephisto shakes his head. "Gone. Reducced to atomsss."

"Aw man! You're kidding me!" Bael groans, while slapping the table. "That was a perfectly good body! Are you telling me I'm stuck in this thin, scraggly, useless thing?"

Mephisto nods. "You may be in luck, though. The Wordsssmith hasss allied with the demonsss. Perhapsss he could ssshift your presssent body back into your old one."

"Ohhh! Yeah, wow, you're so smart, Mephisto!" Bael laughs. "Damn, bro. And now you're gonna be leaving soon? Not even enough time for one last game of Sticks and Bones?"

"I'm afraid not." Mephisto says, his voice lowering. "But, Bael. There iss one other matter I feel I musst tell you about."

Mephisto delivers the truly devastating news to Bael, the news that Sharmur has fallen. In only a single day, all of Bael's friends have perished, with only Melody remaining among the living.

Bael swallows the news quietly. He listens until Mephisto finishes talking, then leans back in his chair.

"...You've gotta be kidding me. What are the Seven Hells coming to, man? Ose's dead. Fenrir's dead. Wolfram, Viola... even little Guura. Dorma, too... sheesh. We're losing folks left and right."

"Many will perisssh." Mephisto says. "However, Bael... now iss a good time for me to extend one lassst offer to you. Why don't you come and work with me? Thesse other foolsss... they are not worth your attention. I intend to unite all the Sseven Hellsss... but I cannot do it alone! Having another Emperor at my sside would help a lot!"

Bael scratches his head. "I dunno. I don't think I'm up for all that fighting stuff right now, Mephis-bro. I'm still trying to work out, make my body a little stronger. You know how it goes. Plus, I've been having all these weird things happen to me, so I'm trying to figure out what that's all about. Sigh."

"Sssuit yourssself." Mephisto says. "I have lingered here too long. If you change your mind, Bael..."

Mephisto reaches into the rotted folds on his clothing. He pulls out a small ring and casually tosses it to the Duke of Pain.

"...Ussse thisss to contact me."

Bael's eyes widen. "W-whoa man. I uh, I don't think I'm ready for this level of commitment! Besides, ain't marriage like, ain't that a HUMAN thing?? Let's not get carried away, pal. I'm still mad at you for what you did during Stormfucker!"

Mephisto gazes at Bael for several long seconds. Then, he shakes his head.

"It iss not a wedding ring, Bael. You are sstill an abssolute moron."

"Ohh, whew! I totally misunderstood!" Bael laughs, while wiping his sweaty forehead. "If this is just an ENGAGEMENT thing, I'm cool with that. We can call it off if our feelings chill out! Less pressure, ya know?"

Mephisto lowers his head. Without another word, he dissipates into the wind, a single thought lingering in his brain.

Bael... you're such an idiot!

After Mephisto leaves, Bael smirks. He fiddles with the ring and slides it on, spreading out his fingers to admire the little green gem.

"Hehe. What a guy. You think you know a fella, then he goes and gives you such a pretty present. Mmm."

Bael's stupid smile quickly cools. He frowns and holds his fingers a little closer.

"Eugh. My nails are all long and pokey. Hey, I know! I'll have the gals give me a manny-cure! That sounds like FUN, hehe!"

Part 364: Humanity's Rise!

Two weeks pass.

In this time, Jason and the Seven Hells begin working together to rebuild Tarus II, relocate the refugees from the Hell of Isolation, and place the human refugees Jason personally teleported to Tarus II elsewhere on the planet.

During this time, all manner of events occur.

Hope returns from the Core with Neil in tow. Shocked, many people welcome back their commander with open arms, hugging and laughing with him due to the joy of his survival. For his part, Neil quietly accepts everyone's feelings, all while his eyes twinkle with insight. He evaluates the rapid changes occurring throughout human society with an air of aloofness. But privately, his thoughts darken as he observes the large numbers of demons working alongside his fellow men and women.

All across Tarus II, housing projects begin and end in rapid succession, bolstered by the efforts of demons and humans alike. To Jason's surprise, Phoebe takes the reins with excessive gumption, organizing the myriad of settlements inside and outside the reinforced crystal dome to ensure every bit of space is used wisely. With the amount of humans exceeding forty-seven million, they end up needing to cram a number nearly four times the population of Tokyo into a space only half the size of that city. Needless to say, this proves impossible to do in such a short time, so Jason makes several compromises.

Not only do forty-seven million humans populate Tarus II, but ten million monsters, and just as many demons, most of them from the Hells of Lust and Isolation, respectively.

With so many people trying to pack themselves into such a small space, Phoebe inevitably relents and begins building huge apartment complexes and individual houses well outside the crystal dome. Before long, the number of people living inside the dome drops dramatically, and the number outside skyrockets.

Despite the frantic energy and rapid expansion of Tarus II's controlled borders, most people remain hopeful and optimistic. The vague and distant specter of a possible alien invasion doesn't rest within their area of control, so the majority of citizens, no matter their species, leave such worries to the higher-ups. Generally, this means the Wordsmiths and the Demon Emperors.

In addition to housing, a thriving economy based on bartering springs up out of necessity. While the Wordsmith might be able to create unlimited energy for humanity, thanks to his replication of extremely safe micro-nuclear power plants, that doesn't mean he has the time, interest, or attention span to spend all day creating materials for humanity. And even if he did possess such inclinations, he still would opt to stand aside and let a certain level of self governance take hold.

Jason's vision proves far-sighted. Restaurants pop up here and there. Stores, markets, and other such establishments come into popularity as the military and civilian populaces find themselves in desperate need of ways to spend their downtime, re-energize, and ready themselves for more work.

In just two weeks, a tremendous amount of work becomes available, and essential, for everyone to complete. Nobody is spared from helping to rebuild and organize humanity's homeworld. Even the children pitch in. As for the elderly, the disabled, and the infirm, none of them exist!

Through the Wordsmith's unique powers, several useful and esoteric facilities spring up, all of them similar in their backend functionality to the Belial Booster.

One of these structures, referred to by the common folk as the Bodily Rejuvenation Depot, draws its power from the collective mana of every human, monster, and demon on Tarus II. By paying a certain number of Merit Tokens, obtained through services to the collective good of humanity, elderly humans can restore their bodies back to their youth while also obtaining dozens of years of additional lifespan! While demons and monsters don't need to use this facility, they still marvel at how the Wordsmith's versatile magic can improve the collective whole of humanity.

"Amazing! Humanity has always suffered from deaths caused by old age, but doesn't this facility essentially make humans immortal?"

"Immortal? Yeah... but then again, it can only restore a few dozen people a day. It's also not as convenient as making humans immortal from the get-go..."

"Doesn't matter. Humans have always been inferior to demons and monsters because they can't live long enough to accumulate centuries of wisdom. How frightening will they become when their collective intelligence is allowed to develop for hundreds of years?"

Conversations like this play out all across Tarus II, as well as inside the Labyrinth. The defeated Emperors can only smile bitterly, knowing they have no way to stop humanity's

accumulation of power. Even if they destroyed the Bodily Rejuvenation Depot, Jason or Hope could easily create another one. If they wanted, they could even make humans individually immortal one at a time, through their Wordsmithing.

Nobody even doubts that the Wordsmiths haven't already done so to the people closest to them. For example, Jason already privately made his wife immortal, and Hope did the same for Neil Adams and Annette. Who can say how many others received these special privileges?

While an undying body might seem incredible to humans, the demons and monsters don't think such thoughts. After all, most monsters and demons are already immortal themselves. But even if one lives well for 100,000 years, a random meteor might crash into their planet, an earthquake might kill them, or another monster or demon might strike them down in combat!

Therefore, the Bodily Rejuvenation Depot might end up being a truly empowering piece of magical technology, but ultimately, all it really does is finally give the humans a partial solution to a problem only they have suffered, bringing their lifespans to the same level as demonkind, monsterkind, and the Volgrim.

However, in addition to the Bodily Rejuvenation Depot, another type of special facility makes itself available! And this one draws huge crowds of not only humans, but members of other species!

Much like how the Belial Booster can boost the ranks of demons from Grunt to Emperor, a series of similar Body Booster facilities spring up, all of them with a slightly different capability, yet ultimately not all that dissimilar to the Belial Booster.

The Body Boosters use magical power to strengthen the metaphysical attributes of those who step inside. Not only can any average man or woman gain super strength, or speed, or perception, but demons and monsters can, as well!

Much like the blood-body strengthening techniques used by the Hell of Blood, Body Boosters allow anyone to obtain permanent bodily alterations to make themselves stronger than the mortal coil would typically allow. However, there are a few downsides to these incredible facilities.

Even with humanity's collective mana rising over time, and slowly funneling into Camael's Cube, the amount of expenditure still dwarfs the amount collected. Jason personally uses the Cube to speed up his own production of high-concept structures, such

as the Belial Booster, while the Bodily Rejuvenation Depot itself also pulls from this wellspring of mana to give humans greater life.

On the other hand, the Body Booster facilities do not pull from humanity's collective mana reserves. Instead, like the Belial Booster, they require an individual with strong bodies, minds, or mana to step inside and temporarily drain themselves of their power, transferring it to another individual. Unlike the Belial Booster though, this effect is not only demon-to-demon, but any species to any other species!

Sometimes, Demon Lords will transfer part of their strength to humans.

Other times, Minotaurs will do the same. Or Goblins. Or Harpies.

Of course, weakening oneself for several days or even weeks would ultimately be an act that leaves that individual defenseless. So why would anyone go to such lengths for strangers? Especially, why would demons and monsters purposefully bolster the strength of weak and pathetic humans?!

The answer lays in the system of Merit Tokens.

Conceived by Neil Adams not long after his return, this unique currency becomes the strongest possible method of exchange among all the species situated on Tarus II. All one has to do is perform a service that collectively assists the entirety of humanity, even in a small way, and they will receive Merit Tokens.

For strong individuals, such as high-ranking demons, powerful monsters, and talented humans, the first batches of tokens are all too easy to obtain.

Through the digital Centurion database, thousands of small, medium, and large-scale missions appear, all of them placed by the upper echelons of humanity's leaders. These consist of many different tasks, some immense, others simple.

Constructing housing and other such structures are the most common. Any able-bodied person can contribute to a construction task, earning a portion of the Merit Token reward for themselves. If 200 people construct a building worth 100 Merit Tokens, they each obtain half a token individually. If some people contribute more than the others, they might obtain a larger portion of the share, or even a unique bonus reward, assuming they somehow innovate on the process or come up with unique solutions to the problem. Most especially, if these unique solutions can transfer to other construction projects,

these creative types can obtain small but repeated amounts of tokens... similar to royalties from patents!

While Phoebe Hiro might be the smartest human on Tarus II, she is far from omniscient. Through the efforts of many other people, humanity's processes become more refined over time, allowing construction projects to speed up to half and even a quarter of their starting estimates! Buildings that once took two days to make now only require half a day. Of course, if people were to use old-style construction technique and tools, it would take weeks or even months to lay down building foundations, build structural skeletons, construct the walls and ceiling, lay piping and wiring, and other such minutiae. But even with construction drones capable of beaming buildings into existence, they can't construct a city instantly.

Construction is not the only method to obtain Merit Tokens. In fact, one of the most efficient ways non-humans can obtain tokens is by donating their strength through the Belial Booster and Body Booster facilities. By doing so, they can obtain dozens of tokens at once, if not hundreds, depending on how big of a boost they give to other sentient beings.

The most frightening part of these Merit Tokens, conceived by Neil, is how aggressively they begin to make the demons and monsters compete to help bolster humanity's power!

Not only can the tokens be exchanged for necessities and luxuries, but also extremely difficult to obtain items, such as permanent boosts from the Wordsmith himself!

Indeed, while Demon Emperors might not be able to boost each other's power through the Belial Boosters, nor will they genuinely desire to boost one another's body, mind, or soul... they can still exchange these tokens for the ultimate boost! A Word of Power granted by one of the Wordsmiths!

Among all the Hidden Emperors, Fae is the very first one to successfully obtain 1,000 Merit Tokens. She immediately obtains the choice of using these tokens for herself, or her minions.

By exchanging 1,000 Merit Tokens for a boost from the Wordsmith, she can augment her body, mind, or soul to become more formidable! She can enhance her perception speed, her physical strength, or any number of other attributes!

But, she can also spend those points to boost the Dukes, Barons, and Lords of her own Hell.

And this, therein, creates a minor complication. A conundrum which befuddles the Hidden Emperors.

Neil, in his genius, not only created the Merit Token system, but also placed a price on using the coveted Belial Booster. Since the molten energy in Tarus II's core takes a significant amount of time to regenerate each time the Belial Booster activates, demons can only use it once every few days. And since Emperors give much bigger boosts to their subordinates than Dukes or Barons, it becomes obvious that they will want to spend their energy boosting subordinates through the Belial Booster rather than through Body Boosters.

But, thanks to Jason's foresight, the Emperors know that the ones granted first access to the Belial Booster will obviously be those who have curried the most favor with the Wordsmith. Be it hunting down Yama or Mephisto, or who can help rebuild humanity the quickest, this measure proves to be quite subjective. Thus, obtaining 1,000 Merit Tokens is not as easy as it sounds. Some of the Emperors who haven't bootlicked the Wordsmith enough can only reluctantly use the Body Boosters to empower humanity's allies instead of the Belial Booster for their own minions. In this way, they can obtain Merit Tokens too!

Neil's insidious plan allows Jason to do the unthinkable.

He can charge Emperors Merit Tokens for the right to use the Belial Booster!

*That's right! For the low-low price of just 500 Merit Tokens, you can boost your subordinates to the ranks of Baron, Duke, or even Emperor! Ah, but are you first in line? Have you played well with the Wordsmiths and kissed their boots enough? Do you even **have** 500 tokens? You should probably earn enough tokens first before coming here! And hey, why spend 500 Merit Tokens to boost a subordinate when you can spend 1,000 to boost yourself? Keep donating your power to Jason's subordinates through the Body Boosters, that way you'll have enough tokens to fulfill your own ambitions!*

These words, while never outright stated by any of humanity's leaders, still ring in the thoughts of the Hidden Emperors.

Through the power of implications, the people controlling the Belial Boosters and the Merit Boards obtain a small but reliable method of forcing the Emperors to submit to

humanity, again and again. Even the most haughty Emperors, such as Gorn, can't help but frown at the realization they're being used.

But even if they are, will they push back?

No!

In truth, while they might be vastly boosting humanity's power more than their own, in the end, these old bastards have remained stagnant in their strength for tens of thousands of years!

Fae fought during the Energy Wars as an Emperor. Aside from the exchanging of different powers through Auger, her own strength hasn't increased even in the slightest for 100,000 years. For her, obtaining more strength through any means, even if only a slight boost, tickles her greed more than any other incentive ever could.

The same is true of all the other Demon Emperors.

A truly rare situation occurs, upending the balance of power in all the Seven Hells. With the exception of Mephisto and Yama, the Hidden Emperors have to engage in a fierce competition between each other to exchange for the benefit of their Hells!

To boost themselves or their subordinates, which option will they take?

Even the greediest Emperors cannot instantly choose. After all, the cost to boost a Duke to an Emperor is half the cost to boost themselves by a marginal amount, but the result is that their Hell may obtain a new Emperor-level powerhouse! This could mean as much as a tenfold boost in power!

Faced with this choice, even Fae can only hesitate, an ugly expression of indecision plastered across her face.

[Dammit. Auger, quit messing with me. I want that boost! The Wordsmith could make me thirty percent tougher and harder to kill. Why should I care about boosting one of our Dukes? They might not even become an Emperor! Then we'll have to spend another 500 Merit Tokens in a few weeks to boost them again! It's better to benefit myself for 1,000 Merit Tokens instead!]

[Don't be so greedy.] Auger transmits telepathically. [The Duke of Contagion is close to the rank of Emperor. I believe that with one boost from you, he could finally evolve. Our Hell is already stronger than the other Hells, with more Emperors than the

competitors. But if you waste 1,000 points on yourself, the Hell of Calamity might obtain another Emperor, matching our strength.]

[The Hell of Calamity? Aw, Christ, here we go again!] Fae groans. [Gorn is half-dead. Yumagi got blown to atoms, and even his soul was scattered. Don't forget, even the Orcs are starting to compete for dominance within their Hell. Emperor Serena isn't a factor, and Crow remains the lone powerhouse. Me and Yardrat can match her, no problem! Especially if I get that boost!]

Auger sighs. [We need to stay ahead of the other Hells, Fae. Look at the bigger picture. You were the only Emperor to obtain a free session inside the Belial Booster, and instead, you raised a different Hell's Baron to Duke. With her enhanced abilities, Mara has increased the powers of two humans so far, earning Merit Tokens for herself and the Hell of Calamity. Meanwhile, Yardrat already exchanged 500 Merit Tokens to boost one of our own Dukes. After you do the same, then you can exchange 1,000 for a boost to yourself.]

[Yardrat failed, though!] Fae complains. [He tried boosting the Duke of Hailstorms to the rank of Emperor, but it didn't work! If I use my tokens on the Duke of Contagion and he also fails to advance-]

[Then the next boost will surely raise him.] Auger interrupts. [No more complaints, Fae. If your empowerment fails to uplift the Duke of Contagion, then I will allow you to bolster your own strength in the next round. That is the limit of my magnanimity.]

[Since when did you become my broodfather?] Fae pouts. [Maybe I'll just boost myself, anyway! If you want to blow your wad on some stupid Duke, then get down here and earn your own damn Merit Tokens!]

For a brief moment, Auger remains quiet.

When he next speaks, Fae's protests catch in her throat, and her bones feel a cold chill.

[Emperor of Terror. **Do not forget your position.** You submitted to me. Your powers lay within my grasp. So long as I will it, I can take away **all** of your abilities and leave you a hollow shell. You will do as I command. You will not speak another word of complaint... or if you do, I will find *another* to take your place. I'm sure there are plenty of Dukes who would be willing to step into the role of the next Emperor of Terror.]

Fae's teeth clench together. A bone-drenching sensation of coldness freezes her in place and forces her to lower her head.

[Y-yeah... of course. Sorry, Auger. I'll, ah... I'll boost the Duke of Contagion, next.]

[Indeed, you will. As for my coming there in person, hmph. You know well why I cannot do that. I will remain here, in solace, as always.]

The mental connection severs, making Fae's eye's flinch.

"...Goddammit. I signed my soul away to that old bastard when I was only a Baron. Now I'm stuck to him for the rest of eternity! What a stupid choice. Wish I could go back in time and slap my dipshit younger self."

After a brief pause, her expression turns gloomy.

"Then again, maybe not. I'd probably never have become an Emperor without Auger's help. I'd have been cast aside during some lame battle against those ancient humans, and that would have been the end of my life. Better to be a lion licking the paws of a Hellhound than a kitten thrown into the meat grinder."

With a long sigh, Fae travels to the Belial Booster facility, exchanges 500 Merit Tokens, and successfully uplifts her subordinate, Dagon, to the rank of Emperor. He evolves from the Duke of Contagion to the Emperor of Pathogens, successfully making himself the third direct Emperor subordinate to Auger. Of course, this does not include the secretive and insane Stitched Emperor, Glinch, but Auger never considered him anything more than a final defense for if the Fourth Hell came under attack.

At the same time as Fae successfully raises the first Duke to the rank of Emperor since the Hell and Humanity Alliance formed, a different Emperor begrudgingly enters the Body Booster facility, where he finds a dark-skinned human male waiting for him.

"Emperor Kristoff." The man says, appraising him carefully. "I have 250 Merit Tokens with your name on them."

The Emperor of Thirst glances at the man before him. "It's my third time boosting a human. What's your name?"

"Lieutenant Samuel." The man answers. "I've been saving up my tokens for a while now. I'm looking forward to this."

Samuel exposes a white, toothy smile. Despite his hatred of demons, the thought that he can exchange a mere 250 Merit Tokens for a powerup from a Demon Emperor fills him with a sense of indescribable satisfaction. Of course, he could also exchange only 100 tokens for a Duke-level powerup, or 50 from a Baron, or even 10 from a Lord, but why

would he do that? Those boosts might make him relatively strong, but compared to the power a single Emperor can give him, a power which he might someday use to exact his revenge, he would much rather obtain a truly legendary amount of strength.

"Are you sure you can handle what I'm offering?" Kristoff asks. "That other woman... Corporal Hurent... she suffered some injuries and had to pay a visit to the hospital to fix herself up. Something about her bones not being able to handle the swelling of her muscles."

"No pain, no gain." Samuel replies, his voice calm. "Do you want my tokens, or not?"

Kristoff snorts. "Obtaining strength similar to mine for a few measly tokens. Without the Wordsmith, you humans would never be able to obtain such a boon, not even if you poured all of your blood and organs onto the dirt."

"Strength is only a means to an end." Samuel says. "That's the problem with you demons. You pursue strength just for the sake of ruling with an iron fist. But I'm not like you. I pursue my own goals. I actually have a reason for my existence."

Kristoff doesn't miss the gleam of hatred in Samuel's eyes.

"Let me guess. You lost someone important because of my people. And now, in a delicious twist of irony, your chance of obtaining vengeance comes by borrowing the powers of your enemies. Fate is full of all sorts of surprises."

Samuel remains quiet. He gestures to the two power-exchange pods.

"We done bullshitting? Let's get this over with. I can't stand jabbering with demons."

"Suit yourself." Kristoff replies. The polite and elegant-looking Emperor steps into the pod on the left, while Samuel enters the one on the right.

Not long after, they both step out, with Kristoff looking half-dead, while Samuel appears exactly the opposite. He grins viciously and pumps his muscles, bellowing at the sky.

"It's Samuel's time to shine!" The Lieutenant roars, before storming out of the building past a crowd of gleeful onlookers.

After he leaves, Kristoff sighs. The Emperor of Thirst glances at his own Merit Token reserves, which have finally reached 1,000 points, but only feels a sense of gloominess in his heart.

"...Oh, Fenrir. How I miss you."

Part 365: Organizational Directives

(Part 1)

Inside the newly erected operational coordination structure known as Elysium, located just half a mile north of the Lazarus Tower on Tarus II.

More than a dozen of humanity's leaders and allies sit at a long, wide table. Among them are mostly humans, several monsters, and only a couple of demons. Notably, not a single member of the newly added Hidden Emperor Alliance, anyone from the Hell of Lust, or the Hell of Isolation sits among their ranks. In fact, none of the Archangels sit on this council either, though their reasons for not showing up have more to do with their own disinterest in the matter than any explicit exclusion by the humans.

Executive Commander Jason Hiro sits at the head of the table. On his right hand side sits the Development Executive, Phoebe Hiro, followed by the Magical Specialist, Fiona Hiro, the Health and Safety Administrator, Belial, and the newly promoted Duke of Locusts, Kiari, who is also the Agricultural Administrator. On his left sits the minotaur chef and Food Distribution Administrator, Yamir, as well as the Array Specialist, Blinker, temporarily human sized so she doesn't have to sit on anyone's shoulder.

On the opposite side of the table sits the Military Force Commander, Neil Adams. On his right hand side sits the Energy Production Overseer, Hope Hiro, the Exotic Weaponry Administrator, Hans Wagner, and General Magnus Chadwick, in charge of personnel recruitment and assignment. On Neil's left sits the T-REX Administrator, Lieutenant Samuel Baker, as well as the Power Glove Administrator, Corporal Linda Hurent and the Felorian, Brunhilda, who guides humanity's troops in military exercises.

Despite the fact that Hope and Jason possess the same powers, due to certain reasons, Hope finds himself not seated directly opposite Jason, which causes his stomach to clench up in anger. Even so, he must admit that compared to Neil's contributions, especially of late, he is simply not as essential to humanity's future growth as his original self.

Jason taps a button on his end of the table, which pops up a huge wireframe hologram of the entire Fortress of Retribution, as well as the crystal wall and the outskirts surrounding the rapidly improving city.

"Thank you all for coming today." Jason begins. "It's been two weeks since we signed the ceasefire with demonkind. So far, they have not reneged on their promises, even once. In fact, the more time that passes, the more they become integrated with our well-being. This is all due to the efforts of every person here, as well as all of your subordinates."

While Jason talks, Hope snorts coldly in his heart.

Sure. The demons are our allies, for now. But how can good things last forever?

Unaware of his clone's thoughts, Jason continues. "I want to extend a special thanks to Neil for his brilliant idea to use Merit Tokens. This currency has essentially caused these once-haughty Demon Emperors to throw themselves at our feet, begging for whatever we can give them. The pricing for various commodities has also drastically tilted the scales in our favor, allowing humanity's expansion to explode upwards."

Several people at the table nod and smile, directing their looks of appreciation to Neil, who continues to sit idly, a shallow smile of his own barely visible.

"It was a simple matter." Neil says, casually waving his hand. "The 'war-time provisions' the Volgrim extended to us gave me the idea to use our own currency. As for the pricing, that was a simple matter, too. For every one subordinate the Seven Hells empower, they will have to empower two of ours. And for every Wordsmith Blessing they redeem, they will need to uplift at least four of our people. These tradeoffs put us in a splendid position of bargaining power."

Neil pauses.

"Although, I do find the current ratios to be only... barely acceptable. I've been thinking we should increase the ratios of Tokens to tilt a little more in our favor. Each time the Emperors uplift one of their own to the rank of Duke, they gain another powerful chess piece they can use against us."

Jason frowns. "That isn't the deal we agreed upon. Right now, we're already outpacing the Seven Hells' growth by a factor of three. For every day that passes where our people get to trade for tokens, we will uplift two to four subordinates for every one of theirs. There's no need to act greedily."

"I don't know about that." Lieutenant Samuel interjects. "Ain't you heard? Some demon from the Hell of Punishment just got uplifted to the rank of Emperor. That's one more of them lurkin' in the shadows who could someday attack us. It's only been two

weeks, but already the Seven Hells have added twelve Dukes and one Emperor to their numbers. Doesn't that worry you, just a little bit?"

"We don't have to adjust the token costs." Hope says. "We could simply... tweak the ratio of power the Belial Booster gives out. If we lower the ratio by ten percent, it will effectively cost the Seven Hells one subordinate per ten uses. And for our people, we can raise the ratio back to normal. They'll never notice."

Belial shoots a look of disgust at Neil, Hope, and Samuel. "You three! The Seven Hells are our allies now! And even if you don't trust a few of those Hells, the Hells of Lust and Isolation are most assuredly on our side. What sort of sincerity would we be showing them if we acted so underhandedly behind their backs? Do you really think these old monsters can't figure out they're being slowly ripped off? The damage such an arrangement would do to our reputation is incalculable!"

Neil doesn't take offense to Belial's words. He calmly strums his fingers on the table while gazing at her with placid eyes.

"Of course I know the Demon Emperors aren't stupid." Neil says. "But right now, while the alliance is still young, this is the perfect time to change and tweak a few minor matters. If we wait a few months, or a year, these token ratios will solidify in the minds of everyone and become far more difficult to change without causing a public uproar. As for adjusting the power ratio of the Belial Booster, I think we can lower it by one or two percent, a little at a time, over the course of several weeks. The effect will be the same, and much less noticeable. As long as it benefits humanity, and the Emperors are unlikely to learn of it, I don't see why that would be a bad idea."

He pauses to gaze at Belial meaningfully. "That is... unless *someone* were to inform her compatriots of this matter. But surely, your loyalties would not be so questionable as-"

"Neil. Knock it off." Jason interrupts, a hint of anger in his voice. "Stop with the mind-games. We're not tweaking token costs, and we're not going to fuck over the Emperors willy-nilly. Period. Your line of thinking is exactly why trust has always broken down between the demons and other species. Right now, we occupy a position of absolute political power. But if we abuse that power, we'll only engender hatred and disgust. I refuse to act so vilely, on the basis that it will poison the well in the long-term."

Neil raises his eyebrows. He leans back in his seat and holds up his palms. "Of course. Of course... anything the Executive Commander says, I obey. I am merely a servant of

humanity, in the end."

Jason doesn't retort, but inwardly, he sighs.

We are not as unified as we appear on the surface.

Deciding to change the subject, Jason points to several positions on the holomap.

"Phoebe. Tell us how the construction efforts are going."

His wife nods. As the Development Executive in charge of housing and infrastructure, her purview is both broad and narrow at the same time. While she personally oversees humanity's expansion efforts, zoning, and building regulations, she also works on other top-secret projects in her free time, all of which she determines on her own. She doesn't consult with anyone, not even Jason, on what to develop next. For his part, the Wordsmith is perfectly fine with allowing his wife to manage this aspect of humanity.

"Rebuilding is proceeding faster than expected." Phoebe says. "Already, we've completed housing for thirty percent of the populace. The rest are currently living in tents, but thanks to the rapid improvements made by our engineers, we've managed to drastically speed up our construction speeds."

Hope snorts. "Yeah. *About that*. I've been speaking to people on the ground. There are a lot of folks dissatisfied with those who are getting access to the first available houses. Jason, Phoebe, why aren't we prioritizing the humans who fought during Stormbringer? All those people fought and bled for our cause, yet it seems you've chosen to equally divide the available housing among the refugees you teleported to Tarus II, our new demon 'friends' and others who actually helped attack Tarus II! Why are you giving priority housing access to our former enemies, the ones with blood on their hands? Or the people who only just recently got rescued by us? They didn't suffer like the rest of our people did!"

Brunhilda, a Felorian who helped fight back demons at the northern side of the Warpgate Outpost during the Stormbringer War, nods along to Hope's words. "I must acknowledge the Energy Overseer's comments. So far, not one Felorian has received access to housing. Every day, we work hard to help construct places for our people to live, yet we feel slighted due to this arrangement. It seems the Hell of Lust has already received access to a pair of premium apartment complexes outside the Crystal Barrier, yet my soldiers still sleep in tents. Executive Commander, how is this fair to those of us who bravely fought and bled on the frontlines?"

Jason sighs. "In due time, every person will receive housing. I haven't intentionally slighted anyone, so I'm sorry if you haven't received your first dormitory yet. For now though, I'm trying to arrange things so all the groups get access at the same time. If I were to prioritize Stormbringer Survivors first, that would send a bad message to our newest allies, don't you think?"

"They have to work to earn their keep!" Brunhilda protests. "Why should my people toil and slave away, yet not get even a single measly room? Have you forgotten that more than 20,000 Felorians died during the Stormbringer Attack?!"

"I'll... I'll try to balance the scales more fairly in the future." Jason mutters, while rubbing his forehead. "We should only need a couple of months to finish building housing for everyone on Tarus II."

"Ah, I see." Neil says, feeling slightly delighted at getting the chance to rib Jason's weakness. "So the Felorians need only sleep in the tents for two months while slaving away on behalf of the newest members of our so-called 'alliance.' Yes, that certainly seems fair. Such wisdom from the Wordsmith, how can I compare?"

"At least Jason and Phoebe get to sleep in a nice, cushy room every night." Hope adds. "It's good to see that you know how to take care of yourselves."

Fiona, in her ghost-like form, smacks her lips. "You must be so concerned for the welfare of others, Hope. Have you given up that mansion on Maiura yet? Let's not be hypocritical. The fact is, not everyone can be given housing instantly. It won't take long for us to get that housing, and the weather will be quite fine for a few months. By the time winter arrives, all our allies will be living decently, while we will also be upgrading even more housing to give everyone a life of luxury."

She pauses.

"How about this? We can open up all new housing to anyone willing to pay Merit Tokens. People can offer bids based on the quality of said housing. We'll offer discounts for veterans of the Stormbringer War, and nobody will be allowed to bid if they already own a house or a room of their own. The goal is to get all our people housed first, and then we can worry about giving out seconds to those who need it, such as large families. We'll also open up a Housing Swap option, so people dissatisfied with their living arrangements can trade with others for something better."

The room goes quiet for a moment.

"That sounds acceptable to me." Corporal Hurent says. As the T-REX Administrator, she speaks to countless people and monsters every day, getting a clear view of the overall situation. "Neil already gave a starting bonus of 100 Merit Tokens to the survivors of Stormbringer. That will give them a huge leg up in obtaining housing first. This can be said to be a 'soft' policy that only somewhat favors Stormbringer's survivors a bit, but it seems fair to me."

Brunhilda slowly nods. "I possess 373 Merit Tokens, myself. I am planning to visit a Body Booster soon. As for my subordinates, most of them have already passed 200. If housing becomes purchasable through these tokens, then they will have a decisive advantage over the slaves and other newcomers who have less 'teeth' in our situation. That is all I ask as a concession."

Seeing that Jason has managed to successfully block his needling, Neil Adams doesn't press the issue of housing anymore.

"What about the Lazarus Tower?" Neil asks. "Are you going to activate it, soon?"

"Not yet." Jason answers. "The souls inside are perfectly preserved. They won't deteriorate or suffer. Right now, I want to spend the next few months building enough houses to satisfy everyone on Tarus II. After that, once we've built even more, we can begin reviving people."

"On that note." Fiona says, lightly waving her hand. "I spent a lot of time talking to Raphael about how we should go about reviving our fallen friends. Unfortunately, the cost is quite burdensome. If we were to resurrect them as Lazarites, angels similar to Cassiel, they would certainly possess incredible fighting power and all-but-undying bodies, to say nothing of their spiritual abilities and wings for flying. However, we would need a vast amount of 'Human Mana,' which we currently spend on the Bodily Rejuvenation Depots. I have made an executive decision that all reborn humans will reform inside their original earthly vessels. They will revive as humans, not Lazarites."

Jason nods. "I approved this measure. Reviving them as ordinary humans will cut down on our Human Mana expenditure. Right now, the 'Cube' is beginning to run low. I need to save a portion of its Primordial Energy for emergencies. We never know when the Volgrim or Kolvaxians will attack. Supposedly, the Volgrim are our allies, but we cannot be sure this will remain the case forever."

Unspoken is the fact that while a 'drop' of Primordial Energy possesses more value than 'ten gallons' of Human Mana, Jason has no choice but to continue using up the Cube's limited reserves if he wants to rapidly advance humanity's strength.

The Wordsmith quietly sighs. *I need to find a way to replenish the Cube's mana reserves. Perhaps, if I could obtain Excalibur, I might be able to use it as a battery, rapidly refilling the Cube... but I'm not sure if that would work, and I don't know how I can obtain it from the Volgrim without starting a bloody war, anyway.*

"It's better to have them revive as humans, anyway." Neil says, surprising Jason by agreeing with him. "Our goal should be to reach for the stars with our own strength, not by borrowing the power of long-dead old fossils. The angels had their time, but ultimately, they all perished. Cassiel is the last living angel, but even she is only a half-blood. Let her retain her special status, and let our people come back as fully and 100% themselves. That is for the best."

After Neil finishes speaking, most of the people in the room nod along to his words.

"I agree." Brunhilda says. "We are humans. We should not strive to change our bodies to pursue the powers of other species. The Body Boosters are the limit of what any of us should accept, and those amount to only a strengthening of our natural physiques."

"Let demons and monsters and angels be themselves. Let humans be humans." General Chadwick adds.

For a brief moment, Jason feels oddly uncomfortable with the acknowledgement of everyone around him. Especially when he notices a strange look in the eyes of Belial, Kiari, Yamir, and Blinker. These demons and monsters visibly shift in their seats, feeling somewhat sidelined by the words of their 'allies.'

"Let's not get carried away." Jason retorts. "If I had unlimited mana, I would absolutely turn all the people inside the Lazarus Tower into Lazarites. Who would willingly turn down a superior undying body? Regardless, it's not possible, so we'll move on. Corporal Hurent! Give me good news. Are the Power Gloves ready for distribution?"

The reminder of a hot new weapon agitates everyone in the room. Corporal Hurent glances across the table toward Hans Wagner, the Exotic Weaponry Administrator.

"I've worked with Mister Hans for the past few weeks, and we've made great strides." The Corporal says, smiling broadly. "Our plan to use the Belial Boosters and Body

Boosters to conduct deep scans of all the demons and other people has given us excellent data to work with. Hans?"

She hands the floor over to the German scientist, who sits up a little straighter in response.

"Yes! Zees has been quite a fruitful endeavor!" Hans says. "I have already downloaded more than two hundred demon powers into the Centurion database. While we cannot separate the powers from the acquired DNA, we can certainly copy them wholesale. If we wish to unleash an army of Samanthas onto the world, we shall do so with ease!"

Having long since been informed of the true purpose of the Belial Boosters and Body Boosters, Belial doesn't appear concerned about people duplicating her powers.

"That's all well and good," Belial says, "but don't forget that humans are magically inferior to other species. Even if you strengthen your bodies, your magical capabilities will not allow you to unleash even one percent of any random Emperor's powers. As for vague abilities like my transformation powers, the Power Gloves will expose your identity, so it's useless."

"Even if we can only mimic a fraction of a demon's power," Neil responds, "we can make up for most of the difference through sheer numbers. We can also experiment with their abilities to learn how they work, thus giving us an advantage if they ever turn on us."

"We still have a big problem on our hands." Belial interjects. "I hope nobody has forgotten about the Changelings. We don't have any way to identify them. Before we worry about infiltrating the Volgrim with our inferior abilities, we should worry about them infiltrating us. They already have hundreds of thousands of years worth of practice. They are far beyond us in this capability."

She pauses to glance at each individual person sitting at the table.

"Any of you, including me, could be a Changeling. Never forget that. They might be capable of mimicking my Emperor aura. They can grow horns. They can change their voices, grow their hair, and do anything else of that sort. They could knock out Corporal Hurent while she's on duty and swap her with a body double. Never underestimate them. We need a counter strategy, and soon."

"I'm working on that!" Blinker chirps. "My Magical Arrays can be quite useful for this sort of thing! The fact the Changelings can't mimic magical abilities means they have at

least one major deficiency they don't excel in. Oh, and that reminds me! I've decided I'm not going to go back to Miss Becker's laboratory to have my children. I'll have them here, on Tarus II! And since I'll be here, I called up some friends of mine to come help me with arrays!"

"You called up some friends?" Phoebe repeats. "What do you mean, Blinker? Other fairies?"

"Mhm!" Blinker says. "I have a whooooole big extended family. We fairies don't reproduce all that much, but we live forever and we're hard to kill, so there's more of them scattered about the Seven Hells than you would expect. Anyway, two of my sisters are coming, along with a bunch of their friends. We'll work together to develop useful arrays."

Blinker glances at Jason.

"Which also reminds me! I finished that, ahem, *top secret* thing you wanted."

The Wordsmith smiles. "Thanks, Blinker. I'll put it to good use."

Their cryptic conversation causes Hope and Neil to both frown.

What 'top secret thing'? Hope wonders. Is Jason up to his usual shenanigans?

Seeing as a temporary lull occurs in the meeting, Hope speaks up.

"I have something else to say. I keep checking with the Hidden Emperors, and it's become clear to me that they are all incapable of hunting down Mephisto and Yama. As such, I am going to head into the Labyrinth to find and kill these menaces. If possible, I also intend to rescue Kar's body and soul, then bring him back. It seems that, while we were rebuilding Tarus II, Mephisto sneaked into Hell Harbor and rescued all of his necromancer minions... we absolutely cannot allow him to exist in peace."

"Hope is right." Neil says, quickly voicing his opinion. "The Necromancer King may not be able to automatically collect human souls anymore, but he can still strike from the shadows and kill people in secret. He has become an Emperor now, too, so he's sure to target other Emperors, if not their Dukes. We can't let him start building an undead army without restraint."

Jason frowns. The coordination between Hope and Neil clearly shows they planned this move out, but he can't figure out why they would need to act so aggressively.

"...You want to go into the Labyrinth?" Jason asks. "Alone?"

"That's right," Hope says, puffing out his chest. "Alone. And I'm not looking for permission. I'm just being courteous and telling you where I'll be going. It's not like I've had much to do on Tarus II."

"You've been a great help in the construction efforts. I've had a lot more free time to focus on building specialized facilities while you expanded our energy production capabilities." Jason points out. "And what about... you know... *Gressil*? If you go into the Labyrinth, he might capture you. I don't want to see that happen."

"I'm taking every precaution this time." Hope says, coolly. "Rest assured. If Gressil comes for me, I'll evade him with ease."

Jason chews his lip. "Well. Alright. If you say so... but why don't you take Arthur with you? I explicitly designed him to counter Gressil."

"There's no need for that." Hope says. He starts to say something else, but pauses for a moment.

After a few seconds of silence, Hope knits his brow, then nods.

"...Actually, yeah. You might have a point, Jason. I'll take Arthur along. Better to be safe than sorry."

Jason relaxes, ever so slightly. "Alright. Stay safe while you're in there. When do you plan to leave?"

His clone smiles, then stands up.

"Right now. Take care, everyone. I'll return soon enough."

Slightly stunned, Jason simply watches as Hope turns and walks out of the room, a feeling of unease in his stomach.

Why do I feel like Hope has some ulterior motive? Jason wonders.

As for Hope, he leaves the building and strolls outside into the bright, summer sunshine. The Wordsmith inhales deeply, feeling excited for what is soon to come.

Neil and I have worked everything out. Hope thinks. Forget Mephisto and Yama. They're not important. I need to meet up with Solomon, Arthur, and Jephthah. Then, I can use them to uncover the location where the Volgrim have hidden Excalibur and the Dominion Rod. If my luck is excellent, I can also try to snag Solomon's Crown.

Hope pauses to survey the world of Tarus II.

This planet should be mine. Jason isn't worthy of ruling over it. While I'm gone, he can develop it for me. I'll come back in a few months and take him down. Then, humanity can truly ascend under my leadership. No more demons, angels, or monsters... except for the ones who fully submit.

Humanity will rise to conquer the galaxy!

Part 366: Organizational Directives

(Part 2)

After Hope leaves the room, the remaining members of humanity's leadership fall silent for a short period before continuing with their previous discussion. For his part, Jason wonders what Hope is up to, but he also has so much on his mind that he can't pay Hope's actions too much thought.

"We're going to start ramping up production of all sorts of services quickly." Jason begins. "First, we have to catch up on housing for all our people, including the humans, monsters, and demons. Once we've caught up and built plenty of extra, we'll start reviving our fallen friends and family through the Lazarus Tower. After that, we'll switch to full time military drills and training. Corporal Hurent, Professor Wagner, tell me how things are going on your end."

As the Power Glove Administrator, Corporal Hurent finds herself placed in the center of the next big revolution in human society. Not only will these futuristic gadgets increase humanity's wartime potential by a ludicrous level, but they will also allow for a significant improvement in inter-species communication, as members of any species will be able to transform into other species at will.

Linda Hurent sits up in her chair. "Reporting, sir. We've already completed nearly 100,000 standard-issue Power Gloves for our army. Professor Wagner is still adding biological scans to the Centurion Database over time, but we've lagged behind in pair-matching DNA sequences to suitable candidates. Myself for instance, it seems I don't match up well with Troll and Orc DNA."

Hans Wagner slightly raises his hand. "Indeed! But we could make up zee difference if we had a few hundred technically inclined volunteers! Zere is simply too much data for my small team to sift through, so if anyone here knows any smart, strapping young minds, we will put zem to good use!"

Jason remains silent, allowing Phoebe to speak up. "I can think of about twenty or so relatively qualified people for the task. I'll pass your requests on to them."

"Twenty is barely zee minimum we need..." Hans grumbles. "But... I suppose for now, it is good enough."

"I worked with Miss Blinker on creating a few Training Arrays," Corporal Hurent adds. "We can place a few of our people inside these arrays, locking them in a small dimensional space where others will not be able to spy on their progress and easily uncover the secrets of the Power Glove's inner workings. Additionally, if they unleash any crazy, devastating attacks, it won't hurt the planet. We can relegate the leftover energy to the vacuum of space."

Jason smiles. "I'm glad to hear we're on track for our targets, so far. Miss Brunhilda, once we start putting our soldiers through detailed training measures, I'll expect you to handle duty assignments and manage those who are most in need of learning how the Power Gloves work. As one of the most magically-attuned humans here, I expect you to start training with the Power Gloves early. Have you already paid a visit to a Body Booster?"

Brunhilda nods. "I have, Wordsmith. I received a boost from the Emperor of the Void. Yadrat's bodily strength was not particularly noteworthy. He only brought me to about half of my 'bodily limit.' I will need to find another relatively weak Emperor to bring me the rest of the way."

Belial pipes up. "Do be careful about that, Miss Brunhilda. I've had too many overly eager people showing up at the hospital with overloaded bodies. If you go past your limits, even by just a percent or two, you will suffer worse than you can imagine."

"Pain means my body is growing stronger." Brunhilda simply replies, closing her eyes and paying Belial's warning no mind. "I seek the apex of combat potential. I will stop at nothing to reach it."

"Let's talk about the Volgrim." Jason says, casually changing the subject. "Sangin Kordonis has been pestering me a couple of times every day, hinting that the Volgrim Founders wish to meet with me. Once Tarus II reaches a certain level of stability, I'll have to leave for a while to visit them. Currently, we are allied with the Volgrim, but make no mistake. They are opportunistic, and so are we. If the Volgrim had a choice, they would exterminate our future potential without batting an eye. We are as much their ally as their enemy. They will not feel comfortable, watching our species rapidly grow stronger while theirs weakens."

Jason pauses to suck in a shallow breath.

"We are not training our military to fight demons, anymore. Instead, we are readying ourselves to join the true War. The War which seems neverending. For 80,000 years now, the Volgrim have battled the Kolvaxians tooth and nail, and they've reached a tipping point where they will soon lose. We must ready our people to join in these battles. Everything we've done is all leading up to fighting a horrifying enemy which can exterminate entire planets in a single day. The Kolvaxians are not an enemy we can afford to take lightly."

"Now, then..." Jason concludes. "Assuming we manage to defeat the Kolvaxians, it is very likely the Volgrim will turn on us. How will we prepare counter-measures to deal with them?"

Immediately, Neil sits up straighter. "We cannot rely on Tarus II as humanity's home-world. Our enemies may not unleash their 'Neutron Bombs' upon us, but then again, perhaps they might. We should spread our population out to different planets. Maiura, for instance."

"All planets share the same weakness." Phoebe says. "They rest at a fixed location, a solar system which has long been mapped out by the Volgrim. I propose we should develop space-living accommodations capable of housing our people and fleeing the galaxy. We know the Volgrim have created half a dozen moon-sized stations capable of traveling at post-relativistic speeds. If we lose the War, they will escape the Milky Way and flee to other galaxies. We should have that option available for ourselves."

"I've already considered that much." Jason answers. "Right now, my number one priority is to make the Cube livable. I've actually been working with Blinker on some... options. We'll have more to say about that in the future."

When Jason mentions the Monster Queen, Neil's eyes light up subtly with recognition.

These must be the 'special arrangements' Jason mentioned earlier, involving Blinker. Interesting.

"For now," Jason continues, "we have another, more readily available and essential option. Spaceships! We need to start developing warp-capable spacecraft as soon as possible. The Volgrim war fleets possess a billion times the firepower we can make even with all my avenues of power running at full force, so our goal shouldn't be firepower, but resilience. We need ships capable of long-term, if not indefinite survival capabilities even

in the darkest depths of space, out past the Milky Way's confines. If the War should come to an end tomorrow and we are the losers, at least some core of our people should be able to escape on spacecraft similar to the Covenant ships from before."

"Zee Covenant fleet is insufficient to meet our needs." Hans Wagner states. "Zey only were intended to last a few years in space, at most. Zey were our last-ditch escape efforts to evade zee demons. Zey are not appropriate for a colony of people to survive indefinitely. We must build new ships from scratch!"

"Phoebe. Fiona. Either of you want to tackle that task?" Jason asks.

"I'm pretty busy right now." Phoebe answers. "But I can try and squeeze in some design work in my free time."

"Don't worry, I can handle it." Fiona says, smiling sweetly. "Most of my efforts right now are being spent helping Jason design Exotic Technology, like the Body Boosters. But that will come to an end soon. Throwing in some casual starship design won't be a problem. We are going to need advanced ship-building facilities on Kelkin, though."

"We'll work that out in due time." Jason answers, casually waving his hand. "Let's see. What other measures should we discuss?"

Yamir, the Minotaur in charge of Food Safety and Distribution, raises his head. "Ahem! It has come to my attention that someone has recently sabotaged a small amount of nutrient supplements our soldiers use during field operations. We are not certain who would do this, but most people suspect the demons are at fault. It has caused a number of minor brawls to break out among our soldiers and some of the mid-ranking demonic newcomers."

Jason frowns. "Food sabotage? Did they poison the nutrients?"

"There was some 'incidental spillage,' yes," Yamir says, calmly enunciating his words through the movements of his hands. "But actually, a warehouse caught fire seemingly out of nowhere. Witnesses reported seeing a pair of small, humanoid figures flee the scene. We weren't sure if they were demon imps or goblins."

"That is strange..." Jason murmurs. "Could the Hidden Emperors be fomenting their people to instigate small amounts of crime? Or... might these be the actions of Changelings?"

Phoebe's eyes flick to Neil for a moment, but any thoughts she might have, she keeps them quiet.

If Neil notices her eye movements, he doesn't say anything about them. "Changelings seem the most likely suspects, but we have no evidence they walk among us. If you and the Monster Queen can come up with a way to detect Changelings, that will assist us in finding the culprits greatly."

Jason nods. "I'll see what I can do. Uncovering the Volgrim's moles should be my number one priority."

Kiari, the newly evolved Duke of Locusts, bashfully raises her hand.

"U-um, if, if you all don't mind..." She says, timidly lowering her hand. "Well, my b-bugs could help out. I can have them... k-keep an eye on the food?"

"We don't really want pests in our supplies." Jason says, smiling kindly at Kiari. "But thank you for your idea. I'll place cameras around the storage warehouses. Right, that reminds me, Kiari. Have your, um, *pets* been useful in maintaining the fields?"

Kiari flinches as every person at the table turns to look at her. Despite being a relatively pretty demoness with some accomplishments on her belt, she's also a shy girl, unaccustomed to attention from others.

"Well, um, I've been taking care of the p-pests in the fields. I moved them away. My Gardeners can fertilize the soil, so that's been h-helping the crop yields..."

"Good to hear." Jason says, nodding. "While I can certainly produce an infinite amount of food, it's always best if humanity can be self-sufficient without my assistance."

Jason and the other leaders continue talking for quite a while, but eventually, their discussion winds down.

"Alright. You all know our goals." Jason says. "General Chadwick, I'll leave the personnel assignment to you. Please work with Miss Brunhilda to assign the most relevant personnel to Power Glove training. Lieutenant Samuel, the T-REX's are still core to our defensive warfare doctrine. Make sure we have enough for every single citizen, plus a reserve in case of malfunctions."

After making a few more cursory statements, Jason rises from his seat.

"Alright, enough horsing around. Meeting adjourned. Everyone, I'll see you all again in two weeks."

Jason gets up to leave, along with his physical and spiritual wife. Yamir joins him, as do Belial and Blinker and Kiari.

Similarly, the other half of the table leaves, becoming part of their own little 'clique.'

One hour later.

Corporal Hurent eases into a booth at one of the local restaurants, a place located inside the heart of the Fortress of Retribution, known as the Fiery Hot Wings. This restaurant, while owned by Yamir, is actually managed by a few of his apprentice monsters, including a Harpie, a Goblin, and most surprisingly, an Orc.

That Orc walks over to Corporal Hurent's table, his body decorated in a simple but noble black and white uniform.

"Hello, Corporal." The orc grunts. "What're ya having?"

"Give me a few minutes," She says. "I'm waiting on a friend. I'll take a lemonade in the meantime."

The orc gruffly nods. "Got it."

He walks away, heading toward another table.

Linda Hurent rubs her chest and collarbone, wincing as she struggles to breathe. For a few minutes, she simply sits in place, sipping her lemonade.

Eventually, a large, dark-skinned man walks through the door. Samuel Baker turns to look at her and smiles.

"Hey, there you are, Linda. Sitting off in the corner."

He walks over and plunks down in the booth opposite her, groaning reflexively. "Ugh. Shit, my damn joints have been creaking like crazy ever since I got Boosted by the demon."

Linda nods sympathetically. "I'm sure you heard. I received a Booster from Emperor Gorn. It exceeded my body's limits by more than five percent. I was crying for hours. Thankfully, Samantha managed to leak out some of the energy, dropping me to my bare minimum, but my- cough! My friggin' clavicle feels like it's about to break. Might need to drain some more."

Samuel clicks his tongue. "I warned you! I told you to get a Boost from one of the weaker Emperors, but you insisted on Gorn. Me, personally, I got a Boost from Emperor Kristoff. My body is at about eighty percent saturation. I might get another Boost from a Baron to top off the rest."

As humans, Samuel and Linda can only receive so much power within their bones, marrow, veins, and brain before their bodies explode. Too little, and they won't reach their maximum potential. Too much, and their bodies will buckle and break as their bones fail to regulate the strength coursing through them, causing immense pain and in the worst case, death.

Linda grimaces. "Easy for you to say. I just barely managed to obtain 250 tokens while busting my butt. No way could I waste a good portion of my potential going for a weak Emperor. The sooner I max out my strength, the faster I can obtain even more Merit Tokens!"

"That's easy to say." Samuel retorts. "But if your bones start snapping and popping, you'll be in for a world of hurt."

While they're talking, the orc waiter returns with a pair of menus. They quickly order some random spicy food, then return to their conversation.

"So, are you excited for the housing swap?" Linda probes. "I hear you're currently living in a little hovel off the beaten path. Might be a good chance for you to move closer to the city center."

Samuel snorts. "I have to jog to work every day. That's not a bad thing, Linda. Some of us like getting in a little light exercise before we start our duty shifts."

"Oh, you!" Corporal Hurent snorts. "You must be the bastard who keeps calling me Lazy Linda behind my back! Now everyone's saying it!"

Samuel raises his palms innocently. "Wasn't me. Must have been some other good-looking guy."

"You *ass*!"

Linda and Samuel mockingly tease one another, then dig into their food when it arrives.

"Say," Samuel says, in between bites of some spicy meat, vaguely similar to chicken. "What's a fellow gotta do to get his hands on a Power Glove early?"

"Oh? You're interested in those?" Linda asks. "I thought you'd be repulsed at the thought of turning into another species. Especially a demon."

"All the better to get to know my enemies." Samuel replies. "I haven't had time to take a compatibility test yet, though. Not sure which species I'll be best able to morph into."

"Drop by after we finish here." Linda suggests. "I'll run you through the scanner doohickey."

After a brief pause, Samuel nods. "Alright."

He and Linda finish their food, then pay a full Merit Token, leaving the difference as a tip for their waiter.

Together, they stroll out into the comfortable, well-built new inner city infrastructure. Not far away, they spot the Lazarus Tower, rising into the sky. Its spire-like tip glows with magical energy at the tip, drawing anyone's attention who looks at it.

"Not much longer." Linda mutters. "We'll finally get to see all the people who fell during Stormbringer."

"No." Samuel mutters, his voice turning icy. "Not all of them. Don't forget, the demons devoured many souls to empower themselves right after Stormbringer. Mephisto probably anchored plenty of human souls to undead bodies. We can't recover them."

Linda's expression turns wistful. "Yeah. You're right."

The two of them continue walking. Samuel's expression darkens as he glances around, spotting more than a few Demon Grunts and even a Lord walking around.

"Can't fucking believe this shit." Samuel mutters, keeping his voice low. "We have to just accept these demons as our friends now. One little peace treaty, and that's it? Tell me you ain't just gonna fall in line, Linda. These bastards murdered millions and permanently devoured their souls. Now we have to play pretend friends with 'em, like they ain't never hurt a motherfucker in their lives."

Linda's shoulders sag. "There are good demons, Samuel. Samantha, for example. Plenty of demons fought alongside us, like Kiari..."

"So what if there are a few good ones?" Samuel snaps back. "What are these so-called 'good ones,' one percent of one percent? Every single demon who ain't an imp reached their level by devouring the souls of helpless humans. Hell, they'll even eat other demons,

that's how barbaric they are. They've whipped and beaten us, killed us, stomped us into the mud... not one of them is innocent."

Samuel's eyes flick upward, to the moon hovering in the midday sky.

"Demons killed my brother. I'll never forgive them. Once we settle this Kolvaxian War, there will be a reckoning, Linda. Just you wait and see. Many of us aren't content with washing the dirty water under the bridge. I only hope that when the time comes, you'll be on the right side of history."

Linda nods slowly. "I understand. I'll have to think about what I'll do if... if that time comes."

"It's not a matter of 'if,' but 'when.'" Samuel concludes.

He and Linda fall silent as they walk toward a large warehouse on the western edge of the plateau. When they step inside, they're greeted with the smell of freshly hewn wood and metal, as well as the sight of many thousands of crates full of Power Gloves, ready and waiting to be distributed to deserving soldiers.

Shortly after they enter, Linda points at a long line of more than one hundred soldiers stretching outside.

"That's the line to get tested for Power Glove compatibility." She says. "But luckily, I'm here. We'll jump ahead of the others."

"Good." Samuel says with a grunt. "I ain't got time to spare."

Linda leads the Lieutenant over to an alcove built into the wall, with a metal platform and a series of scanning lasers capable of deep penetration into his tissue and bones.

Samuel steps inside, Linda activates the scanners, and the two of them fall silent.

Over the course of the next thirty minutes, dozens of scans take place, mapping out not only the strength of his skin, bones, and organs, but his genome, his temporal displacement ratio, and even his magical affinity and mana load-bearing capability.

Some time later, the scanners deactivate, and Samuel exhales.

"Christ. That took long enough. So what's the verdict?"

As he steps out of the alcove and starts to walk toward Corporal Hurent, her expression changes. A look of disbelief crosses her eyes, followed by a scheming, shit-eating grin.

"Pfft. Pfffft! HAHAHA! Oh, Samuel! Ahahaha! You won't believe this..."

Samuel's smile turns cross. He glowers at Linda, behind her computer. "What is it? Goddammit. Don't tell me... my compatibility is highest with demons?!"

"Oh, that WOULD be pretty ironic!" Linda snorts, trying not to burst into tears laughing. "But no, it's even funnier than that!"

She slowly and deliberately turns the monitor to face Samuel. When he sees the data on the screen, his expression turns downright hideous.

"Dammit! Are you kidding me? Is this some kind of sick joke?!"

"It's not!!" Linda protests, while clutching her stomach. "You have a perfect compatibility rating with... fairy biology! You're gonna be a pretty princess, Samuel! AHAHAHA!!"

Samuel gruffly kicks a nearby crate. "Fuck! This is some bullshit! I thought I'd be compatible with orcs, or trolls, not a goddamn fairy!"

"I can't wait to see you with your cute little pretty-boy wings!" Linda howls with laughter, while Samuel storms away. "Come back, buttercup! Don't you want to try on a Power Glove?! It'll be great!"

As Samuel storms out the door, he fires off two final words.

"...Piss off!"

Part 367: Sinner's Revelation

In the basement of a cabin, tucked away near the northern edge of the Fortress of Retribution.

The former Duke of Inferno, Beelzebub, now a pale-skinned, dead-eyed human, lays face-up on a large but simple bed. His arms rest above his head, chained to the bedpost in the same position they've been for several weeks. A sense of emptiness lingers in his heart. The undecorated bedroom is both basic and boring, with only a single light on the ceiling, barely illuminating the darkness. No sunlight streams into the basement. The sounds of the outside world, if any, are muffled beyond comprehension.

As Beelzebub lays there, very few thoughts bubble up in his mind. He listlessly stares at the ceiling with a vague, disoriented look.

His pride, his unshakable spirit, and his sense of superiority were once his most front-and-center attributes. Even a little torture wouldn't have shaken him.

But that was in the past. That was before his final detonation and rebirth. That was before he lost everything which made him a mighty demon.

Now, he feels only despair. He has become a shell of a person.

All alone in that dark room, he weakly licks his dry, cracked lips. His stomach grumbles in protest. It's been a full day since he ate any food or drank any water. As a Demon Duke, he never needed to consume sustenance to survive. But now, having lost all his magical powers, he has become as weak and frail as an old man... an old *human*.

In the world above him, a soft *thump* stirs his thoughts. His eyes slowly trace along the ceiling as a series of footsteps walk along the cottage's upper levels. Before long, the hatch leading down into the basement flies open, and a cheerful voice sounds out.

"Mister Beelzebubuuub! I'm back! Teehee!"

Beelzebub doesn't reply. Even if he had the energy, he now lacks the will. Words will never save him from this wretched, vicious monster in demon flesh. The tormenter of his body and mind.

Rosalia stomps down the stairs and arrives at the bottom, turning to look at him with that same, undying sparkle in her eyes.

"You're awake! Oh goody! Sorry it took me so long to get back today, but work at the hospital was CRAZY! There was a collapse at this construction site, so I had to rush over and help pull a bunch of pathetic humans out of the rubble, and you know how *humans* are, so these whiny little fleshbags were begging and pleading for help, and then my coworker Kiki was all... 'Oh Rosalia, you have to show more compassion to these poor humans,' but I was like..."

Beelzebub doesn't bother listening to anything Rosalia says. After all, not only is the screechy tone of her voice annoying to the point of drilling into his ears, but she never has anything interesting to say. He has also long grown tired of arguing with her, begging to be released, or exchanging any dialogue that would cause her to think he cares.

The corpulent demoness continues bouncing her stomach while she strolls around the room, regaling Beelzebub about her day. After a while, she turns to look at him.

"...so what do you think? Hm? Mister Beelzebub? Helloooo~!"

She frowns, then walks over and waves her hand in front of his dull, glazed-over eyes.

"Are you actually napping? Wakey-wakey! Rise and shine!"

When Beelzebub doesn't react at all to her movements, a look of annoyance flashes across Rosalia's face.

Slap!

She backhands him, knocking his face to the side. This elicits a dull groan from Beelzebub, who finally 'awakens' to her words. He finally looks at her with a vague, emotionless stare.

"..Ros...alia..."

"Oh, my goodness! You weren't listening at ALL, were you?" Rosalia protests. "Now I have to start ALL over again! Sheesh!"

Beelzebub coughs. "Th... thir... sty..."

"Hm? Aww, does wittle Beelzebub need some wa-wa~?" Rosalia asks, clearly delighted at him asking for her help. "I'll get some for you! Heehee!"

As she stomps away, shaking her butt while half-dancing, Beelzebub's eyes once again become empty.

She walks back shortly after with a cup full of icy-cold water.

"Here you go, Mister Beelzebub! Sippy-sip time!"

She forcibly pulls Beelzebub's mouth open, then pours a small amount of water in at a time, delightfully enjoying the sight of his complete reliance on her every whim.

"Isn't this great?! We're having so much fun!" Rosalia chirps.

After Beelzebub finally licks his lips and regains some liquid in his body, he coughs weakly, then looks at Rosalia out of the corner of his eye.

"Ro... Rosalia... I'm sorry."

She waves her hand. "It's no problem! You know me, I LOVE helping you eat and drink! It really brings us together!"

Several seconds pass. Beelzebub lowers his eyes again, gazing at the ceiling despondently.

"No. I mean... I'm sorry. For how I treated you. I always insulted you. I was... a terrible demon. I deserve everything you've done to me."

For a brief moment, the room goes quiet. Rosalia cocks her head and frowns.

"Hmm. What do you mean? You're acting like I'm torturing you, Mister Beelzebub. But I'm not! I sing to you, I feed you, and I even tell you all sorts of funny stories!"

She glances at his chained wrists, both of which are pinned above his head to the bed-boards.

"Oh, and the handcuffs are just so you don't run away again! I wouldn't want that SLUT, that WHORE, Ose, to steal you away! That SKANK is always doing whatever she wants, hmpf!"

Rosalia pauses.

"Ohhh, that's right! I almost forgot! Mister Beelzebub, did you know? Ose got killed! That's right, that stupid bitch got beheaded by the Wordsmith, and now she's dead! Not just dead, but twice-dead! SUPER dead! She's so dead, she'll never be able to slut it up with you again! Hahahaha!"

Laughing maniacally the whole time, Rosalia walks away from the bed to rifle around through her purse, while Beelzebub's heart drops into the soles of his feet.

"D...dead? Ose is dead?" Beelzebub asks.

"Mhm! She'll never bother you again, Mister Beelzebub! Now it's just you and me, ehehe! Isn't that great?!"

Rosalia continues gleefully celebrating Ose's death. As for Beelzebub, he feels a different emotion, deep within his heart.

Loss.

While he couldn't truly have fallen in love with Ose, the two of them did have a few romantic moments, and they did enjoy physical intertwinement. In the end, she used him as a tool against humanity and sent him to the frontlines. This caused Beelzebub to resent her.

But after losing his powers and falling into a near-catatonic stupor for well over a month, Beelzebub's negative feelings toward Ose have long since faded away.

He merely stares forward, at the cream-colored ceiling, while feelings of apathy mix with remorse.

After spending a frightful amount of time locked in this hellish basement with the woman who only uses him for her own emotional desires, Beelzebub has finally experienced a fraction of the pain others endured as a result of his actions.

It was his choice to treat others like dirt which caused Rosalia to resent him and ultimately capture and lock him away from the world.

It was his choice to fly into a rage and detonate his body which caused him to rebirth as a weak, powerless human.

And now, as he lays on that bed, feeling a sense of hollow despair, another emotion also appears.

Acceptance.

For the first time in his life, Beelzebub accepts his lack of power. He accepts that his choices have caused others great pain, and, through a cycle of Karma, have caused him to experience that same pain as well.

What if he had treated the humans, monsters, and demons of the world better?

What if he had acted more kindly toward those around him?

Perhaps now, he would not be in his current situation.

As Beelzebub thinks these thoughts, his eyes stray across the ceiling toward a bug crawling on the walls. This insect vaguely resembles a cockroach, but also appears to be a blue-colored variant native to Tarus II's ecosystem. It crawls around in slow, meandering circles, ultimately drawing his attention due to being the only moving, non-Rosalia thing in the room.

"Alright! I'm gonna take a shower!" Rosalia chirps. "I'll be back in a bit, Mister Beelzebub!"

He doesn't answer. After Rosalia stomps up the stairs and slams the basement hatch closed, Beelzebub simply stares at the blue cockroach on the wall, watching it for no particular reason beyond his boredom and lack of any greater purpose in life.

While Rosalia sings to herself in the shower, Beelzebub continues to lay motionless, a quiet swelling of emotion in his chest.

All my pain is my own fault. I'm trapped here because I deserve to be. Who would rescue me? And why would I deserve their help? I've made so many enemies... even the people who care about me only do so for selfish reasons. I have no friends. No comrades. Only people who hate me and wish for my death.

A single tear slides down Beelzebub's cheek.

I deserve to suffer.

A mile or two to the north of Rosalia's house, the newly crowned Duke of Locusts, Kiari, works excitedly to help her human friends. With another big apartment complex getting built just outside the Fortress of Retribution's confines, it's all-hands-on-deck to install electrical outlets, plumb water through the interior, and fill in the walls and ceiling with insulation before eventually closing them up.

Kiari's most significant ability after becoming a Duke is the ability to enlarge her bugs to ludicrous sizes. Despite always having been able to speak to and control insects, arachnids, and other such creepy-crawlies, her 'cute little pets' typically were too small and weak to help en-masse with certain types of tasks.

But now, thanks to her Duke-level power, she can ride to work atop a massive flying bee-like insect, something resembling a neon green wasp with a spotted body.

Kiari eagerly rushes into the building, followed by an army of foot-tall and ten-foot-long centipedes racing after her, forcing the humans around her to step aside.

"Alright pretty babies!" Kiari chirps cutely. "Get 'buzzy'! We have to finish building this thingy!"

Her army of crawlers divide and conquer, grabbing into tools with their dextrous mandibles to fill in walls, smooth out floors, and otherwise do any task a human might do. Despite Kiari's relative lack of intelligence regarding human technology, she has built enough houses and apartments to know how to follow building construction guides.

At the same time as Kiari's swarm gets to work, the humans outside stand aside, shivering at the sight of so many horrifyingly huge bugs swarming all over the structure.

Linda Hurent rubs her arms and shivers. "Ugh. I love Kiari to death... but damn, her bugs just make me feel so *icky* inside, you know?"

Another construction worker beside her, a succubus from the Hell of Lust, shrugs lightly. "Bugs. I don't think they're that scary when they're big. I hate when a swarm of tiny little ones crawl on me, but when they're bigger, they're easier targets. I can smash 'em if they get too close."

Linda shudders. "Yuck. Don't tell Kiari what I said, alright? She gets really sad if people say anything mean about her... pets."

"I didn't hear anything." The demoness answers with a shrug.

Before long, Kiari's army of giant centipedes swaps out for giant ants, which are even more efficient and dexterous at construction. This swarm rapidly finishes the job, causing all the nearby bystanders to cheer and clap.

"Wow! Way to go, Kiari!"

"So fast! She can do the final tasks in a fraction of the time! That means all the rest of us get our Merit Tokens that much faster!"

"Kiari is so pretty! I love her full, black hair!"

That last comment comes from a random incubus in the audience, though nobody faults him for his words. He is, after all, a literal sex demon.

After Kiari finishes, she shrinks her bugs down and disperses them, sending them off into the woods to leave the nearly-finished building clean and empty for the inspection

crews.

Kiari flies down to the waiting crowd of people atop her giant bumblebee. When she lands, she shrinks it and lets it sit on her shoulder, while cheerfully walking over to Corporal Hurent and waving.

"Heyyy Linda! Sorry to swoop in and take over all the finishing stuff!"

The Corporal waves her hand flippantly. "It's totally fine, Kiari. Thanks for all your hard work!"

She and Kiari go in for a deep hug. After Kiari hugs Linda, she also hugs some of the other people nearby, especially all the demons. When the incubus from before gives her a wink, she winks back.

"I'll have to rest a while to restore my mana." Kiari says, while reaching behind her head to pin her hair into a ponytail. "This is already my third apartment complex today."

"We estimated two days to finish the work without you." Linda says. "So, you cut our completion time down to a fraction of the original estimation. Thanks for that. Are you excited to try out the new Power Gloves? I'll start distributing them to the general public next week!"

Kiari shrugs. "Ehh, I don't know, Linda. I'm not really interested in playing around with human stuff. I just want to help all my friends get into houses as quick as possible. You should see how many mothers and fathers have to sleep in tents with their children. It's really sad..."

The succubus beside Linda taps her chin. "What about the demons without homes?"

"We'll survive!" Kiari says without hesitation. "We demons are tough as heck. We don't need to eat or drink. We pretty much don't even have to sleep, either. We have to make sure we stand up for our cute little human friends and help them out!"

"You're such a kind-hearted girl," Linda praises. "Sometimes I forget you're... how old?"

"Seventeen thousand years." Kiari says, not even batting an eye.

"Right..." Linda coughs. "Seventeen... thousand... good grief, I hope I look as good as you at that age!"

The three ladies laugh in response. Not long after, Kiari waves goodbye. She heads south again, riding atop her bumblebee to get back to the city center of the Fortress of Retribution.

"Hmm... after spending all my mana on work, I'm kinda tired..." Kiari grumbles to herself. "Maybe I should stop by Yamir's restaurant to get some grub! ...Hmm?"

Kiari pauses her flight. She receives a telepathic message from her bugs in the region, all part of their daily reports if they find or discover anything useful. As a secret spy for the Wordsmith, Kiari's true goal is to try and see if she can uncover the identities of any Changelings, but so far, they have either been extremely careful, or don't even exist.

"What's this? You say there's an old man chained up in a basement?" Kiari cries out. "Oh my gosh! That's awful! Who would do such a thing?! That poor fellow!"

Her heart bleeds at the thought of a precious human friend suffering under the boot of some malicious person. Kiari's heart quickly bubbles with anger as she directs her attention to a cottage hidden in some dense shrubbery underneath the plateau outcropping belonging to Tarus II's capitol city.

"Wait a minute. I recognize that house. Isn't that... isn't that where Rosalia lives?"

As a nurse working directly under Belial, Rosalia has garnered a minor amount of renown among the many humans, monsters, and demons living and working on Tarus II. It doesn't take Kiari's Duke-level mind more than a second to recall that Rosalia lives out in this area.

"How could Rosalia chain an old man to a bed, though? She's such a nice person. There must be a mistake!"

Kiari lands a short distance from the house. She hides in the shrubbery and sends in a few bugs to scout the perimeter. Before long, one of her flying pets locates an open window and flies inside.

Using a direct link to that bug, Kiari scouts the house's interior. She discovers a hatch in the floor, one which leads down into the basement, but which is also covered with a rug.

"How strange... how very strange..." Kiari mumbles. "I can't imagine Rosalia doing something like this. Do I have the wrong house? No... there's someone showering right now. It's her! But why would she... why would she..."

Not knowing who the old man is, Kiari can only hesitantly wonder if, perhaps, Rosalia maybe has stranger 'tastes' than the average demoness. After all, plenty of succubi and incubi engage in 'fun play' using handcuffs and other such devices.

"I shouldn't jump to conclusions..." Kiari mutters. "Maybe they're just being *weird* together. It's not my place to judge others... but just to be sure, I should try and ask that old man if he needs any help."

After making her decision, Kiari hesitates. Not wanting to barge in and cause any misunderstandings, she instead opts to move stealthily and stay hidden. She moves to a hidden spot more than a mile away, surveying the cottage with her bugs. After a while, Rosalia exits the shower. She heads into the basement and talks to the old man, but Kiari's bugs lack effective ways to listen in on conversations, and as such, she can only take haphazard guesses as to the contents of their discussion.

However, Kiari can peer through the eyes of her bugs. In doing so, she picks up plenty of contextual clues about Rosalia and the old man's relationship.

"...She seems to have a fondness for him, but his eyes are empty, despondent. He definitely looks like a prisoner she's holding in secret. Perhaps she doesn't want him to escape? But why do this sort of thing to a random old man? I just don't understand..."

Kiari doesn't recognize Beelzebub's face, especially without his demonic horns and skin coloration, to say nothing of his aged appearance, looking almost fifty years old. He appears very different from the proud Duke who detonated his body above the skies of Tarus II.

An entire night passes. Rosalia goes to sleep, then wakes up, eats her food, and leaves with a skip in her step. She heads back to the hospital district to return to work, finally leaving the house unattended.

Once Rosalia leaves, Kiari makes her move.

She steals into the house, opens the basement hatch, and climbs down inside. Upon stepping downstairs, she finally comes face-to-face with the poor old man chained to the bed.

For his part, Beelzebub quickly recognizes that Kiari is not Rosalia. His heart skips a beat when he sees an unfamiliar Duke creeping into the basement. Uncertain of her

motivations, his stomach clenches, but he decides any fate would be better than his current one.

"Help... help me..." Beelzebub coughs. "Please... great Duke... please help me..."

Kiari's heart also skips a beat.

"Old man! Are you okay? Is Rosalia holding you prisoner down here?"

Still unsure of what Kiari's motivations are, Beelzebub slowly nods his head.

"Yes... I... I was kidnapped... that woman chained me here... but who are you? Why are you...?"

"I'm Kiari, the Duke of Locusts!" Kiari chirps. She walks over to the side of the bed and frowns when she sees the deep red marks on Beelzebub's wrists, a sign that the handcuffs haven't been removed even once, potentially leading to gangrene in the future. "Um. And you are...?"

Faced with the question of his identity, Beelzebub tenses up.

Lying would be an easy path. He quickly recognizes a youthful naivete in Kiari's intentions. As a lofty Duke, she could have easily barged in and shoved Rosalia aside, yet she carefully considered the situation and made moves to try and not offend anyone.

If he wanted to, he could easily falsify his name. He could call himself 'Robert' or some other generic human name. No doubt, Kiari would believe him.

It becomes immediately apparent to Beelzebub that lying would be the safest way out of his predicament.

Yet... when the moment comes, he pauses.

The former Duke of Inferno gazes up at the woman seconds from freeing him.

For the first time in his life, he feels a vague sense of... guilt.

Yes, guilt.

Always, he has lied, bragged, and insulted others. His haughty attitude led to the collapse of his pride and the loss of his powers.

In the end, it was his dishonesty that caused his ruin.

During these brief moments of hesitation, Beelzebub even recalls the words he exchanged with his Creator.

"My name..." Beelzebub croaks, pausing just a moment longer.

"It's... it's Beelzebub."

"I am Beelzebub. The sinner who hurt this world."

Part 368: Beelzebub's Guilt

"I am Beelzebub. The sinner who hurt this world."

After speaking these words, the former Duke of Inferno falls silent and gazes at Kiari meaningfully, waiting for her reaction.

However, aside from a brief pause, the Duke of Locusts doesn't give Beelzebub's reply much more than a slightly awkward glance.

"Ah... *hahaha*. Oh, geez. This poor old guy..." Kiari mutters to herself, reaching for Beelzebub's handcuffs. She pinches her fingers and easily shatters the steel bindings, breaking them with her Duke-level strength. "Just what the heck has Rosalia been telling him?"

Beelzebub blinks. "You don't believe me? I am Beelzebub. The Duke of Inferno."

Kiari forces a smile. "Right! Yes, of course I believe you, grandpa! You're Beelzebub, totally! Now come here, ease on up... your body is so frail!"

She quickly but gently lowers Beelzebub's arms, making him groan in pain due to his stagnant blood flow and the rapid movement of long-dormant muscles. He grimaces painfully while she bends his arm around, trying to restore a small amount of blood flow.

"Dammit, woman! I'm- aargh! I'm not lying! I am Beelzebub! I'm not a human! I've just lost my powers and... and changed my appearance, too!"

"Of course, of course." Kiari says, clearly not believing a word this strange old man has said since her arrival. Inwardly, she double-checks his appearance again, then shakes her head. *This poor fellow! I can't believe Rosalia has been holding him down here and brainwashing him! Is she obsessed with Beelzebub or something? Maybe he was her demonic idol? It's so weird she would treat a random human like this!*

No matter how much Beelzebub protests and tries to explain his 'evidence,' Kiari just nods along, trying to humor his 'dementia' or his 'brainwashed thoughts.' She clearly doesn't put any stock into his words, but keeps moving quickly to try and get him out of the basement before Rosalia returns.

Kiari brings along Beelzebub's handcuffs. Once she takes him outside and mounts him on her flying bumblebee, she disposes of the cuffs somewhere secret, leaving behind no

evidence for Rosalia to uncover Beelzebub's escape methods.

"Come along with me, old man." Kiari says, seating Beelzebub in front of her. His arms hang uselessly at his sides, without a speck of sensation in them, like dead appendages. "I'll take you back to my house. It's a bit of a flight from here, perhaps 5 miles, on the west side of the Fortress of Retribution. Can you tell me how long Rosalia had you captive?"

As her bumblebee flies through the air, Kiari questions Beelzebub several times about his captivity, trying to uncover his 'true identity,' but surprisingly, all his timelines line up with around the same time as when the 'actual Beelzebub' detonated his body and might have reappeared.

Whenever he answers Kiari's questions, she pauses for a moment, wondering if, perhaps, this strange old man is actually Beelzebub. Might his story be true?

But always, she shakes her head.

Clearly, he's just a normal old man. Not only does he not have horns, but his skin is pale white, and his ears are human-shaped. The only logical truth must be that Rosalia kidnapped a random old man shortly after Stormbringer and put him in her dungeon, trying to brainwash him into accepting a false identity.

Kiari continuously shakes her head, sighing as they race toward her house.

What a sad story! I can't believe the sweet, lovable Rosalia would have such a hideous side! I'll need to gather evidence, then approach the Wordsmith to punish her! Hmm... but maybe I shouldn't bug him about a matter this minor. I'll just monitor her with my bugs to see what she does next!

Resolving herself to take care of Rosalia's situation 'quietly,' Kiari soon arrives at a small garden not far from the western side of the Fortress of Retribution. Like Rosalia's isolated cottage, a small log cabin resides in this place, several hundred yards from other buildings. This residence is one of the few places that survived Beelzebub's detonation, and its existence is slightly special compared to all the newly built dwellings. As such, its owner obtained a small, private property for themselves where others cannot live.

Kiari lands at the edge of the garden and glances around, checking to see if anyone witnessed her arrival. Luckily, they didn't. She helps Beelzebub off her bumblebee, then leads him toward her cabin.

"Honey!" Kiari lightly shouts. "I'm back! And I brought... a friend!"

After a few moments, the door to the log cabin opens, and a human male steps out. "Mmm? You've returned? I wasn't expecting you for a couple hours, sweetheart."

This man wears a set of folded white robes, with a large red sash thrown over his shoulders. His thick black hair and well-trimmed beard give him an earnest, scholarly appearance.

As for his identity, he turns out to be none other than Saul, King Solomon's last living blood relative. As the nephew of the Knowledge-Seeker, Saul has long grown tired of ostentatious displays of wealth, and instead prefers to keep to himself, living away from other people.

Saul walks over to Kiari and pulls her in for a gentle kiss. Then, he turns to look Beelzebub up and down. Immediately, he spots the inflammation on Beelzebub's wrist, his haggard appearance, and his sickly-looking skin.

"Good heavens! Is this old man alright?"

"He could use some food and rest." Kiari says, a pang of sympathy in her voice. "Let's pull out the guest futon for him, honey. I'll explain the situation to you once we're inside, away from prying eyes."

Saul notices a faint bit of fierceness in his girlfriend's eyes. "Mmm. Alright, we'll do it that way, then."

* * *

A half-hour later, Saul and Kiari sit together on their couch, while Beelzebub flops back in a surprisingly comfortable leather loafing chair. Kiari details the situation to her husband. He frowns, examines Beelzebub more carefully than before, but ultimately lightens his expression and chuckles.

"Haha... goodness. Such a dark tale! To think one of the hospital's assistants would be performing such deeds in secret. And this old man claims to be Beelzebub?"

"He does." Kiari says, glancing at Beelzebub. "But as you can see, he's clearly a human. Does he look anything like Beelzebub to you?"

"I wouldn't know." Saul says, shrugging. "I never saw the fellow. But, come now, the story makes no sense. Clearly, Rosalia has deluded this poor man into believing her crazy web of lies. We cannot allow this farce to continue. Let's just call him... Robert. We'll keep him here for now, and you can watch him until he recovers from his injuries. Considering

his appearance, he could use a visit to the Bodily Rejuvenation Depot. I'll put up the Merit Tokens so he can get his youth back. Then, we can take legal action against Rosalia."

"Legal action?" Kiari asks, batting her eyes. "What's that?"

Saul chuckles softly, then kisses his girlfriend's cheek. "Sorry, love. Sometimes I forget you're not familiar with all these silly human rituals. Miss Phoebe set up a war-crime prosecution department where anyone responsible for misdeeds during Stormbringer can be taken, detained, and ultimately punished. As for what punishment they'll receive, it can range anywhere from temporary indentured servitude to... death! I heard the Hidden Emperors have already rounded up more than fifty thousand participants of the Stormbringer Attack to receive their punishment."

Kiari's expression turns cold. "Good. Those monsters killed far too many of our friends. My brood-sister and I came to Tarus II together, but she died during Stormbringer. I don't even know if Mephisto has her soul or not, or if he revived her as one of his undead... tsk. Anyone involved with Stormbringer should be punished until they beg for mercy!"

Beelzebub lays back in his chair with his eyes closed. Fatigue wracks his mind, but still, he listens to Kiari and Saul's exchange. The raw emotions in his savior's voice cause a certain, inexplicable pain to pierce his stomach.

Unknowingly, Beelzebub's faint feelings of guilt deepen in that moment.

But, even so, he says nothing, allowing them to talk as they wish.

"Robert. Robert, are you awake?" Saul asks.

Beelzebub groans. He opens his eyes and tilts his head forward. "Nnn. Are you speaking to me?"

"Yes, we've decided to call you Robert for now." Saul explains. "That Beelzebub nonsense is clearly something Rosalia told you, but I'd rather not risk your life on hoping nobody believes it. Believe me, not one person on Tarus II likes Beelzebub, and plenty of people would rip that worthless piece of trash a new cavity if they thought he survived Stormbringer. So, do yourself a favor, and just go by 'Robert.' You don't want some dull-headed Minotaur to believe you and start tearing your arms off, do you?"

Beelzebub frowns. "That is my name, though. I am Beelzebub. I won't run from the truth any longer."

Saul stares at the beaten old man with a look of empathy. He sighs and shakes his head.

"Aiya... this fellow. Maybe I can talk to one of my friends about him. We must have a psychiatrist available somewhere in the city. It seems the conditioning runs deep."

Kiari weakly smiles at Beelzebub. "Robert, please. You shouldn't keep calling yourself... that name. You know, a lot of good people died because of Beelzebub. No matter what Rosalia told you, you have to fight those thoughts. Do you really want people to think you're an awful, vicious monster who kills children and the elderly? Because if anyone ever believes you, they'll murder you without hesitation."

Facing Kiari's kindly words, Beelzebub hesitates. He stares into her eyes for a few moments, then lowers his gaze.

"Well... alright. Robert. My name is... Robert."

"Yes, yes, good!" Kiari laughs, clapping her hands. "It's such a nice name, too. Honey, why don't you make us some supper? It's a little early to eat, but I'm sure Robert is absolutely starving!"

Beelzebub's stomach growls, making him wince.

"I... I suppose I could stand to eat something. Thank you, miss... Kiari."

Saul smiles kindly at Beelzebub. He gives his girlfriend another loving kiss, then gets up and heads into the kitchen.

After he leaves, Kiari stares at his back dreamily.

"Mmm. Saul and I haven't been together long." Kiari says, absentmindedly. "When I first joined the human colonies a few years ago, I met Saul while wandering around the plateau. Him and I chatted a bit, and I thought he was rather handsome for a human, but I still had a lot of hostile feelings toward 'fleshbags.' Less so than other demons, but they were still there. Then I met Miss Belial over in the hospital district. Ah, but she calls herself Samantha. Make sure you remember that if you meet her, Robert. Anyway, then I met Samantha, and she started introducing me to some of her friends."

Kiari explains some of her early days spent among the humans, while Beelzebub lays back and listens, saying nothing. His thoughts wander here and there, with no particular rhyme or rhythm.

"...And then Stormbringer started. I was only a Lord at the time, and my bugs weren't very helpful in combat. So instead, I used them to help ferry wounded people off the frontlines. After that wretched Beelzebub blew himself up, he killed more than a million people, and I spent the next several days frantically trying to dig bodies out of the rubble with my bugs. There were several times when I broke down crying. I felt so ashamed, as a demon, because of Beelzebub's actions. I thought for sure that his detonation would make everyone hate me, and in truth, I even began to hate myself."

Kiari sighs.

"There were even times when I... I thought I didn't deserve to live anymore. I thought all demons should just go extinct. Plenty of people even said as much, only saying that I was 'one of the good ones' when I was within earshot. Even so, I felt like they were just trying not to hurt my feelings."

"Maybe they thought... that you would attack them too." Beelzebub mutters. "Like Beelzebub did."

Kiari nods, while gazing through the window to look outside. "Yes. I did feel that way. But then I saw Saul again, and for the first time, he showed me true compassion. We talked. We laughed. He told me my feelings were valid, but that he didn't look at me as a faceless demon. He believed that all individuals could make a choice. What Beelzebub did was evil, but his actions didn't reflect on me. As long as I lived a good, honest life, I could hold my chin high. And that was when I fell head over heels for him."

The moment she finishes her sentence, Kiari's face flushes cutely. "Erm. Don't tell him I said that! He probably knows, but I can't just admit I have such silly, childish thoughts. I'm supposed to be thousands of years older than Saul, but I always feel like he's much wiser than me."

Beelzebub nods slowly. "Saul does seem to have a... broad-minded view of the world."

After a few moments of quiet, Beelzebub glances at Kiari.

"...You said you were a Lord during the Stormbringer War? But you're clearly a Duke now. How did that happen? Hasn't it only been a few weeks?"

It takes Kiari a few moments to register Beelzebub's question. Lost in her loving thoughts regarding Saul, she eventually pulls herself back to the conversation and nods. "Mhm. After Jason Hiro killed Ose and subdued all the Hidden Emperors, he made them

sign a peace treaty. Now, all of the demons are actively working together with him to rebuild human society. He's placed several 'special structures' down, one of which is called the Belial Booster. It can allow demons to rapidly evolve through the ranks! As such, after a couple of sessions, I was able to transform from a Lord to a Duke."

In just a few short sentences, Kiari hits Beelzebub with multiple bombshells, making him blink repeatedly while his jaw hangs ajar.

Jason subdued all the Hidden Emperors? He united all the Hells in a peace treaty? And now there exists a device that can elevate demons through the ranks?

It doesn't take much for Beelzebub to accept these statements as fact. After all, Jason did meet up with Beelzebub and Ose in secret. There, he informed them he could make a device capable of replacing souls with raw mana.

At the time, Beelzebub was very interested in this device. After the meeting, Ose told him the Wordsmith was lying and planted doubts in his mind.

The former Duke of Inferno lowers his eyes to the floor, a faint feeling of dismay in his heart.

...So it was true. The Wordsmith could do as he claimed, and it ended up being Ose who lied to me.

Despite all his quandaries, Beelzebub has always fancied himself something of a revolutionary. Having suffered the misery of several thousand years living as an imp, he ultimately managed to raise himself to the rank of Lord with Master Agares' help. Even so, he always thought demon society was rotten and crooked. He wanted to upend the old order and give all demons a shot at equality, allowing them to rise more quickly through the ranks without being suppressed by the old powers.

Beelzebub chuckles wryly. "He really did it after all..."

"Hmm?" Kiari asks. "What was that?"

The pale old man blinks twice, then shakes his head. "Oh. It's nothing. Don't mind me. Just some... old memories."

Not long after, Saul invites both of them to the dinner table. Kiari helps him to his chair, but when he arrives, Beelzebub finds that he still can't move his arms.

"Oh, don't worry about that." Kiari says. "Here, I'll help you eat, Robert. Tomorrow, I'll take you to the hospital district so we can get your arms fixed."

Beelzebub shivers. "No! I can't go there! I can't."

After an awkward pause, Kiari realizes what she said. "Ah, right. Rosalia works there. Hmm... but your arms are in bad condition. I'll ask Samantha if she can come see you."

Beelzebub stares at Kiari for several long seconds.

Inside his head, he thinks to himself, *Kiari and Saul never met me when I was a Duke, but Belial did. She'll definitely recognize me. I won't escape judgment then.*

However, contrary to his former self, this thought... doesn't bother Beelzebub as much as it probably should.

...Maybe that's for the better. The war is over. Demonkind got its revolution. There was a peace treaty instated. I don't have my powers anymore... so I'm a useless shell of a demon. I might as well... accept my fate.

While Kiari moves her chair to sit beside Beelzebub, his thoughts continue to wander for a moment.

"Mmm. If Samantha can come here to heal me, that would be best. We should keep this a private matter. It'll be less... messy... that way."

"Don't worry!" Kiari says, as if reading Beelzebub's mind. "I won't tell her anything about you and Rosalia. I still need to gather evidence, after all. Just make sure you don't tell her any of that nonsense about you being Beelzebub. You don't understand how much she HATES Beelzebub. She used to be such a kind woman, and would never hurt anyone, but during the war, she snapped and went berserk. Samantha killed tens of thousands of her fellow demons, ripping them to pieces! It was really brutal and scary, and it made everyone feel terrible, just watching her. Afterward, she had to bury her emotions because she was so busy healing injured and irradiated people."

"Just tragic all-around." Saul adds, while taking a bite of his rice and chicken soup. "Few people suffered as much trauma as Samantha. Well, except for maybe the Wordsmith."

Beelzebub frowns. "What do you mean?"

While Kiari dips a spoon into Beelzebub's soup in preparation to feed him, Saul sighs heavily. He shakes his head and pauses his eating, as if sick to his stomach.

"Well, you see... Beelzebub's detonation... during that event, Jason tried to protect everyone. He set up a huge force-field to contain the blast. But in the moments before the

explosion, his little girl showed up and... tsk."

Kiari's expression grows solemn.

"...Poor little Daisy. Everyone loved her so much. She used to run around in the hospital, cheering up the sick soldiers. But now she's... she's dead."

"She wasn't just the Wordsmith's daughter." Saul mutters. "She was *everyone's* daughter. We all loved her. His loss was our loss, too."

Beelzebub nods. He swallows heavily, while lowering his eyes.

"I... I see."

Kiari regains her clarity of mind. She dips a spoon in Beelzebub's soup, then lifts it to his mouth.

"Well, never mind all that. Let's try and keep the dreary talk down at the dinner table. Robert, say 'ahh!'"

Beelzebub looks at the spoon, a heavy feeling in his heart.

"...ahh."

Part 369: His True Identity

On the western side of the Fortress of Retribution's plateau, a brand new hospital, reconstructed from the ground-up after the attack by Yama during Stormbringer, glimmers like a breath of fresh air. While it was once a fairly simple and utilitarian square brick structure in the past, now it is a heavily reinforced crystalline building with plenty of greenery built into it to make it feel warm, cheerful, and refreshing.

With anti-Shade defenses built into its innate structure, the Healing Center erases the old, ugly utilitarian aesthetic of the former Hero City to make way for something resembling a greenhouse, or an arboretum. Sunlight shines through the ceiling to stimulate thousands of plants growing along the hospital's walls, adding plenty of color to the place. Flower buds bloom year-round, and plenty of people come and sit inside the hospital to meditate or engage with others.

Despite the fact that human society has quickly reached a high level of safety and peace, the hospital's staff still have plenty of work to do when it comes to healing those who are sick and injured. Infrequent construction accidents can sometimes cause people's limbs to get crushed, broken, or otherwise mutilated, but with the best healer in the Seven Hells available, these wounds typically don't prove troublesome.

Additionally, many people end up overtaxing their bones and internal organs through the usage of Body Boosters. Besides Belial herself, plenty of hospital staff, including Doctor Fathy and Rosalia, learn how to treat these cases by venting away the excess mana and healing the injured.

Most surprisingly, thanks to the swift empowerment of demons through the Belial Booster, a few new demons, primarily from the Hell of Lust, gain healing abilities only a bit inferior to those possessed by Belial herself! Two incubi and one other succubi join the hospital, all of them extremely talented at healing, but each with their own specialties.

For the first time in well over 100,000 years, a demon skilled at healing brain injuries appears, making up for Belial's weakness. This fellow, an incubi going by the name of Leeroy, the Duke of Restoration, possesses the power to return people's lost memories, repair damage caused by dementia, and otherwise alleviate pain that would otherwise traumatize them while they wait for a doctor specialized in handling other injuries.

Leeroy quickly becomes popular at the Healing Center, not only due to his strong healing abilities, but his gentle and kind bedside manner. The thin, waifish fellow also possesses a unique trait in that he is not an ordinary demon, but a Satyr! As a member of a rare demonic sub-species with greyish skin, blue eyes, and horns which jut six inches out of his head and spiral downward, he draws plenty of glances from men and women alike. His good looks only make him that much more appealing to all his patients.

"Doctor Leeroy," Says one of his assistants, a Demon Lord who recently joined the hospital. "We have a man who was rushed in. A stray brick fell from three stories up and struck his hard-hat. It broke through the metal and knocked him unconscious."

Doctor Leeroy wears a black labcoat, as do the other high-ranking officials of the hospital, including Belial, while their assistants wear white. His slender nose, thin body, and longer-than-usual fingers give him the appearance of a dainty, scholar-like demon boy.

"Thank you, Shelley. I'll go and see him right away."

Leeroy glides through the Healing Center's halls, casually eying the pretty flowers growing on the walls. A small army of groundskeepers maintain the shrubbery, trimming their leaves, watering them, and otherwise ensuring they don't grow into places they shouldn't.

He arrives inside a trauma room where he finds Emperor Belial standing beside a human man as he lays on a hospital bed. No obvious wounds appear on his body, not even his head, thanks to Belial's quick work.

"Leeroy." Belial says with a nod. "He had some internal bleeding which I managed to stop, but approximately forty percent of his neurons in these three areas have suffered extensive damage."

She gestures to an X-ray of the man's skull.

"Here, here, and here. It's simple blunt force trauma. And if you look at the base of his skull, you can see his head suffered whiplash from the impact, which injured..."

She quickly explains the situation to Leeroy, who smiles and nods.

"I see. This should be a simple matter to solve. I'll take it from here, Doctor Samantha."

Not long after, Leeroy directs his healing energy into the man's skull and brain. It takes him much more time, over two hours in total, to repair all the damage and ensure no long-term effects. Unlike bodily injuries, which Belial can restore fairly quickly, brain injuries are extremely complex and not even Leeroy can instantly solve them with a wave of his hand.

Once he finishes, Belial comes back into the room. She and Leeroy help the man up, and he spends several minutes thanking them profusely for saving his life. As a newly arrived refugee from Hell, the man has never encountered such amazing things as the human-built technology and infrastructure on Tarus II. To him, the world is even more magical than actual magic performed by demons.

"Thank you, thank you, Miss Samantha!" The man exclaims. "You truly saved my hiney! This former slave is in your debt!"

"Don't thank me," Belial laughs. "I only took care of some minor flesh and bone trauma. It was Leeroy here who truly brought you back to the world of the living!"

The man quickly thanks Leeroy too. Some time later, he leaves, and Samantha and Leeroy find themselves in a rare lull without any patients to attend.

"Great work." Belial says, gently resting her hand on Leeroy's shoulder. "I'm always amazed at how skillfully you manage to heal people. When it comes to a brain, you are truly the master, and I'm not even an apprentice."

"Haha, thank you, Samantha." Leeroy says. "But I think your all-encompassing healing is even better. I am truly envious that you only have one weakness when it comes to patching people up. If it's not brain-related, I'm useless!"

After the two of them finish chatting, Leeroy departs to hang out in the lobby. As for Belial, she heads to the restroom to clean up her face. She turns on the sink and washes away her sweat and grime with warm water, continuously marveling at the human invention which brings water from a distant location to the hospital.

While a simple matter for most humans to understand, the complex systems of gravity, water pressure, and other such things seem like alien technology to demons. In all the Hells, only a few human-built residences on Hell Harbor hold any sort of indoor plumbing. Were it not for people like Benjamin Brown possessing knowledge of Old Humanity's ways, the demons would have entirely lost that art a hundred thousand years ago, when Earth fell.

After Belial finishes freshening up, she turns to leave the bathroom, only to pause in her tracks when she sees someone at the doorway, awkwardly standing and staring at her.

"Mmm? Kiari! How are you?"

The Duke of Locusts shuffles on her feet and smiles at Belial, clearly not wanting to bug her, or at least, that's how it first seems.

"Hey, Samantha. I don't want to be a bother, but um... I picked up an old man recently and... his situation is a little... *sensitive*. I was wondering if you could come with me to my place? His arms have really bad injuries, and I need your help to fix them."

"You can't bring him here?" Belial asks.

"I can... but I shouldn't." Kiari says. "You'll understand when you see him."

Seeing the strange look on Kiari's face, Belial raises an eyebrow, but doesn't retort.

"Well, alright. I shouldn't have any patients for an hour or two since all the construction workers are going on break. Let's head to your place. I haven't talked to Saul since before Stormbringer."

Belial starts to walk to the door, but before she can reach it, Kiari blushes.

"Um, eh, can you change our appearances before we go?"

"Huh?" Belial says. "Change our... are you hiding something from someone, Kiari?"

"Just... please, Sammy?" Kiari says, not answering the Emperor of Passion's question.

After a moment, Belial sighs. "Fine, fine. You're sure acting strange, though."

Belial changes her appearance and dampens her Emperor aura. At the same time, she casts a bit of illusion magic on Kiari. The two of them turn into random male demons and stroll out the front door, with no bystanders bothering to pay attention to them.

These days, even Phoebe cannot possibly remember the names and faces of all the humans on Tarus II, let alone the demons, monsters, and other sorts. Most people are grossly inferior to her in the facial recognition department, too.

After Belial and Kiari leave the hospital behind them, the higher-ranking of the two glances at her friend doubtfully.

"So. What's with all the secrecy? This isn't like you."

Kiari laughs awkwardly. "Ahaha... um, it's complicated. You know Rosalia?"

"Of course. She was one of the first demons to step foot on Tarus II." Belial says. "She had a bit of an attitude at first, but she's improved a lot in the past few months. Why?"

"Well... it's like this."

Saul's home is surprisingly close to the Healing Center. With both places being on the western side of the Fortress of Retribution, all the two women need to do is drop off the plateau and walk half a mile to Saul's log cabin.

As they walk, Kiari explains her uncovering of Beelzebub to Belial. However, she only states that Rosalia was holding an old man in her basement, not anything to do with Beelzebub's claimed identity. Not only does she not believe he's even Beelzebub in the first place, but she also wants to see Belial's reaction to 'Robert' without priming her to look for similarities to the former Duke of Inferno.

"That's... that's so strange!" Belial exclaims, as they near Saul and Kiari's cabin. "You wouldn't expect Rosalia to capture some random old man. What kind of psycho is she?! Is that why you wanted to hide your identity? Were you afraid of her?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of her, since she's only a Grunt..." Kiari says, pausing to shift her eyebrows. "It's more that, ahh... I'm not sure about something. Before you jump down Rosalia's throat, just know the situation might be a little complicated. I'm hoping your eyes prove my fears wrong!"

Once again, Belial stares at Kiari with confusion in her gaze. "You are acting so odd today."

"Ahaha... I have my reasons." Kiari mumbles. "You'll understand soon."

The Duke of Locusts leads her fellow Emperor up to the cabin's front door. Upon seeing his girlfriend outside, Saul opens the door and smiles. "Honey, you're back already. And hello, Samantha!"

"Hi, Saul. Long time, no see." Belial says, reaching over to give him a light hug. "Where's the patient?"

"Right this way." Saul says, leading Belial into his living room.

They step into the somewhat dark room, where only the midday sunlight illuminates the interior. Unlike all the fancy apartments and other complexes being built around the city, Saul's log cabin is relatively old fashioned, with no electricity, only running water. At

night, he usually illuminates the interior by lighting a fire in his fireplace, or through hanging lanterns.

Even so, and even if it were pitch-black in the dead of night, Belial's demonic vision would prove astoundingly perceptive. She easily makes out the figure of a frail, haggard-looking old man. Visible marks on his wrists give her an indication of how Rosalia handcuffed him in her basement. At the same time, Belial also pays attention to his malnourished body. He looks ancient, in human terms. Perhaps seventy or eighty years old.

"This is... Robert." Kiari says, glancing at Belial from the corner of her eye. She keeps watch for the succubus's reaction, waiting to see if she notices anything. "We're hoping you can fix up his arms. Right now, he can't move them at all."

"Sure, sure." Belial says, sitting down in a chair just two feet in front of the man. She casually examines him, but surprisingly, she doesn't have even a faint impression of this random old man. While Belial might not be the best at remembering people's names or faces, to lack even a single impression of someone leaves her at a loss.

"So, Robert?" She asks, reaching out to take hold of his arm. "How are you feeling, besides the arm thing? Are you hurting anywhere else in your body?"

As Belial talks, she periodically glances at her patient's face. For some reason, the more she looks at him, the more she does, in fact, get a faint sense of recognition from him. However, that sensation is so muted that she finds herself dismissing the thought as being a figment of her imagination.

Beelzebub, for his part, quietly stares at the Emperor of Passion. Several strange feelings well up in his chest. Remembering the times Belial absolutely thrashed him and beat his ass, the fact she can look at him with such tender, loving eyes makes him feel even more distant and ambivalent toward his past.

"No." Beelzebub says, his voice quiet. "No pain anywhere else. Not physically, anyway."

When Beelzebub speaks, Belial's expression changes. Her previously faint glimmer of recognition deepens, ever so slightly.

Hm? This voice. It's so... familiar. Where have I heard it before?

She continues to hold Beelzebub's palm, but stops short of injecting her mana into his injuries. She lifts her eyes to stare at his face even more deeply, but his wrinkled, sagging skin makes his identity difficult to place.

"Say..." Belial mutters. "Do I... know you?"

Behind Belial, Kiari's heart skips a beat. She glances between Belial and Beelzebub, trying to remain calm, but Belial's question causes her stomach to drop into her shoes.

Beelzebub gazes at Belial, unafraid.

"I don't know. Do you?"

The more he speaks, the more that strange, eerie feeling grabs hold of Belial's heart. She turns to look at Kiari, only to see a look of worry on the Duke of Locust's face.

"...Kiari?" Belial asks.

However, Kiari says nothing. She merely stares at Belial with determination, waiting to see if she will say those words that Kiari doesn't want to hear.

Not only Kiari, but even Saul appears unwell. His skin pales when he sees Belial recognizing this old man.

Could it be?

Was the old man telling the truth?

Is he actually, somehow... Beelzebub?!

Several seconds pass. Beelzebub watches Belial's expression shift repeatedly, along with the other two in the room. He chuckles wryly in his heart, then slowly shakes his head.

"Former Second Emperor." Beelzebub mutters. "I'm hurt. To think you still haven't fully figured out who I am. Well, let me clear up your doubts. I am exactly who you think I am."

Every word that Beelzebub utters drills into Belial's ears, making her heart rate increase dramatically.

"No... it... it can't be..." She whispers, squinting to look at him even more carefully.

All at once, a name pops into Belial's head. Her eyes widen as she mentally traces the contours of Beelzebub's face. She transposes Beelzebub's youthful self onto this old man, and sucks in a deep breath.

"You're...!"

"That's right." He says, finally chuckling out loud, his laughter lacking any humor. "I am Beelzebub. No longer a demon. Just a weak, useless old man. A human."

Belial quickly retracts her grip on Beelzebub's wrist. She recoils from him, turning to look at Kiari and Saul with horror in her eyes.

"He's Beelzebub!" Belial exclaims. "You knew this?!"

Kiari's knees start to shake. She opens her mouth to speak, but words fail to come out.

"He told us his identity." Saul states, his gaze cold. "But the story was too outlandish. We didn't believe him. We brought you here, hoping you would show us the truth. And now... you have."

All of Saul's previous kindness to Beelzebub, his trusting words of comfort, come roaring back to slap him in the face. As he gazes at the kindly old 'Robert' he was chatting with amicably not even twenty minutes before, Saul's stomach churns in a sickly manner, making him want to vomit.

"Beelzebub!" Samantha roars, swiveling to look at the former Duke of Inferno with hatred that could melt steel. "So you were alive after all! You murdering piece of shit! You sick, disgusting excuse for a demon!!"

Beelzebub faces Belial calmly. He closes his eyes and bows his head slightly.

"Mmm. Yes. You're exactly right. I survived, and by a twist of fate, the Creator put me in a human body. He ripped away my powers and left me a hollow shell. So, go ahead. Kill me. It's what I deserve, and I've made my peace."

Belial jumps up from her seat. With a casual flick of the wrist, she hurls it backward, where it nearly blasts through the cabin's wall into the outdoors. Her chest heaves dramatically as new, unbridled waves of rage surge in her mind, making her want to rip Beelzebub to pieces!

"You think you can die so easily?!" Belial shouts. "Oh, I don't think so! Bastard! Murdering BASTARD! You killed my niece! You took Daisy from me!!"

Beelzebub says nothing. He keeps his eyes closed, quietly awaiting Belial's final judgment.

"Wait." Saul says, turning to face Belial. "Don't do anything rash, Belial. He's only a human now. He has no power. A casual sneeze from you could kill him with nothing left. We need to take this to the Wordsmith. Jason will absolutely deal with him in the most brutal manner you can imagine."

"Hahaha. Hahaha!" Belial laughs cruelly, a savage light in her eyes. "Oh, yes, he certainly will. To think this is why Rosalia kidnapped him. She must have recognized Beelzebub from the very beginning! What a delightful fate! How excellent! Chained up in a basement and tortured for weeks! Frankly, it's too good for the likes of him! She should get a commendation for her deeds!"

Beelzebub finally opens his eyes.

"If you're going to torture me, or whatever... go ahead. Do whatever makes you happy, Belial. I'm too weak to resist. You can peel me apart, heal my wounds, and repeat the process until my mind breaks. I never thought of you as the type... but war changes everyone."

He shakes his head.

"I think... it may have even changed me."

Seeing Beelzebub's complete and utter lack of fear, a different sort of miserable pain swells in Belial's heart.

She wants to see him beg for mercy. To scream out in pain and plead for his life.

Belial wants Beelzebub to suffer a thousand times the misery he unleashed on Tarus II's populace!

However, his indifferent attitude makes Belial grit her teeth. The reaction she wants doesn't come, leaving her deeply frustrated.

"So you want to act tough?" Belial hisses. "Good. *Very good*. I won't hurt you here, Beelzebub. A million people died because of you. Your suffering deserves to be put on display for all to see. There's a war crime tribunal coming soon... and you will become the protagonist of those proceedings."

The former Second Emperor balls her hands into fists. She struggles with the urge to unleash a brutal punch and instantly kill Beelzebub right then and there. However, seeing him so utterly powerless, so helpless, gives her a different sort of satisfaction.

"Haha. It really is a cruel twist of fate that you've become a powerless human. Not even your arms work, and I certainly won't bother fixing them! I think I'll leave you *just* the way you are."

Imagining the fate Beelzebub will soon face, Kiari's expression sinks. As a kind-hearted person, she doesn't like to see others in pain.

In Kiari's eyes, one of the kindest people she's known has always been Belial. Hearing the succubus utter such vicious words delivers a mental blow to the Duke of Locusts, darkening her thoughts and casting a pall over her face.

Not long after, Belial leads Beelzebub outside of the log cabin. She turns to look at Kiari.

"Thank you for bringing him to me. I'll make sure justice is served to this scumbag, Kiari."

Kiari nods.

"Okay. Bye, Samantha. See you... later."

"Mmm."

Part 370: Emperor Gorn's Dao

At the 'Horned Maître,' located inside the Fortress of Retribution, a stone's throw from the Lazarus Tower.

Jason Hiro sits inside a private booth at the largest restaurant on Tarus II. Owned by his family's chef, Yamir, this place is mostly managed by Yamir's extended bloodline, those minotaurs who have immigrated from Hell in the last week or two. Yamir himself spends most of his time doing what he loves; cooking in the back and managing the kitchen staff. As for the restaurant's other activities, he only plays an auxiliary role.

The Horned Maître, a five-story restaurant with progressively fancier meals and accommodations on each of the higher-level floors, allows for its patrons to spend currency lavishly, assuming they have the Merit Tokens to afford its exclusive and exquisite dining options.

On the first floor, more than six hundred people can sit amidst the hundred-or-so relatively common-looking tables and chairs. For a single Merit Token, each member in a family or a friend group can partake in some of the best cooking in all of Tarus II's civilized space.

On the second floor, that number drops to three hundred people. A few extra, slightly more exclusive meals get added to the menu, but all of them cost two Merit Tokens.

On the third floor, the number of people who can be seated halves, while the costs double.

And so on, up to the fifth floor, where a mere forty people can sit and partake in the most scrumptious and refined food in all of human society. At this level, every meal costs sixteen Merit Tokens per person. This unbelievably extravagant price is, in truth, a sinkhole for those with no thoughts for saving money, or those who want to impress their friend circles.

Additionally, at the fifth floor, every dining area is actually a sealed, private booth where people can discuss business under the cover of magical fairy formations. These formations not only isolate noise, but spiritual senses and visual perception, preventing outsiders from listening in or observing any potentially illicit conversations.

Of course, the Wordsmith's fairy allies are an exception. They record every conversation for administrative and security purposes.

Inside one of the eight private booths, with seats for four guests, just two people sit.

Jason Hiro, and Emperor Gorn.

The reanimated, partially undead Demon Emperor leans back in his chair and meets the Wordsmith's eyes with an even gaze.

"I'm not surprised you were able to amass a thousand Merit Points in just two weeks." Jason says, while leaning forward and casually resting his hands and elbows on the table. "Only that you aren't spending them on your Hell's minions or a Body Booster."

"Heh. The affairs of my Hell have never mattered much to me." Gorn says, calmly clasping his hands in his lap. "Only my own strength does. Serena manages the Hell of Calamity's miscellaneous affairs, while Crow stands as its enforcement and muscle. As for me, I only pursue my great 'Dao.'"

"I'm not familiar with that term." Jason says. "What is a *Dao*?"

"It is a term which originates from human society." Gorn explains. "Chinese philosophy, to be exact. It later spread throughout the whole of the eastern world. A person's Dao is their 'way.' It is the path they seek in their life. Many people absentmindedly waffle through reality with no clear goal in mind. As for me, I know who I am and what I want."

Jason eyes the Emperor of Many Faces up and down. "Power."

"Yes. I seek power." Gorn says, exposing a toothy smile. "You're quick on the uptake. Those Body Booster facilities of yours can only raise someone to the strength of their donor, at a maximum. Since I am already one of the most powerful demons in existence, I can't get much benefit from them. Only through one of your fancy... Words of Power... can I reach new heights."

Jason nods slowly. "I can provide you with any sort of permanent 'buff' you can imagine. Be aware though, that if you ever turn against humanity, I can rip them away in an instant. These will only benefit you in struggles against the other demons."

Gorn doesn't immediately respond. Instead he slides one of his hands out from under the table, rests his palm on the table's surface, and quietly strums his fingers, as if lost in thought.

"...You humans are so clever." Gorn muses. "I hope you don't think my people are fools. We can easily see what you're doing. You're manipulating us with these Merit Tokens. While your species extracts the power of our mana, you also neutralize us as threats to your order. Over time, the weakest demons will grow attached to your more 'fair' and 'partial' way of elevating them through the ranks. No more need to hunt and beg and save for Soul Beads. As for us leaders, we can obtain small but seemingly infinite benefits through your Words of Power. But in the end, you can revoke these benefits if we turn against you."

Jason smiles. "It's always nice talking to a smart person. Saves time on explaining things."

"Right." Gorn says. "And that's the genius part. We can see exactly what you're doing. We can see how, in the long run, humanity will easily fly past us in terms of your overall strength. And yet... we cannot fight back. We're powerless except for giving up our lives in a futile, final battle, or simply accepting that you've beaten us."

"Do you deserve any better?" Jason asks. "I know demonkind's origins. You truly were trampled upon by the angels and Titans. Your history is a sorrowful one. Even so, you had the option to right the past wrongs, but didn't. What I've done is extend a hand of mercy that, frankly, you don't deserve."

Gorn's expression grows distant.

"Indeed. We don't."

The man and demon both fall silent as one of the minotaur waiters at the Horned Maître delivers their meal, including a delicious-smelling seafood entree from Tarus II's nearby sea reserves. Jason presses his knife against the creature's abdomen, and it splits open, revealing a rice-like texture inside, with all sorts of vegetables native to the planet. At the same time, Gorn's dish also appears delicious, though somewhat different, as he goes for a bunch of crunchy fried eggs taken from the exotic Seven Winged Hellbirds from a nearby mountain.

The two men eat in silence for a few minutes. Once they have consumed a suitable amount of Yamir's personally cooked delicacies, they pause their eating to resume their conversation.

"So." Jason says. "Have you decided what your Word of Power will be?"

"A thousand Merit Tokens..." Gorn chuckles. "I haven't decided. But I hope that for this price, you can enlighten me by answering some questions. I'm curious as to what effects you can reproduce through your Wordsmithing."

"Before you came here, didn't someone give you a small book filled with descriptions of the spells I'm willing to cast?" Jason asks.

"Of course. But that tome was so dry and *boring*." Gorn chuckles. "Let's start with 'Invincibility.' This effect seems as if it is able to turn any individual into the Duke of Pain, and yet it costs you practically no mana. How can there be such a good thing in this world?"

"That Word of Power will, indeed, make you unkillable by anything or anyone." Jason says. "But the effect has many, many downsides."

He pauses.

"Consider what it actually does. It renders your skin immune to the sensation of pain. It makes your body impossible to penetrate by any bullet or object traveling at any velocity. Put simply, you will lose your sense of touch."

Gorn raises an eyebrow. "That does seem to be the way it worked for Bael."

"Next," Jason says, "Consider all the other ways you could die. Old age, for instance. For a demon, this won't be a problem. But what about a sonic blast blowing out your eardrums? What about suffocation or drowning to death? Thus, this Word of Power will dull your hearing considerably, weaken your sight, and render you unable to taste food or sniff the roses. To become invincible, you must give up all the pleasures and luxuries of life. Even sex won't be possible."

"Hahaha." Gorn dryly laughs. "That reminds me of an old human story about a man and his younger brother. The man studied his whole life, never smoked, never drank, never partook in raucous sex with women, and did everything he could to extend his life. Meanwhile, his younger brother did exactly the opposite and died at the young age of just *forty*. On his deathbed, the older brother realized that while he had extended his life to twice that of his sibling, he had never truly enjoyed himself, and thus he had wasted all of his years."

"Mmm. You understand my point, then." Jason says, taking another bite of his food. "What other 'Words' pique your interest?"

Gorn eyes the human for several long seconds.

"...I want to become a Demon Deity." He finally says.

"A what?" Jason asks.

"A Demon Deity. It is the next level above Demon Emperor. Now that I know it exists, I have grown restless, of late. I wish to reach that forbidden level. I wish to experience the power beyond what I currently possess."

Seeing the look of confusion in Jason's eyes, Gorn explains to him the process Emperor Wolfram underwent during the battle against the Cherubiim.

"...and for a brief moment, for just one short hour, he broke past the barrier which had stopped every Emperor before him." Gorn says, sighing with irreverence. "Of course, if I have to die to touch that boundary, then I would rather not. But... then again... perhaps experiencing that sensation would be worth the quick death afterward. I have already lived as an Emperor for 100,000 years. Even if I die while becoming a Demon Deity, that would still be the glorious and most euphoric moment of my life. It would allow me to go even further in my Dao."

Gorn eyes Jason Hiro, waiting for a reply. To his surprise, the Wordsmith doesn't immediately refuse his request. However, he does appear lost in thought.

"The level beyond Emperor..." Jason mutters. "And you say it's always been inaccessible to demons? Before Wolfram?"

"It has, yes." Gorn answers. "I cannot list how many souls I've consumed. Demons require ten souls to advance to a Grunt, one hundred to become a Lord, one thousand to become a Baron, one hundred thousand to become a Duke, and one million to become an Emperor. Yet no matter how many I've consumed afterward, I never felt my power reach a level that seemed as if it would 'break through' the barrier. It has always felt as if there was an invisible ceiling preventing me from attaining further heights."

Jason glowers at the Demon Emperor before him. His tone turns cold. "Don't just casually speak about consuming souls in front of me, *Gorn*. Lest you forget, those were *people* you devoured. Humans. Men and women. Mothers and fathers. Children. I don't hear a drop of regret in your voice either, except for regret that you didn't eat *enough* people. And frankly, it churns my fucking stomach."

Gorn shakes his head. "Let's not play games, Wordsmith. Do you really expect me to pretend I've become a changed demon? I am who I am. Two weeks is not enough time to shift my mentality, especially given how I have lived for 100,000 years already. To me, humans are still weak, pathetic little creatures. And if you think I am unique in that regard, you're in for a rude awakening when you have more private chats with the other Emperors."

The Emperor of Many Faces chuckles disapprovingly. "Hehehe. We'll play your game, Wordsmith. We'll dance for you like puppets. We'll scrimp for your Merit Tokens and beg for your gifts, because ultimately, it fulfills our own selfish desires. But, at least for old dogs like me, don't ever expect us to change our thoughts. As far as I am concerned, you are one incredible human living amidst a sea of piss and shit. The rest of your kind can't hope to stack up to the demons. Only by extracting our powers for yourselves can you become comparable, and since this inherently relies on our existence, you therefore will have to become half-demon to achieve anything."

Jason smiles.

"All Emperors think like this, yes?"

"We do." Gorn answers.

"That's too bad." Jason continues. "Because that line of thinking... is *wrong*."

"Oh? How, exactly?" Gorn asks.

The Wordsmith ponders for a moment before responding.

"You demons are stagnant, just like the Volgrim. But in many ways, your stagnancy goes much, much further. Not only can you only evolve to the rank of Emperor at most, but you never *personally* evolve. Your thoughts stay the same your whole lives. Your powers reach a plateau, but never change. Your civilization either remains fixed in place, or it even regresses."

He continues. "Contrast with humanity. We are always evolving. Breaking through the barriers which holds us back. Elevating our capabilities, and our line of thinking. Do you really believe we need to borrow demonkind's power to 'ascend' to your level? I am only using your Dukes and Emperors as a shortcut. If all the demons died off tomorrow, I could achieve similar results by using technology. On the other hand, if humanity vanished, the demons would quickly lose all their momentum. You would kill each other,

yet never come close to replacing the souls lost through said killings. You would self-immolate, reducing yourselves to a fraction of your current population."

The Wordsmith leans back in his chair.

"You speak of demon superiority as if it were a known fact, but you're *delusional* if you truly think that's the case. Your bodies might be strong, and your magical abilities mighty, but in the end, the only way you could defeat humanity was through suppression by a superior population and draconic thought-policing."

He smirks deeply, shaking his head at Gorn's naivete.

"Enough chit-chat. I have things to do after this. Let's finish our food. In the meantime, you should hurry up and decide which Word of Power you want invoked on your behalf. As for that matter of becoming a Demon Deity, it lays outside my abilities."

Finding himself suppressed by the Wordsmith's argument, Gorn can only offer a few feeble retorts before ultimately giving up.

Half an hour later, Gorn makes his choice. Jason imbues him with a Word of Power and sends him on his way.

"An interesting choice." Jason mutters to himself, before getting up, paying his food bill, and leaving the restaurant.

As the progenitor of humanity, he and his wife can print Merit Tokens as needed for their expenses. He casually tosses out thirty-two tokens to Yamir's cooks, all of whom give him a hearty thumbs-up as thanks for his patronage.

Not long after, Jason heads away from the restaurant. Hardly has he walked fifty steps before he spots Phoebe bouncing toward him from an adjacent street.

"Jason. Jason!" Phoebe says, slightly breathless. "There you are. Were you at the Horned Maître again?"

"Mhm." Jason says, giving his wife a kiss. "I had to deal with Emperor Gorn. He exchanged a thousand points for a Word of- is something the matter?"

Jason pauses his explanation of the day's events when he notices an impatient look on Phoebe's face.

"Forget all that," Phoebe says, waving her hand. "You won't believe this. I just met up with Samantha. She showed me something *incredible*!"

Phoebe suddenly glances around, then activates her T-REX. Before Jason can react, she presses his T-REX's activator twice, engulfing him in nanites.

After they both seal up from the outside world, Phoebe opens up a private channel.

"Jason. Beelzebub... is alive!"

"What?!" Jason exclaims, his heart dropping into the soles of his feet. "He is? Where is he?! What happened? Is anyone hurt?!"

"No, no, it's not like that." Phoebe says. "You see, Kiari stumbled upon him, over at this cottage on the north side of the city..."

Phoebe spends the next few minutes explaining to her husband all the details regarding Beelzebub's capture and rescue.

"You said he's... a human?" Jason asks, unconvinced. "How is that possible?"

"It's true. I saw him myself." Phoebe says. "He was difficult to recognize. No boisterous aura. No demonic powers. Pale skin, human ears, and no demon horns. Without a doubt, he is completely and utterly human."

Jason's eyes flash with hatred. "Good. That means he'll be easy to *kill*. Where is he now?"

Phoebe frowns, though Jason doesn't see her expression through her helmet.

"You're not going to talk to or hurt Beelzebub, Jason." Phoebe states, giving him a clear and direct order. "He needs to stand trial for his crimes during the War Tribunal, along with all the other perpetrators of Stormbringer. In fact, I want you to stay away from him until we reach that day."

"What?!" Jason scoffs. "Why are you acting so unreasonable, Phoebe? He killed Daisy. He murdered our little girl! Not to mention a million other people! What use is there in a fucking tribunal? He's the guiltiest of guilty!"

"Don't argue with me on this." Phoebe says. "You're not in a good headspace when it comes to Beelzebub, Jason. You need to stay away from him. And, even more importantly, killing him would be the most selfish thing you have ever done. He didn't just take away *our* little girl, but the children and mothers and fathers of countless others. They all deserve to have a go at him on the big stage."

Jason opens his mouth to retort several times, but continually finds himself at a loss.

Eventually, he says, "Phoebe. I want to have a few words with him. Just a few words..."

"You can grill him all you want once the Tribunal arrives." Phoebe answers. "I'm taking charge here, Jason, and that's final. In fact, it would be better if you saved up your rage and hatred for that day. If you let it all out now, you won't have nearly as much at hand for all the others who have suffered. You have to give a strong voice to their outrage when we put Beelzebub on full display for them to see."

Her argument finally convinces Jason.

"Well. Alright. I guess I can do that. When are we holding the Tribunal, anyway?"

"After we resurrect everyone who fell during Stormbringer." Phoebe answers. "And we'll revive them once we have enough housing built. I don't want any of those victims sleeping on the streets or in tents. They deserve better."

"That could take a few months." Jason points out.

"It *will* take a few months." Phoebe replies. "But don't expect to twiddle your thumbs the whole time. The Volgrim are going to expect you to make a 'diplomatic visit' at some point. I imagine that will happen sooner, rather than later. While you're dealing with them, I can hold down the fort."

Jason rubs his chin. "Mmm. Not to mention they've slowed down their delivery of Wartime Provisions. The Volgrim are deliberately making a power play, but I don't think they know the full situation on our planet."

"You never know. They might, actually," Phoebe retorts. "We still don't know if there are any Changelings here. We'll have to keep our eyes peeled."

"Changelings..." Jason says, his gaze darkening. "Alright, I'll worry about Beelzebub later. If he doesn't have powers, then he's no threat. You *are* certain he's powerless though, right? Because if you're not..."

"I'm certain." Phoebe answers. "And just to be sure, I put a mana-stifling band around his neck. Does that make you feel better?"

"It does." Jason says, smiling. He deactivates his T-REX, and Phoebe does the same.

For a few minutes, they kiss and hug each other, right in the middle of the street, while others walk around them and chuckle.

Not long after, they pull apart and Jason sighs.

"Oh, right. Fiona helped me build the first Beauty Booster today. Can you do me a favor and contact some of the Hell of Lust's succubi to take the first shifts? We'll hold the grand opening tomorrow."

"The Beauty Booster, huh?" Phoebe says, batting her eyes. "Maybe I should pay it a visit."

"No need. You're already perfect," Jason says, grinning.

"Are you sure? I seem to recall a certain Wordsmith subtly making my boobs bigger." Phoebe snarks.

"Uh, Fiona told you?" Jason asks.

"Nope. But you did, just now!" Phoebe laughs, while lightly socking his arm. "Anyway, what sort of pricing are we looking at for this new Merit Token sink?"

The Wordsmith hems and haws.

"Hmm. Well, it doesn't need to be *too* pricey. The fact someone can go there several times means a lot of... physically imperfect people will probably go for multiple visits. I'll leave the pricing up to you, but let's cap it at, say, fifty tokens?"

"Will do, love." Phoebe says, kissing Jason one last time. "I'll see you tonight."

"You too, honey." Jason replies.

The two of them split off to do their own thing.

After they depart, Jason reactivates his T-REX.

"Beelzebub. Tsk. I'll deal with you later. Now, my next goal should be... managing these pesky Volgrim..."

Part 371: Inferno's Imprisonment

On the southern side of the Fortress of Retribution, in an undeveloped area where only military personnel patrol, a half-dozen soldiers in exosuits stomp along in unison. Before them walks an old man with two ruined arms, but even with his limbs unable to be used, they still hang behind his back, handcuffed and useless.

This man is none other than Beelzebub.

The former Duke of Inferno silently walks to the prison, with the six escorts behind him keeping their weapons trained on him, just in case, as per their orders from Phoebe Hiro.

Surprisingly, none of them know Beelzebub's true identity. For her part, Phoebe only informed them that this old man, Robert, was a traitor to humanity and should be taken to his prison cell post-haste.

And so, after several miles of relentless walking, Beelzebub arrives at a familiar entrance to an underground prison complex, the very same one he previously escaped, thanks to Mara's help.

When last he left, he slaughtered dozens of human troopers, burning them to ash with his Duke-level demonic powers. But now, he has become so weak that even an ordinary human teenager could beat him up.

Such a sad reversal of circumstances causes him to lightly sigh.

"Prisoner entry request." Says one of the soldiers behind Beelzebub to a guard at the prison's entrance. "Here are his details."

A few minutes later, Beelzebub gets escorted inside. After going through multiple magical and technological searches, including an incredibly humiliating 'cavity search,' his captors don't find anything suspicious hidden on him. They lead him into the cell block areas, which he discovers have been upgraded and expanded in the past several weeks.

No longer do a mere two hundred cells await him. Instead, more than ten million cells lead deep, deep into the underground complex. Thanks to the assistance of countless Goblin immigrants brought from the Seven Hells, more than a thousand stories of levels

extend deep into the underground space, while their width and length also stretch out tens of times further than before as well.

When Beelzebub arrives in the cell blocks on the first floor, he becomes momentarily astonished at the sheer volume of prisoners being held within the Wordsmith's dungeons. With four people to each cell, not a single bed on the first floor remains open. Instead, the guards lead Beelzebub to an elevator, one which they take all the way down to the one thousandth floor at the very bottom... the VIP holding area.

Here, fewer than a dozen or so prisoners sit inside their cells, quiet and contemplative looks on their faces. Unlike the somewhat loud and raucous first floor, the bottom-most floor is one where hardly anyone lives. As a result, its prisoners are much quieter, barely whispering to each other in quiet tones.

"You've got some real shitty luck." One of the guards gruffly says to Beelzebub. "Only the scummiest pieces of shit get put on this floor. Hell, we haven't even put anyone in the hundred floors above you. Putting you down here is basically saying you won't ever see the light of day again. I can only imagine what some old man did to deserve such a fate."

Another guard beside him snorts. "Maybe it's better we don't know. We might kill the geezer ourselves if we found out."

"Right you are."

The two guards fall silent. They lead Beelzebub to a cell where another man already sits inside, a young human male with brown hair and a common appearance. He wears a basic orange jumpsuit, the same as Beelzebub.

"Guess who gets a friend." The first guard says to the prisoner inside the cell. "Hope you haven't been too lonely in here, *Private* Henry. Since your old boss made it back alive, maybe Neil will throw you a bone and spare your life. But considering how you left him to die... I wouldn't count on it."

The young man in the cell, Henry, barely lifts his head to glance at the old man being led into his cell before lowering his gaze again. He sits on the edge of his bed, absentmindedly kicking his legs to pass the time.

The guards unchain Beelzebub's wrists, then snort coldly at him when they see his arms can't move a muscle.

"Eating-time is gonna be a bitch, grandpa. But don't worry. We'll put a straw in your applesauce so you don't starve to death. You need to stay alive until the trial, after all."

Beelzebub merely grunts. "Mmm."

After he enters the cell, the guards close the gate and lock it tightly, then turn and leave.

A minute passes.

Beelzebub quietly glances around the cell before wandering to a bed on the opposite side of the room as the young human male.

"So." Henry says, his tone neither warm nor cold, but mostly indifferent. "What are you in for?"

Beelzebub's shoulders lightly slump forward as he glances at the human across from him. For a brief time, he hesitates.

Finally, he answers.

"...Murder. Genocide, to be exact."

Henry blinks. He raises his eyes to scrutinize Beelzebub a little more carefully.

"Name?"

"Robert." Beelzebub immediately answers. "That's what they call me, anyway."

"And just who is 'they?'" Henry asks.

"The people who rescued me." Beelzebub replies. "Any other stupid questions?"

The young man eyes Beelzebub carefully, but he doesn't see through the former Duke's identity. With a shake of his head, he returns to looking at the floor.

"No need to be so hostile. You and me are going to be in here for a long time. That is, unless we get executed. Which, honestly, that might happen. This floor is only for the most 'special' of humanity's traitors and enemies, after all."

"Executed." Beelzebub repeats. "Yes. That will probably be my fate. And you?"

"Hmm..." Henry muses. "I don't know. What I did was... they probably won't execute me. But does it matter? Is death any less preferable to living inside these walls where the sun will never shine?"

"You're quite the talkative human." Beelzebub remarks.

"You say that like you're not a human yourself!" Henry lightly laughs. "Got dementia, Robert?"

Beelzebub doesn't answer.

For several long, awkward minutes, he remains silent. Ultimately, he turns around and lays down on his cot, grimacing at the bed's hardness. Unable to use his arms, he can only wriggle around with his waist to try and reorient both his limbs.

After Beelzebub finally gets 'comfortable,' he sighs. "I can't see why you would be down here with me. No matter how you look at it, my crimes must certainly be more heinous than yours. We don't belong in the same cell block, let alone the same cell."

"I didn't actually do anything that directly harmed humanity as a whole." Henry says, shaking his head. "It was more a... matter of principle. I allowed myself to get led around by a demoness. I fed her information without thinking of the consequences."

"Well. That *was* pretty stupid of you." Beelzebub snorts.

"Yeah..." Henry murmurs, his voice low. "I thought I loved her. I thought she loved me. But in the end, her words were nothing more than sweet little lies. She manipulated me... turned me against my people. Hell, she turned me against my own ideals. My own heart. I betrayed everyone around me, as well as myself. If I had just stuck to my principles, she never could have toyed around with me. I feel ashamed for what I did."

"I had a woman do something similar to me as well." Beelzebub muses. "I really thought I loved her. Maybe I did. Maybe I didn't. She's dead now, so... I'll never truly find out."

"Haha!" Henry laughs. "It's funny you mention that. Yes, the demoness I'm talking about... well, I found out she died recently, too. All my struggle to be with her, and in the end, she never was who she said she was..."

Henry exhales deeply.

"Miss Oshina. She seemed so kind and loving, like a white-clad fairy in a delicate dress. But in the end, she turned out to be a vicious, evil, manipulative demoness. And not just any demoness, but the supreme enemy of humanity... *Emperor Ose*."

Beelzebub's heart skips a beat.

"Emperor Ose?" He asks, turning his head to look at Henry. "It was her?"

Henry mistakes Beelzebub's surprise for shock that Henry would be duped by humanity's worst enemy. "Exactly. You see? That's why I'm down here. I let that manipulative woman control me to the point I sacrificed my own commander's life. I even believed her lies when she told me the Wordsmiths were colluding with demonkind. In fairness to myself, I believed that Oshina was a human woman... not the supreme leader of demonkind. I wouldn't have followed her if I knew otherwise."

"It's fortunate that Commander Neil survived." Henry continues, oblivious to the varied expressions on Beelzebub's face. "Ose deceived me, but in the end, I didn't manage to cause any true harm. Still, if I had wholeheartedly helped Neil escape the Core's explosion, who knows how many more people he would have been able to save during the Stormbringer Attack? Without his presence, our people lacked a crucial leader during the initial battles. I still indirectly cost humanity countless lives."

He eventually stops talking, as does Beelzebub.

The former Duke of Inferno shifts his eyes to the ceiling. He gazes upward, lost in thought.

Ose lied to this human boy. She lied to me, as well. Deceived me. She used me as a tool for her own gain... and I foolishly blundered along to her wishes like an imbecile. Now I'm a cripple with nothing left of my former glory.

The demon-turned-human snorts bitterly.

I don't even get a decent end to my life. Ultimately, I'll just die like a caged dog. That is how my legacy will conclude.

A sense of unwillingness wells up within Beelzebub's heart.

If only I could change the past. If only I could see through Ose's lies. I would have pushed her to accept the Wordsmith's treaty... then demonkind and humanity wouldn't have suffered such grievous blows.

With Henry finally falling silent, a momentary lull opens up in the conversation.

Beelzebub tilts his head on his pillow to look at the young man again.

"...Thank you." He says.

"Hm? For what?" Henry asks.

"You've given me a lot to think about." Beelzebub cryptically says, not explaining any further. "Maybe I'll even be able to die without regrets."

"Come on, gramps..." Henry says, laughing wryly. "You can't die now. Humanity has so many tools and ways for you to live on. Besides, you're the first person I've gotten to sit down and chat with in weeks! If you die, won't I be left all alone down here?"

Beelzebub lightly shakes his head.

"My living or dying is not for me to decide."

Elsewhere, deep inside the Labyrinth.

Hope Hiro finally arrives at the entrance to the El-Dorado room. Following in his footsteps is none other than Jason's black hole construct, the one shaped in King Arthur's image.

The two of them quickly step inside the room filled with overflowing treasure, gold, and gems. Weapons and armor of a medieval variety litter the floor in huge heaps and mounds. Brilliant magical lights illuminate the room's interior, making Hope wince as he steps out of the Labyrinth's pitch-black hallways into the divinity of the Three Kings.

"I have returned." Hope says, as he sweeps his gaze across the statues of Solomon, King Arthur, and Jephthah. **"Awaken."**

After uttering a Word of Power, Hope senses the rousing of the Three King's spirits. However, while Arthur and Jephthah quickly bring themselves back to the world of wakefulness, Solomon does not. Due to his merging with his Crown, his spirit no longer resides inside his statue.

"Young man." Jephthah says, his tone neither warm nor cold. "Wordsmith. I feared the worst when you left but did not return. That evil specter which lurked outside this holy room... were you able to handle it?"

Hope's lips tremble. "I... was not. He was a Demon Emperor. And not just any, but a frighteningly powerful one named Gressil."

Hope spends several minutes explaining to Jephthah and Arthur what happened, including his capture and torment by Gressil.

By the end of his speech, Jephthah's aura has grown much more fiery.

"Good. Good! So this Gressil is another bastard in the vein of the ancient Emperors I once slew! This king does not fear a challenge, only that the ones he strikes down will not prove worthy! The suffering that you have endured, young Wordsmith, we will return ten thousand times over!"

Arthur's reaction is much more subdued. "Mmm. Even among the worst demons I've known, Gressil stands out for his cruelty and malice. He inflicts agony and suffering without hesitation. He revels in the pain of others. He is a stain upon creation which must be expunged."

"I agree." Hope murmurs. "But save that talk for later. I came here for a different reason. I need your help, Arthur. Jephthah. I need to find your divine artifacts."

"Excalibur and the Dominion Rod?" Jephthah asks. "And what happened to Solomon's Crown? Don't tell me that child left you, after leaving your original body too."

"Gressil plucked Solomon's Crown off my head, it seems." Hope explains. "And now, it has ended up in the hands of the Volgrim. Just like both of your artifacts. Therefore, I must travel to the Volgrim's core worlds in search of all three artifacts. Only then will I possess the capital to contend with Jason for control of humanity."

Hope gestures to the black hole construct behind him.

"Arthur. By coincidence, Jason happened to craft an incredibly powerful body, one which resembles you. Would you like to possess it and travel with me to the Volgrim's worlds?"

Expecting a rapid and resounding 'yes!', Hope frowns when Arthur doesn't immediately reply.

"Mmm. The appearance is a perfect facsimile... but the soul aura... tsk. There is no resemblance. I will not be able to merge and manipulate that cute little puppet."

Arthur's words carry a hint of melancholy.

"Not that it matters." Arthur continues. "You must remember, Hope. I am not truly Arthur. I am merely a wisp of soul separated from my core soul using Solomon's profound means. The same is true of Jephthah. Our original souls continue to reside in our artifacts. If you try to forcefully extract us from these specially-crafted statues, I fear that we will dissipate in an instant!"

Hope deeply frowns. "Does... does that mean I came here in vain?"

"Perhaps not." Jephthath says. "You wish to seek out the locations of our artifacts, yes? We do not know where they reside. However, we can place our spiritual impressions inside of you, embedding them within your soul. Though your mana manipulation skills are as weak and clumsy as an infant's, even you will be able to sense the presence of our original souls, assuming you draw within a certain distance of them."

"How close will I have to be?" Hope asks.

"It is difficult to guess." Jephthath mutters. "This may seem obvious now that I am saying it, but perhaps you have overlooked this point. I have never stepped foot on another world's soil, and neither has Arthur-boy. Perhaps you will need to be on the same planet as our artifacts, but perhaps you will be able to sense them from farther away. I have no frame of reference, and thus, I cannot say."

Arthur chuckles. "Jephthath speaks truth. Hope, are you not worried? Traveling to a world dominated by the Volgrim... you cannot simply stumble in with your naïve understanding of worldly matters. Or have you forgotten? Among the Volgrim are members of the Psions. They can read minds and peer into the core of the universe. Even if you disguise yourself as a Volgrim, or hide within a spatial rift, do you think these old monsters won't be able to uncover your identity?"

"Haha..." Arthur laughs dryly. "You intend to go and seek out three precious treasures, yet you fail to understand just how frightening your enemies are. I only know of the Volgrim through the actions of Excalibur's inheritors, yet I can say with absolute confidence that they are ten times more terrifying than you can possibly imagine. In a battle against a Ninth Order Psion, such as the Second Founder... even I am not certain I could win."

The more Arthur speaks, the more wary Hope becomes.

"I can only imagine how difficult such a journey would be. But I have no choice! I must seek out the three artifacts. Jason has obtained the power of some unknown, almighty, ancient divine artifact. His power has exploded since he seized it. If I want to challenge him for the right of leading humanity, I need to have sufficient capital."

For a brief moment, nobody speaks.

Then, the blood-red eyes on Jephthath's statue glimmer.

"Isn't this a simple matter to solve?" Jephthath asks. "Just kill Jason. You are a Wordsmith. You have a billion different methods you can use. Jason would never be able to prepare for all of them. Once he is dead, you will become the de facto head of humanity."

"I don't want to take that route." Hope says, his expression gloomy. "I'm not like Jason. I'm not a murderer! I only kill demons... not humans. And besides... if I killed Jason, Phoebe would be..."

A pang of pain flares up in Hope's chest as he imagines the face of the wife he lost, due to Jason's idiotic and thoughtless cloning process.

Phoebe was Hope's woman. They loved each other. Then, one day, she simply *wasn't*. He had done nothing wrong. He had only cloned himself, but in the end, he turned out to be the clone.

"It wasn't fair..." Hope says, his voice low. "It wasn't."

"Hmph." Jephthath snorts. "In my era, I slew countless demons. But I was not a soft man. I killed humans, too. Disrespectful ones. Ones who slighted my reign or implied they could do better. This is the true way of a king! Even Arthur, he..."

Jephthath's soul energy shifts from Hope to Arthur's statue.

"Speak not of that matter." Arthur icily says. "It was my sin. It was the Greatest Sin. I failed as a Hero on that day."

Hope's eyebrows shoot up.

"What did you do?" Hope asks.

"I will not speak of this matter." Arthur replies. "I will *never* speak of it. Not to you, nor to anyone else."

With Arthur closing off the conversation, Hope doesn't bother prodding further. After all, it isn't why he came to the El Dorado room in the first place.

"Regarding your impressions of your artifacts," Hope says, "I have to request that you two assist me. If I obtain your artifacts, I will bring them here so that you can merge back into them, as Solomon did with his crown."

"That is a simple enough task." Jephthath says. "I already said I would, and so, I shall. Arthur?"

Arthur, the Greatest Sinner, nods along to Jephthath's words. "I will pass on my impression, as well. Remember, Wordsmith. The stronger the tremors in your soul, the closer you will have drawn to our artifacts. But do not act greedily. The Volgrim are fearsome. They toppled Earth's military might with a wave of their hand. The only reason they struggle now is due to the Threat within the Milky Way. Even so, it will only take one high-ranking Psion to send you scurrying like a rat back into the shadows."

"I'm confident in my abilities." Hope says with a smile. "Let's do this."

"Very well."

A minute later, both Kings flare up their auras for a brief moment before dying back down.

"It is done." Jephthath remarks.

Hope taps the side of his head, then his stomach and heart. He frowns.

"I don't feel any different."

"Unless you draw within the required distance of our artifacts, you won't." Arthur says. "Soul Pressing is a painless process. It is not dissimilar to writing a few words on the back of your hand. Given your mortal-level of soul and mana manipulation, it's not odd you wouldn't sense any changes."

"Why is my mana manipulation so poor, anyway?" Hope asks, slightly exasperated. "A Demon Emperor could blast me full force with their aura and I wouldn't feel a thing."

"Your abilities are broad. You are a generalist." Arthur explains. "Jephthath and I, however, were both specialists. Our abilities were more narrow, but also more explosive and powerful. There is no such thing as a perfect power-set, only a perfect Hero. If you can master your abilities, I've no doubt you will inevitably surpass the two of us."

"We look forward to your future success." Jephthath says. "As for that construct of yours... a pity we cannot use it. Perhaps, when you obtain our original souls, they might have a better chance of success."

"I'll keep that in mind." Hope says. "Thank you, Arthur, Jephthath. I will return sooner or later."

"Hmph. Indeed, you will." Arthur says.

Without another word, Hope turns on his heel and strides out of the room. The black hole construct follows behind him, and minutes later, he vanishes completely.

Both kings remain quiet for a time.

"I hate that I must linger on..." Arthur murmurs. "But there is a certain comfort in seeing the rise of a younger generation."

"That boy is the inheritor of my will." Jephthah states, his tone firm. "He will slay the demons. He *must* slay them. Only when every last bloodskin has fallen will I allow myself to rest."

Arthur sighs. "That rage... that hatred... it will destroy you, brother."

Jephthah chuckles.

"Heh, heh, heh... it already *has*, Arthur."

Part 372: Death and Shadows

Inside the unique space nestled within the Milky Way, that special existence known as Hell, countless demons and monsters reside in its interior, calling it their home.

Hell refers to the supermassive, ever-expanding three-dimensional Labyrinth shaped vaguely like a cube. With a relative size tens of times greater than that of Earth, the Labyrinth offers its denizens an incomprehensible amount of living space. Trillions of demons and monsters dig out or otherwise burrow into the blackened hallways of the eternal Labyrinth.

At four of the Labyrinth's eight corners, singular Warp Gates exist, capable of transferring demons not only to Hell Harbor and the Labyrinth Core itself, but the tens of thousands of other worlds in the Milky Way.

But, at the other four corners, no such gates exist.

The further one deviates from the zones of life near the Warpgates, the deeper they travel into the *Dead Zones*.

These so-called Dead Zones are not exactly places rich with death energy, but rather, places the Labyrinth's myriad species haven't bothered to colonize. Traveling across all of Hell can take ages for low-level existences. And since high level existences, such as Gorgons, Trolls, or Overlord Orcs, will often require the services of slaves and low-level existences, they won't bother to make their nests and shrines and altars too far from the transfer zones of the Warpgates.

In fact, among the demons and monsters, it is a well-known fact that only the most pitiful and pathetic existences will eke out their worthless lives in the four Dead Zones.

But, at the same time, these Dead Zones offer a perfect refuge for an unexpected type of life-form...

A demon who must avoid being seen at all costs.

Mephisto, formerly the Duke of Mist, but now the Emperor of Legions, stakes out a claim on a small and carefully hidden patch of land somewhere in the south-eastern Dead Zone.

After much preparation and investigation, Mephisto spends a full week placing down soul isolation barriers, mana suppressing barriers, and other such enchantments to hide his existence, as well as those belonging to his necromantic servants.

The Emperor of Legions quietly finishes the final bit of work in solidifying a safe zone for those who follow the call of the dead. Once he completes his work, he cannot help but exhale a sigh of relief.

"Kss... The Wordssmith'ssss sssensssssss are formidable... but I know well the limitsss of his reach. If he findsss me, he will ssslay me. But if he doesss not? Kekeke..."

More than a little tired due to his diligent efforts, Mephisto slumps backward, plopping down on a throne made of bone. Inside this inner chamber of a small palace hewn into the Labyrinth's halls, dark blue flames light up candelabras on the walls, giving every inch of his 'royal chamber' a sickening, ghostly hue.

Inside Mephisto's palace, fewer than two hundred necromancers and their twenty thousand minions join him, with each of them digging out their own rooms to reside within. The vast arrays Mephisto placed down might not compare to those crafted by fairies, but they can still offer him a certain level of concealment and protection.

Ozzar, the Baron of Leprosy, slithers out of the shadows into his master's barely illuminated room.

"Great Emperor, now that we have completed the construction of our... temporary accommodations... to what matters should we attend next?"

Mephisto's expression turns gloomy when he hears his subordinate's words.

"Ksss. In truth, I am not fully cccertain. I can travel unsssseen and unhindered within the Labyrinth. But, the ressst of you cannot. Anywhere we go, the other Emperorsss will attack ussss on sssight. The Wordsssmith'ssss machinationsss are not to be underessstimated. He has already ssseized hold of their weaknesssssss by usssing 'Merit Pointsss' to turn them into hissss ssservantsss."

"If only we could make use of those points ourselves." Ozzar grumbles. "But Master, this setback is only temporary. Your glory towers above all the other peasants aspiring to become the future leader of demonkind. That Wordsmith acts like a lion, but in truth, he is quite soft and lovable, yes? He spared the other Emperors, showing his weak, human side. In time, if you avoid his gaze, he may even forget you exist!"

"If only that wasss the cassse..." Mephisto growls, unwilling to believe Ozzar's fantasies. "Isss the Wordsssmith sssoft? Yesss. But forgetful? *No*."

Mephisto rises from his throne. He strokes his chin, grinding his boney fingers against the pointed tip of his skinless jaw, creating a wretched sound like nails on a chalkboard.

"What to do next... I believe the anssswer isss sssimple. I musst firsst intimidate the other Emperorsss. It will not take them much effort to deducce my location. There are only ssso many placesss I can hide, after all. But sssincce I can hide from the Wordsssmith by turning my body and sssoul ethereal, I can sssilently sssneak attack thossse who would plunge their daggersss into my back!"

"A brilliant ploy, Master Mephisto." Ozzar grovels, bending over at the waist while looking up at his master's back. "You can sneak up on the other Emperors and instantly kill them when their awareness is lowest. And with the Belial Booster and Body Boosters draining their strength, there are certain to be times when they're at their weakest!"

A flicker of light flashes through Mephisto's eyes. "Yesss. True..."

"Each Emperor you kill will only add to your magnificence!" Ozzar exclaims. His black and red robes crackle as he stands up, a shudder of excitement flickering through his bones. "Once you force them to bow to you in death, you will also reap the rewards of any deals they've made with the Wordsmith!"

"Excccellent obsssservationsss." Mephisto muses. "In which cassse, I ssshould not russsh to ssstrike them down. Let usss wait a month or two. They will reap the benefitsss of the Belial Boosster and the other Wordsssmith facccilitiesss. In the meantime, I can look for sssuitable Dukesss to-"

Mephisto suddenly pauses.

The Emperor of Legions frowns deeply. His head flicks toward a dark corner of the room. Immediately, he turns his body ethereal, exploding into mist and becoming impossible to see or detect.

"Who goesss there?!" Mephisto roars.

A few seconds pass, before a deep, dark voice whispers from the shadows.

"Come now, Mephisto. Did you think those elementary enchantments would keep the likes of *us* out of your business?"

A shadow melts out of the darkness, exposing a huge, cruel-looking demonic face.

Yama, the Emperor of Shadows, casually reveals himself.

Sensing no particular malice in Yama's appearance, Mephisto slowly materializes once more, but he keeps a wary eye on the intruder.

"For what reasson have you come, Emperor of Ssshadowsss?"

Yama chuckles. "Hehe. Isn't it obvious? We are in the same boat as you. The Wordsmith has declared that any Emperors who chance upon our existence should eliminate us at once. Of course, we have already long made many enemies and grown used to hiding in the Labyrinth's shadows. We even created our own secret Domain, a place where we can hide our forces without others finding them. Compared to our home, your shabby little hut isn't worth a piss in the wind."

"Come to gloat, have you?" Mephisto asks, also chuckling under his breath. "I didn't think you were the type."

"Not to gloat. To make a deal." Yama mutters. "You and us, we are both enemies of demonkind. But we both know that if the Wordsmiths were to disappear, so too would our chains. Killing just one of them won't solve our problems. Only killing both will. But neither of us possess the ability to rip them apart."

Mephisto stands up a little straighter.

"You... wisssh to proposse... an allianccce?"

"Naturally." Yama replies. "But there is a problem. We have not told many people of this matter, but we swear it is true... a certain demon recently came back from the dead. His revival caused us to suffer a terrible loss. We can no longer corrupt fresh young flowers to join our ranks."

"A cccertain demon?" Mephisto asks, as a strange look colors his face. "Who wasss it?"

"Satan the Devil." Yama answers. "And as to how he managed to return from death for a second time... the one who summoned him turned out to be... Bael!"

"Bael? He brought back the Devil?!" Mephisto gasps. "Nonssenssse! Bael isss no necromancccer! And even if he wasss, Sssatan has already suffered a True Death. Hisss body and sssoul ssscattered to assshesss. They passed through the Great Beyond'sss bubble, and can never again return to the mortal realm!"

"We know that what we are saying sounds like an impossibility, but we swear in the name of the Seven Hells that we speak the truth!" Yama proclaims. He conjures a

blackened palm of shadow and places it upon his chest. "Further, we believe that Bael can even revive other great figures of the past from death! He brought back Emperor Shax during the battle against the Archangels, and caused us to suffer another great loss!"

Hearing this incredible news, Mephisto can only stare at Yama with a mixture of disbelief and incredulity.

If Yama is telling the truth, then the news would prove worldshaking.

But if he is lying, it would be the most unbelievable and bald-faced lie Mephisto has ever heard in all his years!

The fact nobody would dare to utter such an idiotic lie proves to Mephisto that Yama must be telling the truth!

Mephisto turns his head to the side. He falls deep into thought, unsure of what to do.

"Listen to us." Yama says, slithering a little closer to Mephisto. "Satan wasn't simply brought back from the Great Beyond. He also possessed all of his original powers. That ancient Soul Contract, the one he claimed he had long ago erased... he used it on us to make us never again corrupt a female into our Harem! If Bael can summon other figures from demonkind's past, who knows how powerful he will become?"

Mephisto grimaces. "I have no control over Bael. He ssshould be my undead ssslave, but he isssn't. He sssomehow broke free due to hisss ssspeccial sssoul. More importantly, how and why did he manifessst thisss new power? Everyone knowsss Bael and magic are incompatible! They are like oil and water. They cannot coexissst!"

"Perhaps that was true before, but it isn't now." Yama retorts. "In any case, Bael isn't our main concern. You have to make a decision. Will you ally with us? We must work together if we are to kill the Wordsmith and seize control of the Seven Hells! Since we are riding the same boat, there is no need to speak of 'sincerity.' So, what do you say, Mephisto?"

Yama draws in even closer to Mephisto. A gleam appears in his eye.

"Do we have a deal?"

Elsewhere in the Labyrinth.

A demoness sits on a random rock in a hallway not far from the Oracle Hive, the place where Demon Oracles work to gather intelligence for the Seven Hells. This demoness wears an armless T-shirt that exposes her midriff, her cute, tight little booty shorts, and knee-high black leather boots.

Her identity? Abby, the Baron of Happy Thoughts.

However, contrary to her demonic title, a truly sad expression rests on her face. She sits numbly in the same spot she has sat for well over a week, staring blankly at the floor. While the Oracles around her continue going about their business, some of the longer-lived ones shoot curious glances at her before shaking their heads.

"Abby's still in that same spot, huh?" One Oracle asks another.

"Yup. Ever since Ose died... tsk."

"I don't get it. Ose seemed like such an ice queen. Were the two of them close?"

"You wouldn't think so. Ose never liked Abby. But in truth, they were both Barons and both worked together on a lot of occasions. Abby even fought alongside Ose during the Energy Wars. She picked up a certain knowledge of human culture, just like Ose did. Hell, I heard she even sang in Bael's band."

"Damn. I guess Ose's death must have really... hit her hard? Someone should go and cheer her up."

The older Oracle shakes his head. "There's no point in trying. Abby always had a huge crush on Ose. Now that Ose's experienced Two Deaths, she'll never walk the mortal coil again. For matters like this, you just have to give our older sister some time and space."

"Mmm. I'll leave her alone, then."

The discussions continue among the many different Oracles, with the longer-lived ones explaining or giving hints to the less-knowledgeable ones.

One day, Abby sighs deeper than she ever has before. A shudder goes through her bones as she finally resolves herself.

"...She's really gone." Abby mumbles. "Man. I didn't think... I mean... I promised Ose if she died... but I didn't think she'd really just..."

Abby recalls that conversation she had with Ose, six years earlier, shortly after her ascension to Emperor. When the Wordsmith first appeared, and Ose realized a great

calamity might someday befall all of demonkind if the Hero wasn't handled properly.

"We were so close." Abby says, her voice imperceptible. "But I couldn't save her. That evil, evil Wordsmith... he *murdered* her. She was always so misunderstood. She was a victim! And he actually just... he's such a monster..."

Abby shakily climbs off the rock. Her legs tremble slightly, more from emotion than any mortal failing, like hunger. As a demon, she can exist in perpetuity without consuming food or water.

Compared to the emotional loss of the demoness she loved most, no amount of physical pain has ever cut Abby's soul so deeply.

"I promised Ose." She mutters. "I promised her. And friends... we keep our promises."

Slowly, Abby shuffles out of the Oracle Hive. She begins walking toward an unknown destination, somewhere very, very far from her current location, a place hidden deep within the furthest recesses of Hell.

Despite Abby's rank of Baron, and her speed usually being more than enough to travel halfway across Hell in just a few days, she takes her time walking the whole way, mostly so her thoughts can whirl around in her head.

Abby passes thousands of other demons, many of whom recognize her. When they call out or say hello, she doesn't even hear their words, so numb is her heart.

Three weeks pass.

Eventually, Abby arrives inside a simple, nondescript hallway somewhere in the northern reaches of the Labyrinth. This hallway appears completely ordinary, like any other for hundreds of miles around it. Not a soul stirs in the area for a thousand miles in any direction.

Abby glances at a simple ring on her finger. Its diamond gem glows bright white, like the color of lightning, and the closer she holds her hand to the wall, the brighter its glow becomes.

The Baron of Happy Thoughts sighs.

"Ose... why couldn't it have been me who died? How am I ever supposed to smile again... without you?"

A few moments quietly pass. Abby eventually clenches her hand into a fist, lifts up her ring, and begins drawing a series of demonic runes on the wall.

It takes her a full hour to draw more than two hundred of these demonic runes, all while pouring her mana into the ring. When she finishes, she exhales deeply, her face flushing with blood.

"Open."

With a single word, Abby activates those demonic runes. A vertical crack splits the wall in half, and both halves begin to slide to the left and right, revealing a hidden inner chamber.

Abby's mood dims visibly as she watches the room reveal itself, allowing her to enter.

In her mind, Ose's words replay.

If I perish, that will mean the Wordsmiths have won. Even so, there is always a chance for demonkind to regain its momentum. Travel to the designated place and use this code. All will be revealed to you at that point.

When the doors open and Abby walks into the room, she cocks her head slightly, glancing quizzically at the hidden chamber's contents.

Inside, a demonic pentagram drawn on the floor in blood immediately captures her attention. To Abby's surprise, the aura emanating from the blood is painfully familiar, as it belongs to a familiar Emperor-level powerhouse.

"Ose..." Abby mutters.

Just as Abby recognizes the demonic blood's origin, a movement in the back left corner of the room makes her jump in surprise!

She whirls to the left, only to see a skinless, metal robot step out of a previously unimportant-looking alcove. The metallic robot stomps its feet against the floor. Its two blood-red irises lock onto Abby with mechanical indifference, while its frightening facial features make it look like a machine designed to destroy all biological life.

"What the hell?!" Abby exclaims, tripping over her own feet as she sees the 'metal monster' take a step toward her. "Aaaah!"

She falls backward and lands on her butt, quickly shoving herself backward across the floor until she presses against a wall.

"S-stay away! Eeeyaah!" Abby cries.

"Demonic life form designated 'Abby.'" The robot says. "My designation is the Automated Demon Assistant Mechanoid. You may call me ADAM for short."

ADAM pauses, perhaps sensing Abby's fear.

"I have been awaiting your arrival. According to Master Ose's specifications, if you were to come, that would indicate her life had expired. Should I take this as confirmation that Master Ose no longer exists in this world?"

Abby's eyes go up and down the metal machine's head, body, and legs. She gazes at its contours, and its frightening face, looking like a truly hellish demon from some ancient story told to frighten human children. When contrasted with its gruff but otherwise polite tone, she simply cannot resolve these wild differences in her head.

"I... yes... Ose... dead..." Abby says, her voice shaking. "Don't... don't come any closer! What the hell are you?!"

"As I said before." ADAM patiently repeats. "I was placed here by Master Ose in case demonkind should suffer a great loss, or the event of her death. I am a reprogrammed Protectorate, a machine that once belonged to the Volgrim. Now, I am your assistant, and hopefully the salvation of demonkind."

ADAM stares at Abby with its blood-red, lifeless eyes.

"Do you require any assistance in standing?"

Abby immediately shoots to her feet. She continues to press her back against the wall, while shaking her head.

"N-no! No help needed! I'm fine! Don't touch me!"

"I am fully aware of the prejudice toward technology that all demons feel." ADAM states. "Your feelings of fear do not offend me. I am incapable of feeling offense. However, if you remain like this, I will not be able to demonstrate to you my Master's grand plan for saving demonkind. Will you be able to calm your nerves and restore your mind to a state of serenity?"

For several minutes, neither Abby nor ADAM moves. Abby closes her eyes. She inhales and exhales deeply, while forcibly trying to control her fear. Like all demons, she is not

only ignorant to technology, but terrified of it, especially when it suddenly 'springs' upon her out of nowhere.

Still, ADAM's simple movements, calm voice, and lack of hostility eventually manage to pacify her.

"O...okay. What are you... going to show me?" Abby asks.

Adam immediately nods. The robot gestures toward the demonic pentagram drawn on the floor in blood.

"This is a spatial transfer pentagram." ADAM explains. "Master Ose drew it with her own blood. She coded its effects to only function for a small handful of demons, with you being one of them. In truth, Master Ose did not trust most people, but she did trust you. She believed that if demonkind were to face a calamity, you would carry out her wishes. Now, you need only step on this pentagram and activate it with your mana. It will automatically transfer us to the... 'Facility.'"

Abby frowns. "Facility? What is that? Some sort of secret base?"

ADAM's unblinking eyes gaze into Abby's.

"Affirmative."

With Ose's death hanging on Abby's conscience, in truth, she would do anything for the woman she loved. The Baron of Happy Thoughts feels a warmth bubble in her heart at the realization that despite how Ose treated her somewhat coldly, in fact, she didn't hate her like she always said she did.

"Ose... she really did care..." Abby mumbles.

Without delay, Abby steps onto the spatial transfer mechanism. At the same time, so does ADAM.

"I will join you. The Facility contains extreme amounts of high technology. For the average demon, it will be an overwhelming experience. Please do not be frightened by whatever you see. I assure you, nothing there is designed to deliberately harm you."

As Abby pours her mana into the pentagram, she frowns.

"Wait, what do you mean, 'deliberately?'"

Fwoosh!

The Pentagon illuminates with a blood-red light, and the sensation of space tearing swallows Abby and ADAM whole!

A moment later, both of them vanish, transported elsewhere in the galaxy to a secret place nobody alive has ever seen before...

Part 373: Garden of Eden

The space around the Baron of Happy Thoughts contracts and shrinks, stretching her perception of reality. A feeling of suction swallows her brain, momentarily making her black out.

An unknown amount of time later, Abby's eyes open. She finds herself in a brightly lit area, with spots dancing in her vision. ADAM stands beside her, its metallic arm lightly holding her up by the back of her shirt.

"Apologies. The spatial transfer array was improperly aligned. You encountered a higher than expected amount of distortion during the transfer. Are you injured?"

Abby blinks twice. She glances around, completely unable to wrap her head around the strange place she's arrived in.

A huge, metal box.

That is Abby's first impression, due to the steel walls, ceiling, and floor surrounding her.

She immediately feels as if she has teleported into a giant aluminum box, but as she orients herself, she finds that she has arrived atop a hovering platform some two hundred feet in the air, suspended inside a gigantic hangar of incomprehensible size. Below her, thousands of mechanized drones and robots mill about, all of them performing work on strangely shaped 'things' which she can only reluctantly recognize as *spaceships*.

Indeed, despite her casual ignorance of technology, Abby has observed spaceships before. During the Energy Wars, not only did she encounter numerous Volgrim ships, but even the humans made significant technological progress during that time.

But the ships below Abby appear completely different. As if carved from rock, she finds herself surprised by the exterior layer of blackened demonstone coating their surface. Some of the ships look like two long tubes with an orb in between them. Others look like rectangular cubes with heavy engines mounted on the back, as well as weapons of an unknown nature on their tops and sides. The majority of the ships look like they

could fit crews of a dozen or so people comfortably, but the bigger ones seem tailor-made for crews of more than a hundred, or even a thousand!

All of the robots and drones busily attend to these hundreds of craft, maintaining them or even building new ones. Abby quickly spots a few works in progress; ships lacking their outer shell that show their exposed innards.

"I'm... I'm fine." Abby says, slightly dazed. "Where is this? Where are we?"

"This facility is known as The Garden of Eden." ADAM states. "It is a long-kept secret which Master Ose never spoke to anyone about. This facility was intended to be her weapon against the Volgrim Empire. In her final years, she changed her priority to that of surviving the Plague, as well as posing a threat to humanity. You will tell me the manner in which she died."

Instead of requesting information, ADAM forcefully orders Abby to describe Ose's final moments. Abby stands up a little straighter and swats ADAM's hand off the back of her shirt.

"Fine, fine. Don't touch me! I'll tell you what I know."

Abby briefly details the circumstances behind Ose's death. She tells ADAM about the Wordsmith's execution of Ose through his Arthur-puppet, and the other events ADAM is unaware of, including humanity's newest demon-enthraling gadgets.

"You did not witness Master Ose's death yourself?" ADAM asks.

"No. I heard about it through the Oracle network, though." Abby mumbles, averting her eyes. "She's gone. The only woman I ever liked..."

"Death is not always the end." ADAM states. "Master Ose anticipated that someone might kill her. Even after obtaining full control of Bael's body, she made preparations in the event of her untimely demise."

"Preparations?" Abby repeats. "Do you mean this facility? What is it? What is the point of this place?"

ADAM takes two steps forward, arriving at the edge of the hovering platform. Before the robot, a digital console springs into existence, projected holographically through a lens on his hand. ADAM manipulates the holographic controls, causing the platform to zip forward, traveling at a breezy 50 kilometers an hour above the hangar floor.

As the two of them fly, Abby's eyes can't help but notice just how many robots there are swarming all over the Garden of Eden. Despite being labeled a 'garden,' there isn't a single inch of greenery anywhere in the entire facility, not that she can see, anyway.

"The Garden of Eden is demonkind's final refuge." ADAM states. "Following the end of the Energy Wars, the angels and Titans were killed. Humanity was defeated. But although demonkind ultimately prevailed over all of their old rivals, they could not contend with a fraction of the Volgrim's power. At that point, Master Ose was only a Baron, and she remained as such, all the way up to her Emperor ascension six years ago."

ADAM continues. **"Even so, Master Ose was a genius savant. Unlike all her compatriots, she was talented in the art of creating technology. She alone possessed the foresight to craft contingency plans which might someday preserve demonkind's power."**

As ADAM speaks, he gestures to Abby's right, in the opposite direction of her current gaze. Abby follows his finger. The platform flies around the corner of the facility's wall, travels down a short but tall and wide shipping corridor, and ultimately arrives inside a different branch of the Garden of Eden.

Inside, Abby sees something that shocks her to her core.

A supermassive spaceship, more than ten kilometers in diameter, shaped like a huge sphere with one hundred metal legs attached to its base, sits alone in this secondary hangar bay. Resembling a strange, alien creature made of demonstone, the ship seemingly slumbers in place, allowing the horde of robots to swarm around it and maintain its systems. Even when not in use, there are plenty of things that require attending to, so the ship must always stay maintained.

"This is EVE." ADAM states. "EVE 001, to be precise. There are seven EVEs in total, one for each of the Seven Hells. Master Ose built them as a final place for demonkind to assemble, should a great crisis befall them. They are self-sustaining exoships with perfectly recirculating internal systems. In total, five hundred thousand demons may live comfortably inside of them."

"In truth," ADAM continues, "these Ark-class vessels, if used, would indicate a great defeat. Only if demonkind completely falls to humanity should they be utilized."

"Incredible!" Abby gasps. "Oh, Ose! I can't believe you thought this far ahead! She's so amazing, just like I always said she was!"

"Demonkind is not the only species to create Ark-ships." ADAM states. "The Volgrim have also done so. Furthermore, the Wordsmith created several miniature ships called Covenant ships. All of them have similar functions. The core difference between EVE and other Ark ships is its power source."

Adam pauses to look at Abby.

"EVE's inner power cells are energized through mana. Not electricity. This allows them to possess an inexhaustible amount of power, so long as there are demons rich in mana to release their energy into EVE's cores."

"A mana-powered ship?" Abby asks, her expression thoughtful. "If anyone could invent such a thing, it would certainly be Ose..."

ADAM continues piloting the platform across the hangar. The robot eventually pulls up to a docking platform, where it and Abby both get off and continue walking until they reach the central control facility. They enter a series of white-painted hallways, leaving behind the mechanoid-like atmosphere of the spaceship hangars for the more 'livable space' in the facility's interior. As they walk, they pass dozens of other robots similar to ADAM, though many of these machines have different limbs for different functions, such as maintenance and manipulation. Not one machine even glances at Abby. To them, she doesn't even exist.

"Say... where are we, anyway?" Abby asks. "We can't still be in the Labyrinth, can we?"

"The Garden of Eden's location is a closely guarded secret." ADAM explains. "You are not authorized to know where we have traveled. We are deep beneath a planet's crust, where even the Volgrim's most powerful sensors will not penetrate easily. Beyond this information, I will not speak further."

"Oh. Alright." Abby says, slightly dazed by that realization. "We traveled all the way across the galaxy to the inside of a planet. Ose's teleportation thingy is... so cool!"

"Your enthusiasm is noted, if not appreciated." ADAM intones. "Now, take a look. We have arrived."

ADAM stops before a door leading into a seemingly random room. Several doors line the hallway, and the door ADAM chooses doesn't appear all that important. However,

outside this one are several highly advanced scanners and analyzers, all of them dedicated to proving the identity of anyone seeking entry into the room.

Barring the path is a sturdy looking steel door with hexagonal lines criss-crossing its outer surface. The honeycomb structure gives the door added resilience in the event of an attempted forced entry, not that Abby would bother with such a thing.

"What's inside here?" Abby asks, batting her eyes at the creepy robot.

"A specially developed artifact, created personally by Master Ose. This artifact was originally intended to be a trump card used against the Volgrim, until the Wordsmith's emergence six years ago destroyed the need for it."

ADAM's fingers rapidly type a hundred digits into the keypad, its fingers moving far too fast for Abby to follow them. After uploading several bits of information related to its own identity, ADAM turns to Abby while holding out a transparent glass slide in the palm of its metallic hand.

"Baron of Happy Thoughts. Saliva."

Abby stares at him blankly.

"P-pardon?"

"Please deposit your saliva onto this slide. Your DNA is required to gain entry to this room."

Adam calmly states his order, ignoring the look of embarrassment on Abby's face.

"Why the heck would you need my saliva?" Abby asks.

"For DNA scanning purposes." ADAM replies.

"I... have no idea what that means."

ADAM spends the next several minutes explaining to the technologically illiterate demoness what DNA is and why he needs it, but she still scratches her head, eventually resorting to thinking the giant robot must be fucking with her.

"If you wish to see Master Ose's artifact, you must deposit a small amount of saliva onto this slide. No exceptions." ADAM finally states, drawing a hard line.

Abby wiggles her feet and rubs her hand together, feeling gross about the situation, but eventually relents and daintily drools on the slide, grimacing at the robot as she does.

"Ptoo! There! Are you happy?! That's soooo gross!"

"I experience no emotions as a result of your compliance." ADAM states, before turning and placing the saliva-covered slide on a DNA scanner.

Moments later, a red light above the door blinks before turning green. With a loud hiss, the reinforced door opens up, revealing a dark room inside.

As Abby looks into the room, a wave of powerful demonic mana wafts out, slightly startling her, but also making her pupils dilate with excitement.

"Ohmygosh! OH! MY! GOSH!! What the heck?! I can feel Ose's energy! Is she in here? Did she freaking clone herself or something?! That's SO exactly what Ose would do!"

Before ADAM can reply, Abby bounces excitedly into the dark inner room, and her eyes quickly adjust. However, instead of chancing upon a cloned body of Ose, or some other thing resembling such, she instead finds herself in a demonic armory with dozens of demonstone weapons mounted on the walls. Swords, sabers, polearms, spears, staves, axes, hammers, the list goes on and on. The room's walls are also coated in demonstone, absorbing the light cast by the minimal overhead bulbs and giving the room an ominous feeling.

At the back of the room, a pitch-black set of demonstone armor stands at attention, fastened to the wall. Spikes jut out of its shoulders. Its fully enclosed helmet gives Abby the impression someone could be lurking inside, ready to pounce at her and strike! Resembling a medieval demon lord's platemail, this set of armor possesses a fearsome aura. Lightning crackles off of it, causing the hair to stand up on her head. And, at the same time, Abby realizes Ose's aura seems to be emanating... from the armor's core!

ADAM walks up behind Abby. The robot's eyes contain neither reverence nor interest, only mild indifference.

"This is the Matriarch's Armor." ADAM says. **"Master Ose created it before obtaining Bael's body. She spent more than twelve thousand years pouring her energy into it, and even a wisp of her soul. This armor can function autonomously at five percent efficiency, but in the hands of her original body, it can display a fearsome power, increasing her combat strength threefold. She originally crafted the Matriarch's Armor in the hopes it would allow her to fight on equal footing against the High Psions. However, she was unable to test that hypothesis, and now, it remains here."**

A burst of excitement goes up Abby's spine. "You said Ose put a sliver of her soul in it?! Then doesn't that mean she's still alive?! We have to bring her back! We have to revive her!!"

Abby starts hopping up and down giddily, the agony of Ose's death instantly vanishing from her mind, replaced instead with thoughts of bringing her beloved back to life. However, ADAM remains unmoved.

"Master Ose's soul is permanently bound to the Matriarch Armor. Only by reattaching to her original body can she regain her autonomy and 'resurrect.' However, after her first death, and the swapping of souls and bodies with the Duke of Pain, Master Ose expressed to me that she could no longer forcibly take back her original body. Bael's soul is too powerful. Too resilient. However, if he were to wear this armor... he would be capable of interfacing with it. Therefore, the reason Master Ose wished for you to someday travel here was for this purpose."

Abby turns around to look at ADAM. "Wait, I don't understand. What purpose, exactly?"

"Bael is demonkind's final option, if the worst should occur." ADAM states. "If you are able to convince him to don the Matriarch's Armor, Master Ose can continue using his body -her original body- as an avatar. While she will not be able to fully resurrect, she will be able to speak through him and continue moving along her plans for the Garden of Eden."

Abby frowns. "Forget Bael! What about me?! Can't I just get in the armor? I wanna talk to my precious-wecious Ose!! She should be all mine! Let me give it a try!"

ADAM's gaze turns cross. **"Master Ose stated that you would act possessively toward her. It seems her psychological analysis was correct. If you wish, you may attempt to don the Matriarch Armor. However, your soul will not be able to interface with Master Ose's remnant soul. You will fail. Only the Duke of Pain can do so, and that is because his body possesses a connection to Master Ose's soul sliver."**

Abby huffs. "Well, I won't know unless I try! Here I go!!"

Without waiting for ADAM's permission, Abby grabs the helmet and puts it on. She begins pulling the gauntlets, boots, and chestplate off the wall, donning them one after

the other. To her surprise, the armor actually changes its size to accommodate her smaller frame. The chestplate opens up and wraps around her, engulfing her in its wretched, evil aura.

After a few minutes, Abby finishes. She spreads out her demonic sense and quickly finds a solidified pentagram drawn in blood in the suit's interior, pressing against the back of her neck. In it, the sensation of a soul laying dormant grabs her attention.

"Ose! Ose, it's me, Abby! It's your bestest-best friend in the whole wide world! Come on, don't be shy! I can feel you in there! Wakey-wakey, eggs and bakey!~"

Abby prods Ose's soul dozens of times. She whispers sweet nothings to her, all in a sickeningly, aggravatingly syrupy tone.

However, no matter what Abby says, Ose's soul doesn't respond.

After thirty minutes, Abby's spirits deflate like a punctured balloon. She stares at ADAM in front of her with a look of defeat.

"This... she really can't hear me? There has to be a way we can talk..."

"You misunderstand the Matriarch Armor's purpose." ADAM states. **"It is not a vehicle for Master Ose's revival. At the very least, it was never intended to be. Her soul sliver only exists to grant the armor a certain degree of remote autonomy. Bringing her original body into the armor can be said to be a loophole, a minor way of returning her brilliant mind to life. And now, Baron of Happy Thoughts, I must entrust this mission to you. You will bring the Duke of Pain here so that we can place him inside the Matriarch Armor. Only then can Master Ose's final plans for demonkind's survival become active at a moment's notice."**

Feeling more than a little dismal, Abby simply nods. She begins pulling off pieces of the Matriarch's Armor, then places them back onto the mounts on the wall. Not long after, she fully extricates herself and gazes gloomily at them.

"It's so unfair..." Abby mutters. "Why couldn't it have been me? If only Ose body-swapped with me, everything would have been perfect. Then we could have hugged, and kissed, and-"

"We will now return to the spatial transfer glyph." ADAM interrupts, not bothering with Abby's whining. **"The sooner you complete your mission, the**

better. Do you know the Duke of Pain's current location?"

ADAM leads Abby out of the Matriarch's Armory, closing the door behind them. Once they leave, Abby shrugs.

"I don't know. He probably went to Tarus II. That's where everyone goes, these days. Bunch of fleshbag bootlickers. All the Emperors are eager to kiss the Wordsmith's butt if it means they can scrounge up some benefits."

"I understand the general concept of the 'Belial Booster.'" Adam says. "However, the truth is, such a device was never necessary for demonkind to thrive. If the Volgrim did not exist, your species could have easily bred humans en-masse and slaughtered them by the billions for the sake of reaping their souls. The population limits enforced on humanity by the Volgrim were as much a limit on humanity as they were a limit on demonkind."

ADAM glances at Abby. **"If demonkind were to leave the Milky Way and escape the pull of the Volgrim, your species could simply breed humans en-masse. Would that not solve your internal political problems?"**

Abby's heart skips a beat. Her eyes shine with light.

"You're... you're right. I never thought about that. I always did find it weird we had so few human souls. We should have had billions of them, but we barely had millions, and we always spread them around the lower-ranked demons. We pretty much never used them to advance Barons, Dukes, or Emperors..."

"The reasons for doing so were myriad and diverse." ADAM states. "If one Hell were to suddenly gain an additional Duke or Emperor, the others would become outraged. As a result, the safest way to keep the balance and not risk a revolt was by maintaining the status quo. Prior to the Stormbringer War, Beelzebub was one of the very few demons to rapidly advance through the ranks."

"Beelze-chump!" Abby snorts. "That ugly hothead! Ew! He was always eying my precious Ose, but she'd never give HIM the time of day! Ose only loved ME and nobody else! I should have been the one to advance to the rank of Duke, then me and my Ose could have been together forever!"

If ADAM could sigh, he most certainly would, especially when faced with Abby's relentless barrage of Ose-loving word-vomit.

"Noted. You are indeed exactly the demoness that Master Ose described."

"Damn right!" Abby exclaims. "And don't you worry! I'll drag that Bael here, kicking and screaming if I must! He'll definitely bring back my Ose, for real!"

"I hope to hear of your eventual success." ADAM states.

Part 374: Gorn's Seclusion

At the outskirts of Tarus II's Warpgate Encampment.

Not long after finishing his business with the Wordsmith, Emperor Gorn confidently swaggers his way out of the city, passing the numerous humans that have begun to spring up in houses, duplexes, and large apartment complexes. The further west he goes, the smaller the population, before ultimately reaching a half-mile zone without any structures, in between the Fortress of Retribution and the Warpgate Encampment.

When Gorn reaches the encampment, a few monster guards at the gate, namely a pair of Harpies, quickly scan his body for any strange paraphernalia before waving him through. Gorn reaches the Warpgate itself only a few minutes later, and ultimately passes through to the Labyrinth Core, where he finds himself amidst a bustling hub of activity. No longer is the Core merely a place for humans and their allies to meet up, but it has actually become ten times more densely packed with demons as well.

Newly rebuilt, the Core features multiple levels for people to conduct their business. It functions not only as a transfer between worlds through its seven Warpgates, but also a trading hub for all the different species to congregate.

On the bottom-most level, the computers responsible for calculating Warpgate transfer coordinates have been rebuilt from the ground up by Phoebe Hiro, allowing for the gates to deactivate and reactivate two times faster than they did prior to Stormbringer. While it may have taken ten or twenty minutes to calculate Warpgate coordinates in the past, now it typically only takes five to ten.

The level above the computer center is the primary level, where people enter and exit the Warpgates. Instead of a bowl-like formation, the entire Core has been remade to feature as flat of ground as possible; extra useful for transferring vehicles and supplies between worlds.

As for the third, fourth, and fifth levels, these mostly consist of demons, humans, and monsters waiting for their gates to open next. Only by collectively contributing Merit Tokens can any group accelerate the speed of their gate transfer opening up. Even for Gorn, a lauded Emperor of the demons, he cannot demand for a gate to his homeworld to

be opened before those of other people, unless he contributes a substantial number of his own Merit Tokens.

Sadly, this cannot be helped. With only seven Warpgates but billions of potential people needing to travel to hundreds of different locations and worlds, the Core must be put on a strictly limited and regulated rotation of worlds to maintain order.

When Gorn steps through the Tarus II Warpgate, the central of the seven which always remains active and connected to Tarus II, he inhales deeply.

A smug smile flashes across Gorn's face as he dwells on the truly fortuitous encounter he just enjoyed.

"Hehehe... Wordsmith. You have helped me more than you know."

Gorn turns to an Orc stationed near the Tarus II Warpgate.

"Where is the group for Diabolus?" Gorn asks.

The Orc turns to evaluate him, and immediately snaps to attention when he spots Gorn's Emperor-level horns.

"Urgh. Diabolus group. Third Level. East Wing."

Gorn nods. "Very good."

He ignores the orc's presence and wades into the crowd before him, more than two hundred thousand people all mashed together with only a few feet between them at any given spot. Not only does Gorn pass humans, but goblins scurrying beneath his feet, minotaurs towering above his head, and even other demons who glance at him in surprise when they sense his aura passing them by. Even with humanity and demonkind technically united, Emperors are still rarely seen, and hardly any low-level demon Grunts will ever witness a living Emperor in the flesh.

Gorn rides an elevator to the third level. He walks to a seating arrangement where more than twenty-thousand demons from his Hell of Calamity await their turn to travel home.

Among these demons are also a smaller group of Orcs. Gorn raises an eyebrow when he spots one of the orcs, an older male of notable origin.

"Shorath, fourth son of Maltus, the First Ancient." Gorn says, taking a seat in the waiting area beside that tall, imposing Orc. "Quite some time has passed since I last saw

you. Your aura has grown substantially more imposing over these last few millennia."

The muscular orc, a cunning-looking male with a thick black beard and hair worn in dreadlocks, turns to look at Gorn with mild respect. "Emperor Gorn. It is my lucky day to meet you here. I have just returned from a great hunt! The beasts on Tarus II are quite fearsome. I encountered a twelve-eyed creature with vicious mandibles that nearly rent me in half. My third cousin actually died to its maw, the poor sod!"

Speaking of death so casually, Shorath doesn't seem to care at all that one of a thousand cousins perished. In time, a thousand more will spawn, and at least half of them won't survive to their hundredth year alive. To him, the loss of one insignificant cousin means nothing.

"This generation is too weak." Gorn comments, turning his eyes to the far wall, where expected wait times update on huge monitors live for each of the Warpgates. He spots the next opening of the Diabolus gate, scheduled for just two hours in the future, and smiles. "I do hope you were able to enjoy a good laugh at his expense."

"Indeed!" Shorath chuckles. "Ultimately, I smote that creature with my father's ancestral club. Ah, have you heard? The Zhurm's Guard Selection will soon occur, just three months from now. I intend to compete and win the right to serve at my Zhurm's side! It will earn my lineage great honor."

"Oh? Maybe I'll pop over and watch." Gorn idly replies. "Though, I might be too busy. Hehehe... I happen to have acquired quite the useful gift from the Wordsmith. All of my problems will soon fade away."

"What sort of gift?" Shorath inquires.

"The kind that costs a thousand Merit Tokens." Gorn replies, a sly smile twitching at the edges of his mouth.

"You paid for a Word of Power? How extravagant!" Shorath says, clearly unimpressed. "The cost to performance ratio just isn't worth it. I looked up the two hundred Words of Power he offered. None of them are all that impressive! Compared to making two Dukes into Emperors, you have suffered a loss."

"The only power a person can rely on in this world is his own strength..." Gorn mutters. "Minions and underlings might make my Hell more formidable, but the more Emperors there are in the Hell of Calamity, the more competitors I'll have. I would much

prefer to strengthen myself until I become unstoppable. Then I won't need the little peasants..."

"Your ambitions sure are *impressive*." Shorath praises, in a somewhat sarcastic manner. "I hope you can bear the cost."

"I will pay any price to attain power." Gorn concludes, leaving no more room for discussion. "If you ever reach the apex of your species... you will understand."

Shorath chuckles. "To become the Zhurm... it is what any self respecting orc would want. But doing so is harder than ascending from Hell to Heaven! I have countless years before I can match up to the great Ashura..."

The two of them fall silent for a while, before ultimately returning to more banal topics.

Two hours pass. A voice transmits over the loudspeaker.

"Attention, all entities in the waiting areas. Gate Five will open for transfer to Diabolus in three minutes. It will remain open for twenty minutes. Please begin shuttling to the transfer position now."

Gorn stands up.

"Finally."

He, Shorath, and all the other demons and orcs transferring to Diabolus move to the second level. By the time they arrive, the Warpgate has already transitioned, allowing them to smoothly pass through to their homeworld of Diabolus.

After walking through the Warpgate and arriving on Diabolus, Gorn pauses when he senses the aura of a Duke nearby.

"Ah, Mara." Gorn says, flashing a toothy smile at her. "On your way back to Tarus II?"

The Duke of Collection pauses before stepping through. "I am. Hmm? Your aura seems a little... different."

As a high level demoness, Mara notices a faint fluctuation in Gorn's demonic aura.

"Does it? That might be due to my recent visit with the Wordsmith." Gorn chuckles. "If you can save up a thousand points, I believe the effects will be quite... pleasing."

"What Word of Power did you exchange for?" Mara asks, eyeing Gorn curiously.

"Haha." Gorn chuckles, without elaborating. "I take my leave."

Invisible question marks pop up over Mara's head as Gorn walks away, but ultimately, his business is none of her business. She passes through the Warpgate to the Core, while Gorn continues traveling forward.

After walking half a mile from the Diabolus Warpgate complex, Gorn lifts his eyes to the blood red sky, soaked in fire. On this planet, 38C (100F) temperatures are normal, while on the hottest days, the planet's heat can easily reach 65.5C (150F). No human would dare come here, nor would any of the lesser monster species. But for orcs and the hardiest demons, the planet's sweltering temperatures don't bother them in the least. For Gorn, anything cooler than Diabolus's average heat is almost like a wintery chill.

"Mmm. Smells like death is in the air." Gorn randomly remarks.

The Hell of Calamity's mightiest Emperor reaches up and grabs hold of his face. He begins to pull on it, and immediately, a mystical scene takes place as his bearded, mature, and intimidating visage peels away. A flurry of light and darkness explodes around him, shrouding his appearance, while he pulls out another mask from his Mind Realm. This mask, surprisingly, exudes a mixture of a holy and divine energy, but mixed with something bloody and vile. A single eye, like that of a cyclops, sits above its nose. Its color is a mixture of pale white with blood-red streaks coloring its entire surface.

"It's been a while since I donned 'Bloody Tear,'" Gorn chuckles. "If only I could still use Vermillion... but that damned Mephisto... tsk."

Gorn places Bloody Tear onto his face, and another explosion of light and shadow erupts, continuing to shroud his body and make it impossible for observers to see his 'true form.' A few moments later, Gorn stands tall as a six-armed angel of death, something resembling a monstrous version of demonkind's former enemies. Six blood-red wings sprout from his back, and his singular eye sweeps around, as if searching for prey.

Bloody Tear. A solid investigative-type mask, but one lacking in power. Compared to Vermillion, a mask based on propelling the power of fire to its peak, Bloody Tear is more of a mask designed for speed and scouting. Its singular eye contains visual acuity that can not only pick out a coin on the ground from fifty miles in the air, but can even peer through half a mile of dirt and debris to gaze inside of mountains and buildings.

In the past, Gorn used Bloody Tear to hunt down angels, humans, and other dissidents. But that was during the Energy Wars. These days, he only uses it if he requires the power of flight.

"Tsk. With Vermillion gone, I'll need to craft a new Face." Gorn growls. "Bloody Tear is too old and unwieldy. My crafting prowess has grown by leaps and bounds since the Energy Wars."

With a shake of his head, Gorn leaps into the air and spreads his six bloody wings. He takes to the skies, causing countless demons to gaze up at him with awe in their eyes.

"Look! That's Emperor Gorn!"

"His aura is so powerful! He must be the strongest demon alive today!"

"Yeah... well, now that Ose's gone, anyway."

"Shut up, idiot! Do you want him to come down here and kill you?! Gorn could murder you with a flap of those wings!"

Despite these demons whispering under their breath, even though Gorn is two thousand feet above the planet's surface, he easily picks out the sounds of individual conversations thanks to Bloody Tear's unique spying capabilities.

"...Hmm. Perhaps this old face does still have some use." Gorn muses, ignoring the blabbering weaklings.

Gorn races across the sky. In less than an hour, he arrives at a demonic temple built into the side of a mountain. Carved from demonstone and granite, this temple is actually Gorn's palace, his home for the last 100,000 years. The first thing a casual observer might notice is the temple's Oriental origins, with its many pagodas sprinkled around the mountainside, its high levels of Feng Shui, and even its curved rooftops, allowing the occasional molten rainfall to drizzle off the sides of every structure.

On Diabolus, not a single green plant grows anywhere. Instead, fire-type plants and wildlife abound, such as Phoenix Parasol Trees or Inflamed Yang Beetles. These creatures thrive in the heat, bolstered by the rich demonic mana that has accumulated near populous areas for the past 100,000 years. Even in Gorn's personal palace, colorful red and yellow shrubbery line the walls, livening up the decor and increasing the heat indoors further. To enter Gorn's palace, only the strongest demons and monsters would even be able to step foot there, let alone live there for extended periods of time.

Gorn drops to the ground. His vicious and evil angel visage draws the attention of several guards posted around his living quarters, but they immediately identify him and bow respectfully.

"Oh, Gorn, darling." Says a Demon Duke inside Gorn's quarters. "You returned later than I expected."

This Duke, a female named Mai Sho, lays back on a silk couch woven with red and yellow fibers. Her long, pink legs stick out of her Chinese-styled dress, exposing her thighs and calves in a sensually arousing way. As one of Gorn's many concubines, she holds a high position in his harem.

Gorn strides into the inner chamber. His singular eye sweeps across not only her, but a half dozen other Dukes and Barons, some of them male, some of them female, all part of his harem.

"That new Warpgate time system added an extra hour to my wait." Gorn simply says. "Is Serena here?"

"Lady Serena is currently working with the survivors from the Hell of Isolation." Mai Sho says. She lifts a long, slender smoking pipe to her cherry-red lips and inhales from it. "I imagine she will return later tonight."

"Mmm. I am going to go into seclusion for a few months." Gorn says. "During that time, unless you receive a notice exceeding the fifth level, don't bother me with it. Serena and Crow will be in charge."

A handsome male Baron wearing a tight-fitting corset sits on a chair not far from Mai Sho, his legs crossed. He lifts his chin, a look of surprise on his face. "Gorn, dearest, you're going into seclusion? At a critical time like this? Whatever for, love?"

Gorn doesn't immediately answer. He pauses for a moment to glance at the dozen or so members of his harem present before shaking his head.

"I am going to mold new faces. Thanks to the Wordsmith, I have made tremendous gains. Even he will not be able to fathom the tool he has given me. I estimate my speed will increase by... a hundredfold!"

Several demons gasp in surprise.

"A hundredfold?" Mai Sho asks, sitting up a little straighter. "How is that possible? The shortest time you've ever taken to craft a face was seventy years. Are you saying you might be able to make a new face in only seven months?!"

"I will not know until I try." Gorn says. "But... I feel quite confident in my chances."

"If you succeed, you will surely obtain even greater gains than merely a few new faces!" The male Baron from before exclaims. "Best of wishes to you, love! I will meditate for your good luck!"

Gorn nods. "I would like to try and visit the Zhurm's Guard Selection in three months. Inform me when that day arrives. If I choose not to go... it will be for a very good reason."

Without any further fanfare, Gorn steps through the doors of his private chamber, passes through that room into a secluded meditation chamber, and slams the door shut.

A fifty-ton boulder blocks the doorway, sealing Gorn inside where nobody will be able to easily bother him. With a flick of his wrist, Gorn activates the chamber's internal lights, bathing himself in a blood-red glow.

A huge mirror takes up one of the walls, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. In the center of the chamber sits a mat made of soft but heat resistant fibers, suitable for one to sit on for extended periods of time. And, most importantly, a series of magical tools sit attached to the far wall, all of them exuding various amounts of demonic energy. These tools are Gorn's primary means of molding 'faces,' and as such, are the most precious things he owns. If he were to lose them, he could remake them, but he would need to expend a great deal of time and effort.

The Emperor of Many Faces stands in the center of the room for a full hour. He stares at his reflection in the mirror, the image of the one-eyed, six-armed and six-winged angel. For a long while, he simply gazes at himself.

Then, he reaches up and grabs hold of his face.

With a light tug, Gorn pulls away his Bloody Tear mask. A wave of light and dark energy spirals around him, shrouding him from the senses of anyone who might want to look at him. Even if he looks into the mirror, he won't be able to see himself amidst the cloud of black and gold smoke.

But after ten seconds, the smoke fades away.

Gorn doesn't don a new face.

Instead, he steels his stomach and waits for the smoke to clear.

When it finally fades away, Gorn's true body appears.

He gazes at himself with empty eyes.

His sickly brown skin does not look like the vibrant hue many dark-skinned humans might have, but rather, like the color of dried-out demon blood. Old, rotten, and fetid.

His scrawny arms and short stature make him appear to be at most five feet tall. He resembles a sickly human more than the frightening Emperor who rules over one of the most powerful Hells. His hairless body and wrinkled face even make him look like a cross between a lanky teenager and a half-dead old man.

Without a doubt, when not wearing one of his masks, Gorn does not appear intimidating or powerful in the slightest.

The Emperor of Many Faces gazes at his shriveled, scrawny, weak and pathetic little body with a look of disgust.

"Why must this be me...?" He asks, in a voice that cracks, as if he were suffering from early puberty. "Why must I falsify myself to earn the slightest respect?"

Slowly, Gorn sits down on the mat, cross-legged. He continues to stare at himself for a while before sighing deeply.

"The last face I molded was the Emerald Devil... but that was thirteen hundred years ago. I haven't had much drive for quite a long time. But that all changes... now! Thanks to the Wordsmith, I finally have the capability to change my lot in life. I can move forward with my great experiment..."

Gorn inhales deeply. He closes his eyes and meditates for an hour, then stands up and walks to his wall of tools. He pushes a button on that wall, and it splits down the middle, sliding open to reveal another room hidden just a bit deeper. Inside, the room appears entirely empty, except for rows upon rows of 'racks' attached to the walls. These racks are custom-made to fit Gorn's masks, allowing him to slot them onto the walls for easy viewing.

Gorn reaches inside his Mind Realm. He begins pulling out masks, one after the other, and placing them on the walls.

"Vermillion. The Desirable One. Bloody Tear. The False Idol. Mother's Embrace. Sleeping Viper. Tiger God. South Sea's Sunderer..."

One by one, Gorn places masks on the walls. He lines them up in order of importance, taking the time to calm his mind and dwell on all the past feats he's accomplished with these masks.

In total, Gorn possesses more than two thousand faces! Each of them is a frightening artifact capable of not only granting him incredible powers, but also blending into target populaces, mixing with other species unseen, hiding his aura and body, and even boosting his capabilities when crafting new ones.

But among these masks, the most precious is undoubtedly the second one he placed down...

The Desirable One.

This is the face he wears every day, any time he steps out in public. Almost never does he take off The Desirable One. In fact, the only times he historically will do so is during periods of seclusion, when he intends to craft a new face.

Gorn finishes placing all of his 2,398 masks on the walls. It takes him several hours, but this does not feel to him like work. Instead, it is more of a ritual he must perform in order to sharpen his frame of mind.

He inhales and exhales deeply, allowing Diabolus's heat to wash over his skin. With the door closed, the room reaches a sweltering temperature that would soon boil water.

But Gorn pays this mild heat no attention.

Instead, a smile traces upon his lips.

"Wordsmith. I must thank you. That Word of Power you granted me... **Perception.** It will change everything. I have spent 100,000 years trying to find the limits of my powers, but now, thanks to you, I can accelerate my scale by an unfathomable amount. Are 'faces' truly my only limit? I think not. I can craft even more incredible things... but it is you who ultimately will grant me the push I need to unlock my full potential."

His smile deepens, becoming more and more sinister by the second.

"That First Emperor... so scary. He hides his identity for reasons unknown. But I do not fear him. My masks can copy anyone. They can counter *anything*. The First Emperor does not frighten me. Only the fear that I might never reach the pinnacle of power keeps me up at night. But I need no longer worry about such things. You have granted me a terrific boon, indeed... hehehe!"

As Gorn laughs to himself, he plucks one of the faces off the wall and dons it, transforming into an Orc of refined majesty and intellect.

"Today, the Dire Blacksmith will begin his work! In just a few months, I will create a mask that can shake the cosmos and rattle the heavens! I wonder what looks the others will give me when they discover my new limits?"

"Heh heh heh..."

Part 375: Lorent's Golden Garden

Tarus II, near the city center.

Just a short walk to the south-west of the Lazarus Tower, one of the Fortress of Retribution's most popular resting spots provides a relaxing environment where any person who wishes can come and sit, easing their mind and letting them take a load off after a hard day of work. This place is a huge, open park known as the Golden Garden, where thousands of beautiful and exotic plants collected from thirty-plus paradise-class planets have been planted and maintained by the people in charge of it.

Benches sit scattered, to and fro, amidst more than ten carefully cultivated walking paths made of soft and loosely compacted dirt. In some spots within the city's largest park, flowers are arranged to form rainbows of color, while in others the colors are deliberately placed to create chaotic and random arrangements.

In addition, seemingly ancient and long-lived trees with pink and yellow flowers dot the perimeter, forming a natural enclosure that cuts off the sound of the city by reflecting any noises outside the garden. Dedicated sprinkler systems provide the trees and flowers and other assorted plants with the water and nutrients they need, while a hundred groundskeepers trim and maintain the plants.

While the Golden Garden might appear ancient, in truth, it isn't even a week old. Thanks to the Wordsmith's magic, the trees and flowers have been rapidly and artificially aged to create the park, which would have otherwise required a hundred years of careful planting and cultivation.

However, once they've already been formed, maintaining them takes considerably less effort.

The head of the Golden Garden turns out to be none other than Sir Lorent, Phoebe Hiro's nephew. Despite technically being only a spiritual life-form, thanks to specially created soul-enhancer devices that enable him to take a solid form, he and Shana, and even Fiona can enter and exit the Golden Garden, becoming fully corporeal and capable of interacting with solid matter. It's only when they exit the park that their bodies return to incorporeality, making them act like ghosts that can pass through walls.

On this particular day, Sir Lorent Berthold and Shana, having becoming close over the past month or two, sit together in the park with a pair of easels before them. Since their daily tasks have already been completed, neither of them needs to do any work for the rest of the day, and as such, they don't have much to do.

The southern section of the park is a very special place where many works of art now sit, some of them depicting battles of the Arthurian Era, while others look like doodles made by children. In fact, they *are* doodles made by children, with Shana being just one of the kids hanging out with Mordred's Butcher while he works.

Not only does Shana sit beside him, but half a dozen other kids, all of them with their own paintbrushes and easels. They watch Lorent's hands with gasps of ooh's and ahh's, laughing when he splashes paint on their noses or adds images of butterflies and birds to his scenic vistas.

"Mister Lorent! I finished!" Says a young boy nearby, just seven years old. He quickly pulls his painting off the easel and holds it in his arms proudly. While the image is a relatively simple drawing of stick-men and a house, Lorent doesn't stint on his praise.

"Very good, Will." Lorent says, pointing at the top of the painting. "Your clouds look better than ever! The way you mixed the blue and white truly makes them appear vivid and lifelike!"

"Thanks!" Will says, a cheesy grin on his face. "I'll draw them better-er next time!"

Sir Lorent smiles kindly. In his heart, a faint sense of satisfaction swells with pride.

This is the life I've always wanted to live. Compared to following Mordred's orders or suffering silently within that white void for an eternity... this life truly does feel like bliss.

After a moment of contemplation, Lorent returns to his painting. Before him sits an incredibly realistic depiction of Alexander the Great, a Hero Lorent has always admired. Drawn in a statue-like pose, Lorent vividly depicts Alexander's heterochromatic eyes, with one being blue, and the other yellow. Alexander stabs his sword at the sky, and his mouth hangs open, as if shouting a fearful warcry to intimidate his enemies.

On Lorent's left, Shana draws a beautiful garden not unlike the Golden Garden she currently sits in. Despite looking and acting like a child, lacking any sort of adult vocabulary, Shana's true intelligence is actually quite high. Having been locked in her

artifact for 100,000 years, she was never able to grow up and mature, socially, but her mind is neither empty nor devoid of thought. Within an astoundingly short period of time, she has already become quite adept at drawing her thoughts out with images, if not words.

"What a beautiful garden." Lorent comments, patting Shana's head. "Those roses are so pretty, I feel as if they will soon jump out of the painting and start swaying in the breeze."

"Me paint like daddy!" Shana says, smiling at Lorent. "Daddy good painter!"

Seeing her heartfelt gaze of admiration, a pang of emotion tugs at Lorent's sensibilities. He squeezes her shoulder affectionately.

"And what a good little daughter I have."

The two of them have spent large amounts of time together, and as such, not long ago, they informally started referring to one another as father and daughter. For Lorent, whose family have long, long ago perished to the annals of time, Shana is just about the closest he might ever have to a child. And considering their shared history of isolation within their artifacts, they can truly relate to each other on an emotional level. As for Shana, she was an orphan from birth, and as such, never knew the love of a mother or father.

Shana leans her head against Lorent's side while continuing to paint, and as for Lorent, he keeps his hand on her shoulder, using his other free hand to paint.

Time passes. Some of the kids finish their painting and leave, while others get called away by their parents. Even when some of the children leave, others come to take their place. The Golden Gardens can't be called the most popular place for kids to play, but among humanity's members, there really aren't that many children still alive. Those who do exist were the few lucky survivors of Stormbringer, those who escaped and later returned on the Covenant ships, and perhaps half a million rescued from the Seven Hells during Jason's teleportation incident.

In total, of the sixty-something million humans in the galaxy, perhaps only two or three million of them are children.

But once the time comes to revive the fallen through the Lazarus Tower, those numbers will inflate substantially.

Just as Lorent is about to finish his painting of Alexander the Great's statue, a figure approaches him, catching his attention.

"Ah, Aunt Phoebe!" Lorent says, a smile spreading across his face. "How good to see you."

"Hi Fee-bee!" Shana says, not adding anything else, but waving cutely at her.

Phoebe Hiro walks toward Lorent, but doesn't say anything. She sits down on a bench across from him and sighs.

"Ohh..."

Lorent frowns. He pulls his hand away from Shana, sets the easel aside, and takes a more careful look at his aunt.

"Are you alright?" Lorent asks, noticing her somewhat pale expression.

Phoebe rests her face in her hands and rocks from side to side. "I... feel a bit nauseous."

"Hmm. You've been working yourself too hard, auntie." Lorent says, walking over to sit beside her. He gently rubs Phoebe's back. "Why don't I help you to the hospital? Samantha can check you out."

Phoebe groans. "No. That's not... necessary. You won't be able to help me once we leave the garden, anyway. I have a splitting headache. I just need to sit for a bit and collect myself."

"Hmm... alright, then." Lorent says. He turns to one of the boys near him. "William, go and fetch Miss Doris. Tell her Phoebe needs help getting to the hospital."

"Okay!" Says the little boy.

William runs off to fetch one of the groundskeepers, while Lorent keeps his aunt company.

"You should take the rest of the day off." Lorent says. "I know you're in a rush to build houses and homes not only for the people on Tarus II, but also those from the Lazarus Tower. Even so, if you faint from exhaustion, you'll cause quite a fright. Don't make me tattle on you to the Wordsmith."

"Jason's a big softy." Phoebe says, laughing wryly. "Haha... he'll melt like putty if I stand my ground."

"I'm sure he will." Lorent concludes.

A few minutes later, Doris shows up and helps Phoebe to her feet. The two of them leave the Golden Garden, while Lorent remains behind.

"She'll be fine..." Lorent says, more to ease his own tension than to allay anyone else's concerns.

Lorent returns to his painting. Not long after, he finishes the depiction of Alexander the Great, then picks up the painting and walks over to a designated empty space a few hundred feet away, right in the middle of a smattering of flowers and vines.

"Look, look!" The kids exclaim. "Lorent's gonna do it again! He's gonna do it!"

Lorent holds up the painting. He frowns deeply, concentrates his mind, and begins to focus his magical energy onto the painting held firmly in his hands.

Weng!

The painting hums and shivers, like a dog excited to snap up a treat. It glows with power, and Alexander's statue becomes blurry and indistinct.

Moments later...

Whoomph!

The paper becomes pure white, and Alexander's statue vanishes. It reappears not far from Lorent, right atop the designated platform!

Standing twenty feet tall, Alexander's commanding visage materializes in reality, his sword stabbed at the sky, as if defying the will of the heavens!

"Whooooaaa!" William shouts. "So COOL! I wanna be like that guy when I grow up!!"

"Alexander the Great." Lorent says. "He was a Hero, like me, Shana, and the Wordsmith. He was our predecessor, a mighty warrior whose eyes could manipulate time and gravity. Legends say Alexander the Great smote dead two of the Demon Emperors of his era, as well as nearly two dozen Dukes. He died young, though, ultimately slain by Satan the Devil. Now, nothing remains of his soul in this world. As for the Gordian Knot, none know of where it disappeared."

Shining admiration appears in the eyes of all the children. Even Shana appears a little entranced.

However, not long after, Shana shakes her head.

"He empty."

Lorent glances down at her. "Hmm? Empty?"

"Yeah. He empty. Nothing there."

"That's because this is only a statue." Lorent chuckles. "My painting ability isn't all that useful. All I can do is conjure inanimate objects. It would be quite impressive if I could bring a fallen Hero back to reality, haha."

He pats her shoulder, then returns to the bench where he was sitting before, as do all the children behind him.

"Alright, kids. I think I'll take some requests now. What do you want me to paint next?"

Phoebe sits inside a private room with Belial, both of them on a couch together, comfortably close.

"...And you're sure that's what it is?" Phoebe asks.

"I'm sure." Belial says, smiling sweetly. "When will you tell Jason?"

"Later tonight." Phoebe says. "Well... I still have things to do. Tell Doctor Leeroy I said thank-you for the help with my headache. It means a lot."

Belial leans over and kisses Phoebe's cheek. "I'll let him know. Take care."

Phoebe leaves the hospital, a strange feeling swelling in her heart. She heads to the east side of the city, in the general direction of her house. After passing the Lazarus Tower, she pauses to look at the one and only church in the entirety of the Fortress of Retribution.

Built just two days after the capitulation of the Hidden Emperors, the beautiful structure stands amidst an ocean of smaller homes and a small park, with an isolation formation placed over it to protect the privacy of its occupants. From outside the barrier, nobody can see those living inside, nor whatever activities they might be up to. All they can see is the building itself and all the parts of its glorious, gold-crested structure towering over the nearby homes.

With a beautiful golden cross placed atop its steeple, and stained glass windows that shimmer under the light of the midday sun, the church is actually the residence of not

only the four Archangels, but Cassiel, too.

Few people know of Cassiel's identity. Aside from the soldiers who helped rescue her from Faith's End, nobody else has seen her in person, though this is almost entirely due to her staying indoors and never coming out in the light of day. The demons, especially, don't know of Cassiel's identity. Not that any of them would try and snoop on the church. After hearing rumors of the dreadful might of the Cherubiim, not even the gutsiest demon, let alone any of the Hidden Emperors, would attempt to intrude on the Archangel's privacy.

As such, Cassiel lives a comfortable life, one without any misery or strife. Simple, basic, and lacking all flair...

But at the same time, she also gets to live with her fellow angels. While what remains of angelkind is naught but four scattered Archangel souls and one single Lazarite, they still occupy a position of considerable power in the human-demon alliance. Any of Raphael's words could change the situation, if he so desired.

Phoebe pauses to look at the church. After a moment of consideration, she changes her mind from heading home to heading into the church.

A minute later, she passes through the isolation barrier and steps into the church's confines. With three levels of living space, the church is not so much a congregation point for pious people as it is the designated living space for angelkind's remnants. As such, the interior is peaceful and quiet, with barely any noise to hear at all.

When Phoebe arrives inside, she pauses, spotting Cassiel sitting in front of a large piano placed against the eastern wall. Light streams through the stained glass windows, falling onto her body and warming her skin. The Lazarite doesn't play the piano, but instead merely stares at it, as if in a long, drawn-out daze.

"Hello, Cassiel..." Phoebe says, but before she can say anything further, Cassiel jumps in fright, startled by Phoebe's words. The Lazarite stumbles off her chair and scurries backward, her heart racing while she gazes at Phoebe in terror. The halo above her head dims and flickers, affected by her scrambled emotions.

Only after a few moments does she recognize the person who spoke. Still, she remains curled up on the ground, unable to take her eyes off Phoebe's figure.

"S-sorry..." Phoebe whispers, wincing at Cassiel's reaction. "I... didn't mean to startle you. Is Raphael here? I'm... I'm looking for him. I need to talk to him."

Cassiel's chest rises and falls. She inhales and exhales, struggling to slow her racing heart, while the halo above her head slowly brightens again. After a few moments, she shakily pulls herself to her feet, sits back at the piano and glances at Phoebe from the corner of her eye.

"Th..."

Cassiel starts to say something, but hesitates.

"...Third..."

Having uttered just one word, she turns away, unable to say anything else.

"Third floor? Okay. Thank you, Cassiel. I... appreciate your help." Phoebe says, while forcing a smile.

Feeling a little awkward and slightly ashamed of herself for having scared the Lazarite, Phoebe turns and walks toward the spiral staircase at the northern side of the building. She makes her way up past the second floor to the third, the one closest to the roof.

Each of the three floors is a dedicated living space for the Archangels. Typically, Cassiel, Soleil, and Uriel share the first floor, while Michael and Gabriel share the second. Raphael alone lives on the third floor, though he isn't always there, typically taking to the skies to observe humankind from above. With his abilities, hiding from those around him is a simple matter, and as such, he often works as a secret spy for humanity.

"Raphael?" Phoebe says, as she walks up the stairs. "Are you home?"

When Phoebe reaches the top of the stairs, she finds herself stepping out of the confines of a mere building into the interior of a self-contained world. Raphael's illusory powers allow him to create a miniature replication of Heaven, with scenic vistas including Heaven's primary locales, its mountains, its forests, and even its greatest cities. She blinks in surprise as every one of her senses tells her she is no longer on Tarus II, but has traveled back in time to the apex of angelkind's Ancient Era rule.

"Incredible..." Phoebe murmurs.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Asks Raphael, sitting atop a mountain plateau 'far' in the distance. Despite speaking normally, his words reach her with ease. The tens of miles separating them seem comfortingly close, as if he were sitting just a stone's throw away. Phoebe can

even make out the individual hairs on his beard, proving that his illusion does have its limits.

"Come. Take a seat." Raphael says, gesturing to a spot beside himself.

A moment later, Phoebe's body flickers. She teleports beside Raphael, drawn to him through his spatial powers.

"Oh!" Phoebe exclaims, slightly startled. "I... this isn't what I was expecting."

"Verily, I like to come here on many an occasion." Raphael says, his tone wistful. "Seeing the remnants of my civilization brings both comfort and pain to my heart. And what of thyself? Dost thou also partake in the vicissitudes of melancholy? The memory of years long past?"

Phoebe blinks. "I... I don't know. Maybe?"

"Hmm. Perhaps this scenery does not bring forth any memories to thee, but what if I were to change the view?"

Raphael holds up his hand. With a swirl of his wrist, the illusion shifts, transforming from an image of Heaven to that of the ancient city of Camelot. Phoebe's heart tightens as she and Raphael travel to the top of a church spire in Camelot's center, with the hustling and bustling city beneath them.

Mothers and children travel here and there, purchasing grain and wheat for their daily bread. Fathers walk the streets, either as guards and soldiers, or minstrels and priests. Shopkeepers shout out their wares, trying to reel in the affluent customers, while birds sit atop roofs and chirp at each other, looking for food the humans may have dropped. There are even dogs that run about, pet and fed by Camelot's many citizens.

"Camelot..." Phoebe whispers.

"'Twas thy home, and thou doth not lacketh any love for it. I, too, came to visit this city on many an occasion." Raphael says. "Arthur was one of my proudest children. The mightiest Hero. A figure who could force demons to their knees simply by using his divine aura. And his city, 'twas centuries more advanced than those that came after it. Camelot's fall was a tragic affair, indeed. A shining jewel of humanity, lost to greed and decadence."

Raphael turns his head to give Phoebe a sidelong glance.

"So, young one. Why hath thou come to visit me on this merry day? Surely, thou art not the nostalgic sort, a person who likes to layabout with old fogies like me."

Phoebe shakes her head, causing her white hair to tickle her nape.

"No. It's not that. I actually had some questions to ask you, Raphael."

"Questions." Raphael repeats. "I don't lack free time, so by all means, ask away. I shall clarify any doubts which might dwell within thy mind."

"Alright." Phoebe nods. "It's about the... Heroic Aura. You helped make it, yes? Do you know how it works?"

"The Heroic Aura?" Raphael asks, raising an eyebrow. "Indeed, I do. 'Twas intended to be a weapon of great power against demonkind. Not tied to any human's bloodline, so that humanity could not rise up against angelkind too easily and strike us down. After all, in those days, we feared the first Hero, Jephthah, as much as we feared the demons."

He continues. "The Heroic Aura was made to seek out the most worthy human of each generation. When each Hero died, the Aura would scour the Earth for the next heir and transfer inside their soul. Thus, it would always ensure that within one to two decades of any Hero's passing, a worthy successor would arise!"

Phoebe chews her lip. "Why did it choose Jason?"

"Pardon?" Raphael asks.

"Jason. Why did the Heroic Aura choose him? Was he the most worthy human of his generation? Did the Aura know he would enter cryostasis?"

"Ah. Thy doubts art understandable." Raphael says, patting Phoebe's back. "The Heroic Aura neither is nor ever was omniscient. It entered the bodies of many a young man or woman, ones who might not grow up to be figures of legend. Just take little Shana, for instance. She died at the tender young age of just seven years old. If the Aura were omniscient, why would it choose her?"

"That makes sense." Phoebe says. "But... in all the time you ruled the Archangels, did you ever hear of the Aura entering a new Hero before the current one had died?"

"I did not." Raphael answers. "This question... thou seemeth to be thinking of thy daughter, Daisy."

Phoebe nods. "Daisy had Heroic powers, Raphael. Shortly before she... well, Samantha confirmed she was able to heal soldiers in the hospital. Further, Daisy's healing abilities seemed even more intense than Samantha's. Additionally, when the demons attacked,

Daisy apparently summoned the ghosts of the Hydra and Titans. These powers... have you ever heard of a child hero possessing such incredible might? And, more importantly..."

Raphael nods. "Jason is still alive. Not just Jason, but Hope, too. How could'st thy daughter possess heroic powers when two living Heroes still walked the cosmos... these are the doubts thou wisheth to clarify, yes?"

"Yes." Phoebe nods.

"Mmm..."

Raphael falls silent for a few minutes.

"...I have given this matter much thought." Raphael murmurs. "The Heroic Aura chose Jason for a reason. Like his predecessors, he is this era's Chosen One. However, I have never heard of a Hero bearing a child who also possessed Heroic attributes. For Daisy to do so... something must have changed in how the Heroic Aura functioned."

Phoebe licks her lips. "Could this at all be related to Hope's existence? Since Jason cloned himself, that would mean there are now two Heroes living at the same time. Has that ever happened before?"

"Two heroes at the same time?" Raphael repeats. "Indeed. There were three such instances of such a thing occurring. All of them occurred as a result of twins being borne of the same womb. These three Hero Duologies were not particularly resplendent moments in the Aura's history. The three pairs ultimately made only a minor impact on the world before fading into the annals of history. But, there was one interesting tidbit..."

"What do you mean?" Phoebe asks.

"Mmm. When twins are born with the Heroic Aura... should'st one of them die, *both* shalt die. Their lives become linked. In this way, the Heroic Aura remains a singular entity."

Raphael sighs.

"I cannot say for certain... but perhaps if Jason were to die, so too would Hope. And if Hope were to die, so too would Jason. However! The fact thy daughter hath perished, yet neither of the Wordsmiths have, makes my theories difficult to reconcile!"

"The Heroic Aura has changed." Raphael says, his tone solemn. "But in what manner, I cannot say. 'Tis a self-regulating entity. I no longer hold any control over how it evolves."

Phoebe nods. "I... understand. Thank you, Raphael. That's all I wanted to ask about."

"Anytime, anytime." Raphael smiles, while dispelling Camelot's illusion. "If any quandaries should'st befuddle thee, come to me and I shalt do my best to help ease thy worries."

Phoebe bows her head. "You are truly a respectable man."

The two of them say their goodbyes. As Phoebe heads back downstairs and waves farewell to Cassiel, she steps outside just in time to run into a familiar man.

"Hmm? Buddha?"

Phoebe stops just outside the church's doors when she sees the familiar face of Makoto Ueda. The Japanese man nods at her and smiles.

"Ahh, Miss Hiro. How good to see you. Excuse me. I have brought flowers for the Daughter of Heaven."

He holds up a beautiful bouquet of roses in his hand, to which Phoebe smiles back.

"How lovely! I'm sure she'll enjoy them."

After the two of them exchange pleasantries, Buddha heads inside the church, and Phoebe leaves.

"I'm... so tired." Phoebe sighs. "I need some rest."

Part 376: Marching Toward the Future

After saying farewell to Phoebe, Buddha walks toward the entrance of the Archangel's church, their current home. The structure, while just as new as all the others on Tarus II, exudes a certain majesty that causes any who look at it to feel a momentary sense of awe.

Except for Buddha.

As a reincarnator, Buddha has lived more than a hundred lives. He has seen through the beauty of the world, as well as its ugliness. Despite being positioned on the 'side' of humanity and the angels, he does not hold any special reverence for the Creator's children.

"A lovely church." Buddha muses, before pushing the church's doors open.

With Phoebe having just left, the sound of the doors being opened a second time causes the lone angel inside, Cassiel, to turn her head toward the entrance. Expecting Phoebe to return due to forgetting something, Cassiel instead blinks in surprise when a random Japanese man walks inside.

The man appears to be in his forties, or perhaps even his fifties. A calm and peaceful aura of serenity surrounds him, making him appear small and harmless. As he enters, he takes off his straw hat and holds up a bouquet of roses, smiling faintly.

"Hello, Cassiel. That is what they call you now, isn't it? I thought I would pay my respects. Though, I am not certain if you will remember me."

As the man approaches, Cassiel stiffens. She slides a little on the piano bench, pulling away from Makoto Ueda as he walks toward her. However, Makoto changes direction to walk to a window on the opposite side of the room as the Lazarite. Spotting an empty ornamental vase, he picks it up and walks over to a nearby sink. The interior of the church's ground level is neither excessively regal, nor overly practical. Rather, it is a mixture of holiness with a few modern amenities.

Buddha does not look in Cassiel's general direction, but instead, places some dirt in the bottom of the vase, adds a small amount of water, and unwraps the roses before placing them inside.

"Lovely, aren't they?" He asks rhetorically. "Roses are beautiful, yet their thorns can hurt if one were to grasp them too firmly. Similarly, beauty can lead to covetousness, greed, and pain. You have suffered greatly, these past hundred millennia. I am sorry that you had to endure such awful torment."

The hunched-over old man wanders back to the window and places the flowers in front of the sunlight shining through. He smiles gently, then turns to face Cassiel again.

"Daughter of Heaven. We have spoken many times in the past. While this is my first time appearing before you in this body, perhaps you can still recognize an old friend?"

Cassiel's expression shifts, ever so slightly. Her heartbeat quickens.

She stares at the man for several long moments.

After a full minute, she swallows heavily.

"G-Gau...ta...ma?"

Her voice shakes and cracks, belying her shattered sense of confidence, but Buddha doesn't fault her.

"So you do still remember. That warms my heart. Indeed, I am Gautama Buddha. I recently revived due to a series of interesting karmic coincidences, and now, I have come to give my greetings."

Buddha bows slightly in greeting, then walks over to Cassiel's side. While she does flinch slightly, she doesn't try to run away, and instead remains sitting, watching him with her crystal clear eyes.

Buddha calmly sits down beside Cassiel. Instead of making eye contact with her, he places his gaze on the piano, noticing the empty sheet music holder on its top.

"Ah. How unfortunate. A piano, but it has no music. Is this not a small tragedy? This instrument has but one purpose, yet it is unable to fulfill its destiny. As I recall, you are quite the accomplished pianist, yet you do not appear interested in playing a melody. If so, may I have the honor?"

Cassiel stares at the side of Buddha's head, examining his profile. After a few moments, she nods, then turns to face the piano, just like him.

The Lazarite and reincarnator both fall silent. Buddha begins to play a song on the piano, one of Beethoven's symphonies, the very first one. Under the flow of his fingers, a

soft and melodious tune flows out, lacking any pomp or circumstance.

For ten full minutes, neither Buddha nor Cassiel says anything. They merely listen while his fingers rhythmically play through the first half of the piece.

At some point, after reaching a crescendo, Buddha smiles.

"Do you remember? You and I used to talk about all sorts of things, back in the old days. Before the Energy Wars, and before humanity properly matured. You were only a hundred years old, just a small child compared to me. Still insecure, and trying to find your place among the angels. Back then, you were such a chatty little dove. You always had something to say, while I was the quiet old man filled with melancholy."

Buddha's fingers continue to dance across the keys, but he slows his pace.

"Look at how things have changed. Now, it is me who talks, while you sit silently. I suppose this is the cycle of karma at play, yes? The past affects the future. Cause and effect. Causality..."

Several more minutes pass. Buddha and Cassiel remain silent. Finally, he concludes Beethoven's First Symphony and leans to the side stretching and popping his back.

"Mmm. A beautiful song. But not as lovely as I imagine your voice might be. Is there something you want to say, Cassiel? I am always here, if you wish to discuss the... unspeakable tragedies you have suffered."

Cassiel continues to say nothing. However, a flicker passes over her eyes, a haze that doesn't simply come and go. She knits her brow, glances at Buddha, then averts her eyes.

"I..."

Cassiel whispers a single syllable, but falls silent again.

Buddha closes his eyes. He inhales and exhales.

"The wound... runs deep. Your pain is not something even I can fathom. In my many lives, I have lost family and friends. I have perished in fires, earthquakes, and avalanches. My fellow man has brought about my end through iron and steel and has hunted me down, claiming I was a witch. I have lived in captivity as a slave, in decadence as a king, and have even been tortured by crusaders during an inquisition. Yet, I still cannot pretend to know your pain."

Buddha's gaze hardens, ever so slightly.

"Nevertheless... if there is one thing I know, it is that pain and trauma are not merely permanent afflictions one must passively suffer. They are an opportunity! A chance to grow. Through pain, one can comprehend and expand their limits. Though the eyes of your oppressor may have burned themselves into your mind, that can instead become your drive. By treating your pain as a tempering opportunity, you can overcome the past and push toward a brighter future!"

Buddha touches the piano before him.

"Can a deaf man appreciate the sounds of music? Some would say 'no,' yet Beethoven became a renowned musician whose legacy lasted for millennia. It is only when you lose or lack something that you fully appreciate what you still have left."

"Now that you have suffered, the blisses of life surely seem inconsequential." Buddha continues. "Compared to your pain and fear, how can you ever feel happiness again? You must harbor these thoughts, all day long. Am I right, Daughter of Heaven?"

Cassiel bows her head. Her dainty hands ball into fists, and she nods along to Buddha's words.

"How... how can... I... be... happy again?" Cassiel whispers, her voice soft and wracked with sorrow.

"Happiness is not a state of mind. It is a pursuit that one can devote themselves to, either in full or in part." Buddha answers. "Some people never pursue happiness. Some are content to search out pain, or rage, or hatred. Many demons live like this. So do many humans, and more than a few angels have, as well. Let me ask you this, Cassiel... is it truly 'happiness' that you seek, or something else?"

He turns his head slightly to look at her.

"Was the Blood Reaper ever a truly happy woman? From what I remember, it was not peace and love that you sought, but a higher calling. It was the end of demonkind. The extinction of humanity and the angels' perpetual enemies. In short... what you sought was a purpose. And a purpose... hehe."

He shakes his head while chuckling.

"A purpose does not require any particular emotion. You have lost your purpose, but it is not yet impossible for you to recover it. Much as the karma of your past sent you into a dungeon, so too can the karma of that dungeon send you soaring into the skies. You

merely need to accept your pain, let it flow through you, and step back onto the path you once walked. It is not so difficult."

Cassiel quietly listens to Buddha's guidance. When he finishes speaking, she heavily blinks her large, limpid eyes.

"Let... it... flow..."

The Lazarite opens her fists. She stares at her palms, as if trying to divine her future through her fingerprint lines.

"What if... I'm not... good enough? I failed once. I can't... I'll fail again..."

Buddha's expression becomes heavy. He gently places his palm on the back of Cassiel's neck and gives her a light squeeze. Despite him being a man, she doesn't recoil from his touch, showing her deep trust in him.

"You don't think highly enough of yourself, little one. You are worthy. You always have been. Even now, you walk in that woman's shadow, afraid you will never measure up... and while her legacy is ironclad, lasting even to this very day, you are not inferior to her. I have divined the causality of the coming times. When the Great Shattering occurs, you can create a big splash, but only if you are able to push past your trauma and become whole again. Neither I nor anyone else can solve these problems for you. You must do so yourself."

Buddha slowly retracts his hand, but he pauses to touch Cassiel's cheek. Smiling, he lowers his arm and folds his fingers through hers, enveloping her palm in his.

"You are delicate, like that vase from before. You might break if someone throws you to the floor. But you are also strong. You retain your spirit, but fear to let it flourish. Of the people living in this universe, you have the potential to rise above all of them. You can become a goddess of death, or a goddess of life, but in the end, that choice remains yours."

Cassiel's eyes flick to Buddha's hand, still clasping hers. She brings her other hand over to rest atop his, and faintly smiles.

"I... I see. I thought... I thought I could never... be whole... again. Maybe I'm not... not a failure... after all."

"Hahaha..." Buddha chuckles. "It is only through failure that one's worldview can reach the apex. Now that you know what you can lose, you will never again let it cloud

your thoughts. Isn't that so?"

Cassiel nods. "Yes."

With a nod, Buddha pulls his hand away. He stands up and reaches into his pocket, then pulls a small necklace out of his robes.

"I have a gift for you, Cassiel. If you ever wish to step outside this church, you'll draw the attention of countless demon eyes. However, if you happen to wear this relic, well..."

Cassiel's heart skips a beat when she sees the necklace. She stands up, a look of shock on her face as she looks at Buddha.

"My... my... locket!"

"Indeed, it is." Buddha says. "Camael's artifacts are not the sorts of items one can permanently lose, certainly not by accident. I followed your path of Karma and stumbled upon it... and now I'll return it to you."

He reaches out and places the locket in Cassiel's palm, tracing his fingers across hers before pulling away.

"You know how it works. When the time is right, I hope you will put that artifact to good use."

Buddha turns and walks away.

Just as he is about to push open the church's doors, Cassiel calls out from behind him.

"Master... Buddha... thank you!"

He smiles back at her.

"You are very welcome, little one."

Jason Hiro hovers in the sky, levitating through the use of wings he grew via a Word of Power. As his angelic wings flap, he finishes some miscellaneous business, communicating with several of humanity's leaders and sighing deeply.

"Yes. I already confirmed the time. It'll happen in a few days. Unarin insisted. I'll talk to Phoebe about who will be in charge while I'm gone. Okay. Yeah, thanks. Jason out."

The Wordsmith groans. He glances at the waning sun and checks his T-REX's internal clock.

"Almost nine PM. It's about time to call it a day. If anyone else wants to pester me... fuck 'em."

A moment later, he speaks a Word of Power. "**Teleport.**"

He travels to the east side of the Fortress of Retribution, arriving at a large mansion near the edge of town. Not only do Jason and Phoebe live here, but so do more than a hundred children, all of them orphans rescued from various places. Some of their parents may have died during Stormbringer, but the majority of them were child slaves beamed out of the Seven Hells to Tarus II.

In addition, one other person lives at the mansion, his identity being the Minotaur, Yamir. As a renowned chef, his ability to cater child-friendly food en-masse makes him quite popular with all the orphans.

As for Jason and Phoebe, they find a small amount of comfort in taking care of children after losing their own daughter. Not only can they give the kids a place to live, play, and sleep, but they can satisfy their own maternal and paternal instincts, as well.

"The Word Man is back!" One of the girls shouts, drawing the attention of the others.

"Word Man! Word Man!" Chant the other children as Jason steps inside.

Feeling a little helpless, Jason chuckles. "Is Phoebe back yet, kids?"

"Uh-huh! Miss Hiro is helping Yamir make the food!" Says one of the older boys. "It should be done, real soon!"

"Great." Jason says, ruffling the kid's hair.

Not long after, Jason sits down with his wife and Yamir in the house's huge dining area, where three long tables filled with scrumptious kid-friendly food awaits. Robotic butlers made by Phoebe serve the food and clean up, and everyone takes some time to talk and unwind after a long, hard day of work.

Later, as night falls, Jason and Phoebe go upstairs to their master bedroom. After closing and locking the door, they both sigh deeply. Jason plops face-first on the bed, defeat etched into his face.

"Every day, Phoebe... every day. I just don't know if I'm cut out for this 'leader' business. I'm only twenty-four years old. I barely feel like I've gotten a grasp on 'adult stuff,' let alone managing a whole planet of people."

Phoebe undresses, taking off her brown leather armor and other clothes to slip into dark red lingerie and a bathrobe. She sits on the opposite edge of the bed, listening to Jason with a faint smile on her face.

"That's not true. You're one hundred thousand and twenty-four years old, husband."

"The... the hundred thousand doesn't count." Jason retorts, turning to stick his tongue out at her.

"If you say so."

Phoebe's smile fades away. A much more vague expression, lacking any emotion, takes its place.

Jason doesn't miss this detail. Having been married to Phoebe for more than six years, he's already learned to pick up on her moods.

"How did your day go, hun? Honey? Phoebe?"

Jason repeats his words, until Phoebe snaps out of what seems to be a daze.

"Oh! Uh... it was... it was... fine."

"Fine?" He asks, frowning even deeper. He rolls onto the bed and lays on his side, facing her. Even so, she continues sitting at the edge of the bed, with her back facing him.

"Come on. Is something eating at you? You wanna talk about it?" Jason asks.

Phoebe goes quiet.

Several seconds pass, with only the sounds of her breathing and his permeating the air.

"I..." Phoebe says, her words hesitant. "I... talked to Samantha today. I was feeling a little nauseous, but wasn't sure why, and..."

Jason lifts up his head and rests his face against his palm by crooking his arm into a 'V' shape.

"Yeah?"

Phoebe's voice catches. She turns to look at Jason, but in that moment, tears well up in her eyes. Before Jason can react, she suddenly buries her face in her palms and chokes back sobs!

"I'm... I'm pregnant!" Phoebe cries, wailing painfully. Her words tear at Jason's chest, making him quickly sit up. He pulls closer to her, visibly shocked.

"Phoebe! You're pregnant? But... but that's good news! It's great news! Why are you crying...? I don't understand..."

He crawls behind her on the bed and wraps his arms around his sobbing wife. Her previous statement and her tears make him feel a rush of indescribable emotions. The Wordsmith momentarily can't even decide if he should be happy or sad.

"I don't deserve it!" Phoebe cries. "Hic... I don't deserve it... what kind of mother am I... just... just terrible...!!"

Jason embraces Phoebe from behind, his emotions turbulent. He rubs her arms and leans his chin on her shoulder, trying to console her.

"It's good news, Phoebe. Not bad. You're not a terrible mother. You can't say things like that..."

"I couldn't save Daisy!" Phoebe sobs. "I don't deserve a child! I don't deserve anything!"

"That's not true. I love you, and so does everyone else. Daisy might be gone... but... her death was never your fault. It was mine, if anyone's." Jason says, his expression turning cloudy.

"While you were off-planet, hic... I was in a coma! I should have been awake to protect Daisy! How can I have another child?! I should just... abort it!"

"Phoebe!" Jason exclaims, more than a little shocked. "How could you say that? Of all the people I know, you wouldn't ever be the sort..."

Tears and snot continue to stream down Phoebe's face. She pulls away her hands to wipe at her eyes furiously. "If I'm just going to kill my kids, I might as well do it now! There's... there's no p-point in going on with a charade, Jason! There's no god-damned point!"

Phoebe's tears of sorrow shift quickly, far faster than even Jason can anticipate. They quickly turn to tears of rage and self-loathing.

"One dead child! Two! What does it even matter?! I'm a failure of a mother anyway! I shouldn't ever have another one, not ever!"

Pulling away from her husband's embrace, Phoebe stands up and walks to the other side of the room. She paces back and forth, visibly agitated, while her chest heaves with frustration.

Jason stares at her gloomily. He lowers his gaze and shakes his head.

"If you insist on an abortion, I won't stop you. It would break my heart, and I know it would break yours, but I come from a relatively progressive time, so I'm a bit understanding on this issue. Even so, Phoebe... is that really what you want? Is that what *Daisy* would want? She asked us to give her a little brother too many times to count. If Daisy knew you wanted to... kill her sibling... what would she say?"

Phoebe slows to a stop in front of a body-sized mirror. She rubs her stomach slowly, feeling much of her anger disperse. Staring at herself in the mirror, feelings of remorse once again return, but this time, much more mildly than before.

"I... I don't know. I don't know, Jason. I just feel... like... I always fail. I failed Arthur. I failed Daisy. I can't do anything right. What is the point in even trying?"

Jason gets up and walks over to his wife. He hugs her from behind and rocks back and forth, ever so gently.

"I've failed a lot of times too, Phoebe. A lot of times. Like... like a *lot* of times. Holy crap, so many times. But... if there's one thing I've learned, it's that picking myself up after a failure always makes me a little bit stronger, smarter, or perhaps even a little wiser. As long as there is life, there is hope. What happened to Daisy was... yeah. But we can't stay stuck in the past forever. She wouldn't want that. If I were to die, I wouldn't want you to give up, either. It's not right."

Phoebe turns around to look in Jason's eyes. "If you died? No, Jason, no... you can't say things like that. If I lost you, what would I even do? How could I possibly go on?"

"I feel the same about you." Jason says, gazing into her eyes. "But if we have another child, we'll always have a pillar. Something to live for. Don't you see? This is the Creator giving us a second chance. I don't want to throw that away."

Phoebe looks down at her belly.

"...Samantha said I'm about one month pregnant. That means... even before Stormbringer..."

Jason sucks in a breath. "Such timing... this can't be a simple coincidence. Don't you see, Phoebe? We have to keep it. No matter whether it's a boy or a girl, we'll love him or her, just as we did for Daisy. We'll try again, and this time... we'll do things right."

Phoebe steels her expression. She nods at Jason, while a look of determination embeds itself on her face. After wiping away the last of her tears, she forces a smile.

"I'm sorry. I... lost myself for a moment, Jason. I'm so glad I married you. You've given me nothing but happiness."

"I don't deserve a wife as good as you." Jason replies. "Every day with you, even those days when the demons are trying to kill us, are pure bliss. I love you, Phoebe."

"I love you too, Jason." Phoebe whispers.

After reconciling their hearts, the man and woman come together, kissing one another passionately. They pull each other close and embrace, feeling their heartbeats intertwine.

"No regrets." Jason says. "Never. Remember that, Phoebe."

She nods. "I will. Always."

Part 377: Desire Unleashed

After consoling his wife, the Wordsmith finally helps her stabilize her thoughts. The overwhelming release of emotions brings Phoebe to the end of her mental rope, and eventually, she falls asleep, along with him.

The next morning, both of them wake up, feeling more refreshed than ever.

Jason summons two cups of coffee through his Wordsmithing. He and Phoebe sit together on the balcony terrace outside their room, soaking in the early morning sunshine rays.

"I meant to tell you last night, but I got distracted," Jason says at one point. "Yesterday, someone contacted me through the intelligence bureau. Guess who it was?"

Phoebe sips her coffee. She stays quiet for a moment, contemplating his question.

"...Marie Becker?"

The Wordsmith chuckles. "Sometimes I wonder about you, honey. Are you sure you're not a Hero with mind-reading powers? Yeah, it was Marie. Not just her, though. I also received a communication from our 'pal' Sangin Kordonis. It seems Volgrimkind's Number One wants to meet me."

Phoebe's eyebrows shoot up. "...Unarin?"

"Yup." Jason says. "I don't know exactly what he wants to talk about. However, Kordonis made it very clear... Unarin wants to bring me up to speed on some 'important secrets.' I think he wants to deepen the relationship between humanity and his people."

"Only because he's getting his butt whooped." Phoebe snarks.

The Wordsmith hesitates.

"Yeah... but let's not act as if that's a good thing, Phoebe. If the Volgrim's battle-lines were to suddenly collapse, humanity would be... well, fucked. Royally fucked. We don't know a damn thing about the Kolvaxians. You heard what happened to Sharmur. The demons aren't exactly weak, and their entire planet got overrun in a *single day*. Do you really think we're all that much stronger than any of the Hidden Hells?"

Phoebe chews her lips. "No. I suppose not. I'm worried for you though, Jason. This Unarin... he might, I don't know. He might try to mind control you, or infect you with a poison, or do something else to get a firm hold on you. To the Volgrim, our T-REX's aren't much of anything at all. They're primitive little nano-buckets of bolts. How can you ensure your safety?"

"I'm still thinking about that." Jason says, rubbing his chin. "But either way, I'm not worried. No matter what, humanity will have Hope. And I can always bluff Unarin with the threat of making more clones."

"You need the Crown to do that." Phoebe points out. "Without Solomon's Crown, your clones will just end up as empty flesh-vessels. You said so yourself, six years ago."

"Unarin doesn't know that." Jason retorts.

"Unarin has *mind reading gods* at his side." Phoebe states, directing a wry smile at her husband. "Do you have any idea the feats a seventh, eighth, or ninth level Psion can accomplish? Perhaps they might even be able to remotely download the contents of your brain without you knowing."

Jason's expression shifts to one of grim realization.

"Shit. That might be true. But if so, how can I possibly protect my knowledge?"

"Well, you've already found that Fiona and the rest can create a powerful barrier around your Mind Realm." Phoebe postulates. "Following that, maybe you need to deliberately erect sturdy mana defenses. Psions will need to force their way inside, alerting you to their intrusion, at the very least."

"Mmm. Sangin Kordonis had a Psion on his ship." Jason recalls. "Low-level, if Samantha's guess was correct. I could sense her tickling my Mind Realm, but she wasn't able to pierce it. As for how strong a high-level Psion would be, I can't imagine."

Phoebe leans back in her chair. She and Jason both fall silent, allowing the sounds of distant birds and nature to drift into their ears. Overhead, some wispy clouds drift into view. Phoebe gazes blankly at them, her mind drifting off elsewhere.

"Fiona is the spiritual expert, not me." Phoebe finally says. "Consult with her. I might be able to stick some sort of tech device into your head to help ward off the Psions, but it also might end up becoming a weakness. You can't underestimate these Technopaths, either. They can interface with technology remotely."

Jason nods. "It sure is nice having two genius wives. Maybe I should make a few more, huh?"

Phoebe snorts. "If you need another wife, I'm sure I can find a taker. What about Samantha? I'm sure she'd *loooove* to bed a Hero. You'd make for a good notch on her belt."

Feeling slightly offput by his wife's fierce counterattack, Jason simply chuckles. "No need for that. She's way more into you than me, honey. Try not to stick your tongue down her throat while I'm gone."

"I make no promises." Phoebe replies, solemnly raising a hand. "I might get up into all sorts of tomfoolery without you here to keep me in check."

"Yeah, I don't doubt that for a minute!" Jason laughs.

Not long after, Jason and Phoebe walk downstairs, eat some breakfast, and head off to deal with their duties.

As they leave, they give each other a long, loving kiss.

"See you later," Jason says. "Love you!"

"Love you too!" Phoebe says.

After Phoebe disappears down one of the city's main streets, Jason activates his T-REX to look at his day's itinerary.

"Hmm. I'll probably head off to deal with Unarin... tomorrow! As for Marie Becker, she can wait until I return."

Past the northern edge of the Fortress of Retribution, inside a small cottage located in the woods...

A demoness sits on a stool in the middle of the house's living area. This demoness, a portly woman named Rosalia, rocks back and forth while blood vessels in her eyes threaten to burst.

"...him from me... took him from me... that skank! How dare Belial! How dare she?!"

Recalling the conversation she had the day before, the top of Rosalia's head threatens to explode with rage.

Belial came to her while she was on shift at the hospital. Her tone was warm. Friendly, even.

She told Rosalia that 'someone' had found Beelzebub in Rosalia's basement, by chance. But how could such a random thing happen?! No doubt, Belial was snooping on her subordinate and stumbled across Beelzebub.

Belial then went on to thank Rosalia for torturing Beelzebub, since he deserved no better. Now, however, he would have to be put into custody until the day of the Stormbringer Tribunal. On that day, he would most likely face execution for his crimes.

"If it weren't for you holding him all this time, he might have escaped! Whatever means you used to deduce his identity, you've truly done humanity a big favor, Rosalia!" Belial had happily proclaimed.

"What favor? WHAT FAVOR?!" Rosalia roars at the ceiling. "That skanky, no-good, fat-titted bitch! She took my Beelzebub from me! He's mine! MINE!"

Rosalia stands up and kicks her foot backward, sending the stool rocketing away. It crashes against the wall and explodes into splinters, with some of the smaller ones bouncing off her back.

She paces back and forth, seething like never in her life.

"Always, always it's some skinny slut who wants to take him from me! First, Ose! Now, Belial! RRRRRGH! How am I going to get him back?!"

As Rosalia paces, a voice speaks inside her head.

I warned you, Rosalia. I told you that you couldn't hold back if you wished to receive what was rightfully yours.

Rosalia hesitates. She frowns.

"Desire..."

I'm still here. Haven't gone anywhere. I *have* been watching you, though. Laughing at your naivete. Do you still not get it? Beelzebub doesn't want you. He never has and never will. At least, not as you are, now... a fat slobbish, unlikable woman. Dull-headed and stupid. It's only *natural* he'd prefer the company of a tight little succubi...

"Shut up!" Rosalia snarls. "Mister Beelzebub... loves me! If it wasn't for that skank forcibly removing him-"

Pish-posh. Lie to yourself and lie to everyone else, but you can't lie to me. I am Desire. I am *your* Desire. I know what it is you want. But how can you get the things you want without expending effort? Follow my lead, and you will take whatever you please.

The corpulent demoness pauses to stare at a full-body mirror. So fat is she that she can't even see the sides of her body unless she takes several steps back.

Rosalia frowns. She touches her lumps of fat, and her expression turns gloomy.

"It will take forever to shed this weight. And what's the point, anyway? Mister Beelzebub is a Duke... I'm barely even a Grunt..."

Ah, now you're being honest with yourself. Desire says. You acknowledge that your appearance is a limitation to attaining your desires. As for how to solve that limitation, isn't the solution obvious? You need only... evolve!

"Evolve?" Rosalia repeats, taken aback. "You mean... to the rank of Lord?"

Lord. Baron. Duke. Emperor. All of these things are within reach. You need only possess the proper mindset to seize them. What is the fundamental requirement for evolving to the next rank?

"Souls." Rosalia says. "Well, I could try the Wordsmith's method, too. If I can just get some Merit Tokens, I can visit the Belial Booster... yuck! Why would I want to use HER booster? Why is it named after that slut, anyway?! I'll never go that route!"

Hehehe... Desire chuckles. Indeed, you should avoid it. Using the Wordsmith's systems will only empower him. And besides... why go against the grain? Why not use an ancient, tried and tested method of advancement? Souls are even more readily available and plentiful than ever. You need only... consume them.

Rosalia's frown deepens.

"That's... no, that's not right. Demons have lost our access to humanity's souls. They're all inside that Lazarus Tower now. How can I possibly obtain any now? Don't tell me you think I'm capable of breaking in and eating them right from the source?!"

Of course not. Why would I ask you to do such a pointless thing which will surely result in your death? No, I think you've overlooked another way you can obtain souls for yourself. And that way... is through the old fashioned method.

"I... don't follow." Rosalia says.

You really are a useless fat idiot. Desire snarks. **Consuming souls directly, Rosalia! Directly from the source! Is it not obvious?**

"Huh?!" Rosalia exclaims, visibly shocked. "You want me to eat humans and consume their souls directly? But... how?! Even if a demon kills a human, their soul will instantly get sucked into the River Styx! Well, I guess it's the Lazarus Tower now, but you know what I mean!"

True... most demons are incapable of doing this. Desire says, her tone filled with disdain. **But you forget... my Master is a demon of great means. Through me, you can harness a unique ability. All of those who accept his 'worms' can do this. It is a simple matter. When you kill a human, I will lock onto their soul and forcibly drag it into your body for you to devour! Simple and clean.**

Rosalia blinks several times, suffering multiple mental shocks as a result of Desire's explanations.

"So I can eat human souls? I can... become a Lord, a Baron, and even a Duke?!"

It is a simple matter. Desire states. **However! All of humanity now lives on this one, singular world. To become a Lord, you will need to consume 100 souls. To become a Baron, you will need an additional 1,000 souls. To become a Duke, you will require 100,000 souls! And to become an Emperor? One million souls! In total you will require 1,101,100 souls to reach the highest rank among your species. To do so quickly will be impossible. But if you take your time and move with caution, I promise... your rise will be inevitable!**

Rosalia's expression becomes more determined as she listens to Desire's counsel.

"The humans have eyes everywhere. Even finding and killing a hundred people will be super tough! Plus, how will I hide the bodies? Don't you think this task is harder than it was at any point in the past?"

Becoming powerful is never easy. There are no free lunches. When it comes to the bodies, don't you worry. I can assist you with that. Listen to me, follow my commands, and I promise you will achieve great things, little Rosalia.

Rosalia nods slowly. Her eyes become focused as she looks in the mirror, imagining a reborn version of herself, enchanting and beautiful enough for even Beelzebub to take notice.

"I can't save Mister Beelzebub the way I am. Alright! It's settled, then. If the me of today can't do anything, perhaps the me of tomorrow can! I'll chase my Desire and become someone everyone envies! I'll make myself beautiful, Beelzebub my man, and the filthy humans my cattle!"

Good... so long as you follow my guidance, you will receive everything you deserve. Desire says, giggling sinisterly to herself.

Phoebe Hiro walks around the city, talking to dozens of people over the course of several hours. As humanity's chief inventor, as well as Tarus II's Development Executive, countless activities and request demand her attention, yanking her around with reckless abandon.

At some point, it reaches lunchtime. Phoebe drags herself over to a food stand to grab a bite to eat. After piling some beef, cheese, and other sloppy fast food onto a plate, she wanders over to a nearby fountain and sits down.

This fountain is part of a town square with several benches lining the perimeter, along with some bushes and flowers. Despite only two weeks having passed since Beelzebub's detonation, Jason's Wordsmithing has allowed the trees and foliage to grow back far faster than expected, bringing nature to the masses.

As Phoebe sits on the edge of the fountain and starts to dig into her food, she glances to the side and spots a few other people sitting on its edge. The sound of bubbling water always draws people hoping to escape the hustle and bustle of their daily workload, so seeing other people doesn't seem out of the ordinary.

Rather, a familiar face draws Phoebe's gaze, making her blink twice.

"Hmm? Amelia?"

Hope Hiro's fiancé, Amelia, also known as Annette, dryly munches on some carrots, her expression one of disgust.

Phoebe hesitates, but ultimately relents. She stands up, walks over to Amelia, and smiles.

"Um, hey, Annette! How are you? Mind if I sit here?"

Annette glances up at her in surprise. "Phoebe? Sure, sure. I don't mind."

Her tone, while a little gruff, isn't completely unfriendly. Phoebe bites the bullet and sits down next to her, forcing a smile.

"I'm still never sure whether to call you Annette or Amelia." Phoebe says. "Which would you prefer?"

"Doesn't matter." Annette says, chomping down onto one of the carrots. The loud crunch seems to sicken her, so she slows her chewing to a more slow and deliberate speed. "I used to be able to eat food. Ever since Hope assimilated Amelia's memories into me, I've had the damndest time. My body requires food. I feel hunger. But it all tastes *disgusting*. I can't tell the difference between vomit and celery anymore."

With half a bite of meat in her mouth, Phoebe chokes on her food.

"Ack! Um, what a... *vivid* description."

"Oh. Sorry." Amelia says, glancing at Phoebe's plate. "I'm surprised you can even eat meat. I thought you were some hippie-dippy vegan."

"Vegan?" Phoebe repeats. "No, no. I like meat just fine. Where did you ever get such an idea?"

"You're such a prissy do-gooder." Amelia says. "You're always chatting with people and playing miss-nice-lady. I figured eating animals would be impossible for you."

Phoebe snorts. "Well, you don't know me very well. I love meat. I do feel bad for you, though, Annette. What with your... condition."

"I'll survive." Amelia says, taking another bite of her carrot. "Though, I'm having trouble in... other ways. My problems with food are nothing by comparison."

"What sorts of problems?" Phoebe asks, her ears perking up. "Can I help?"

Amelia falls silent.

Several seconds pass as she lifelessly chews the orange mush, rolling it around her mouth before stifling her gag reflex to swallow it.

"I don't know who I am anymore." Amelia finally says. "Am I Debra's sister, Annette? Or am I the Black Queen, Amelia Greyheart? I have both of their memories. But the sheer difference in quantity isn't something I can avoid. Amelia lived to be tens of thousands of years old, and that's not counting the time she spent in that statue. As for Annette, she barely existed for a hundred years, if we exclude the time spent as Bahamut's enchanted servants."

She pauses.

"I look like Amelia. I have more of her memories in me. And she definitely died on Polaris, no doubt about that. But I was also Annette originally. Those are my... my 'pure' memories. But are they really me, now? Do I even want to 'be' Annette anymore?"

Phoebe listens quietly, slowly taking bites from her beef and cheese plate while Amelia talks.

"I never liked being Annette." Amelia continues. "I was so boring. I was a nobody. Then my sister introduced me to 'Jason,' who was actually Hope. We hit it off. He was having so many problems, and I wanted to be there for him. He kept saying how I reminded him of this other woman, and ultimately I suggested making me look like her, but it wasn't enough. I could see it was eating him up. Then I went through a total transformation, replaced Annette's memories with Amelia's, and now, six years later... I barely even feel like Debra's sister anymore."

She heaves a deep sigh, finally setting the carrots on her lap, unable to take another bite.

"I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know what to do."

Having listened the whole time, Phoebe slowly nods.

"You're having an identity crisis. I can't blame you. You feel like you're Amelia, but instinctively, you know you aren't her. Amelia died, Annette. She's been gone for six years."

Phoebe cocks her head and smiles.

"But even so, what really makes a person a person? Hmm? Bael and Ose swapped their bodies. Does that make them any less their original selves? Even Buddha has returned to

the realm of the living. He's possessed Makoto Ueda's body... but does that mean Makoto is dead? I don't think so."

Before Phoebe can continue, Amelia interjects. "Wait, you said Buddha is alive? Buddha? As in... Siddhartha Gautama? The Hero who pacified two Demon Emperors in his prime?"

Phoebe nods slowly. "You weren't aware?"

"...I wasn't." Amelia says, looking annoyed. "I've met him before, you know. Rather, Amelia did. I did? Amelia did. *One of us* did, anyway. I met him back in Ancient Rome. He had reincarnated into the body of some noble and immediately noticed my presence. He said some mumbo jumbo about Karma, and the next thing I knew, he summoned a freaking lightning bolt to strike my head. Nearly killed me, the bloody bastard!"

Amelia grinds her teeth as she talks. "What a prick. Never liked those self-righteous types like him or Arthur. Anyway, uh... what were we talking about?"

"Your identity." Phoebe says slowly. "Who you really are."

"Right. That." Amelia grumbles. "Never mind. It's too heavy of a topic. I don't wanna talk about it anymore. Actually, since you're here, I had this idea I wanted to run past you for a while now..."

"What sort of idea?" Phoebe asks.

Amelia gestures vaguely to a small platoon of T-REX-wearing soldiers walking past.

"The Black Queen has fought in a lot of battles. Like... like a LOT of battles. I have all her memories. I know what peak human fighting capability looks like. Your soldiers have good equipment, but their training is terrible."

"Training so many soldiers while also trying to rebuild after Stormbringer is... kind of difficult." Phoebe says.

Amelia nods. "I know. Plus, doing a bunch of combat training is pretty tough on the body. BUT! What if there was another way?"

"Another way?" Phoebe says, raising an eyebrow. "What sort of way?"

"That's simple." Amelia declares. "...virtual training! If you let me help you, we can make a magical artifact that allows humans, monsters, and demons to fight one another in a virtual environment. I had the privilege of using Caesar's artifact once. It allowed all

of his soldiers to train their bodies and minds even past the brink of death, turning them into unstoppable, battle-hardened warriors. With my help, you can make a relic that mimics the effect of his Colosseum, allowing millions of people to become much more powerful on the field of battle!"

"That's... a useful concept." Phoebe says. "I *have* been working with Blinker on something else, though... so maybe you can talk to her and Fiona about your idea. I happen to be swinging over to see them after this... want to join me?"

After a few moments of consideration, Amelia bobs her head up and down. "This... alright! I'm still a human, you know. I want to see humanity thrive. While Hope and Jason are off doing their thing, we ladies have to do our part too, right?"

Phoebe smiles. "Right you are. And we can't let the men get big heads, thinking we're dragging them down. Frankly, if it weren't for me, I think Jason would forget how to tie his shoes!"

Amelia laughs. She and Phoebe throw away their leftovers, and as they leave, the former Black Queen gives the white-haired Wordsmith's wife a long look.

"You know, Phoebe... you're really not that bad after all."

"Gee, thanks."

Part 378: Cube World

It doesn't take long for Phoebe and Amelia to travel away from the Fortress of Retribution's upper plateau. They leave through the western ramp, then make their way past all the newly constructed houses and apartment complexes, wandering through surprisingly tidy little neighborhoods with lots of other people also walking the streets. Already, a simple mass transit system has taken hold, thanks to a few dozen buses built earlier in the week.

Even with buses available, space on them is hard to come by. With tens of millions of people in the city, every bus is always packed as they ferry people from the city center to any of the other four cardinal directions. Once reaching their destinations, they can depart and travel on foot anywhere else they need to go.

Still, the two women take the scenic route. It takes them about an hour to reach the northern military base, where they finally encounter a large, heavily fortified base built out of demonstone and Wordsmith-fortified exosteel. Even if a nuclear bomb were to detonate, this particular base would survive the explosion, along with up to five million citizens. Its underground areas, having been hollowed out and reinforced by goblins, offer plenty of room, if not comfort, for people to huddle down in the event of another Beelzebub-type emergency.

When Phoebe arrives at the walls surrounding the military base, she flashes her ID to one of the guards. They allow her in, but one of the guards gazes with muted hostility at Amelia.

After they enter, Amelia glances backward, then reorients her gaze to the front.

"Problem?" Phoebe asks.

"You didn't notice?" Amelia asks.

"Notice what?"

"...Nothing."

Amelia shakes her head, slightly dismayed. Invisible question marks pop up over Phoebe's head, but she doesn't press the issue.

They head deeper into the compound, traveling past two-story buildings, warehouses, and ammunition depots on their left and right. As they walk, Phoebe and Amelia pass by hundreds of troopers, all of them decked out in active T-REXs. Some of the soldiers swivel their heads in the women's general direction, but upon seeing Phoebe, or perhaps even Amelia, they look away a moment later.

"Excuse me," Phoebe says to a passing trooper. "Where is Fiona?"

"Miss Hiro!" The man says, snapping to attention with a brisk salute. "Miss Fiona is presently working with Lady Blinker on that... special array. The one you-"

"That one. I understand." Phoebe says, nodding along to his words. "Thank you."

"Anytime, ma'am."

The man continues on with his day, while Amelia shoots a curious glance at Phoebe.

"What's this about a 'formation'?"

"Well. Blinker is a fairy." Phoebe says. "Fairies specialize in 'formation magic.' As such, we have her working on all sorts of top secret projects."

"Should I have access?" Amelia asks.

"If I say you can see something, you can see it." Phoebe answers, lightly patting the former Black Queen's shoulder. "No worries."

"Alright. If you say so..."

Phoebe leads Amelia into one of the base's central facilities, a convex dome painted black like the night, with blacked-out windows made from two-foot-thick exoglass. Impossible to see inside, but very easy to see outside, the dome is the base's most important structure.

After they step inside, Amelia finds herself amidst more than thirty desks with computers and laptops whirring quietly. Two hundred high-level personnel mill about in the well-lit interior, as blue lights above shine down, giving everything and everyone a sapphire-like hue.

At the center of the room, there is a circular staircase that goes downwards, into the depths of the facility's secret underground area. As Phoebe leads Amelia toward it, several of the personnel, those not wearing exosuits, shoot sidelong glances at Amelia.

Their expressions are anything but pleasant.

Amelia fidgets with her fingers as she descends the staircase. With Phoebe in front, leading the way, she doesn't notice the look of discomfort on Amelia's face.

"...Maybe I shouldn't be down here." Amelia repeats. "Phoebe, don't you feel like... like the people here are looking at me funny?"

Phoebe glances backward. "Huh? They are?"

She continues walking, but a thoughtful expression plays on her face.

"I guess that makes sense. I mean... you *are* the Black Queen. At the very least, you look like her. Amelia never was popular among the humans, especially the survivors of the worlds she... ravaged. Some of them are here with us now. They probably have talked about you to the others... so you'll have quite a bad reputation."

Amelia nods glumly. "Yeah. That makes sense."

After descending a hundred feet into the planet's depths, the spiral staircase opens up into a wide hallway with a few doors on each wall, and further up the hallway, multiple corridors branch off to the right and left. Faint sounds trickle into Phoebe and Amelia's ears from the distance, but as for what they could be, Amelia has no idea.

As if guided by a beacon, Phoebe beelines toward those distant sounds. She walks up the corridor, passing by several humans in military uniform, but none of them wearing currently active T-REX's. One thing Amelia can't help but notice is the complete absence of any monsters or demons in this region. Only humans travel around in this restricted zone.

The floors, made of stained black granite, shine and gleam as if polished only ten minutes before. The cream-colored walls appear to be made of reinforced dirt, but also strains of marble put in with random patterns to liven up the decor.

As they walk, Phoebe and Amelia pass a large mural on the wall, one emblazoned with Jason and Hope's visages. The two men strike heroic poses, gazing off into the sunset, as if looking forward to a bright future for all of their friends and family.

To the right of their faces, large words sit emboldened on the walls, a declaration of intent sure to burn into the minds of any who lay their eyes on them.

HUMANITY WILL REIGN SUPREME!

Phoebe pauses as she walks past the mural. She glowers at those words for a moment before shaking her head and continuing forward.

"...Problem?" Amelia asks.

"Not exactly. Well, sort of." Phoebe answers, her tone unusually gruff. "That 'slogan' wasn't there yesterday. Neil's doing, no doubt..."

"It's a good slogan, though. Isn't it?" Amelia asks.

"It's not the goal Jason is pursuing." Phoebe explains. "Jason wants to forgive the old grievances and mend old wounds. In his ideal future, all of the species can live together, seeking mutual benefits without conflict. But this slogan... tsk. It reeks of Neil's human-first attitude. He's always hinting that monsters and demons must come second and third to humans..."

"And you disagree?" Amelia prompts.

"I'm a human." Phoebe says, turning her head to look at Amelia while the two of them walk. "Obviously, if I have to pick between my species or the others, I'll pick humanity's survival every time. But I have many friends among the monsters and demons. I understand Neil's point of view, but Jason is my husband, and I'll always support him. If he wants to make a utopia where all the species live together in harmony, then I'll damn well do what I can to make it happen."

"Are you going to have that slogan blotted out, then?" Amelia asks.

"If only things were that simple." Phoebe says through gritted teeth. "Jason is popular. But so is Neil. So is Hope. Most of the civilian populace favors Jason. Especially the huge numbers of recently rescued slaves from the Seven Hells. But the military favors Neil. Publicly, they will always speak out in favor of Jason's orders. But in private... tsk. Let's just say there are a lot of bitter and angry soldiers who aren't keen about playing house with the demons."

"Can you blame them?" Amelia asks. "Beelzebub... he killed a lot of people. He wasn't the only demon murderer during Stormbringer, either. The hatred for demonkind runs deep."

Phoebe stops walking. She halts abruptly and swivels to face Amelia.

"Of course I can't blame them! How could I?! There are days when my own hatred is so overwhelming, and so all-consuming, I can barely control myself! The demons MURDERED my little girl! They killed Kar! They killed millions of innocent men, women, and children too! It's not like I can just smile and grit my teeth with no consequences.

Every goddamn day, I see things that remind me of all the people I've lost. And I know that if I think these thoughts, then so do all the others who survived Stormbringer..."

Phoebe sucks in a huge breath. Her chest heaves with frustration as she fights back tears.

"That slogan isn't just a bunch of words on a wall. It's an idea! And frankly, it's an idea that would tempt any Stormbringer survivor. If Jason wasn't so stubborn with his ideals, I'd have surely broken down and joined Neil's side, and without hesitation! But for Jason's sake, I have to try and be better, every single day! I have to remember what we're fighting for, and that hatred only begets more hatred."

Amelia's expression becomes solemn. She listens patiently with her hands folded in front of her waist while Phoebe rants. When the Hero's wife finishes, Amelia slowly nods.

"It's been... hard on you."

Phoebe's shoulders sag. A deep weariness momentarily takes over her mind, making her close her eyes and sigh in exasperation.

"It has. Every day is a struggle... you're actually... the first person I've told about all of this."

Amelia leans against the wall behind her. "You haven't told Jason? I thought you didn't keep anything from each other."

"We don't. I'm not exactly hiding anything... I'm just... I don't want to put too much on his plate. Ever since Daisy's death, he's become more steeled and resolute, but I can hear the words he doesn't say out loud. He blames himself for what happened to her. If I were to unload on him, he'd feel so guilty, he'd insist on taking over all the work. And if he did, I'd feel so incredibly guilty myself..."

"Hope and I don't talk all that much." Amelia says, lowering her eyes to the floor. She traces a circle on the smooth granite with her toe. "Especially not since his return. He's always gone, off doing something. Now he's in Hell, looking for a couple of Demon Emperors. I wish I could talk to him, but he's just not available."

Phoebe chuckles. "We women have our own problems."

"Yeah. We do." Amelia replies, a smile playing on the corner of her lips.

"Well. Let's keep going. I still have a lot to show you." Phoebe says, gesturing forward. "We're almost there."

Amelia nods. She falls into place beside Phoebe, and the two of them walk toward a large pair of steel doors. The distant sounds become more audible the closer they draw, until Amelia can finally make out the sounds of combat.

Phoebe pushes open the doors. Immediately, Amelia freezes on the spot, visibly bewildered.

"What the hell? Did we step into a parallel universe?"

"Not quite." Phoebe says, smiling at Amelia. "But something like that."

A large ramp descends downward into a huge underground jungle. The sounds of gunfire and shouting ring out, and through the dense underbrush, Amelia can just barely make out distant movements of human soldiers.

The underground space is vast, far bigger than Amelia can comprehend. At a glance, it appears to be a self-contained world, and even sunlight streams down from the 'sky' above.

That detail makes Amelia blink her eyes in confusion.

Wait, sky? Why would there be a sky underground? And why does it appear so vivid and realistic? Did we walk through a warpgate to another world?

Gunfire rings out in the foliage. The roar of a primal beast causes the trees and plant-life to shake, even making Amelia flinch.

"Where the heck are we?" Amelia asks, directing her attention to Phoebe.

"This is a Special Training Zone." Phoebe answers. "It's one of many. As for where we are... you might not believe me, even if I told you."

"Try me." Amelia says.

The Wordsmith's wife looks at Amelia and chuckles. "We're inside... a cube!"

"A cube?"

"Yes. Jason discovered a super-massive, ultra powerful artifact belonging to an ancient Archangel. Camael, to be exact. The Cube's existence is top-secret. Only humanity's leaders know about it. When we stepped through the doorway, we traveled across space to enter the Cube's confines. As for this jungle before us... it's real. The Cube is bigger than you can imagine. You could fit Tarus II's entire surface area inside of it... ten thousand times over. It's so enormous, you can't possibly wrap your head around its size."

"I... I had no idea humanity had obtained such a potent artifact." Amelia says in amazement. "And right now, we're not even on Tarus II anymore?"

"That's right." Phoebe smiles. "Not only that, but this inner space is... special. You probably can't tell, but there's a time enchantment active. Three minutes in here is only one minute back in the Milky Way's temporal timeline. This allows our soldiers to train three times faster than the monsters and demons on Tarus II."

Phoebe gazes into the jungle. "It's humanity's secret weapon."

"Then... do these soldiers know they aren't on Tarus II anymore?" Amelia asks.

"No. As a famous Hero once said, before you can deceive your enemies, you must first deceive yourself. The soldiers here only believe this is a special underground space. As for the sounds we heard while we approached this place, those were... fake. We have special recordings that play sounds heard inside of here out in the hallways to give the illusion that this training zone lays beneath Tarus II's surface. No doubt, some of the clever soldiers have realized something is 'off,' but they won't be able to easily uncover this training area's secrets."

Phoebe gestures behind herself, at the doorway she and Amelia just walked through. Amelia follows her gaze, and finds that the entrance and exit to this area appear completely normal. She can still see the hallway outside, and nothing looks to be out of the ordinary.

"But... how can anyone look at a jungle this huge and a sky like that, but not think they've traveled to another world?" Amelia asks.

"Fairy magic." Phoebe says. "That's what we tell all the soldiers we bring here. Officially, this training area is an illusory formation created by Blinker. That's why the sky appears so real and the creatures our soldiers fight are so lifelike. Of course, Blinker could create a training area with similar attributes, but the size wouldn't be at this level."

"What about the other training zones?" Amelia asks.

"We have several environments to choose from. This is a jungle, but there's also an urban environment, a shattered-urban environment for simulating bombed-out areas, a world of fire, an aquatic biome... and we'll be adding more soon."

Seeing the look of disbelief on Amelia's face, Phoebe wryly smiles. "If you think these environments take up a lot of the Cube's space, let me tell you... we haven't even used up a

millionth of a percent of its interior! The Cube is humanity's refuge, should the worst come to pass. Over time, we'll be converting it into a place where humans can live and thrive, outside of the Volgrim's grasp."

Amelia frowns. "You say it's for humans... but what about monsters and demons?"

"Well..."

Phoebe's expression becomes downcast.

"...Right now, they're not in the cards. Neil has a lot of pull with this operation. Outwardly, he only wants to build military training depots, but soon he'll be creating living spaces that rival or are even superior to those on Tarus II. I don't doubt he wants to secretly divert people to live in the Cube. With the time differential, humans will reproduce and expand our numbers three times faster than in the outer universe."

"That is indeed... a little sinister." Amelia says. "Why not talk him out of it, then?"

Phoebe hesitates. "Well... that's because... I don't exactly disagree with him."

"Mmm. His idea does have a lot of merits..." Amelia says slowly, a frown playing upon her face. "There are only sixty-three million humans in existence. All of them are on Tarus II. If a plague were to strike, or another mass extinction event, or god-forbid a Beelzebub-event, humanity could go extinct. It wouldn't be smart to put all your eggs in one basket."

That's right." Phoebe nods. "If we were to put ten million humans in the Cube, it would only take six years for babies to grow up and reach the age of eighteen. Then they could have children. And those children would have children. For every one generation that grows up and reproduces on Tarus II, three would grow up on the Cube. As you can imagine, with humans also no longer dying of old age, our population would explode. We would make a numerical resurgence at a speed that might shock you."

Amelia glances out at the underground jungle.

"And it all starts with this training area..." She mutters. "But I do have a question. You said before that Blinker was involved. If this place isn't an illusion, then what does she... do?"

"Oh. That's easy." Phoebe laughs. "Her work is actually quite simple, at least on the surface. See the doorway behind us? That's all Blinker."

"I don't follow." Amelia says.

Phoebe walks back to the doorway at the top of the ramp. She steps inside and outside of it, walking back and forth while smiling at Amelia.

"See how seamless the transition is? In truth, traveling from normal space to a time-accelerated temporality would put a tremendous burden on the body. However, Blinker laid a formation at the entrance that perfectly bridges the gap from 1x Temporality to 3x Temporality. The further you travel into the jungle, the faster your state of existence will become. Likewise, if you draw back toward the doorway, your existence will slow down, merging back into ordinary-space. Also, to travel from a planet to the Cube, located in another dimension tens of thousands of miles distant from Tarus II... I'm sure you can imagine the difficulty of setting up such a spatial transfer."

Amelia nods. "Even when walking through the Warpgates, my body shudders a little. The transition isn't nearly as smooth as walking through this doorway..."

"We call that 'Spatial Shock.'" Phoebe explains. "It's just like Temporal Shock, but for space instead of time. Blinker's formations bridge that gap."

Phoebe clears her throat. "Anyway. Now that we've gotten all the technical stuff out of the way, let's actually get down to the reason I brought you here. Blinker should be here, in this jungle. When she isn't setting up fancy-shmancy spatial-temporal doorways to extradimensional vacation and training areas, she's usually here, helping to train our troops."

The Wordsmith's wife pauses for a moment. Her smile fades.

"As for why Blinker works so diligently, I'm sure you can fathom the reason. Her husband was killed by the demons. She gets along fine with Samantha and a few others... but realistically, she's more on Neil's side than Jason's. She wants humanity to become more powerful, that way she can beat the hell out of Mephisto and recover Kar's body and soul. There's still a chance we might be able to save him, after all."

"Do you think she'll be interested in my idea?" Amelia asks. "For an inter-species training simulator, I mean."

"Oh, I don't doubt she will." Phoebe nods. "One big constraint we face with these Cube-biomes is that the losses and injuries are... realistic. Too much so. If you die in the jungle, you're dead for good. It's great for our elites, but a bit too much for the newer recruits or the mentally unsteady. Your idea would allow us to craft training sims where

people's lives aren't on the line and they can fight to the death. Further, if we can incorporate spirituality into the sims..."

Phoebe's gaze deepens as she gazes out at the jungle.

"...I'm excited for the potential. Humanity needs a leg up. Our enemies are ancient, entrenched, and willing to murder us if we slip up even in the slightest. Things are going well lately, but how long will that last?"

"Do you believe Jason can make a utopia where all the species peacefully coexist?" Amelia asks.

"If I'm being honest? I don't." Phoebe answers, turning back to the other woman. "But even if I don't think it can happen, that doesn't mean I don't want to *try* to make it happen."

"And yet you still quietly support Neil's projects." Amelia says, nodding slowly. "You're... hedging your bets? Just in case?"

"Yeah. I can't take a risk involving my entire species." Phoebe says bitterly. "Especially not now that I'm... pregnant. My baby's future depends on humanity's survival. I've already lost one child. I can't bear to lose another."

"You're pregnant?" Amelia asks. "Well... congratulations?"

"Thanks. I haven't told anyone but you, Jason, and Samantha. I hope you'll keep it quiet for now."

"No problem. I won't tell a soul." Amelia says, smiling sweetly. "Now, regarding Blinker. Can you take me to see her?"

Phoebe nods. "Sure. Just follow me."

"Alright."

Part 379: Foundational Formation

Contemplation

Phoebe and Amelia continue heading down into the jungle training world. Once they reach the bottom of the entry ramp and stand amidst the trees and plants, Amelia can't help but feel like the independent world is indeed incredibly lifelike. The smells of damp moss and rainfall mix with the chirping of birds and other sounds of strange and exotic insect life. As for the distant soldiers, their voices are slightly harder to hear than at the top of the ramp, due to all the underbrush blotting out the local sounds.

Phoebe reaches into her pocket and pulls out a tiny handheld communicator. She lifts it to her mouth, holds a trigger on the side, and says, "Phoebe Hiro to Blinker."

Moments later, Blinker replies. "Hey, Phoebe! Are you here?"

"I'm at the entrance. Where are you?"

"I'm with Fiona. Just head to this position..."

Blinker tells Phoebe where to walk, and she nods. After putting away the communicator, she guides Amelia toward a spot deep in the jungle.

"Are we in any danger?" Amelia asks, after hearing the sound of a frightening monster roar less than half a kilometer in the distance.

"We're fine. When people come here, Blinker's formation puts a temporary spell on them that makes them invisible to the wildlife. Only if they're here to train will they intentionally disable it, or if they attack a creature it will disable automatically."

"That's good to hear." Amelia says, glancing in the direction of the previous roar. "As a reminder, I don't actually have any of Amelia's magical powers, so..."

She trails off, but leaves her meaning clear for the world to understand.

Before long, the two women arrive at a large and conspicuous bunker in the forest. Like a blackhead on a snow-white face, the obsidian-colored steel sticks out from the greenery and foliage around it like a sore thumb. At only fifty feet in diameter, it's quite small, but Phoebe explains that it also has an underground resting area for recruits to eat

and sleep after their training. Indeed, several officers and cadets linger in the area, their weapons held at the ready in case the local wildlife approaches the bunker.

As soon as they show up, Fiona pops out of the ground and levitates upward, her soul-form easily passing through the terrain without issue. Likewise, Blinker flies down from the sky and lands on Phoebe's shoulder.

"Hi Phoebe! Hey Amelia!" Blinker says. "What brings you to my neck of the woods?"

"Hello, Amelia." Fiona says, faintly smiling while also directing a nod toward her physical self.

"I was talking to Amelia earlier," Phoebe explains, "and she had an interesting idea for another type of training sim that might interest you two."

"Oh? Do tell." Fiona says, fully directing her attention at Amelia.

"It's like this." Amelia explains. "I've been thinking of a way to send people's minds and souls into a training environment that perfectly recreates their abilities, both physical and magical. This would allow humans and demons to engage in virtual wars without suffering any bloodshed. The problem is, I don't have the ability to make such a system. Maybe you two can help me?"

Fiona widens her eyes in surprise. "A virtual battlefield? That's quite an innovative idea. I can see more uses for it than simply training soldiers, too."

Blinker's expression becomes contemplative. She rests her left arm across her legs while rubbing her chin with her right hand.

"Hmm... I don't have the skills to make a formation like that... but my fairy friends are going to arrive on Tarus II pretty soon. If we can get a talented Orc artificer on board, we can probably combine our efforts and make an artifact that does something similar!"

Fiona nods. "Blinker, you told me before that the Fairy Queen is the best formation master of all the fairies. Will she be coming along?"

"Nope." Blinker says. "But her daughter is! Fairy Queen Fae does not tend to leave the Fairy Realm ever, unless necessary. You have to remember that a lot of species want to capture fairies and... do bad things to us. She stays there as a deterrent to those bad people."

"That's unfortunate." Fiona says, frowning. "Maybe we should invite the fairies to Tarus II. I didn't realize your people suffered such hardships."

"It's like that for mermaids and succubi too." Blinker says, throwing her hands up helplessly. "Beauty is a curse. I'm lucky I found such a good guy like Kar... too bad that's a once in a lifetime thing..."

At the mention of Kar's name, the mood becomes momentarily somber. Perhaps sensing she's created an uncomfortable atmosphere, Blinker quickly coughs and changes subjects.

"Err, ahem! Regarding the Fairy Queen, I should probably mention that there isn't strictly *one* of them. There are actually several Fairy Queens. I'm even considered one, due to inheriting the Sphinx's power. Fairy Queen Fae is just the highest ranking one, so if you do ever encounter her, make sure you don't act as if she's the only one who matters. You might offend the others!"

"Why would there be multiple queens?" Phoebe asks. "Doesn't that seem a little odd?"

"Silly girl!" Blinker laughs. "That's like asking why there are multiple Demon Emperors. 'Fairy Queen' is a title reserved for the most powerful fairies. It's not a title of nobility or birthright, but of strength! Since fairies specialize in illusions, temporal and spatial magic, and formations, Fae is considered the strongest in two of those categories! She's a formation master, and an expert in illusions. Her fighting prowess isn't too high, but when she's bunkered inside her formations, she's untouchable."

"Formation magic sounds pretty incredible." Amelia muses. "How does it work?"

Blinker glances around the jungle.

"Mmm. It's a bit hard to explain... I should just do a demonstration instead. But this place isn't good, let's head back to Tarus II!"

"Alright." Amelia says.

Amelia, Phoebe, Fiona, and Blinker all exit the jungle, allowing the sounds of roaring monsters and animals to fade into the distance. After they leave through the door back to Tarus II, Amelia glances at Fiona.

"I thought you couldn't leave Tarus II's confines? How are you able to travel to the Cube Worlds?"

Fiona turns to Amelia while they walk. "Well, on Tarus II, I require special 'anchors' to maintain my soul-form while away from Jason's Mind Realm. However, the Cube is

different. Jason bound his soul to the Cube through the Phoenix, so I can travel there independently. It's a bit complicated, but you probably get the gist."

"Mmm. I guess that makes sense." Amelia replies.

The group of four leaves the military complex entirely and travels toward the northern edge of the city's limits, where few developments exist. After stepping into a lightly wooded area, a place where Beelzebub's explosion didn't actually reach, Blinker finds a clearing in the middle, away from prying eyes.

"Okay! So, this is my Intro To Beginner Formations!" Blinker says, directing her words at Amelia. "Fiona already knows how this works, but you and Phoebe haven't seen me do it before. Check this out."

Blinker closes her eyes. She inhales deeply, then begins turning her head around while keeping her eyes shut. She points her head in several directions, left and right, up and down, forward and backward, all while sitting on Phoebe's shoulder.

"The first step. I have to sense all of the spiritual energy in the surroundings. Usually, beginner fairies will use external mana sources, like mana stones, to set up a formation, but I'm way beyond that. I can use the environment's mana to create one. It's a bit tricky, and it limits what types of formation I can make, but the upside is I don't have to constantly put fresh mana stones into the formation every few days."

Blinker opens her eyes.

"We're on a planet teeming with life. That means a 'life' formation, or a 'wood formation' is the best type to put down. But if we were above a metal deposit, or some precious stone, we could put down a formation of those types. If we were near lava or fire, a heat-type formation would work too. The same is true of lightning, water, and all the other elements."

Blinker points at the grass in the clearing.

"I'm not going to go all out with this formation. I'll just do something simple! I'll make a 'healing formation'!"

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "You can make something like that? Won't that put Samantha out of work?"

"No, no, silly." Blinker chuckles. "Formations aren't that incredible. Healing formations can certainly allow people to regenerate limbs and their entire body, but the

amount of mana required would be bonkers! An environment-type formation like this can, at best, speed up the body's natural healing abilities a little. I already put one over the hospital, but I doubt anyone has even noticed."

"I didn't notice, sorry." Phoebe says with a shake of her head.

"The effects are pretty mild." Blinker explains. "Your blood will clot faster. Your body's natural healing will work more effectively. Oh, and if you get sick, you'll get over it a lot faster too. But healing from cuts or burns, the formation won't help there. Anyway!"

Blinker holds up her finger. She flies off Phoebe's shoulder to the center of the clearing, where she levitates, her wings flapping like a butterfly.

"Most fairies will start by using all sorts of exotic materials and supplements to create formations. For example, if you want to make a fire-type formation, you'd need fiery materials. When you add in stuff like mana stones, these formations can become quite formidable... and expensive! Most high-level fairies don't use external materials for the average formation, though. We consider them crutches. In my case, I'll use my own mana to do all the work!"

"I see." Amelia says. "So you could make extremely strong formations with external items, but they wouldn't be self sustaining and they're expensive to maintain. On the other hand, making a natural formation will align its element to the environment, making it self-sustaining, albeit weaker than a resource-based one."

Blinker nods. "That's right. And for the record, the formations I created to connect the Cube and Tarus II spatially and temporally are resource-based. I have to feed them goodies every week or they'll fall apart. Very inconvenient!"

She shakes her head, then resumes her work. After a few moments, Blinker summons three balls of light above her finger. They spiral around like moons orbiting a planet, before each firing out into different directions, where they land on the ground.

Weng!

A chime sounds out when they land, as if produced by the ringing of a bell in the air.

"The first step for a Natural Healing Formation is to place three Synergizing Beads." Blinker explains. "They help align and regulate the formation in a triangle formation. I've spaced each of them out to exactly ten meters from one another, so this will be a fairly tiny formation. But there's an advantage in doing this! Large formations can cover a

bigger area, but require more natural energy and have smaller effects. Mini formations are more 'concentrated' and thus can produce better results. If a sick person were to sit inside this completed formation, they'd get over their illness two times faster than if they recuperated inside the formation I made around the hospital."

"That makes sense." Phoebe says with a nod.

After placing the first three orbs of light, Blinker summons nine more orbs, and these change color to green and brown, with the central one being red. Half of them become a square enveloping the triangle of previous beads, while the other half become a diamond resting on the edges of the square formation's lines. Finally, the red bead goes directly in the center of all the previous beads, shining with a bright red light as Blinker places it down, before eventually fading away.

Next, Blinker starts drawing lines between all of the different beads she's placed. However, she doesn't draw a symmetrical pattern, but instead one that vaguely resembles a five-fingered hand with its palm facing upward.

"After placing the Synergizing Beads and Elemental Stabilization Beads, we next draw Symbol Lines. Every formation is different, and the intent behind the lines matters as much as the shape the lines take. In fact, I'd personally say the intent matters way more! I could draw a fist, or a bird, or anything else, and so long as I have images of 'healing' in my mind, the formation will work pretty well. But if the Symbol Lines more closely align with my mental intent, the formation will exert much more strength."

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "Huh... that sounds a lot like Wordsmithing."

"Pardon?" Blinker asks.

"Well. Jason always says intent is at least half of what makes his Words of Power function. 'Fireball' can mean any sort of flaming ball of fire, but its shape and power will vastly differ based on what image he shapes in his head. It can be small and fast, big and powerful, or even tiny and concentrated, like a railgun round."

Blinker nods slowly. "Hmm. Yeah, I can see the similarities."

After a few moments, she returns her attention to the formation.

"Usually, you wouldn't want to lose your concentration while creating a formation. That will mess up the intent and make it function poorly. The strength could drop by half or more. But luckily, I'm sort of a BIG expert, and this formation is pretty simple, so that's

no problem. Now that we've placed the different Beads and drawn the Symbol Lines, we just need to coalesce the terrain's energy, align all the elements in the area, disperse any harmful elements, remove any imperfections, and stabilize the final product..."

Blinker's hands dance in the air, casting out even more beads, drawing more lines, and stacking all sorts of mystical effects onto her newly created formation.

"...Success!" She declares. "The formation is all donezo! If you want, you can cut your finger a little, step inside the formation, and watch it heal. This formation ended up reaching the level of 'Excellent' but it didn't quite reach 'Perfection.' All formations have different tiers of power and effectiveness, ranging from Mediocre to Passable, Effective, Superb, Excellent, and Perfection. I can usually make low-level formations like this one reach the level of Perfection, but my mind wandered a little during the process, so I screwed up."

"Pardon my ignorance," Amelia says, "but these formations seem pretty simple to make. It barely even took you five minutes."

Blinker chuckles. "Well, it's not THAT easy. I spent several millennia learning how to make formations, and mostly spent time on illusions. A tiny one like this is simple, no problem at all. But I spent two whole days working on the one at the hospital! In the end, it reached the level of Superb, so it only boosts a person's innate healing ability by maybe forty percent or so. As for the formations linking Tarus II to the Cube... yikes! I felt like I was going to die. If Fairy Queen Fae were to see them, she'd probably ridicule my shoddy skills. The best one is only Effective, but the worst is Mediocre. You can tell the difference by how your body 'jolts' when traveling to the aquatic biome versus the jungle."

Phoebe nods. "The jungle one is like walking through an open doorway. Direct and simple. But the aquatic biome always makes my head hurt for a few minutes."

"That's because the aquatic biome was way different compared to Tarus II's environment. Trying to synergize the two was a big pain in my butt!" Blinker complains. "It works, but I'll have to consult the other fairies and see if they can improve or even redo the formation from scratch. I'm super untalented with the elements of water and fire."

Amelia bobs her head along to Blinker's words. "So, does that mean my idea for a soul battlefield is impossible to achieve? For you, at least?"

"Yeah... it's a bit beyond my capabilities. But if Fae's daughter is half as good as her mother, don't you worry! We'll think of something. I can see a hundred uses for this sort

of fighting simulator!"

"A hundred uses?" Amelia says, confused. "I don't understand. What other uses do you mean?"

"Think about it." Blinker explains. "We're talking about an arena where people can fight to the death without suffering any negative consequences. It won't be limited to humans, so that means demons and monsters can join in. Don't most people love watching big, bloody fights? You could settle disputes by having people beat the heck out of each other! You could set up a special fighting arena championship once a month, letting people duke it out for prizes!"

Phoebe grins. "Blinker's right. This virtual area has a heaping of uses beyond just training our troops. We can also slowly turn it into a camaraderie generator, where humans and other species work together to clear challenges, thus building trust between one another. If nothing else, I'm sure Jason will be excited to hear about it."

"Oh! I hadn't even thought of that." Amelia says, her eyes flashing with insight. "If it can be that useful for all of you, I'd be super happy."

"This is just what we needed to get people acquainted with the upcoming Power Gloves." Fiona says, shaking her fist in front of her chest. "I was worried about how they'd be able to go all-out and train their powers, but with a Soul Simulator, we can give them practical training in real-time."

Blinker flies over to Amelia and lands her feet on her shoulder. She reaches over and pats Amelia's cheek with her tiny hand.

"Great contribution, Amelia! Don't you worry. I'll make sure people start changing their minds about you, pronto!"

The four women turn to walk away. As they start to leave, Amelia jerks her thumb over her shoulder, toward the healing formation.

"Uh, are you going to leave that behind?"

"Of course!" Blinker chirps. "It's not hurting anything. Maybe an injured animal will wander into it and get its wounds healed. Undoing the formation would take some effort, and I'm feeling lazy, so I won't bother."

Blinker continues. "Besides, formations aren't exclusively a 'fairy thing.' They appear all over in nature. Fairies simply decoded how formations work and turned them into one

of our core abilities."

"You did?" Phoebe asks, bewildered. "Wait, do you mean *magical formations* can naturally occur? But... but how?"

"I can answer that." Fiona says, taking a small bit of delight in being able to lord some knowledge over her physical self. "Mana exists everywhere in nature. And wherever mana appears, it has a chance to create basic formations. Life itself shifts from chaos to order, and from order to chaos. When things become orderly, formations can appear, gently assisting the life-forms within their confines in some small way. However, natural formations made by the cosmos are generally much weaker and harder to detect than those made by fairies."

"Order to chaos, and chaos to order..." Phoebe repeats. A frown stretches across her face.

"Hm? Something wrong?" Fiona asks.

"No. No, I just... had this strange moment of Deja Vu." Phoebe says, waving her hand through the air. "It's probably nothing."

Amelia glances at Phoebe. For some reason, the mention of 'chaos' stirs a thought in the back of her mind, but it swiftly vanishes, as if silenced by an external force.

"Huh... how *odd*." Amelia murmurs to herself. "I wonder what that was..."

Part 380: Jason's Departure

Two days later.

Five weeks after Stormbringer, and a little over two after Ose's death, humanity's intelligence bureau receives a communication from the Volgrim.

Sangin Kordonis has arrived.

As the designated ambassador for human-Volgrim relations, he has been tasked with bringing the Wordsmith to Volgarius, where the First Founder will finally speak to him in person. As the two leaders of their species, both people hold positions of power, but Unarin's strength wildly exceeds Jason's, making him the higher-status individual. As such, it's simply not appropriate for him to travel to Jason.

Even so, the Wordsmith doesn't feel humiliated at being placed below Unarin. As a Wordsmith, he's fully confident in his abilities, and believes that given time, humanity will far exceed any accomplishments the Volgrim have ever achieved. For the moment though, his forces are indeed far inferior to even Volgrimkind's weakest auxiliary armies, let alone the ones stationed on their capital world.

Jason, Phoebe, Fiona, and Neil all stand at the southern side of the Fortress of Retribution, some distance from the prisons, outside the crystal dome that covers the city. Before them, a huge landing pad sits, created by Jason just ten minutes earlier, formed out of concrete and steel.

Behind humanity's leaders, fifty thousand soldiers stand at attention in five rows of ten thousand each. They form up behind the Wordsmith, granting him an impressive and awe-inspiring retinue. To Jason's right, a small army of demons stands, while on his left, an army of monsters also stands.

The clouds part, and a giant ship half a kilometer in length slowly descends. The utilitarian, boxy-looking vessel sports two wavy wings stretching out of its sides, each one equipped with double-barreled photon cannons for ship-to-surface combat. The front of the ship narrows to a point, making it look like a rectangular, winged javelin capable of piercing through other vessels should it choose to execute a ramming maneuver. The fact it possesses stealth modules only adds to its lethality.

As a stealth and combat-type frigate, the VLL Hatoraxia is considered by many Volgrim to be a well-equipped, bog-standard vessel used by elites of all the different sub-species. With only a few unique modifications added to it, it wouldn't stand out compared to others of the same class, but it still possesses enough firepower to wipe humanity's existence off the face of Tarus II.

In that respect, it commands fear from all who gaze upon its subtle black exterior.

Humanity's elites, as well as countless monsters and demons, stare with grim expressions at the descending starship. Its massive size and sleek, formidable appearance reminds them of the might the Volgrim possess. Even the cockiest Demon Emperors realize that before a mere frigate of the Volgrim Empire, their combined strength simply isn't even worth a sneeze.

The Hatoraxia's landing struts *clank* against the landing pad, and its thrusters blow up a small storm of dust. A minute later, its side opens up and a ramp extends downward. Sangin Kordonis and his Psion comrade, Invocator Miikil, walk toward the awaiting human elites.

"Greetings to all of you." Sangin says, appearing much more calm and regal than the last time he met with Jason. "I offer well-wishes to your species on behalf of the great and glorious Five Founders."

Having recently dedicated a certain amount of time to the study of humanity, Kordonis has observed many of their mannerisms from old holodisks. Now that he has mentally prepared himself for what the Wordsmith can do, he doesn't allow himself to get flustered before humanity's people. After all, as a high and mighty Volgrim representative, he must project power before the mud-dwellers, lest they forget the strength of their 'betters.'

Jason casually walks toward Kordonis and extends his fist forward. "It's good to see you again, Sangin Kordonis. Is it fine if I just call you Kordonis? I'm not much for formality."

Kordonis nods. "You may."

He glances at Jason's extended fist, then hesitates for a moment before extending his own arm. However, instead of a hand, his limb tapers off into five long, stringy tentacles. He balls them up into a shape somewhat resembling a fist, and presses them against Jason's fist.

"I was under the impression most humans preferred to 'shake hands' as part of your formal greeting." Kordonis says, retracting his arm afterward. "However, I have learned that some of the... *less refined* among your people, prefer to perform the ritual of a 'fist bump.' I came prepared."

Kordonis's mouth-tendrils quiver as he speaks, carefully enunciating his words to be loud and audible for everyone to hear him.

"I'm not big on formalities." Jason says. "I treat everyone casually and as an equal. Too much rigidity in social structures makes the titles and positions of power more desirable than actually performing good and worthy deeds to earn those titles."

"A fair assessment." Kordonis nods. He turns his attention away from Jason. "Ah. And you must be the female mating partner of the Wordsmith, Phoebe Hiro. Although... I am confused as to why there are two of you, and why the second one appears to be a holographic entity."

"I'm Phoebe Hiro." Phoebe says. "This is Fiona. She's my... twin sister. Due to a series of odd events, she's now only a soul-form."

Fiona puffs out her chest. "I'm also married to Jason, though. It's complicated."

Kordonis nods sagely. "Of course. I have read that powerful warriors among the humans often take multiple female partners as their mates. It is a sign of virility and proof you will bear many descendants."

Jason, Phoebe, and Fiona all exchange brief, awkward glances before coughing into their fists.

"Yeah. Something like that." Jason says, quickly changing the subject. "Has your war situation changed recently?"

"The War is neverending." Kordonis says. "Once it began, not one cycle has passed wherein the Volgrim were not slowly losing ground. The Kolvaxians are an enemy more frightening than you can possibly imagine."

He glances in the direction of several demon leaders, among them being Emperor Melody.

"As for what happened to the world of Sharmur, First Founder Unarin expresses his sincerest condolences, and has offered to help locate a new habitable world suitable for the Hell of Isolation to reside upon."

"That ain't necessary." Melody says, waving her hand. "For now, we're going to stay on Tarus II with our friends from the Hell of Lust. We'll help the humans rebuild."

With a nod, Kordonis directs his attention back to the Wordsmith.

"The attack on Sharmur was not an isolated incident. In the last twenty-three rotational cycles, eleven worlds inhabited by my people have fallen. Billions have perished to the alien menace. Unarin is... anxious to become acquainted with you in person, Wordsmith. Have you completed all of your preparations?"

Jason nods. "I'm going to bring a few retainers with me on the trip, but otherwise, while I'm gone, Phoebe and Neil Adams will be in charge of humanity's matters."

"We have plenty of room aboard our ship for your comrades to stay." Kordonis says, his voice slow and soothing. "We would like to return to Volgarius in haste. Time is of the essence, so that you can begin assisting us in investigating and repelling the Plague. Uncovering its weakness, as well as its origins, is our top priority."

"I understand." Jason says with a nod. "I'll join you on the ship shortly."

Kordonis bows slightly as a form of deference. Turning around, he heads back up the Hatoraxia's ramp with Miikil, and they vanish into its interior.

Jason turns to the throng of humans, demons, and monsters behind him.

"Everyone. I will return soon. In the meantime, please continue rebuilding without me. Phoebe will hold the Stormbringer Tribunal in my stead. Before then, she will take care to revive all of our fallen people through the Lazarus Tower. I hope to hear good news upon my return. Stay safe... and don't get into any fights. If I come back and find out anyone crossed a line they shouldn't have... there will be hell to pay."

Jason kisses Phoebe goodbye. Fiona steps inside his Mind Realm, as do Shana and Lorent. With Jason leaving, they won't be able to maintain contact with the soul pylons that enable their materialized bodies to become visible, and they would only be able to stay on the Cube. Not only that, but Jason seeks as much protection from the Psions as possible, so he chooses to bring the three of them along... just in case.

Before heading onto the Hatoraxia, Jason pauses when he sees Uriel approaching him. She holds out her hand, face-up.

"Wordsmith. These Volgrim, verily they art deceitful and treacherous. Trust none of them. My brother has asked if he might join thee on thy journey."

Jason glances at the ring in Uriel's outstretched palm. He plucks it from her grasp.

"Raphael? Sure. I'll feel a lot safer if I have a master of the soul arts like him reinforcing my Mind Realm."

"Excellent." Uriel says, her voice somewhat growly. "Consult with him often. I believe the First Founder may attempt to deceive thee upon many an occasion. He is far less scrupulous than he acts."

"Noted." Jason says. "If you happen to see Hope, let him know where I've gone. Maybe he'll return soon, having successfully killed or captured Mephisto and Yama."

"Those two bastards art tricky like chameleons." Uriel observes. "Uncovering their hiding location shalt prove difficult, indeed."

Without any further words, Jason nods and turns to the Hatoraxia. Behind him, a few different humans and monsters follow along. Among them is, surprisingly, none other than Yamir, as well as Lieutenant Samuel. With work soon to complete on the Power Gloves, Samuel's job of coordinating T-REX handouts is temporarily less necessary than before, so he joins the team as Jason's muscle.

In addition to the monster chef and the human lieutenant, a demoness joins their ranks. Serena, the Emperor of Soul Whispers. While Jason originally felt it was a bit odd to have a former enemy join him, he changed his mind due to the fact that her combat strength wasn't especially high, and because she suggested she might be able to help him with defending his mind from high-ranking Psions.

As the group reaches the bottom of the ramp, Emperor Serena turns to the Wordsmith. Her sightless eyes fixate on the general direction of his face, and she speaks in a quiet, whispery voice.

"Emperor Gorn wishes to thank you for your Word of Power. You have opened his mind to the greater truths of the Dao."

"It was nothing." Jason says, casually waving his hand. "Happy to help."

"Mmm. Gorn is my lover, you see. His pleasure is also mine." Serena says. "You are a good man, Jason Hiro."

"Thanks. Uh, you too." Jason says, cringing awkwardly at his words. "I mean... never mind."

The party of ten people boards the ship. As the entry ramp closes behind them, Lieutenant Samuel glances around at the bright and shiny steel interior, along with the glowing power conduits on the walls, the soft white lighting along the ceiling, and the other futuristic designs that stand far apart from humanity.

"Well. Ain't this some fancy shit?"

Hope Hiro travels across the Labyrinth. With his abilities, he could travel to and from the El Dorado Room in under a minute, but he conserves his mana, taking the long and hard route instead. Arthur's construct follows behind him, suppressing its aura so as to not alarm any enemies, while the two of them practice their stealth skills.

It only takes Hope a day or two to secretly return to the Core. He stows away Arthur's construct by turning it into a compact soul-form, then placing it within his Mind Realm via a Word of Power.

"Storage."

After putting the black hole construct away, Hope turns himself invisible and ethereal. He saunters back into the Core, completely unseen and undetected by a single entity. Not even the mighty Demon Emperors notice him when he passes them on the sly.

Hope listens to the chatter of the people around him. He quickly gets up to speed on the happenings that have taken place, then nods to himself.

It should be about that time. Jason will be departing Tarus II. Since I don't know where Volgarius is or how to reach it, I'll have to stow away!

Hope silently follows Jason around, like a specter in the night. He coldly watches his main body while standing not far from him. Creepily, Jason walks right past Hope, never once realizing his clone could reach out and murder him with a twist of his wrist, let alone a Word of Power.

It would be so easy. Hope thinks. I could kill Jason and he wouldn't be able to retaliate. Hell, I could take his place. I could get Phoebe back. I could get everything I deserve! But I won't do that. It wouldn't be right, and I'm not a murderer like him. So I'll bide my time. I'll win over humanity with my own efforts, just you wait and see, Jason...

With a shake of his head, Hope pushes those thoughts into his stomach. He continues following Jason until the Volgrim ambassadors arrive. After the Hatoraxia lands, and

while Jason exchanges pleasantries, Hope scans the entire ship with his Wordsmithing. He locates dozens of viable hiding places, then teleports inside, concealing himself in a secret corner on a lower deck.

The Wordsmith's clone extends his spiritual senses around, identifying and marking every Volgrim on the ship. Without any of them knowing, he copies their memories and places them inside his Mind Realm to be dealt with later.

If only I had a Fiona of my own. Hope muses. She could go through and sort all these memories for me. Oh, well. I have time. I'll just have to do it myself.

Hope dives into the stored memories of the Volgrim and begins sifting through them. Despite there only being a few hundred crew-members aboard the Hatoraxia, each of them possesses at least tens of thousands of years worth of memories, and some have a hundred thousand, a million, or more!

Among the Volgrim, a five million year old is still a junior even when placed beside a five thousand year old junior. To their species, seniority comes from results, not age.

As such, Hope find that even among the older-lived ones, their knowledge base doesn't include any useful or classified information. Not one of them knows where Excalibur is located, nor the Dominion Rod or even that these artifacts exist!

However, as Hope browses through one crew-member's memories, his blood turns cold.

In his mind's eye, a scene plays out.

A scene of horror that Technopath officer personally experienced... and one he will never forget for the rest of his life.

The world of Kavos, forty-six thousand years ago.

I was a young initiate at the time. Five thousand years old. I was still inexperienced in matters of second-order technology, but I was working my way toward mastering it so I could someday reach the first-order. I wanted to become a great inventor, a creator of technology on par with the leaders of the Great Clans.

At that time, I was only a simple field technician. The War had been raging for well over fifty thousand years, but I never thought it would reach me. I simply repaired the

ships that came back from the frontlines. I did my part, and I was rewarded for my efforts.

It was a simple life, but I was a Volgrim with grand aspirations.

Technician 71145, that was my worker designation. I had no merits, so my name was never used, at least not by my superiors. Sometimes, I envied the simpler life-forms, those who were allowed to possess their own identity from birth. But I was not like them.

Relatives. Friends. Family. These terms were not ones I connected with.

I was a vat-born servant of the Five Founders. I was created to enhance their military strength and push back against the Plague.

But then, one day, it came for me. For all of us.

All of the vat-born on Kavos. We lived with a shroud of clouds covering our skies. Not literal clouds, but figurative ones, borne from our worry we might never climb the ranks to achieve greatness... worry that we might meet our end before our fated day arrived.

It was an ordinary day like any other. I was repairing the engine core of a B-Legion Crimson Interceptor when the alarm rang in my hangar bay. I raised my head, confused. Had a fire broken out? Was I in any danger?

The transmission array activated, and words streamed into my neural cortex feed.

The Plague has made landfall on the world of Kavos. All personnel must evacuate and report to their designated star-post for decontamination and inspections. Failure to clear contamination will result in your biological expungement.

My blood froze. My body seized up. Terror swept through my veins.

It all happened so fast. Before I knew what was happening, hundreds of people swarmed into my hangar. They clambered for any available ship. They stuffed themselves onto vessels to the point it exceeded their weight capacity and they could not take off.

As for me, I made a split-second decision. I jumped into the interceptor I was repairing and took flight, ignoring any potential engine issues that might arise.

I lifted off, and as I flew toward the hangar's exit point, I began to hear screams.

Terrified, I looked down. I saw the writhing mass tearing into the crowd.

Green skin. Mottled eyes. Mucus covering every inch of its body. It was a Plagueborn. It grabbed anyone within range and bit onto them, ripping out chunks of their flesh

before throwing them back to the floor.

It did not hunger. It did not consume for the sake of pursuing nutrients.

It merely... assimilated.

Even a hundred feet in the air, I could clearly see what that creature's true intention was. It was neither mindless, nor intelligent. It attacked anything that drew too close, but its strikes were also targeted and precise.

It came with a goal... and that realization frightened me.

I ignited my boosters and raced out of the hangar. Not ten micro-time-units later, a torrent of Plagueborn surged toward that hangar from outside, pursuing the Volgrim who had fled to it in the hopes of saving themselves.

As my gaze swept into the distance, I saw for myself the truth of the matter. Flames burned, and smoke rose into the sky. In less than a day, all of our lives crumbled to nothing.

A world of twenty billion loyal Volgrim... and I was one of only two hundred thousand who survived.

I no longer seek glory, or fame, or fortune. I seek only the survival of my species.

These juniors, they still hope that we might defeat the Plague. But I have long lost my hope. The Plague is invincible. It is a wave of devastation which no wall can block.

I must do what I can to save even a sliver of my people... but I fear that in the end, all my efforts will come to nothing.

As Hope pulls back from that Technopath's memories, he shivers involuntarily. He imagines himself in their place, fighting for his very survival against a monstrous, primal, animalistic enemy. In his heart, he isn't sure what his courage would amount to if he didn't possess the powers of a Wordsmith.

Kavos. Hope thinks, shaking his head. A tragic loss. Just like Sharmur and the rest. I have to ensure I possess enough power to protect humanity! It's not about my personal ambitions, or possessing a title of power... it's about the survival of my species!

He remembers all the discussions he and Neil have had over the years. The talks of humans versus demons. Which species is better. Why humans deserve their rise to glory...

But it's only now, when he sees the personal recollections of this random Technopath, a single survivor of an atrocity among hundreds of thousands of others, a speck of a speck... that he realizes he hasn't been broad-minded enough.

It's about survival. The right to exist. Not about supremacy, or conquering the weak. There is no joy in genocide. There are no winners. It only spreads hatred and pain.

He sits in the corner of that dark room and ponders quietly to himself, as the Hatoraxia's engines hum to life and it lifts off Tarus II's surface.

When did I change? When did I stop thinking like Jason and become so cold, so callous? Is it true that demons are the enemy? They've committed atrocities... but they aren't entirely a sterile, unfeeling species. Not like the Plague.

The Plague is humanity's true enemy. The demons are... evil. But they can be cowed. Threatened. Coerced into acting morally. At least on a temporary basis.

But the Kolvaxians are different. They exist only to consume and conquer. If all of our species don't unite to stop them, what will be left of us? We'll simply become a horde of mindless, rampaging zombies.

Hope glances to the side, where he gazes out of a window into space. Already, the Hatoraxia has reached orbit, and from his position, Hope can barely make out the fading image of Tarus II. As the Hatoraxia pulls away, the planet's cloaking field seals up, hiding Tarus II from view. It disappears, leaving behind a seemingly empty void in space.

If the Kolvaxians succeed, Tarus II will fall. Humanity will fall. It will be as if we never existed at all...

Part 381: The Psionic Laws

As the Hatoraxia lifts off Tarus II's surface, Jason and his soldiers stand idly for ten or so minutes, watching out a nearby window while their homeworld fades into the distance. Even Jason, a man who has gone to space many times in the past six years, feels a sinking sensation in his stomach as the distance between him and Phoebe lengthens.

Hopefully I won't be gone too long. Jason thinks.

He turns to look at all of the soldiers behind him, then subtly clears his throat.

All of his men, as well as Emperor Serena, reach behind their heads and press a button on a device concealed beneath their skin. These gadgets, a countermeasure made by Phoebe, create mental interference in their thoughts and memories, with the intent of making it difficult or impossible for Psions to extract the knowledge of anyone in Jason's party.

Of course, the Psions might be able to hack the devices, hence why Blinker added tiny formations to them with magical effects that will cause any hacker to throw up their hands in defeat. Without a solid background in technology and magic, nobody should be able to rip into Jason's thoughts or intrude in secret. At least, not in theory.

Once the Hatoraxia clears the gravity wells of Tarus II and its moons, Sangin Kordonis descends from the Bridge, along with Invocator Miikil, to greet their guests.

"Humanity's delegates." Kordonis says, as his heavy titanium legs clank against the metal decks. "We have a two-week journey ahead of us as we travel to Volgarius. Why don't you join me in the leisure hall? I will have someone prepare appropriate sustenance for your species."

"That's fine." Jason says, as he and the others begin following Kordonis out of the entry bay. "How far is Volgarius from here? And can we reach it faster?"

"Volgarius is roughly 12,000 light-cycles from our position." Kordonis explains. "Tarus's star system is located in the southern region of the Milky Way, while Volgarius is located within the south-eastern region, somewhat close to the Galactic Core. The Hatoraxia can only travel at Warp 7 safely, while Warp 8 will breach its safe operating limits."

At this point, Invocator Miikil speaks up. [Regarding your former homeworld of Earth, it is located within the south-western region.]

"Allow me to introduce my peer." Kordonis says, after walking into the Leisure Hall. "Invoker Miikil is a young Psion of the 5th Tier. Her powers are neither extraordinary nor sub-par. She is a talented individual who will surely someday rise to great heights."

[Captain Kordonis flatters me.] Miikil transmits telepathically. [I am neither talented nor impressive compared to any other Psion. Countless peers of mine who are younger and swifter of mind have already reached the 6th Tier.]

"She exaggerates. Invocator Miikil is one of the fastest to reach the 5th Tier of power in the past 100,000 cycles. Few can compare to her, especially given she is not a Specialist, but a Generalist."

Kordonis gestures to a simple steel table with comfortable but basic chairs arranged around it. He plods to the opposite side and takes a seat, along with Miikil, while the humans, monsters, and Emperor Serena sit opposite them.

Jason and the rest take their seats. The Wordsmith smiles cordially at Kordonis. "Forgive me, but I'm a little ignorant of Psion ranks. I don't follow what all these different 'tiers' mean."

[It is only natural a mud-dwell- ah, it is only natural a non-Volgrim like you would not understand the intricacies of our wartime capabilities and systems of measurement.] Miikil says, displaying the proud and haughty air of a young Psion elite. Still, she corrects herself after almost uttering a casual slur toward the ship's respected guests.

"This knowledge cannot be considered confidential or classified information." Kordonis says, shooting a quick glance at his subordinate to remind her to be polite. "Psions are masters of telekinesis. Their ability to use psionic powers will typically increase with time, practice, and understanding. Unlike demons, their powers are not limited to a handful of abilities, but can increase infinitely and without limit, so long as they are capable enough to grasp the highest laws of Psionics."

He continues. "There are nine tiers of psionic potential. Within these tiers, there are also smaller grades, though most Psions do not bother speaking about them. Two 3rd Tier Psions can have significantly different fighting capabilities based on the knowledge they've comprehended. The older and wiser a Psion is, the more progress they are likely to have made."

"Nine tiers." Jason repeats. "Since Miikil is a 5th Tier, she should be right in the middle of the pack?"

The Wordsmith's eyes light up with interest. His knowledge of Volgrim society is shallow, far too shallow, to the extent he really cannot grasp just how much power they control. How can he ever hope to break their chokehold on the Milky Way if he does not know the limits of their strength?

At the same time, Kordonis and Miikil recognize the Wordsmith's ambitions. Even so, they know in their hearts that the Five Founders, and in particular the Second Founder, are invincible existences. No matter how much the Wordsmith barks, he cannot ever think of truly defeating Volgrimkind. If he does, he will fall to the Kolvaxians. And if he defeats the Kolvaxians, the Volgrim will be free to turn their full military might upon him and humanity, returning them back to their primitive origins.

Kordonis subtly shakes his head. *He's so pitiful. The Wordsmith dreams of ascending to glory, but he is a tiny fish in a great ocean. He can never defeat the monsters swimming around him, no matter how he struggles. A minuscule existence.*

"While the 5th Tier may be the middle of the nine tiers, it is far from middling in power." Kordonis explains. "Let me tell you what the differences are in the tiers so you can... better grasp the power Volgrimkind harnesses, which will also inform you on the power the Kolvaxians control."

Kordonis launches into an explanation of each tier without waiting for Jason's reply.

"All Psions start out in the 1st Tier, Initiator! There are many titles a Psion can earn. Among them are military titles and civilian titles. From the moment they are spawned, every Psion possesses a minimum level of psionic potential. Even the weakest and most infirm can levitate small objects around themselves. At the peak of the first tier, Psions can fling objects with great strength and lift as much as a ton of mass, even with great difficulty."

"At the 2nd Tier, a Psion's power increases significantly. Being able to lift multiple tons is just one aspect of their development. Harnessing the power of Primal Psionics at a basic level is required for all 1st Tier Psions, but the 2nd Tier is where they can begin branching out into different fields of Psionics."

Jason holds up his palm. "Primal Psionics? Other fields of psionics?"

Miikil interjects. [Primal Psionics is the most elementary branch of psionic power, one involving raw telekinetic power. Lifting and tearing the physical realm. Levitating oneself. Flight. All Psions possess at least a basic knowledge of Primal Psionics, for it is the foundation upon which all Psionic abilities are built. At the highest levels, Primal Psions can crush planets, compress tens of tons of matter into marble-sized beads, and tear apart their opponents with raw telekinetic strength.]

She continues. [As for the other branches of Psionics, they are too numerous to mention in great detail. Body Enhancers focus on mastering their physical forms. By harnessing their psionic potential, they can increase their thinking speed, their strength, and their bodily durability. At the highest echelons, even Capital-Class Starship Cannons will only be capable of inflicting light injuries upon them.]

"There are also Energy Manipulators, Liquid Manipulators, Spatial Psions, Temporal Psions, and many other branches." Kordonis explains. "At the 2nd Tier, most Psions will begin building upon their foundational knowledge to learn what branches of Psionics they are best suited to learn. Miikil, for instance, is a Gaseous and Liquid Invocator, with smaller achievements in several other branches. When it comes to her mastery of fire and lightning, or space and time, her abilities are not much to speak of."

[In a cloud of toxic or corrosive fumes, I am within my element.] Miikil states with absolute confidence. [I can transform a simple body of water into a weapon capable of threatening Harbinger-Class starships. I can even break down hardened exosteel into its elementary particles, deteriorating the atomic bonds between this ship's deckplates.]

Jason nods slowly. "How much stronger are you, a 5th Tier Psion, compared to a 2nd Tier?"

"I will continue with my previous explanation." Kordonis says. "At the 3rd Tier, most Psions have already begun to master their chosen ability types. The first four tiers of Psionic Power are considered not too impressive in the Volgrim Empire. They are only allowed to work as civilians, researchers, or other low-level administrative assistants. In Miikil's case, she was assigned to study hostile worlds with toxic fumes for the sake of future potential expansion efforts, on behalf of the Founders."

[Things change for us Psions when we achieve the 5th Tier.] Miikil says, once again feeling a certain level of smug pride at showing off to the pitiful mud-dwellers. [The 1st and 2nd Tiers are for low level world construction Psions. They use their abilities to

directly assist the Founders in building new settlements. The 3rd Tier is where most Psions become capable of flattening weaker indigenous populations. The 4th Tier is where most Psions will become the heads of their own small little worlds, or will begin to receive classified tasks of the civilian rank. While 4th Tier Psions can certainly battle and defeat most Demon Dukes, they are still not a match for Demon Emperors.]

Miikil flicks her eyes in Emperor Serena's direction, but the blind woman stares blankly into the distance, as if this conversation has nothing to do with her.

[The 5th Tier is a demarcation point. It is the level where Psions become far, far more powerful than any mere indigenous population.]

Emperor Serena slowly blinks. "That's right. Jason, you were not around for the Energy Wars, so you may not be aware. Of the Psions who attacked Earth, ninety-nine percent of them were of the 5th Tier. Only a small minority were of the 6th Tier, and not once did any higher tiered Psions bother showing up. Even so... they were more than capable of flattening our militaries."

Lieutenant Samuel frowns. "Wait, hold up a minute. You're telling me... Earth was only some kind of... whetstone? It was just a place where you guys sent your grunts to temper themselves?!"

Miikil tilts her chin up haughtily. [That is correct. Earth was never the slightest threat to the glory of the Volgrim Empire. Humanity's mightiest weapons were no more alarming to us than... the toy guns one of your children might play with.]

Kordonis shoots a glance at Miikil, then frowns.

"There is no need to act antagonistically toward our guests, junior. I am sure the Wordsmith is wise enough to roughly fathom Volgrimkind's superior might."

[Of course.] Miikil 'apologizes.' [I spoke too flippantly. Please forgive my crude mannerisms.]

Despite the two Volgrim's 'contrite' attitudes, Jason easily deduces that this is merely another method they use to brag and lord their power over the feeble mud-dwellers.

However, he doesn't bother with chastising or correcting them. In his heart of hearts, he begins to feel a certain amount of suppression and wariness toward their Empire.

Even if the Volgrim are exaggerating a bit, it can't be by too much. Serena stated that they never even bothered dispatching 7th, 8th, or 9th Tier Psions during the Energy

Wars. If so, that means we really were only facing their basic armies. Not even their elites!

His thoughts turn grim.

Even if the Volgrim are being suppressed by the Kolvaxians, their military might is unfathomable! I honestly don't know how I would hold up against an 8th or 9th Tier Psion.

As if sensing Jason's thoughts, Kordonis chuckles. "The higher the rank in Psionics, the fewer the number of Psions that exist. To date, only a few thousand 7th Tier Psions walk the mortal realm, and only six 8th Tier Psions."

Kordonis states these 'small' numbers of planet-destroyer and galaxy-level threats as if they were a weakness, but his words only serve to make everyone on Jason's side of the table feel even more stifled.

Humanity couldn't beat a fraction of Volgrimkind's 7th Tier Psions during the Energy Wars, and even if we did, there are still half a dozen 8th Tier Psions above them!

However, as he thinks these things, Miikil sighs deeply, exhaling through her nostrils.

[Of course... even among Psions, there is only a single 9th Tier member of our species. The revered Second Founder, Dosenia. She is an invincible existence. Among Psions, she is our goddess. Profaning her name will bring forth a calamity upon anyone who dares to do so. Even the other Founders would never dare to speak ill of her. Among the entirety of Volgrimkind, if there is a reverse-scale one must never touch, it is insulting the Highest Psion.]

Hearing the deep respect in Miikil's voice, Jason presses his teeth together.

"How... how powerful is the Second Founder, exactly?"

"Nobody knows." Kordonis states, his tone distant. "The last time she fought in a serious battle was during the Seven Great Wars of myth. Nobody on this ship was alive back then. None of us are qualified to know the details. All we know is what was taught to us during our upbringing. Under the combined assault of thirty Sentinels, Founder Dosenia fought for a hundred rotational cycles straight, allowing Founder Unarin to activate the Gatekeeper Protocol. In that era, there were five other 9th Tier Psions. All of them fell in that battle, leaving her as the lone survivor."

"I've heard about your Great Wars." Jason says, recalling Unarin's broadcast, which Marie Becker secretly gave him. "I'm not entirely sure what a Sentinel is, but I understand it's some sort of killer robot."

"Details of the past are murky, locked within the minds of the survivors." Kordonis says. "Even if I did know, I would not tell you without permission from the Founders, as our history is considered classified knowledge. Details about the Sentinels are difficult to come by."

[The Seven Great Wars were devastating to the ranks of Psion-kind.] Miikil states. [We once had six 9th Tier Psions leading our people. Now, we have only one. While this is true, one fact is for certain... Founder Dosena was more powerful than all five of her peers combined. After all these millions of years, she has likely reached a level none can fathom. There are even rumors she may someday touch upon the 10th Tier.]

"I don't understand." Jason says. "Why not raise some of the 8th Tier Psions to the 9th? Why is Dosena the only one to reach the 9th after all this time?"

[I am not qualified to know the matters of high-level Psions.] Miikil states, shaking her head. [If I had to hazard a guess, I would assume it is due to flaws within the foundations of our current 8th Tier Psions. To advance in a tier, one must possess knowledge and power befitting its standard classifications. There are many methods of advancing, but the requirements become far stricter at the highest levels.]

[For example, to become a 2nd Tier Psion, one can opt to have two masteries that reach the second level of Psionics. However, this would mean one must have three levels of mastery for the 3rd Tier, or four levels for the 4th Tier. In my case, I possess only two masteries of the fifth level, with those being Liquid and Gaseous Manipulation. This is far from enough to qualify me as a 5th Tier Psion, but I also amassed significant accolades to earn myself a promotion, and my mastery of several other fields has reached a moderate to acceptable range. In truth, my potential is likely capped at the 7th Tier, but I may reach the 8th with plenty of time and hard work.]

"So... that means you will never reach the 9th Tier?" Jason asks.

[Indeed.] Miikil answers, lowering her head in shame. [The same is true of countless other aspiring Psions. Not only must one work diligently to understand and comprehend the Psionic Laws, but they must temper their bodies and minds, while not neglecting their

fundamentals. If one is half-hearted in their efforts, they may reach the 5th or 6th Tier, yet fail to progress any further for the rest of eternity.]

"That's too bad." Jason says, though his expression betrays his exact opposite thoughts. After all, having the Volgrim advance slowly is certainly better than having them advance quickly.

Jason turns his attention away from the topic of Psions.

"Thank you for informing me about these matters of which I was unaware. At least now, I'll sound like less of an oaf when I talk to the Founders."

"It is a small matter." Kordonis replies, waving his finger-tendrils casually. "In fact, Founder Unarin gave me strict commands to ensure I debriefed you on our illustrious Empire. Since you are from a backwater world and lacking in knowledge, it is only appropriate for me to inform you of the basics, the low-level knowledge all Volgrim already know."

Jason's eye twitches. "Yeah. Thanks... a lot."

As the Wordsmith and his comrades continue conversing with the Volgrim delegates, the Hatoraxia jumps to Warp 7. Nobody even notices the faint shift in the air as the ship smoothly enters Hyperspace.

"So, you're a Technopath." Jason says to Kordonis. "Can you tell me anything about your species? Sub-species, rather. I know you have clans or whatever, but that's about the extent of my knowledge."

Kordonis nods. "My full name is Sangin Kordonis. I hail from Clan Oblong. Perhaps you may know of my clan's leader, Sangin Lidra."

Jason's eye twitches a second time as he recalls his encounter inside Marie Becker's underground facility, when the Volgrim inspection team arrived. "I... know of her."

"The many Technopath clans possess subtle differences a rimworlder like you will not easily notice." Kordonis explains. "But the biggest difference comes in each clan's distinct design philosophy."

"Design philosophy?" Jason repeats. "Like how you build things?"

"Correct." Kordonis nods. "Take this starship we currently reside upon. The VLL Hatoraxia is a standard-issue Assault and Stealth Frigate-Class vessel for Oblong's captains. Unlike our direct competitor, Clan Symmetra, we Oblongers prefer to design

simple and basic ships and weapons that work well for the lowest cost. We do not add flashy decorations or adornments. We do not attempt to turn our ships into sleek predators of war."

"Why not?" Jason asks, visibly confused. "Don't you want your ships to look good? Presentation is quite useful, since it can perform a variety of purposes."

"Everything has a cost!" Kordonis declares, his voice filling with righteous indignation. "Unlike those foolish Symmetrians, we Oblongers do not waste the Empire's valuable and limited resources. Our ships are tough, durable, and functional. Their square and boxy exteriors may appear unimpressive, but they are much easier to repair. We do not outfit our ships and technology with individualized components, but instead attempt to build them from standardized parts as much as possible."

"Further," Kordonis continues, "Clan Symmetra goes to great lengths to ensure their ships are symmetrically designed, as their clan name would imply. If there is a crew quarter on one side of the ship, there will be another on the opposite side. This is a foolish way to design technology! Those ignorant bastards actually put their ship reactors right in the central nexus, a place where if a catastrophe were to occur, the entire ship would detonate and kill all its loyal Volgrim soldiers. Such irresponsible behavior is why we must never stop until we have brought their design philosophy to ruin!"

Kordonis's passionate and unexpected outburst takes Jason and the others by surprise. Seeing the fervor in his eyes, Jason realizes this previously placid and somewhat milquetoast captain isn't as calm and steady as he appears. He, too, holds certain ideals close to his heart, and will fight to uphold them, even if they seem a little silly to others.

"Mmm. I value practicality myself!" Lieutenant Samuel says, chuckling under his breath. "You don't need weapons to look fancy. You need them to kill! What good is a pretty-looking ship if it ends up weaker than its opponent? You should maximize crew safety and efficiency, not idle, vapid bullshit."

Kordonis turns to evaluate Jason's subordinate with a gleam of happiness in his eyes. "Precisely! That is exactly the sort of thought a wise man should have. What is your name? I will make sure you receive excellent treatment while you are aboard my vessel."

"It's Samuel." The man answers. "No need to treat me any differently from the others. I'm just here to do my job."

"Excellent. Most excellent!" Kordonis laughs. He turns his attention back to Jason. "It is always good to meet a mud-dweller who knows their head from their feet! You have brought along a most excellent subordinate, Wordsmith."

Jason stifles the urge to roll his eyes.

"Gee. Thanks, Kordonis."

Part 382: Kordonis's Secrets

Jason and his comrades raise their eyebrows in surprise as several crew-members of the Hatoraxia walk into the Leisure Hall. While presently, only the Captain and Jason's men are inside, ordinarily this room will have as many as one or two hundred Volgrim inside. Therefore, it currently feels quite empty, with only one of the long and wide tables having anyone sat down.

These crew-members aren't there to fraternize, though. Instead, they bring with them more than twenty plates of food. They place the food down on humanity's side of the table, while placing nothing on Kordonis's side.

After uncovering the dishes, fragrant smells drift into the air. In an instant, Jason and the rest of his soldiers evaluate their contents, raising their eyebrows even higher.

"American, Greek, Turkish, Indonesian, Chinese, and even Japanese cooking." Jason mutters out loud. "These dishes all seem to be..."

"That is right." Kordonis says, spreading his arms a little to show his magnanimity. "These are all authentic dishes modeled just like the ones you would have found on Earth."

Jason eyes the many varieties of pork, chicken, rice, and pasta. His gaze sweeps across seafood, Mexican dishes like burritos and tamales, and most importantly, hamburgers.

So many hamburgers.

An entire plate of high-class hamburgers. At least thirty of them.

"Authentic Earth food." Jason says, tilting his eyes in Kordonis's direction. "Given how Earth is... extinct... how are you able to make all of this?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Kordonis asks. "Replicators. Our replicators are capable of creating any sort of exotic cuisine you can imagine. Of course, we Volgrim do not typically need to consume edible nutrition more than once every several cycles, but we may engage in recreational consumption for the sake of pleasure."

Samuel clears his throat. "Ahem. Well, shit, don't mind if I do. Boss, pass me two of those burgers. Sally, spoon me some of that Italian Fettuccini."

Jason nods quietly. He and the others start passing out food, filling their plates, and eating whatever suits their fancy.

However, Jason himself doesn't eat anything. He realizes in an instant the true purpose behind this meal.

We've barely even left orbit and the Volgrim are already feeding us? Furthermore, they aren't eating anything themselves. It might seem slight... but this is a power move on their part. They're trying to insinuate that our need to 'consume nutrients' makes us lower than them. If I refuse their 'generous offer,' I'll surely sound petty. But if I dig in while they don't, I'll seem like a stupid monkey eating scraps while they lord over me from the other end of the table.

As such, Jason opts to eat nothing himself, allowing his men to do so instead. Of course, he's not the only person to ignore the food. Emperor Serena also continues sitting quietly, like a dignified princess oblivious to the rabble of the commoners.

"You are not hungry?" Kordonis asks, his tone 'innocent.'

Jason gestures to the giant minotaur beside him. "I brought along my personal chef, Yamir. He always makes my food. I only ate an hour ago, so I'm fine. I'm much more interested in learning more about your Technopath clans, as well as the other Volgrim subspecies."

Kordonis realizes the Wordsmith has seen through his ploy, but he doesn't bother pressing the issue. After all, in the end, it's merely a minor psychological trick, and nothing worth making a big fuss over.

While Jason's people loudly munch on burgers and slurp down pasta, Kordonis continues with his discussion.

"The Technopath clans are not limited to only Oblong and Symmetra. No, tens of thousands of them exist in the Volgrim Empire. Some large, and some small. The bigger clans often contract low-priority work to the smaller ones. Even this ship has some elements from the design work Oblong contracted to Clan Corona, which installed microscopic biological entity scanners in all of the different entry and transfer points throughout the Hatoraxia. That way, our people would not accidentally introduce foreign pathogens to our crew, causing a viral outbreak."

"I didn't notice anything when I entered." Jason remarks. "Were we scanned?"

"That's right. Clan Oblong has its own anti-pathogen scanners, but our pale in comparison to Clan Corona's. A lot of smaller clans can carve out their own niche by focusing on lower-tiered technology and raising it to a higher level. Clan Oblong is more of a 'greater picture' clan than a 'small details' clan."

He continues. "There is also Clan Kokorat, which is another of the bigger clans. They actually maintain the Warpgate infrastructure, but they are not its original creators. And thank the Founders, for that clan is a bunch of worthless, addle-brained idiots! They should never be allowed near technology!"

"Oh? What's their problem?" Jason probes further.

"We Oblongers place a high focus on low-cost overhead development, with additional focus put on utilitarianism in our technology. But Kokorat is filled with fools who take a similar premise much too far! They always cut corners and leave all sorts of faults in their vessels. As the saying goes, 'Live in a Kokorat ship, die in a Kokorat ship!' Everything they make is a walking time bomb. They are a disgrace to the Founders!"

At this point, Miikil speaks up. [They are able to create and build technology much faster than the other clans. Therefore, they do still have an important use to our glorious Empire. Most of the newest and freshest recruits ride to the border battlefields on Kokorat vessels. Better to lose them in an accident than a more elite fighting force.]

Kordonis turns his attention to Miikil and harrumphs. "Better not to lose anyone to an accident! Those damned *koko-rats* have probably killed more loyal Volgrim soldiers than the Plague has!"

He mutters several curses under his breath before turning back to the Wordsmith.

"Anyway. There are too many Technopath clans for me to mention them all. Clan Dyna is one you should remember, though. They hold the highest access to classified military technology and information. They have developed many forms of classified technology that I won't be able to see no matter how high I rise in Oblong's hierarchy. Despite their prestige, they are actually only a mid-sized clan with fewer members than Kokorat, Symmetra, and Oblong. Even so, they have gained access to many keys of power. Founder Cuanali is the one who originally created Clan Dyna, countless eons ago!"

Miikil closes all six of her eyes. [It is said that Clan Dyna is a clan so ancient that they even existed during the Great Wars. They are most likely the clan which helped create the Sentinels, machines which wiped out 99% of all Volgrim in the galaxy.]

"That's right." Kordonis nods. "So if you encounter a member of Dyna, even a seemingly low-level officer, keep any criticisms locked within your primitive throat! You never know what sort of tragedy might befall you, even if you are Founder Unarin's personal guest."

Jason nods. As the Wordsmith, he couldn't give less of a shit about this Clan Dyna or whatever. But the same can't be said for his soldiers.

"You hear that?" Jason asks, rhetorically. "Make sure you keep your noses clean while we're on Volgarius."

Samuel and the rest nod in between bites of food. "Yes, sir."

"There is plenty more worth mentioning about the Technopath clans," Kordonis continues, "but those can be shelved for later. Are you familiar with the other Volgrim subspecies?"

Jason shrugs. "I know they're called the Ascended, Changelings, and... Volgrimites?"

"Dolgrimites." Kordonis corrects him. "They are the most elusive of all the subspecies. While their population does number a few billion, they confine themselves almost entirely to the former homeworld of Volgrimkind, Grimvolas. They have not participated in the war against the Kolvaxians. Even the Fifth Founder, Cinculu, does not show himself in public events. I've yet to actually exchange any words with a Dolgrimate, and I'm tens of thousands of cycles old."

"I don't get it." Jason says. "Why are the Dolgrimites such recluses?"

[There are many conflicting stated reasons and theories.] Miikil answers. [The most logical and compelling reason is that they believe all of the calamities the Volgrim have suffered came as a result of our own hubris. We created the Sentinels. We expanded too aggressively and ended up in a war with Earth. And now they even blame our current predicament with the Kolvaxians on our expansionary greed.]

Kordonis snorts. [The Dolgrimites are powerful. Each individual wields tremendous physical strength. I don't know how they would stack up to humanity's Heroes, or Demon Emperors, Archangels, and the like... but if they did come up short, it wouldn't be by much. Personally, most Volgrim don't like them. We Technopaths, especially. The Dolgrimites are a bunch of primitive savages, not unlike- err, I'm sure you can

understand my meaning. They swear off technology in all its forms and instead try to commune with 'nature' and their 'highest god'."

[They are a bunch of religious fanatics.] Miikil states. [You're unlikely to ever encounter a Dolgrimite. But if you do, steer clear of them. You wouldn't want to enrage them with an accidental slight against their sensibilities.]

"I see. And what about the Changelings?" Jason asks, as a glint flickers in his eye. "I imagine I'll run into them during our foray."

Kordonis's expression shifts imperceptibly. Indeed, Founder Unarin has gone to great lengths to remove all the Changelings from the Hatoraxia's crew so that the humans won't be able to obtain any DNA or useful information from them. After all, they can't say for certain if the Wordsmith will be capable of identifying the Volgrim's hidden agents on Tarus II, but giving Jason any sort of access to Changelings might shift the balance in his favor.

As such, Kordonis hesitates for a moment, not certain of what he should say.

"The Changelings are... a busy species." Kordonis says. "They are always hard at work, performing scientific research. Especially with regards to the Kolvaxians."

"And they can shift their bodies." Jason says. "I'm *very* interested in learning how such a procedure works. Do you think you could fill me in on the more... *subtle details*?"

Kordonis's eye twitches.

"Haha... I do not have access to such information, unfortunately. As this is a military ship, we do not typically bring Changelings along with us."

"Oh. Is that so?" Jason asks, his voice lilting inquisitively. "That's funny. I could have sworn when I teleported aboard the Hatoraxia the first time that I saw a few Changelings among your crew?"

Lieutenant Samuel pauses his chewing to glance between the Wordsmith and the Hatoraxia's Captain with interest, but says nothing.

Kordonis forces a neutral expression, but a gloomy shadow appears under his eyes. "Those were mere junior officers we were transporting to Volgarius from a remote outpost. Generally, the Hatoraxia does not carry any Changelings in its crew complement."

"Too bad." Jason says, leaning back a little in his chair. "And here I was hoping to meet a few of them. I have a professional interest in their body shifting techniques, as you can imagine. Because of my good friend, Emperor Belial."

Kordonis's face loses a bit of its color. "Of course. Because of Belial."

The Wordsmith flashes a sickeningly sweet smile, having gotten his message across. "Perhaps I'll be able to meet a few of these Changelings on Volgarius."

"Yes. Perhaps." Kordonis says slowly, forcing a smile of his own. "Ah, and what of the Ascended? Have you heard of them, Wordsmith?"

Despite Kordonis's blatant attempt to change the topic, Jason doesn't question his motivations, and instead lets him off easily.

"The Ascended. All I know is that Unarin is one. What can you tell me about them?"

"Among the Volgrim, the Ascended are the most numerous, and not by a small margin, but by a vast and unfathomable sea." Kordonis says, extremely glad to have changed the subject. "The Technopaths are the second most numerous of the species, yet for every individual Technopath, there exists a thousand Ascended! Even so, despite the unbelievable population the Ascended possess, you will most likely encounter even fewer of them than you will the Dolgrimites. If it weren't for Founder Unarin and a few carefully placed Ascended among the highest echelons of government, I would personally never have seen one in the flesh."

"From what I understand," Jason says, "The Ascended all live inside of... virtual reality pods?"

"That's right." Kordonis says. "They live lives of pure bliss. They all mentally exist inside a shared living space we call the 'Kingdom of Paradise.' However, that is not to say that they are soft, or that they love peace. In fact, most Ascended are even more violent and bloodthirsty than the Psions. It's just that... they engage in brutal, never-ending war within the virtual worlds, where they will personally rip apart and murder septillions every cycle."

[Other subspecies can and have visited the Kingdom of Paradise.] Miikil adds. [I paid a visit there once, myself. As part of my training, I was allowed to spend ten orbital cycles inside, wherein I engaged in the daily battles and struggles the Ascended did. I was shocked by their vicious and brutal methods of dispatching their enemies.]

"They kill each other, revive, and kill each other again." Kordonis chuckles. "Of course, while they may war with one another endlessly, they would describe this as 'fun' or as 'casual exercise.' Indeed, they also engage in virtual gluttony, intercourse, and other primitive wants and desires. The Kingdom of Paradise is a place where the Ascended can live carnal and indecent lives far away from the confines of the mortal realm."

Samuel, having finished his burgers and pasta, leans back in his chair, satisfied.

"I don't get it. Aren't you guys in the middle of a war? Why aren't the Ascended helping you fight the Plague?"

"In a way, they are." Kordonis explains. "The Ascended live within a virtual reality where they can not only fight and engage in daily pleasures, but their perception of time is also greatly increased. A single cycle in our realm is a hundred cycles in theirs. Therefore, we often send Changelings inside to perform important research at accelerated mental speeds."

"That's not the Ascended doing anything special." Jason retorts. "That's just the Paradise being a useful tool for Volgrimkind. Honestly, these Ascended seem like freeloaders. You've got Unarin doing important work, but the rest of them are dicking around inside a giant videogame. When you've got a galaxy-class threat knocking at your doorstep, you shouldn't be screwing around."

Kordonis shakes his head helplessly. "I am not qualified to question the Founders' intentions. If they have allowed the Ascended to live inside the Kingdom of Paradise, they must have a good reason for doing so."

Samuel snorts. "Yeah. It's called preferential treatment."

Kordonis frowns. "And by that, you mean...?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Samuel asks. "Unarin is the head honcho of the Volgrim. While the other subspecies bleed and suffer and die at the hands of the Kolvaxians, his subspecies gets to multiply and live happy, carefree lives in their little isolated paradise. Awfully convenient, don't you think?"

Miikil abruptly stands up. [Insolent! How dare you question the integrity of our First Founder?! Dull-headed mud-dweller! You know nothing of Founder Unarin's sacrifices! He has fought and lost too much for the likes of you to-]

"Invoker Miikil." Kordonis quickly interrupts, shooting a pointed look at her. "They are ignorant backwater people. They cannot be faulted for not respecting our great and noble leaders. Take your seat and speak no further antagonistic words to our... respected guests."

Miikil inhales several times. She glares daggers at Samuel, as if wanting to rip him apart right then and there.

After a few moments, she abruptly plunks back down in her chair, but her expression doesn't soften in the slightest.

[You had better take care not to utter such words on Volgarius!] She mentally shouts. [Founder Unarin is not just the most respected member of our species, but something more akin to a deity! You dare not provoke the ire of a High Psion, lest they crush you into plasma without waiting for an explanation!]

Jason glances at Samuel. Seeing the Wordsmith's expression, Samuel nods apologetically.

"Sorry. I ran my mouth without thinking. Of course your First Founder knows more than me. I'm sure he has plans I can't even wrap my primitive brain around."

Immediately, Miikil calms down.

[Hmph. At least you know how to apologize properly.]

With that outburst lingering in the air, the atmosphere around the table turns a little awkward. Having finished their food, humanity's soldiers eventually take their leave, retiring to their quarters along with the Wordsmith, while Miikil and Kordonis head back to the Bridge to deal with other matters.

As Jason and his men reach their quarters, he pauses to turn to Emperor Serena.

"Pardon me for being blunt, but what is your reasoning for tagging along? You've barely said anything the whole time."

Serena's sightless eyes gaze through Jason, as if he isn't even there.

"I am Gorn's ears. Anything I hear, I will report to him when I return."

Jason frowns. "What, so you're a spy? Are you really going to just say that straight to my face? That takes some guts."

Serena slowly waves her hands. "You already know this truth, so why should I act as if you do not? I am not interested in you, but in the Volgrim. I wish to learn what they have been up to since the end of the Energy Wars."

Jason's eyes flicker with insight. He falls silent, instead opting to switch to telepathic communication through his Wordsmithing so that the ship's internal recordings won't pick up his next words.

[Are you saying that Gorn wishes to get a better grasp on the Volgrim's wartime capabilities?]

Serena blinks slowly. [It is as you infer.]

[But why?] Jason asks. [Don't tell me he plans to fight them?]

[Perhaps he does, and perhaps he does not.] Serena replies. [It is not my place to speak for him. However, one thing is certain. The Volgrim have lied to you several times now.]

Jason blinks in surprise. [They have?]

[Yes. At the very least, they have not spoken the full truth. The Ascended are much more important than Kordonis has let on. There is almost certainly a greater secret at work regarding their subspecies.]

[That's not telling me anything.] Jason replies. [What secret are you referring to?]

The Emperor of Soul Whispers shakes her head. [I do not know.]

[So you're making a blind guess?] Jason asks, feeling stifled in his chest. [Then how do you know Kordonis is hiding information?!]

For a brief moment, Serena says nothing. Then, she cocks her head.

[His soul... whispered to me.]

[Yeah??] Jason asks, even more bewildered. [So what did it say? You're speaking in riddles!]

Serena lowers her head. She chews her lip, while a thoughtful expression plays upon her lips.

[It is not what his soul whispered, but what it did *not* whisper. There is something he is not saying. Perhaps it is something he does not even know himself. He certainly harbors questions of his own, regarding the true purpose behind the Ascended.]

Serena raises her eyes.

[Even their very name... *The Ascended*... what do you suppose they have ascended... *from?*]

Jason knits his brow.

[That... that is a good question. Haven't they ascended beyond the mortal coil? Now they live in some fancy virtual reality, where the rest of the subspecies can't? That's like ascending to a higher existence, right?]

Serena shrugs, ever so slightly.

[Mmm. Perhaps that is it. I will take my leave, Wordsmith.]

After exchanging a polite curtsy with Jason, Serena turns away and heads to her personal quarters, her princess-like figure and snow-white dress vanishing through the closed door.

After she leaves, Jason continues to stand in the hallway. He glances around, wrestling with the thoughts in his mind.

Are the Ascended hiding something? Is there truly a greater purpose behind their existence?

A chill goes down Jason's spine. He glances around again, feeling a cold sweat drip down his back.

And why does it feel like someone is always WATCHING me?

Part 383: Hold'em, Fold'em

A week passes while the VLL Hatoraxia continues traveling at Warp 7 to its destination, Volgarius. With the journey half-over, and a week still to go before arrival, most of the people among Jason's group have gotten relatively used to the atmosphere on board the ship.

It's on the seventh day that one of the myriad Volgrim Technopaths walks into the Leisure Hall, where they find the humans sitting at one of the common tables, talking and laughing, all while sitting in a circle and playing with a deck of cards. This particular Technopath happens to be a simple ship technician, though still ranked highly enough to enjoy a prestigious post on a Captain-level vessel like the Hatoraxia.

His six spider-like legs *tink* against the ground as he pauses in the doorway, glancing at the strange activity the humans are performing. Emperor Serena also sits at the table, although she doesn't join in on their card game, but instead sits off to the side, ambivalent, like a goddess untouched by the mortal realm.

After staring at the humans for a few long moments, the Technopath crewman slowly walks over to another table, one lacking any seats. He transmits a command through his neural interface, and a minute later, a robotic drone flies over to him with a bowl of green goop-like substance.

This substance, known as Bio-Paste, is the only 'food' most Volgrim ever consume. Suitable for sustaining their bodies, it is cheap and filled with enough nutrients for them to live off for several days.

The Technopath lifts the bowl to his lips and begins silently slurping down the paste with the same lack of enthusiasm he has for the past twenty thousand years, since the day he spawned from the Technopath Creation Facilities, where his DNA was repurposed from many living Technopaths to create a suitable worker drone.

Each Volgrim subspecies has its own method of reproduction, methods Jason and his crew have learned about over the past several days through their interactions with Sangin Kordonis and Invocator Miikil.

The Dolgrimites, those who stick to the 'natural order,' reproduce in a manner somewhat similar to many life-forms on the now-destroyed homeworld of Earth, through

females that lay eggs fertilized by males. The eggs eventually hatch, and new Dolgrimites walk the mortal plane as a result.

Psions very rarely reproduce. Not only can they live for an extremely long time, but it's also quite rare for them to permanently die, thanks to a unique method none of the humans have uncovered. When new Psions do come into being, it is through 'Energy Osmosis,' wherein multiple Psions gather together and congeal their psionic energies to form a being made of pure cosmic energy. After its form stabilizes, this being takes the form of an adult-looking Psion, one that never has to toddle about, and possesses instincts and knowledge well beyond what any newborn mud-dweller might.

Changelings reproduce asexually. As their species has no gendered males or females, what they instead do is split apart into secondary, child-like Changelings upon reaching a certain age. By splitting off parts of their bodies, the Changelings can grow second versions of themselves, versions which will ultimately split off at an indeterminate point in the future, as well. If necessary, they can even repeat this process later in life, or they can force it to occur earlier.

As for the Ascended, their method of reproduction may not be particularly secretive, yet no matter which of the humans asks, not a single Volgrim answers their queries...

Finally, Technopaths are beings who reproduce through technologically advanced cloning machines. However, these machines do not produce clones of individual Technopaths, but rather, they are massive facilities containing the DNA of billions of Technopaths, and by randomly or predeterminately combining different strings of DNA, they can output new Technopaths of unique biological origins.

As such, this simple Technopath officer holds anywhere from ten to ten thousand different strings of Technopath DNA inside of his body. He is a unique individual, yet his uniqueness comes from those of other, far longer-lived Technopaths before him.

After slurping up every drop of Bio-Paste, the Technopath mechanic sits silently at his table, directing his attention to the humans at the far corner of the Leisure Hall. Samuel, Yamir, and the rest of their comrades laugh uproariously, while a pile of chips sits on the table before them. Jason Hiro does not sit among them, but instead remains back in his quarters, attending to some important matter.

"That was a lucky hand, Samuel!"

"There's no luck to it. I'm just better than you!"

Samuel rakes in a few hundred gambling chips and pulls them to his side of the table. After stacking them up, he deals out the next rounds of cards, sniggering at his 'skill' in the art of gambling.

These soldiers continue playing, oblivious to the gaze on their backs. After a few minutes, the sound of an approaching Technopath, its clear and distinctive metallic feet clanking against the deckplates, draws their attention.

Samuel's eyes flick to the side. He notices a spider-legged Technopath with six metal limbs sticking out of its torso. The Technopath says nothing for a moment, but instead stares intently at the cards in their hands.

Finally, the Volgrim glances at Samuel.

"Whas ut shut athsu'usx xuia hianant a'a angagung un?"

A deathly silence follows, as every person at the table turns to look at the Technopath, unsure of what he said.

Realizing his error, the Technopath clears his throat.

"Grr-ahem! Forgive me. I am not yet used to speaking in your human tongue. I have only downloaded the language files a few days ago. I wish to inquire: What is this activity you humans are engaging in?"

"Oh." Samuel says, nodding slowly. "We're currently gambling. Playing some cards. Would you like to join us?"

The Technopath blinks. "Gambling. Playing cards. I am unfamiliar with this terminology. Explain."

Yamir snorts. "We were bored, so we decided to have some fun. We are playing some cards to let off steam. What do you Volgrim do when you have free time?"

The atmosphere at the table turns slightly tense. Given the Technopath's fearsome appearance, the human crew always feel a little tense around any of their alien 'friends.' But especially this awkward and blunt fellow, who speaks his thoughts without restraint.

"Free time. Free." The Technopath states, analyzing Yamir's choice of words. "Meaning you do not need to pay a monetary fee. Do mud-dwellers need to pay a fee to access the field of space and time? I do not understand the terminology."

Yamir casually raises his hand. "It seems we have a misunderstanding. This is the Leisure Hall, right? That means it is a hall for leisure activity. When you are not performing your active duties, what do you do? For us, we play games to pass the time."

"You play games." The Technopath repeats. "What function does this 'games' activity serve? Are you attempting to pursue an objective your commanding officer set out for you?"

One of the humans, a female officer, chuckles. "No, silly. We're just having fun. This isn't work! Work is when you're off repairing some conduit or whatever. This is something we're doing to pass the time. Look, why don't we deal you in, teach you the rules of this game, and maybe you'll even have some fun too?"

The Technopath blinks several times. It takes him a full ten seconds to reply, leaving another awkward silence to linger.

"I must perform my duties in three standard time-units."

"Three hours?" The woman asks. "What are you going to do before then? Stand around in a corner all by yourself? Just play some cards with us, and you'll pick it up quick."

She pauses for half a beat.

"Unless... the Volgrim aren't as *smart* as us inferior mud-dwellers. I suppose this game might be a little too advanced for you."

The Technopath frowns. "I am a highly intelligent bio-adaptive life form. I am certainly superior to you in the many aspects of gradable intelligence!"

The woman smirks. "We'll see about that. What's your name?"

"My designation is Sangin Pondis." The Technopath says.

"And I'm Ashley." The woman says. "This is our commanding officer, Samuel. And this is Yamir..."

She introduces Pondis to the rest of the crew, and the Technopath mechanic settles in to stand along the side of a table. He lowers his legs so that he is at roughly the same height as the other people, then watches as Samuel deals him a pair of cards.

"This game is called 'Texas Hold'em.'" Samuel explains. "The rules are simple. You need to beat the hands of everyone else, or bluff them into folding. To do this, you need to make guesses about what their two cards are, versus the three cards shown on the Flop.

After the Flop comes the Turn, then the River. One person's crappy Pair might become a Full House or even a Four of a Kind, so you have to watch out."

Ashley pipes up after Samuel. "This game is as much about guesswork as it is having a strong 'poker face'! My poker face sucks, so I'm terrible at bluffing, but even I get lucky sometimes. A lot of people have 'tells' that give away whether they're bluffing or telling the truth. This game follows the principle of Sun Tzu's Art of War; show strength when you are weak, and weakness when you are strong!"

Pondis nods slowly. He accesses a collection of Earth's archival knowledge and rapidly downloads the details of this game known as 'Texas Hold'em,' absorbing the knowledge into his neural cortex.

"What is the objective of this activity?" Pondis asks. "I have accessed the information pertaining to 'Texas Hold'em' but have found no information on its strategic value."

Ashley frowns. "It, uh..."

From across the table, a surprising voice speaks. Emperor Serena, of all the people seated, answers Pondis's question.

"There is no material point in playing this game." Serena says slowly. "Humans engage in this behavior for the sake of achieving dopamine highs. By playing games similar to this, they can also further their bonds while engaging in 'small talk.' This allows them to become closer as friends and comrades."

Yamir chuckles. "Yeah. What the princess said."

Samuel clears his throat. "Let's make this round a practice round for the new guy. No stakes, no wagers. I'll deal the Pre-Flop."

He passes two cards to each of the players, face-down.

"In this game," Samuel explains, "subterfuge is the main strategy. If you're not interested in playing for fun or to pass the time, think of this game like a mental training exercise. It will hone your social acumen, making you more adept at spotting and identifying the expressions of your opponents."

Pondis's eyes flash with insight. "Yes. I understand. It is a tactical training exercise. I must observe the faces of my opponents to better annihilate them!"

Ashley coughs. "Ah, ah, that's a *metaphorical* 'annihilate,' you know..."

"Of course." Pondis nods.

Samuel flips his cards face-up. "During the game, we don't usually do this, but this is a practice round. As you can see, I have an Ace of Hearts and a Two of Spades. When the Flop gets dealt, my goal is to match my Ace and Deuce with more Aces and Deuces, or to try and make a Straight. Sometimes, I might also luck out and get a flush when four Hearts or Spades show up. But it's also likely one of the other players will have a Heart or a Spade of their own, in which case I need to hope I have a Higher Value than them. Threes beat Twos, and Fours beat Threes. And so on."

"I have already compiled the rules of this training exercise inside my neural cortex." Pondis states. "Let us continue."

"Sure, sure." Samuel says. "Alright, since we're not making any bets, I'll just deal out the Flop."

He places three cards face-up in the center of the table, then smiles. "As you can see, two Aces have shown up. But also, there's a Seven of Hearts. That means I have a Three of a Kind. Mine is also the strongest type of Three in a Kind, since Aces have the highest value. But my supporting card is terrible, since it's a Deuce. If the next card on the Turn or the River is an Ace or a Deuce, I'll be in a good position."

Pondis nods. "Affirmative. Your loss will occur if someone else here possesses an Ace of their own, and even if you deal out a Two, you can still lose if they have a higher value supporting card, such as a Seven."

"That's right." Samuel says, smiling. "You're a quick learner."

"Affirmative." Pondis repeats. "Mud-dweller Ashley has already won this round. She has an Ace of Clubs and a Seven of Clubs face-down in front of her."

Ashley's expression turns ashen. "W-what? How could you know that?"

Yamir snorts. "You must be easier to read than we thought. Even a Volgrim can see right through you."

Pondis shakes his head. "Incorrect. I accessed the Hatoraxia's internal scanners to uncover the hidden values on the cards at this table. I have also determined the order of the cards yet to be dealt in this round. In terms of tactical understanding, my knowledge exceeds all the others at this table. This is proof that the Volgrim are superior to mere mud-dwellers."

The entire table goes silent.

Ashley, Yamir, and Samuel all gaze at Pondis with looks of embarrassment, shock, and incredulity.

"Um... Pondis..." Yamir says, scratching his head bashfully. "Since this is only a practice round, I... I won't say anything crude... but using the ship's scanners is sort of... *cheating*."

Samuel coughs. "It's good that we did a practice round first."

"I knew I wasn't that easy to read! Sheesh!" Ashley pouts.

Pondis cocks his head. "Did I speak in error? I used my superior advantage in information warfare to exploit your weakness. Why do you all act as if I have broken the rules of the game?"

"It's not your fault." Yamir says. "In games like this, 'cheating' is considered bad form. You must use your own personal ability to discern the cards of other players, not external means, like the ship's scanners. You also probably shouldn't cheat with your Technopath implants, or whatever else."

Serena smiles faintly. "Think of this as a training exercise taken under limited constraints, Pondis. You must defeat these inferior mud-dwellers without using your superior technology. If you have to resort to higher technology the mud-dwellers don't even possess, can you truly state that you are a superior life-form?"

"You are also an inferior mud-dweller." Pondis says, directing his words at Serena.

Serena's sightless eyes look right past him. She imperceptibly frowns.

"Perhaps. But at least I am not *rude*."

The game continues. Serena continues to sit on the sidelines, while Pondis gradually acclimates to the limits placed upon him. Surprisingly, as ten and twenty rounds pass, he doesn't cheat again. He still makes several blunt statements that directly or indirectly insult the inferior mud-dwellers, but the humans pay his insults no mind, treating them as they would light ribbings directed at them by their fellow humans.

Two hours later, the humans and Yamir all stretch and pop their backs.

"Well. This has been an interesting experience." Samuel says. "Thanks for joining us, Pondis. I don't know if I had fun, but I did have a good time."

Pondis blinks. "Is the tactical exercise complete? It does not seem that we reached any suitable end-goal. Nobody has acquired all of the credit-chips on the table."

Yamir waves his hand casually. "There is no need for that. At the start of every game, we just give everyone an equal amount of chips anyway. The chips only exist for bragging rights. And since Samuel won the most chips in today's games, he has earned those bragging rights."

"What are 'bragging rights'?" Pondis inquires.

"They are, essentially, an invisible social trophy one can accrue through their actions in games like these." Serena says. "If you wish to acquire social points of a similar nature, you should strive to win the next time this group gathers."

"I contemplate, and I comprehend." Pondis replies. "I am ignorant regarding the values of mud-dweller culture. Do you intend to engage in additional tactical exercises such as this in the future?"

Ashley smiles. She grabs the deck of cards off the table and holds them toward Pondis. "That's right! And hey, why don't you try getting your fellow Volgrim to play this game, hmm? You might have fun, and you might even deepen your bonds!"

Pondis stares at the cards for a moment. He reaches out his five-tentacled limb to grasp the deck.

"I contemplate, and I comprehend." He repeats. "I shall attempt to educate my crew-members on the nature of this exercise."

After Sangin Pondis leaves, the humans return to their quarters, as do Yamir and Serena.

Upon reaching his quarters, Samuel finds Jason, who sits with his eyes closed, seemingly meditating on his bunk. The two men, as the highest ranked on the expedition, share a room.

"Samuel?" Jason says, opening his eyes. "You were gone a while. Guess your game ran longer than expected?"

"We had a new player jump in." Samuel explains. "One of the Volgrim."

"Oh. That's cool." Jason says, not too interested. "I didn't take them for the types to play card games."

"He wasn't. We had to frame it as a 'tactical exercise.'" Samuel says with a smirk. "But in the end, everything worked out. We taught him how to play, and everyone had a good time."

Jason nods, but clearly, his attention is elsewhere. "Right, right."

"Something on your mind?" Samuel asks, while sitting on his bed.

"The Lazarus Tower will soon activate." Jason says. "I just communicated with Phoebe back on Tarus II. The day we arrive on Volgarius, she'll likely start bringing back the fallen. The Power Gloves are ready, so tomorrow she'll do a big ceremony and start handing them out to the soldiers."

Jason pauses, and a wicked smile stretches across his face.

"Say, Samuel! I had Phoebe teleport a few Power Glove prototypes to me. Didn't you already get checked for compatibility?"

Samuel's heart chills. "Uhh..."

"Ah, that's right!" Jason exclaims, as if having 'remembered.' "You're compatible with fairy magic! That's so adorable. Here, let me give you a Power Glove so you can test it out right now!"

Jason giddily procures a Power Glove out of thin air, summoning it from the storage within his Mind Realm. As soon as it appears, Samuel's expression turns livid.

"Oh, fuck off! I'm not going to turn into some god-damned prancing little fairy!"

"But Samuel!" Jason protests, puffing out his lower lip. "You'd look so *cute* with those little butterfly wings."

"I'm about to butter-beat your ass, whether you're the Wordsmith or not!" Samuel shouts, flipping over on his bed to face the wall. "Now fuck off and let me sleep."

"Alright, alright, no need to be a little princess about it." Jason says, forcibly controlling his snickering. "I'll leave it on your desk. There's a bunch of modes pre-programmed, so when you're ready, we'll try all the different transformations tomorrow."

"Can't wait." Samuel growls, before ultimately falling silent.

Jason laughs quietly to himself, before eventually going back into a daze. He immerses himself in his Mind Realm, where Fiona, Raphael, Shana, Lorent, and the Phoenix all hang out.

As the Wordsmith converses with the denizens of his Mind Realm, neither he nor any of the people he brought along have any idea of the weapon they've unwittingly unleashed. Over the next several years, a storm will sweep across Volgrimkind, a whole new concept known as 'Texas Hold'em,' its conception borne upon the Hatoraxia, during a seemingly random and innocuous meeting between one Technopath and his temporary human guests.

Few could ever conceive of the changes this would bring about in Volgrim society.

Part 384: Cassiel's Road to Recovery

The VLL Hatoraxia draws ever closer to Volgarius, but back on Tarus II, plenty of events continue to play out, even with neither of the Wordsmiths around.

Despite the two Heroes disappearing, everyone believes Hope is inside the Labyrinth, hunting down Mephisto to slaughter him. Nobody doubts Hope's hatred of demons, to the point that even with a treaty signed, most Emperors simply aren't sure if it will bind the Wordsmith's clone. The more they interact with the humans, the more they begin to pick up on the signs there is quite a rift in human opinion. Clearly, many fleshbags are barely containing their eagerness to resume the war and rip down these Emperors from their golden thrones. If Jason weren't firmly in control of human society, would there be anyone to reign Hope and Neil in?

At the same time, a rift appears in demon society too. But rather than a split between their leaders, it tears across the divide between the mightiest Emperors and all of their subordinates at or below the Duke-level.

Most Emperors easily recognize the Wordsmith's intent with the Belial Booster and his other special facilities on Tarus II. In secret, they have their best sages, their Dukes, their formation masters, and other types look into replicating these incredible works of magic. However, all of their efforts fail. The Wordsmith's unique magic is simply too versatile, too reality-defying. They cannot rip him off and make their own versions, not even grossly inferior ones.

Perhaps, if Ose were still alive, she might be capable of replicating this feat, given her unique understanding of human technology and demonic magic. Sadly, with her gone, the rest of the demons are woefully ignorant.

At the same time, the lower-class demons also realize something isn't quite right with humanity's arrangements, and that they are clearly benefitting much more from the Merit Token system. Sadly, most low-ranking demons are uneducated simpletons who know nothing of economic theory or other systems of that sort. They merely shrug their shoulders and continue with their lives, blissfully unaware of how the disparity between humanity and demonkind's strength lessens by the day.

Just over three weeks after signing the pact with demonkind, one of humanity's allied demons evolves to the rank of Emperor!

Through her diligent efforts, Kiari becomes the Emperor of Pestilence, a monstrous genius capable of controlling insects across entire planets, whipping them into frenzies. Not only that, but her ability to empower insects and enlarge them gives them additional practical roles as beasts of burdens, hideous though they be.

Despite her title, her abilities involve anything but pestilence! Kiari summons massive numbers of insects to fertilize fresh farmland soil, endearing her to the farmers living on the Fortress of Retribution's outskirts. Her insects become even stronger and smarter after her evolution, allowing them to directly construct buildings by themselves. Thanks to her upgrade, humanity obtains a loyal and powerful Emperor-level powerhouse on par with Belial, and their construction speed bursts into the stratosphere!

Phoebe jumps up from her chair giddily when one of her subordinates hands her a report, just two days after Kiari's evolution.

"Incredible! Amazing!" Phoebe gasps. "I can't believe it! A threefold speed increase?! We constructed just 176 apartment complexes three days ago, but today we've constructed more than 600! We'll be able to bump up the timeline for the Lazarus Convention considerably! Perhaps by the time Jason returns, we'll have already brought back every last recovered Stormbringer soul!"

Phoebe stands alongside a few other people, namely Neil Adams, Blinker in her human-sized form, and Linda Hurent.

Linda smiles, infected by Phoebe's enthusiasm. "I've started handing out Power Gloves to our personnel. Early tests show a lot of promise. Not only will we be able to bring back our families sooner than expected, but we'll also be able to give them an effective means of defending themselves."

"It's too bad." Neil says, a hint of darkness in his eyes. "We can bring back many people, but Mephisto consumed a million souls to reach the rank of Emperor, and he's not alone. We've permanently lost good men and women. Children, too."

Phoebe's excitement deflates upon hearing Neil's words. "...This again? I can't stand it either, Neil, but constantly bringing it up won't change the past."

"Perhaps not." Neil says, biting his words off. "But at least I stand for principles. I'm not gleefully rewarding those who murdered our species with power-ups and strength boosts."

"We are by FAR receiving the lion's share of the benefits-" Phoebe starts to say, before Neil cuts in again.

"That doesn't matter!" Neil interrupts. "When you have two children and one misbehaves, you don't break off a fifth of a candy bar and give it to the little brat while the good sibling gets the rest. You discipline them and give the whole candy bar to the good one! You must reward the virtuous and punish the deviant. Jason had a chance to make a strong stand. He should have executed all of demonkind's leaders right there on the spot. Do you really think we need their help? We already have Belial. She could raise our own homegrown Emperors without the help of the other murderous bastards."

Blinker snorts. "Oh, so *now* you call her by name, Neil."

"I don't like Belial. I don't like *any* demons." Neil says. "But there are certainly degrees of evil. Belial is the more benign of the options. She's on our side... for now. These other Emperors are looking to pounce upon us the moment they sense a hint of weakness."

Phoebe rolls her eyes. "You're preaching to the choir, Neil. We've heard your arguments a hundred times. I even agree with most of them. But we have the Cube, and we have two Wordsmiths. Right now, the demons are not even remotely a threat, not compared to the Volgrim and Kolvaxians. You have to stop riling up past rage and focus on the future."

Neil tosses his hand up. "The hell I do! My 'past rage' comes from hardly over a month ago! You can act as if a genocide didn't just happen and isn't looming over our heads every day, but the only person you're fooling is yourself!"

With that, Neil spins on his heel and storms away, leaving the three women looking annoyed, embarrassed, or even contrite.

Phoebe, Blinker, and Linda all massage their temples in unison, unsure of what to say.

"...I don't know how to handle that man." Phoebe grunts. "How many times do I have to tell Neil? I agree with him! But we still have to be better than the demons."

"I don't know..." Linda murmurs. "Jason seems to think so. But I have to admit... I wouldn't mind putting a gauss round between the eyes of every enemy Emperor."

Blinker shrugs. "I have a lot of friends among you humans, but ultimately, I'm a fairy. The demons may have gotten a little... *rapey*... with us fairies in the past, but they mostly keep their paws to themselves. I just REALLY want Mephisto to end up in a blender!"

"Well, let's pray Hope can sort that out." Phoebe says, weakly smiling. "I don't think any of us wants anything less than Mephisto's bones crushed into powder. His days are numbered."

Linda's expression becomes downcast.

"One of my friends, she found out her daughter wasn't listed in the Lazarus Tower's Soul Registry. We suspect... Mephisto might have... consumed her."

Linda pauses for half a beat.

"She was only four years old."

Phoebe's expression turns ashen. So does Blinker's.

"Too young." Phoebe mutters. "Too awful."

"Phoebe," Blinker says, hesitantly. "Is there, like... is there some way we can... extract the souls from demons? Maybe they're still inside them? Maybe we can just... pull them out?"

Phoebe's heart skips a beat. After a brief pause, her spark of excitement dies.

"I don't think so. Jason might have a way. I'll ask the next time I talk to him. But... don't get your hopes up."

Blinker glances in the direction of the Warpgate.

"My 'hopes' are always up... that Mephisto will suffer terribly."

On the eastern side of the Fortress of Retribution.

Cassiel stands at the doorway leading outside the Archangel's Church. In her hands, she clutches a simple necklace, one with a cross-shaped locket attached to its center.

This locket, created for Cassiel and a group of other angels during the Energy Wars, is a special camouflaging artifact capable of hiding her true appearance. Known as the Heaven's Shroud, there once existed around five hundred of them, casually created en-

masse by the Archangel of Divination. However, with Earth's destruction having happened long ago, perhaps only the one in Cassiel's hand remains.

She flips the locket around, noting the name inscribed on its backside.

Margaret.

This is not Cassiel's locket, but one that belonged to one of her sisters, someone who died long ago. As for where Cassiel's specific locket has gone, not even she knows. But it does not matter, since they all have the same effect.

While the Lazarite hesitates at the door, a figure approaches her from behind. Soleil, Cassiel's dedicated protector, walks up to her side and stands idly, glancing at the locket in Cassiel's hand.

"Are you going to use it, Cass?" Soleil asks.

Unlike Arthur, Soleil is a much friendlier and more talkative construct. She has a higher degree of intelligence, and is considered by Jason to be as much a protector of the last living angel as she is a therapist, someone capable of helping Cassiel break free of her mental shackles.

Cassiel's lower lip trembles.

"I... I don't... know..."

While Cassiel might not talk to most people, Soleil is the exception. Having had Soleil at her side since her rescue, Cassiel has grown comfortable enough to whisper words infrequently to her angel-like friend. She recognizes that Soleil is not a genuine angel, but even so, her kind and calm disposition allows Cassiel to feel noticeably more at ease than even around the other Archangels.

After all, Michael is a cold and callous man, while Raphael is a bit too lofty. Gabriel is pleasant enough, but he's also huge and intimidating, while Uriel's bloodthirsty aura always makes Cassiel feel anxious.

Only Soleil can bridge the gap in her heart.

Cassiel holds the Heaven's Shroud loosely, deeply desiring to put it on. She continually lifts it toward her neck, but pauses and lowers it once again, frozen as much by her fear as her indecision.

Finally, Cassiel turns away from the door. Tears threaten to well up in her eyes, as she chokes on her breath.

"I'm... I'm not... I can't do it..."

"You can!" Soleil chirps, gently resting her hand on Cassiel's shoulder. "You don't have to rush, though. You're stronger than you think. That's what Raphael says!"

The Archangels also know that Soleil is not a genuine angel. Even so, Soleil is such a bright spirit that they can't help but find her intriguing. With only one angel truly still among the living, and all the Archangels nothing more than remnant souls inside of constructed or stolen bodies, they quietly take time to pass their knowledge and heritages on to Soleil.

As a Black Hole Construct, Soleil's body is insanely powerful. With physical strength capable of crushing any Baron, and even some Demon Emperors, she is no pushover by any means. Each day, she practices with her holy magic, becoming more adept in its use. Even Uriel marvels at her versatility.

Additionally, Soleil's thinking speed and brain capacity are thousands of times greater than any human. She absorbs knowledge like a sponge, instantly memorizing any information Raphael feeds her. He tells her about the past of his people, the details of the Ancient Era, and even pertinent information regarding the Primordial Era and the Dragon and Titan Wars.

However, all of this knowledge is superfluous. Nothing Soleil learns can compare to her primary objective of rehabilitating and protecting Cassiel. All other interests come second.

Cassiel walks away from the church's doors. The further she draws away, the better her expression becomes. The thought of walking out in the open terrifies her to the point of almost suffering a panic attack.

She takes a seat in one of the church's pews. While the church might not allow any human guests, it's still fairly traditional-looking on the bottom floor, where Cassiel lives. Should she ever allow the common folk inside, humanity will be able to pour out their hearts to the angels, seeking their favor and guidance.

For now, though, there are merely three sets of ten pews, and she takes a seat in the one closest to the door.

Cassiel hangs her head gloomily. The church's all-but-silent interior feels ominous to her on this particular day. The oppressive quiet looms over her head, like a specter in the darkness.

"Soleil..." Cassiel whispers. "Play a song."

Soleil obediently nods. She walks over to the church's pipe organ, sits down, and begins running her fingers across the keys with perfect, robotic precision.

Within moments, a beautiful melody begins to fill the air, calming Cassiel's heart. She closes her eyes and sways back and forth to the music, as if hypnotized by Soleil's melody.

Minutes pass. An hour. Cassiel opens her eyes at one point, stands up, and walks over to Soleil, sitting on the bench beside her.

Immediately, Soleil stops playing and slides over, leaving room for the Lazarite. She retracts her hands, allowing Cassiel to take over.

It's quiet times like these when Cassiel feels a rare moment of peace in her heart. For countless millennia, she has suffered torment unlike anything a single other living entity can imagine.

Hounded, assaulted, stabbed, cut, and pierced a seemingly infinite number of times, she has lost count of the instances in recent memory where agonizing flashbacks tore across her thoughts, giving her unbearable day-terrors.

Even if Gressil were here, he might not be able to torture Cassiel as effectively as her own mind does...

In this rare moment of solace, Cassiel hums along to the song her fingers play, feeling a peace settle within her bones.

She continues for a while, but ultimately, the moment passes. She stops playing, and stares at the organ despondently, all those dark emotions welling up again.

Soleil glances at her.

"They will be happy to see you, you know." Soleil says. "Put on that locket, and you'll blend into the crowd."

Cassiel glances down at her lap, where she previously set the Heaven's Shroud. She picks it up and stares at the name on the back, her emotions darkening even further.

"Margaret... I couldn't protect her."

"I couldn't protect... any of them."

"I'm useless."

Soleil listens quietly. Cassiel criticizes herself harshly. Every minor fault in her life, every moment of weakness becomes amplified a hundredfold, turning her from a mildly flawed individual into a hopelessly useless imbecile who never accomplished anything.

"Raphael has told me about your accomplishments." Soleil says, softly. "You killed two Demon Emperors. No other Lazarite ever came close to your feats. Even so, you weren't invincible, so you can't blame yourself for what happened."

"Maybe not." Cassiel whispers. "But I do."

Soleil reaches her arm across Cassiel's back. She hugs her softly, providing physical comfort.

Cassiel's eyes drift back to the church doorway. She stares at the doors, yearning to step outside with all of her being.

"You fear other people." Soleil says. "You're afraid they'll hurt you. But, you also know they won't."

"It's irrational..." Cassiel says. "The humans are good people."

"You're a human too." Soleil points out. "You're just in an angel body. But even so, humans are your people."

"I know." Cassiel says. "I know..."

Soleil smiles. She reaches out and takes the locket from Cassiel's hand, who allows her to do so without any resistance.

"Why don't we take this one step at a time?" Soleil chirps. "Let's start by simply putting the locket on."

Cassiel tenses up, but after a moment, she nods.

"Oh... okay..."

Soleil stands up and steps behind Cassiel. She traces the Lazarite's fair, beautiful white neck, then pulls aside her long white hair. She carefully wraps the necklace's chain around and behind her head, clicking its rear together with ease.

Nothing happens, and Cassiel merely touches the cross affixed over her chest.

"I... still have to activate it..." Cassiel whispers.

"Mhm. It's very pretty on you!" Soleil says.

Cassiel's expression turns wan at the mention of her beauty.

Anytime someone mentions the Lazarite's physical appearance, Gressil's voice rings in her head. She hears his words, repeated countless times over the millennia.

You're beautiful. You're a slut. Your body is too perfect...

His grating voice echoes in the room, making her shiver. Indeed, she is beautiful, but the thought of looking good to anyone now triggers a flight response, making her want to run and hide in a dark corner.

Sensing the change in Cassiel's body language, Soleil takes a step back.

"Sorry, Cass. I shouldn't have said-"

"It's not your fault." Cassiel says, lowering her head. "It's... it's his. It's *his*."

Cassiel traces the locket with her fingers. For several minutes, she gazes at the mirror behind the panel, where only her head and shoulders appear visible. The silver-colored cross appears quite shiny against her pale skin, and somehow, her angelic aura amplifies its splendor, making it appear an object untainted by the filth of the world.

The Last Lazarite bites her lip. She closes her eyes, then presses her entire hand against the front of the locket.

A feeling of weakness momentarily seizes her body, almost making her fall backward off the organ bench, but Soleil catches her. The Heaven's Shroud pulls from her holy energy to forcibly alter her appearance, making her wings completely transparent, hiding the halo above her head, and completely suppressing the field of holy energy surrounding her body.

After a few moments, Cassiel's weakness disappears. The Heaven's Shroud finishes its work, and she opens her eyes.

Slowly, the Lazarite stands up, gazing at herself in the mirror. Where before, a gorgeous white-haired goddess stood, now, a simple and homely woman with brown hair remains. Remembering those long, distant, ancient memories of her childhood, Cassiel struggles to remember her appearance as a young girl. However, without a doubt, if she had never died, she would likely have appeared like this when she reached her twenties or thirties.

Her wings remain attached to her back, allowing her to fly, and if someone were to try and touch them, they'd certainly be able to do so, but now they appear completely invisible, to the point no matter how hard someone tries to squint, they could not perceive them.

Of course, if Cassiel wishes, she can activate the Heaven's Shroud a second time, elevating its abilities to the next level. At that point, her wings would recede into her body, and her appearance would become even more ordinary, preventing anyone from telling she is a Lazarite even if they tried to feel for her wings.

But she doesn't do that, at least not for the moment. She merely gazes into the mirror, pressing her fingers against her face. She touches her face in the mirror, as if unsure if the person she's looking at is really her, or perhaps someone else.

At the same time, Soleil smiles.

"I like this version of you, too. Every flavor of Cass is my favorite!"

Soleil closes her eyes. With a brief bit of concentration, her appearance shifts. She adopts the appearance of a completely average-looking black-haired human woman, a transformation Jason included in her design, should she need to travel incognito. Many people already know of her angelic appearance, but only the Wordsmith himself and Cassiel know what Soleil looks like in her human form.

Soleil beams a radiant smile at Cassiel's reflection in the mirror.

"See? Isn't this fun? If we go outside, nobody will be able to tell who we are! Don't you want to go out and see all the people? It's so boring in here, where you're all cooped up..."

Cassiel's eyes inadvertently turn to the church doors.

"I... I do want..."

Soleil takes Cassiel's hand in hers. She slowly pulls the Lazarite toward the doors, while keeping an eye on her face.

"There's nothing to fear, Cass. I'm with you. You're safe with me, no matter what!"

Cassiel nods. As the doors loom closer, her heart begins to pound like a frightened rabbit stomping the dirt.

But even so, it doesn't beat *quite* as hard as it did just a while earlier.

Soleil reaches out her free hand and places it on the door.

"If you can't do it, should I?"

A minute passes, while Cassiel stands frozen on the spot.

Ultimately, she shakes her head.

"No. I... I have to be strong."

She no longer hesitates.

The brown-haired woman steps forward and pushes the doors open, flinging them outward, so that she can take her first real steps to recovery.

Her story... has finally begun.

Part 385: Approaching Volgarius

Jason Hiro stands on the bridge of Kordonis's vessel, the Hatoraxia, watching as a timer counts down the last five minutes until arriving inside the Volgrim's home system.

He turns to the side, where he observes Kordonis sitting in the captain's chair, fiddling with a screen Jason can't quite make out.

"This is the VLL Hatoraxia." Kordonis says, speaking to a small holographic face that appears in front of him, a face belonging to another Technopath officer in the Volgarius system. "I am transporting Class 1 guests on a diplomatic voyage to Volgarius."

"Identity confirmed, Sangin Kordonis of Clan Oblong." The other Technopath states. "You have been cleared for arrival and landing. Follow the transmitted flight coordinates to your designated arrival zone."

"Noted." Kordonis replies, before concluding the transmission with a few perfunctory words.

As Kordonis turns his attention back to his ship, Jason speaks up. "How are you able to do that? Communicate with other Volgrim while mid-warp, I mean."

Kordonis stands up from his chair and casually approaches Jason.

"Have you not heard of a Quantum Entanglement Node?"

Jason shakes his head. "I can communicate with my people on Tarus II, even across infinite distances. But my means are magical, while yours appear... more mundane."

"Mundane." Kordonis repeats, a hint of derision in his voice. "Quantum Entanglement Nodes are not even considered a Class 1 Technology. They are quite benign, by Volgrim standards. By tuning into a specific spatial frequency, one can communicate with any other being aligned to that frequency, so long as one resides within the same material dimension."

"Does that mean you would not be able to communicate with a fellow Volgrim if they were inside the Labyrinth?" Jason asks.

"Correct." Kordonis says. "But of course, there are many ways around this limitation. For example, a directly linked communication node that transfers information from one material dimension to another could serve as a relay. A 'hardwired' relay would also

suffice. In practice, the limitation of same-dimension communication never stops our species from reaching one another."

Jason nods thoughtfully. Fiona communicates with him in his Mind Realm, and he gives voice to her observations.

"You mentioned using 'specific spatial frequencies' for these QETs. How many frequencies are available? Surely, there can't be too many of them."

"Fewer than twenty." Kordonis replies. "Enough for a broad range of civilian and military frequencies. Are you thinking of spying on our communications?"

"Could you stop me if I wanted to do so?" Jason retorts.

The Hatoraxia's captain laughs softly. "I could not. But even if I could not, do not be so sure the same is true of the Second Founder. You may even meet her, on this very day."

The Wordsmith bares a toothy smile. "I've heard so much about Founder Dosena. It would be a shame if I didn't."

The Hatoraxia continues for a minute or two longer before abruptly decelerating. Nobody in the ship feels anything, and the visible space outside the ship doesn't change much, but one of the dots in the sky appears just a tiny bit brighter than it did during their travel. Additionally, one of the distant stars burns much hotter and draws Jason's attention.

Kordonis sits in his captain chair once again.

"Welcome to the Volgarius Star System, Wordsmith. My proud homeworld is just one of fourteen planets and more than a hundred moons in this system. Here, almost every single planet is inhabited by my people. Of course, only five planets have been fully Volformed to be as comfortable as possible, but the rest are still habitable by hardy Psions and other species that adapt their bodies in specific ways."

Kordonis continues. "We will have to approach the inner system at sub-light speeds, due to inner traffic restrictions. It won't be obvious from here, but the inner system has more than ten million craft in the vicinity of any planet at any given moment. For the homeworld, that number likely exceed two hundred and fifty million."

Jason blinks multiple times as these staggering numbers metaphorically slap him in the face.

A quarter of a billion craft orbit Volgarius?! How is that even possible? These ships can't possibly be much smaller than the Hatoraxia, and I'll bet a large number of them are significantly bigger!

The Hatoraxia flies forward at 99% the speed of light, while a speck in the sky grows continually larger and brighter as they approach.

"Is that Volgarius?" Jason asks.

Kordonis glances at the several hundred Volgrim personnel on the Hatoraxia's Bridge, none of whom involve themselves in his conversation with the Wordsmith. As for Miikil, she's nowhere to be seen, as she is currently preparing for their arrival on Volgarius.

"No. This is the outermost planet of our great home system." Kordonis explains. "Of the fourteen planets in the Volgarius system, I have been instructed to introduce you to over half of them."

He waves his hand, and a holographic image of the upcoming planet appears before them.

"This is Volforus 03, the furthest of the three outer ice-type exoplanets." Kordonis explains. "It is a world where my people mine exotic materials and maintain a defensive position for protecting part of our system's perimeter. The planet is colder than you might expect, at below -65C at any given moment. However, there are several habitats built beneath its permafrost, where pockets of a few million researchers and miners can live."

"You mentioned your home system had over a hundred moons." Jason points out. "How many does Volforus 03 have?"

"Seven." Kordonis says. "As for the planet's size... it is roughly a quarter the diameter of your homeworld, Earth."

"Interesting." Jason remarks, without actually displaying much interest. "Good to know, I suppose."

He watches as the planet approaches, but before long, the Hatoraxia races past, continuing its journey toward the inner system.

Along the way, the Hatoraxia passes another two ice-type planets, both of them being a little larger and a bit more populated than Volforus 03. These planets, Volforus 01 and 02, are roughly the same as the outermost world, albeit with significantly more moons.

"I'm surprised." Jason says at one point. "Your star system holds far more planets and moons than Earth's did. Why is that?"

Kordonis shakes his head. "Vulgarius might be our modern homeworld, but it is not our progenitor planet. That honor belongs to Grimvolas, the home of the Dolgrimites. However, it is now little more than a barren wasteland. It exists in a system with only four other planets and twelve moons. Our people left it after the conclusion of the Seven Great Wars, when we needed to place the future of our species within a more habitable system. The Vulgarius system, just 5,000 Lightcycles distant, proved the perfect mixture of planets, moons, and star classification."

"Star classification?" Jason repeats. "And by that, you mean..."

"You humans once referred to it as a 'Goldilocks Zone,' the distance where a planet is most optimally situated for rearing life. The Vulgarius system has three planets within this theoretical zone, and an additional two which are not too distant from it to be Volformable. In total, a third of the Vulgarius system's planets are comfortably livable for all species. The other nine, less so."

Before long, the Hatoraxia draws near to a supermassive gas giant, one colored blood red, with slowly swirling hurricanes of cream-colored clouds peppering its surface.

"Our people colloquially refer to this planet as the Crimson Storm. Officially, it is known as Holifan. Of the hundred moons in our home system, more than fifty of them orbit Holifan."

"Does anyone live on Holifan?" Jason asks.

"No. Only the hardest Psions capable of resisting the gravity, corrosive miasma, and white phosphorous in its atmosphere can travel to its deepest depths in search of valuable exotics. We have an entire fleet of drones capable of transferring lighter compounds from its upper atmosphere, too, but generally, Holifan is frequented by travelers due to its numerous moons. Most of them are relatively habitable by lower-class Volgrim."

The Hatoraxia continues its flight deeper into the core of the Vulgarius system. By the time it reaches the first major habitable planet, Kordonis's expression becomes noticeably more muted.

"We've reached the first of five Paradise-class planets. The world we're approaching now is known as Volmar. It is two times bigger than Vulgarius, and holds three times the

population. Even so, most of the Volgrim who live there are considered 'peasants.' Young trainees, our species equivalent of children, and other such immature Volgrim stay on Volmar until they reach an appropriate age where they can be sent to a higher-level world to train and improve their abilities."

"Volmar sounds like a huge nursery, or an academy." Jason observes.

"Those are adequate analogies." Kordonis replies. "Currently, we have detected 171,445,105 vessels in Volmar's orbit. We will have to slow our speed down to Warp 0.3. This will increase the time needed to reach Volgarius, but will also ensure we do not collide with the countless ships in the planet's inner and outer gravity well. Even 500,000 kilometers away, there are a shocking number of ships in the local void."

Jason looks around through the Hatoraxia's external monitors, but he doesn't see any ships, and can only barely make out the slowly approaching speck of light known as Volmar. Even so, he knows the ships are out there; his feeble human eyes simply can't see them amidst the vast and expansive star-filled sky.

"Regrettably," Kordonis continues, "we will not be able to pass by the second of the five Paradise-class planets in this system. The world of Sorvolvo is presently located on the opposite side of Volgarius's star. After we pass Volmar, we will next encounter Tarvol, the third Paradise-class planet. It is actually twenty percent smaller than Volgarius, but is also considered an exclusive vacation destination for Volgrim who have accrued notable merits."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "Vacations? I thought your species didn't engage in such 'useless' pursuits?"

"The Volgrim are not simple minded, like the average mud-dweller." Kordonis states, with a hint of racial pride. "But Tarvol's concept of 'vacation' is quite different from the one you might apply. Psions go there to hunt its dangerous and exotic wildlife. Technopaths go there to admire the rare First Class technology applied to its habitations. Changelings go there to practice their populace blending capabilities, as it also houses many non-native species imported to diversify its biology."

"I should have known!" Jason exclaims with a wry laugh. "For you, a vacation is just an excuse to pursue personal projects. You Volgrim are all work and no play."

"I would not go that far." Kordonis retorts. "To you, 'fun' is an idle pursuit that accomplishes nothing. You pursue it so that your primitive brain can fire bursts of

dopamine into your neural receptors. But for the Volgrim, achieving greater feats for the Founders, or for our own glory, that is a form of 'fun' you cannot fathom. Our 'fun' advances our sense of purpose."

"Humans can do that too." Jason points out. "My wife loves inventing new technology to help other humans. She's not so different from your people, in that regard."

"There are always a few enlightened individuals, even among the *lower* forms of life." Kordonis replies, while dismissively waving his limb. "But the majority of mud-dwellers cannot imagine a universe where they contribute to a collectively greater whole."

Jason shrugs. "You're not wrong, but you're not right, either. Humans aren't a monolith. There are more 'enlightened mud-dwellers' among us than you can imagine."

"And neither are the Volgrim a monolith." Kordonis equally retorts. "There are plenty of strange, useless, and stupid oddballs who flounder about, wasting their lives. They would make for excellent mud-dwellers."

"It never fails to amaze me how you can utter such offensive words without batting an eye." Jason snorts.

The Hatoraxia continues slowly past Volmar. It takes multiple hours to breach its outer gravity well and ultimately return to normal space. Half a day later, the Hatoraxia passes the world of Tarvol, the final planet before they can ultimately reach Volgarius.

Surprisingly, they don't detour around the so-called vacation destination, but instead fly directly toward it.

Jason glances at Kordonis. "And we're going here... why?"

"A few of my crew have earned the right to two cycles of rest." Kordonis explains. "They have decided to vacation on Tarvol for 0.5 cycles instead, since it is considered a luxury-class vacation experience."

"Uh... by 'cycle' do you mean a day-cycle, or a year-cycle?" Jason asks.

"An orbital cycle." Kordonis clarifies. "My crew will stay on Tarvol for half of one human-year."

"Damn..." Jason mutters. "Imagine having half a year of paid vacation time in paradise. Immortal alien empires sure have their perks."

He remains silent as the Hatoraxia approaches a supermassive transitory ship, where it docks and allows just over fifty crewman to depart. They board the transitional living ship along with a hundred thousand other Volgrim, where they will await a shuttle that can take them down to the planet below.

After completing the docking and boarding process, the Hatoraxia breaks off and resumes course toward Volgarius.

"Things are about to become extremely crowded." Kordonis says. "I've just received word. There are presently two hundred and seventy-one million ships in Volgarius's vicinity. We will have to approach at significantly slower speeds than expected. We will drop to Warp 0.1, a tenth the speed of light. Only in this way can we move through the mess of exosteel without crashing and killing everyone aboard the Hatoraxia."

Jason nods. "How much longer until we reach Volgarius?"

"Two rotational cycles." Kordonis says. "You can return to your quarters. I will inform you when we are within one standard time unit of the homeworld."

"Sounds good." Jason says. "Let me know how it goes."

The Wordsmith doesn't waste his breath. Having been on the Hatoraxia's Bridge for nineteen hours straight, even he is starting to feel a bit worn-out from the endless waiting.

After the Wordsmith leaves, Kordonis activates a beacon, alerting Unarin to their imminent arrival.

Soon, the heads of humanity and Volgrimkind will meet in person for the first time ever...

In another section of the Hatoraxia, an invisible Wordsmith lurks out of sight and mind.

Hope Hiro, having made himself a comfortable lodging in the walls, monitors the entirety of the ship with his Wordsmithing. He easily uncovers the distance to Volgarius, teleports out of his hidey-hole, and arrives in an empty Hatoraxian corridor.

I can't stay here. He thinks. Who knows what those high-level Psions will be able to detect if they sweep the Hatoraxia with their minds. I'd better teleport to a safe spot on

Volgarius ahead of schedule.

"**Atlas.**" Hope says, casting his senses to the galaxy beyond the Hatoraxia's hull plating.

Immediately, a flood of information streams into Hope's mind. A burst of faint, divine energy spreads from his mind outward in a bubble and fires toward the distant reaches of the Volgarius star system. Hope identifies the countless masses of ships floating in the void, both near and far, as well as all the system's planets. It doesn't take much effort for him to find Volgarius.

However, what he finds makes him frown deeply.

*Damn. There are trillions of Volgrim living on every spare patch of ground. I'll need to teleport somewhere the Psions can't detect me, and then work on my disguise. I need to figure out the best methods of fooling the Psions... because if they find out there's an undercover Wordsmith roaming about, they will probably become a **tiny bit annoyed.***

Hope sweeps his senses across Volgarius more than ten times. Alarming, he finds that each time he does this, a strange, distant power seems to grow more and more aware of his presence. Though it fails to lock onto him, the sheer cosmic depth of this strength makes his stomach sink into his shoes.

What the fuck? Is that... the Second Founder?!

Hope quickly stops his magical scans. Sweat pools on his back, making him feel a little lightheaded.

That sense of depth... not even a dragon or the Cherubiim should feel so powerful! If that's what I'm going up against, how can I possibly hide?

Hope's expression becomes dismal. If he wishes to uncover the hiding locations of Excalibur and the Dominion Rod, he must be able to travel around Volgarius without drawing any suspicions. But now that he more directly senses the Second Founder's strength, he feels as if he is about to go skydiving straight into a black hole.

Still, with the Hatoraxia drawing closer to Volgarius by the minute, Hope doesn't have much time to rethink his plans. He aims his mind at a specific spot on the planet, a place right in the middle of some ordinary Technopaths and Changelings, where he picks out one Changeling's biological signature at random.

"Scan. Convert. Assimilate. Transform."

Hope copies that Changeling's genetic uniqueness into himself. He mimics and transforms into it perfectly, becoming an identical clone.

"Memory. Acknowledge. Link."

To protect himself in the event of a Psionic mind-scan, where they either will be able to read his very-human and very-Wordsmith thoughts, or they will be arbitrarily blocked and thus realize Hope is no ordinary Changeling, he sneakily cheats by copying that Changeling's memories, then creating a 'false mind' directly linked to the same Changeling inside his own head.

Now, if a Psion scans my brain, they should read the thoughts and identity of that random Changeling, thus hiding who I am. I can't afford to be discovered, lest they bring out the big guns against me.

With that thought out of the way, Hope spends an hour or two combing over the Changeling's memories to better acclimate himself to how he should act.

My cover identity will be... Second-Class Initiate Observer, Xainir. I'll be a low-level-nobody who easily blends into a crowd. No notable accomplishments, and no notable demerits, either. There's no reason anyone should give half a shit about my existence.

After gathering a bit more perfunctory information regarding his unwitting quarry, Hope opens his mouth and utters a word that will forever change the course of his life.

"Teleport."

He vanishes from the spot, instantly traveling the remaining distance to Volgarius.

From this moment forward, his effort to infiltrate the Volgrim will truly begin.

But only time will tell if his efforts can bear fruit.

Only time will tell if he can obtain the power he needs to take control of humanity...

Part 386: Arrival on Volgarius

The Volgarius system is far, far larger than Jason Hiro's former home, the Sol System. It has significantly more rocky worlds within its confines, though it only possesses a single gas giant. The distances between these planets are also much greater, with the furthest planet in the system ten times more distant from the system's center than the Sol system's Pluto.

Even so, it has fewer moons, mostly as a result of only possessing a single gas giant. Where the Sol system formed two massive gas giants that sucked up the majority of the matter which wasn't consumed by its star, the Volgarius system developed in a much more balanced manner, giving it far superior possibilities for its future biodiversity.

During the two days Jason Hiro spends in his quarters waiting for the Hatoraxia to reach Volgarius, he receives some helpful but vague schematics of the system, which he compares to his Wordsmithed star charts. Like Hope, he too uses the Word of Power, **Atlas**, to scan the system. He learns all sorts of juicy details which he and Fiona discuss in his Mind Realm, along with Raphael and the rest.

"Fascinating." Fiona says, her and Jason exchanging words that only they can hear. Even the Hatoraxia's resident Psion, Miikil, couldn't listen in on their conversation if she wished. "To think such a star system could evolve naturally over the eons. It actually has binary stars!"

"The heat they output causes three of the inner planets to be far too hot for proper terraforming." Jason observes. "Err, 'Volforming' is what they call it. Anyway, they do have residences built deep under the crust, where the heat doesn't reach. Though, it makes more sense to call them mining colonies."

"The third planet from the system center isn't as hot as the first two. It houses a fairly sizable population. I wonder how safe each of the Volgarius system's planets would be if the Kolvaxians were to show up." Jason ponders.

While he and his mind-wife converse, Raphael stands behind Fiona, gazing at the dizzying arrays of holographic star charts, schematics, and readouts she and Jason have collected. However, the Archangel of Wisdom does not look at these charts, but well past them, with hollowed-out eyes and a distant look on his face.

Jason eventually notices Raphael's contemplative expression.

"Are you feeling alright, Raphael?" Jason asks.

The old angel blinks wearily. He shakes his head and frowns.

"Mmm. I simply... verily, I must wonder about a great many things." Raphael says, cryptically. "Jason. Dost thou remembereth what I told thee, once?"

"Specifically?" Jason prompts.

"'Twas in regards to life on Earth." Raphael says. "I told thee that when the angels went searching for a planet to inhabit, we discovered that Earth had life residing upon its surface already. 'Tis only now, all these years later, that a question begins to form in this old man's mind."

Jason falls silent for a moment.

"...Is it in regards to why life evolved on Volgarius, as well? Or rather, Grimvolas, their old homeworld?"

"Correct." Raphael nods. "Why dost it be that, in addition to Earth, the Volgrim evolved upon a distant world? Dost thou not find it strange? Additionally, by the time we angels settled upon Earth, the Volgrim had already begun to evolve on their own world. Perhaps they may have already become a spacefaring species."

"Life evolves at different speeds." Fiona says. "I don't see what the problem is."

"'Tis not the evolutionary speed of life which causes me concern." Raphael clarifies. "Please remember. Thou cannot fathom the eons angel kind spent alone in the cosmos, or the length of our wars against the Dragons and Titans. To use a term like 'eons' or millenia of millenia' would not do such a length of time justice. The Dragon Wars alone, we fought for at least four hundred million of thy human years."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "I don't really see the point..."

"We did not war continuously." Raphael says. "There were often tens of thousands of years when nobody fought anybody else. In those idle times, we angels would often spread our wings and casually explore our galaxy. If I told thee that I had visited every Milky Way star system multiple times in my life, wouldn't thou believeth me?"

"If you say you did, then I have to assume you did." Jason answers. "But... so what? Did you never encounter any planets with life during those times?"

"Indeed, we did not." Raphael answers. "Yet when the Titan Wars ended and we needed a world we could settle on to create the imps, a species which would permanently sustain our depleted spiritual stores, we happened to stumble upon Earth, a planet I had visited at least a handful of times. Where had it evolved life so quickly, I must ask? And how did we miss the world of Grimvolas, too?"

"Maybe you didn't check the planets all too thoroughly." Jason suggests. "Can you really remember, I dunno, a hundred million or a hundred billion individual worlds? Especially at your age?"

"Thou hath peered into my memories through Solomon's Crown." Raphael says. "Thou knoweth well that my mind doth not decay as a feeble humans' would'st. I remember this star system well, though it hath been the better part of an eon since my last visit. While the number of planets hath shrunk slightly, t'was not this capable of holding life back in those days."

"That's because the Volgrim 'Volformed' it." Fiona helpfully points out. "Raphael, life evolves in mysterious ways. I don't know why you're acting so odd about this. If life could evolve on Earth once, then evolving on Grimvolas a second time certainly isn't out of the question."

The Archangel clicks his tongue. "Tsk. 'Tis only the intuition of an old fossil. Perhaps I am overthinking the matter."

"Yeah..." Jason says slowly, suddenly not so sure of his own position. "That might be it."

Jason continues examining the star charts with his mind-wife. He and Fiona confirm that the system developed in a relatively centralized manner, with the worlds in the Goldilocks zone typically possessing the most moons, while the ones closest to and furthest from the binary stars ended up with the fewest. The biggest exception is the eleventh planet, Holifan, the only gas giant in the system, which holds half of the system's moons in its orbit.

"Looks like we skipped right past the ninth and tenth planets during our flight." Jason murmurs. "Larvolis and Sherrol, the first of which is a rocky mining world, and the second a water-covered planet. Larvolis isn't Volformable, but it does have artificial habitations built on its surfaces, where the mining population lives. Seems it's mostly a

planet where spaceships are built for the rest of the system, and the lower gravity helps with lifting them into orbit."

"As for Sherrol," Jason continues, "it's an aquatic planet with a watery surface covered in a thick sheet of ice. But beneath the ice sheet, the Volgrim constructed thousands of underwater habitats."

"This system really does have a bit of everything." Fiona comments. "The first three inner planets are all molten hellholes, but apparently they also house some exotic resources, so they have mining colonies. Every planet except the gas giant is being used for some grand purpose by the Volgrim."

Jason nods slowly. "Waste not, want not. The Volgrim seem to live by a creed of exploiting every resource as efficiently and wastelessly as possible. Not a lot of room for fun and leisure in their culture, though."

"Perhaps that's the case now." Fiona says. "But we don't know if that's always been true. Don't forget they're fighting an alien bio-plague that turns the infected into mindless zombies. It's hard to focus on leisure when your existence is under constant threat."

"Yeah... everyone has to do their part." Jason says, quietly. "I wonder what sort of person Unarin is. To be under all this stress, he must have incredible mental fortitude. Leading a galactic nation of septillions can't be anything but soul-crushing."

"Imagine doing it for longer than all of human existence." Fiona says dryly. "Either he's picked up a few tricks over the years, or he is the ultimate pencil-pusher with no sense of joy. His happiness probably got beaten out of him during the Seven Great Wars."

"You never know. The guy might actually be quite the interesting fellow." Jason chuckles. "But make sure you keep sharp. It's entirely possible I won't know if Dosena intrudes upon my thoughts. Hell, she could be doing so right now and I might not know."

Fiona shudders. "That's a frightening possibility."

The Hatoraxia finally draws within range of Volgarius. After two days of flight at only a tenth the speed of light, they have to slow down even more and enter a long queue of ships being inspected not only for paraphernalia and other such things, but any traces of contamination by the Plague. The Technopath inspectors take their duties extremely

seriously and perform several invasive scans of Jason and the other humans, making their skin crawl from the powerful beams irradiating their entire body.

After the inspectors leave, Samuel shoots a glance at Jason. "You sure those scanners were safe? Pretty sure they just dosed me with fifty thousand years worth of radiation."

"They're... probably fine." Jason says, before changing the subject. "Did you get to try out the Power Glove yet?"

Samuel rolls his eyes. "I messed around with the minotaur and orc settings. Pretty nice. I can beat some ass with them. The transformation was a bit painful, though."

"That's because your compatibility is lower with those species." Jason says, exposing a toothy grin. "But the fairy setting..."

"Man, fuck off with that bullshit!" Samuel snaps. "I ain't playing with no goddamned fairy settings. End of discussion!"

"Sigh. Suit yourself." Jason says, shrugging. "Now, keep sharp. We'll be breaching the upper atmosphere in ten minutes."

Jason leaves the Leisure Hall and walks down the Hatoraxia's corridors toward the Bridge. As he walks, he munches on a sandwich whipped up for him by his chef, Yamir. Some sort of cheese and beef mix along with gravy coats the inside of the bread, melting in his mouth while he chews.

"Damn. That son of a bull really knows how to cook." Jason mutters to himself.

When Jason arrives on the Bridge, his eyes stray toward the primary viewport, where the surface of Volgarius looms before him. Against the backdrop of the planet, countless miniature specks move about, each one of them an individual ship floating against the backdrop of space.

However, what truly makes Jason pause and stare is the planet itself. Neither blue, nor green, the entire planet's surface appears to be a dull, gray mess. To the Wordsmith, it looks more like a bowl of calcified gravy, completely uninteresting to gaze upon.

Jason turns to look at Kordonis, who sits in his captain's chair. Invocator Miikil stands beside him, her attention placed half on the Volgrim homeworld and half on the Wordsmith.

"I don't know what I expected." Jason says. "But I definitely didn't expect your capital world to be so butt-ugly."

Kordonis doesn't offer a witty retort. Instead, he merely sighs. "Vulgarius is a completely industrialized world, and the central nexus of our galactic empire. There are more Volgrim living there than you can imagine. I don't think anyone knows its exact population on any given day, but the number is well within the trillions. All those Volgrim need places to stay. As such, space is at a premium. Between the underground cities, the aboveground gigascrapers, and the levitating spires, you can't find vegetation even if you scour the planet looking for it."

"How do you maintain air quality without vegetation?" Jason asks.

"I couldn't tell you the exact mechanisms even if I wanted." Kordonis answers. "But it involves nanotechnology on a global scale. There are nanites everywhere that convert the air into something breathable."

"Nanites." Jason repeats. "Seems legit."

He falls silent and begins to watch intently as the Hatoraxia falls toward the planet at a comfortable speed. The ship's antigrav modules activate, allowing it to smoothly glide downward, where it ultimately breaks through the grey clouds to reveal the world below.

Jason's eyes widen as he finds himself gazing upon the most tightly-packed urban landscape he has ever seen. Not only do divisions between the buildings barely exist, but there are hardly any streets at the ground level to speak of. Instead, travel tubes stack on top of one another, ferrying millions of passengers along in any given direction, from one place to another.

As the Hatoraxia transitions from space to planet, two escort shuttles approach and fly on either side, each of them resembling deadly silver-colored weapons of war, like a pair of javelins with wings jutting out of their sides.

"Captain Kordonis. Follow us to the Founder's Hand." Says a voice transmitted to the Hatoraxia's Bridge.

"Initiating autopilot." Says the ship's Technopath pilot.

Kordonis issues orders every now and then, but otherwise, the trip is uneventful. Jason stares out the window at the hideously grey planet outside, where every structure is as boring and utilitarian as possible. Not one part of the massive and unending cityscape is pleasant to look at. If Jason were to try and navigate on his own, he'd become hopelessly lost within an hour, at best.

"Boy, I hope the rest of your planets aren't this bland." Jason mutters dryly.

"No. Volgarius is a special case..." Kordonis mutters. "Perhaps if you can truly help us win the war, we'll be able to move our displaced people back to their homeworlds in the galactic exterior. Then the capital system won't be so crowded anymore."

Jason swallows any further snide comments. He remembers the fact that many of these Volgrim are refugees fleeing from a menace he has yet to encounter himself. What if it were humanity in their situation? He would certainly be a lot more understanding.

The Hatoraxia travels for more than an hour, racing across the planet's sky until eventually slowing down. A set of five giant buildings amidst a field of green appears in the distance. The way this unique set of structures stands out from their surroundings forces anyone with a functional brain to notice them, and Jason is no exception.

"Is that...?"

Kordonis nods. "The Hand of the Founders. Also known as the Five Fingers of the Founders, or the Founder's Fingers. There are many names for this location, but one thing is certain. It is heavily guarded, to the point where if you breathe even the slightest insult toward the Founders, an Eighth Level Psion may just step out of the gaps in space next to you and kill you before you know what happened. Of course as a delegate for humanity, this probably won't happen to you, but..."

Kordonis pauses to look at Jason meaningfully.

"...don't press your luck. The Founders are our people's only shining ray of light in these dark times. Many otherwise good-natured Volgrim might explode if a mud-dweller were to step out of line. They might not attack you, but your subordinates should tread carefully."

"Noted." Jason says, his expression turning grim.

Already, a faint sense of pressure has begun to push against his head. Fiona warns him of an onslaught of attempted intrusions as countless high-level Psions either gently or not-so-gently try to peer into his mind and uncover his secrets.

Luckily, Jason's magical and technological countermeasures protect his thoughts.

Or at least, so he prays.

There's still the possibility that Dosena or some other high-level Psion can crack open my mental defenses without alerting me. We had better pay close attention, Jason

transmits to Fiona.

The Hatoraxia and its escort vessels descend toward a designated landing area, one where a mere half-dozen other ships sit parked and ready to fly for various VIP purposes. Not even a quarter-mile away, the nearest of the Five Fingers, the Founder's Thumb, awaits. The granite and obsidian tower, windowless, rises like a tall, rectangular mountain impaled onto the land.

Jason and his fellow humans depart the ship. Additionally, Yamir joins them, as does Emperor Serena.

"You're coming, too?" Jason asks her.

"Naturally." Serena says quietly. "This is the first time I have ever been to Volgarius in person. I would like to observe the sights and get to know it better."

"Alright. Suit yourself." Jason says.

He and the others join Kordonis and Miikil. They travel toward the Founder's Thumb and step inside, then ride in dual grav-lifts upward, traveling hundreds of floors as they rush into the skies above. With no windows to peer out of, and inertial dampeners that keep the sense of motion nonexistent, Jason can't help but feel as if the lift isn't moving at all. As it travels, he spreads out his divine sense and takes note of several spots along the way.

Under his breath, he Wordsmiths several times.

"Waypoint. Waypoint."

Kordonis glances at him. "Hmm?"

The Wordsmith shakes his head. "Oh, it's nothing. I was just reminding myself I had to talk to my wife about something when I have a chance."

"I see. Well, just be aware that you will be under constant surveillance while you're here." Kordonis says. "Don't try any... funny business."

Jason faintly smiles. "Oh, I wouldn't *dare*."

Unbeknownst to Kordonis, Jason places several Waypoints, special Wordsmithing beacons that will allow him to instantly teleport back to this tower with a single Return command, should he ever wish to do so. Undetectable by anyone but himself and Hope, these Waypoints have served both Wordsmiths well over the past six years. So long as

they remember to drop a Waypoint, they can return to any place they've traveled in the galaxy, at a minimal mana cost.

Otherwise, teleporting directly over a vast distance would consume a huge amount of spiritual energy. Even for Hope, traveling several light-hours to Volgarius would surely drain his mana, but doing so through a Waypoint would barely even put a dent in his reserves. The same is true for Jason.

As the grav-lift reaches its designated floor and opens, Kordonis hesitates.

The door slides open, but Kordonis shakes his head.

"I've... never actually been this high up in the Founder's Thumb. It is such an honor to come here. When Founder Unarin met with me, he did so on a much lower floor. Soon, we'll be entering his personal quarters, so everyone here had best remember to follow proper decorum."

"We're going to Unarin's room?" Jason asks.

"No. The entire top ten floors are Founder Unarin's designated living area. They are also where he keeps his... precious possessions. It is quite the taboo for someone as lowly as me to travel there. I will have to ask that your companions stay on this floor, and the two of us will walk to meet the First Founder ourselves. We'll have to travel the last five floors on foot, as per his command."

Jason nods. "Works for me."

He knows this is another minor power-play by Unarin, one that will force the lowly human to meet the Founder on his own terms, but Jason doesn't mind.

At least I'll get to see what his 'home' looks like before I meet him. Might even give me an idea of his personality. Jason thinks.

Of course, Jason has seen Founder Unarin before, through the broadcast Marie Becker gave him. However, the way a great leader speaks to an audience versus one-on-one with another person are likely very different. It's almost assured he will act differently toward a single mud-dweller compared to an assortment of his peers.

Kordonis leads Jason past hundreds of Technopaths, and even a few Ascended. Outside the Founder's Thumb, the Ascended almost never appear, but in these upper levels, a couple hundred of them live and work under Unarin's direction.

Jason walks through softly lit hallways, workspaces where holographic displays show the many battlefields of the Kolvaxian war effort, where teams of high-level Technopaths, Psions, and Changelings monitor the battle situations and report any suspicious movements to their superiors.

As Jason makes his way through these open areas, another thought strikes him.

Maybe Unarin doesn't just want to show off to me. He wants to show me something specific. The War has permeated every facet of Volgrim life. They have dedicated their entirety to eradicating the Kolvaxians, while I remain obsessed with 'minor' matters, such as the demons. I need to set my sights higher and focus on the bigger picture.

Before long, Kordonis and Jason reach a large pair of double doors, two times taller than the both of them.

"This is where I stop." Kordonis says, a hint of regret in his voice. "Inside, you will find the First Founder. I cannot proceed into his inner sanctum. I am not worthy."

"Thanks for leading me all the way here." Jason says. "Hopefully, this won't take too long."

Kordonis chuckles. "You have much to discuss. I'll be leaving, now. Take care, Wordsmith."

Without another word, Kordonis turns and walks away, leaving Jason to stand in front of the double doors.

The Wordsmith inhales deeply. Then, he walks forward, places his hands on both doors, and gives them a push.

Unarin awaits.

Part 387: The First Founder (Part 1)

Jason Hiro pushes open the doors leading into the First Founder's Sanctum. The sight that greets him is one of almost religious significance. He enters a room coated in white stone floors, walls, and ceiling. This stone resembles marble, but it also has distinct cloudy patterns etched into its texture, and as Jason gives the stone floor before him a brief glance, he gets the impression the patterns are not random, but part of a massive mural that spans the sanctum's entirety, one which he might only see if he views it from an elevated position.

Dozens of paintings hang on the walls, many of them depicting the ancient wars fought by the Volgrim Empire. The hallway leading deeper into the Sanctum starts narrow but quickly widens, and Jason observes several legendary Volgrim figures, many deceased, engaging in battles against other Volgrim, as well as the Sentinels. Some of these Volgrim stand solo in their paintings, striking heroic poses, or otherwise holding or wearing technology they made. The latter type often tend to be Technopaths.

Jason continues further into the sanctum. He passes by countless art displays on tables, statues, and even miniature recreations of ancient Volgrim cities.

The more he passes, the more he feels a little nostalgic for the museums of his own world. He also can't help but wonder why the First Founder would hold onto such old-fashioned, low-tech items as hand-crafted artwork. Surely, Volgrimkind can afford to create fancy holo-art or some other crazy futuristic nonsense?

Jason glances toward the ceiling. He finds lanterns hovering above the ground, shaped like pyramids. Their alloys glow in a mysterious manner, providing light to the sanctum.

As Jason momentarily loses himself in the display, a figure approaches him from the side, his movements discreet.

"Are you enjoying my collection?"

The Wordsmith shifts his attention to the newcomer. Immediately, he recognizes the red-skinned Ascended before him as none other than the First Founder, Unarin, leader of all Volgrim.

Unarin stands half a head shorter than Jason. Despite his height disadvantage, he does not appear inferior to the Wordsmith, and his 'aura' of authority rises far beyond anything Jason could muster, even on his best days. Perhaps, among all of humanity, only the fabled King Arthur could possess such a commanding air. In no way does Jason even remotely stack up to the First Founder.

The Wordsmith clears his throat. "It's an impressive gallery, Founder Unarin. Though, I do wonder what the purpose is in collecting old relics like these, when you could surely create some sort of digital or holographic collection instead."

Unarin maintains a neutral expression.

"I enjoy technology in moderation. It is a necessity, of course. It is not something I can cast aside. But in many ways, I am quite old-fashioned. I enjoy objects I can look at and touch in person. Holograms... they simply aren't historically authentic. Don't you agree?"

Jason nods slowly. "I do. Although, humanity sure doesn't have much left in the way of historical artifacts. Our past seems to have... vanished."

"A tragedy of the times." Unarin says, with a humorless smile. "Walk with me."

Jason follows Unarin, folding his hands behind his back as he ponders the reason the First Founder brought him here. No doubt, it has something to do with humanity's revival and expansion efforts, to say nothing of the war against the Kolvaxian menace, but something tells the Wordsmith that Unarin's intentions are far from simple.

Unarin leads Jason deeper into the sanctum. Before long, they arrive inside a holographic simulation of the cosmos. A projector summons dots of starlight all throughout the room, creating an unthinkable vast galaxy of light that swirls in the air, just twenty feet above Jason and Unarin's heads.

The First Founder stops. He gazes up at the simulation of the galaxy, one which Jason can tell at a glance is an authentic and accurate map of every individual star. He cannot fathom the distances between them in reality, yet inside this terrarium, the most distant star is only a stone's throw from any other one.

Unarin slowly turns to look at Jason.

"What do you know about Goblins?"

"Goblins?" Jason repeats, frowning ever so slightly. "Is this... a test?"

The First Founder faintly smiles, but says nothing, leaving Jason to fill the empty air.

"Well. I suppose... they're small creatures that burrow underground. They're valued by the demons due to their cheap feeding requirements and the fact they make for excellent slaves. In fact, Goblins are all too happy to perform menial labor in exchange for almost nothing."

Unarin chuckles. "Perhaps I phrased my question poorly. Let me try again. Where do Goblins come from?"

This time, Jason appears truly confused.

"I, uh... I don't follow. From what I understand, Goblins didn't exist until Emperor Lucifer created them. She created them, orcs, fairies, and all the other monster species on Earth as part of her twisted experiments. Not shades, shadow-walkers, vampires, or werewolves, though. Others were responsible for those."

"The expected answer." Unarin says, his tone casual. "I cannot fault you for uttering such a statement. Your ignorance regarding the truth is hardly your fault. Let me try another tactic. How many planets bear life in the Milky Way?"

"I fail to see what this has to do with you bringing me here today." Jason replies, his tone curt but polite.

"It has everything to do with everything." Unarin states. "It is part of the Truths that form our reality. And if one does not understand all of the Truths, the conclusions they might draw will surely be erroneous."

A few moments of silence follow. Unarin raises his hand and points a finger at one of the seemingly infinite specks of light in the sky above them. A single dot, barely perceivable, located somewhere near the 'bottom' of the Southern Galaxy, turn blood-red.

"This is where Earth is located." Unarin says. "When my people first found Earth, we were bewildered by its complex biosphere. What an odd planet it turned out to be, a world unlike any other. Far more distinct than our own. We set it aside for preservation-purposes. Why do you suppose that was?"

Jason snorts. "Don't tell me. Because of the Goblins?"

"Your sarcasm is palpable." Unarin says. "But you're not wrong. It wasn't only the Goblins. It was the angels, the demons, and the humans, all locked in one great big war marginally fiercer than the First Great War my people ever fought. But it was also the so-called 'monster species' that comprised Earth's... *incongruous* population."

Unarin points his finger again. This time, a different world, tens of thousands of lightyears from Earth, turns blood-red.

Before the Wordsmith, a holographic image of a planet appears. It resembles Earth in some vague ways, aside from the far smaller oceans and much greater concentration of land-masses. Deserts stretch across much of its surface, but the planet's entirety appears to be made up of a single super-continent, with only scattered lakes and seas here and there.

"This world probably isn't one you've encountered before." Unarin says quietly. "Its designation is Gollax. It fell to the Kolvaxians 40,000 cycles ago."

"That's too bad." Jason mutters, not showing much emotion. "Was there something special about it?"

Unarin's eyes remain fixed on it. "Yes, indeed. Gollax was the homeworld of the Goblins."

It takes a second for Unarin's words to burrow into Jason's ears.

"Wait, what? Their homeworld?!"

Completely bewildered, Jason narrows his eyes and stares at the planet with significantly more curiosity than before.

"But didn't Lucifer create the Goblins on Earth?"

Unarin doesn't answer his question. He points at another random world and brings it down to hover before the two of them. This world appears fiery and choked with lava, ash, and magma.

"The world of Throg. It fell to the Kolvaxians just 15,000 cycles ago. It was the homeworld of the orcs."

Jason's expression becomes more lucid the more Unarin speaks. "Once is an anomaly. Twice is a coincidence..."

"And this world here," Unarin says, pointing to another. "Pixiv. Homeworld of the venerable fairies. Luckily, it still exists, and is where the Fairy Queens continue to dwell."

Jason slowly looks at Unarin with a hint of shock and awe.

"What are you saying? Someone... planted the goblins and orcs and fairies on Earth? Maybe the angels?"

"No. You were correct before, Wordsmith." Unarin replies. "Lucifer did 'create' the so-called 'monsters' of your planet. But, without fail, all of them hail from completely different worlds, worlds they typically ruled as Prime Species. Apex predators. Conquerors."

Unarin gestures for the Wordsmith to follow him. And so, Jason does.

The First Founder leads Jason past several additional miniature cities, all of them constructed in frighteningly lifelike detail, to the point that even if he were to stare at them for days on end, he'd still find new oddities.

Before long, the two of them reach a small park, with beautiful alien trees and flowers growing in chaotic and orderly arrangements alike. A pair of benches sit ten feet apart from each other with a pair of small fountains between them.

Unarin sits down at one of the benches, then gestures to the opposite one. Jason takes his seat across from Unarin, and the two of them stare at each other for a moment.

The Volgrim leader's eyes drop from Jason's face to his hands resting in his lap. Unarin smiles.

"That's an interesting ring on your finger."

Jason tenses up, ever so slightly. "It's from my... human mating ritual. I exchanged an identical one with my wife when we got married."

"Haha." Unarin laughs softly. "I was referring to the Archangel's ring. That should be Raphael's ring, if I'm not mistaken. I wonder if he's listening to our conversation..."

Jason's expression darkens. "You recognized it... just like that?"

"I had a few theories as to how and why the Archangels might have managed to return." Unarin says, his voice gently lilting as the mood strikes him. "Considering the power the Cherubim displayed, I thought that surely they must have survived in mind, soul, and body too. But it seems that isn't the case. They cling to the mortal realm through Camael's life-preservation rings, the unique artifacts she made for all her brothers and sisters."

Unarin turns his gaze to the side.

"Who are the angels, Jason? Who are the angels, really? Have you ever asked yourself that question?"

Jason's expression turns solemn. "Of course I have. Many times. And I happen to have the head of all angelkind resting on my finger, so I can ask him for answers any time I want. Where are you going with this line of discussion?"

"You talk with Raphael often." Unarin says, his sharp gaze suddenly turning back to the Wordsmith. "Another doubt of mine, resolved. I'm beginning to get a clearer idea of your living situation. But even if you can ask Raphael any questions that might spring to your mind, are you sure that his answers are truthful? Can you state for certain that he is not deceiving you?"

"Well. I already know Raphael isn't entirely... *truthful*." Jason says, recalling several key pieces of information Raphael tried to hold back, but which Solomon revealed. "Are you implying Raphael is hiding something important from me? Something I need to know?"

Jason flicks his gaze into his Mind Realm. Raphael observes the outer world through Jason's eyes, allowing him to see exactly what the Wordsmith sees. However, rather than apprehension that Unarin might reveal some terrible secret, Raphael simply appears... perplexed.

It seems even the Eldest Archangel hasn't a clue where Unarin is taking the conversation.

"Implying?" Unarin says, dryly. "No. I am stating a fact. The Eldest Archangel is harboring a secret not just from you, but all of humanity. I would advise you to take off that ring and put it away for a few minutes. You may question him later about my information, if you deem the risk to be low enough."

"Harboring a secret... stating a fact..." Jason repeats, slightly dazed. "Raphael is my friend. You, on the other hand, are still my enemy, at least in practical terms. Why would I lower my defenses just for some information? Anything you want to say, you can say it in front of Raphael, too."

"You're worried that if you remove Raphael's ring, your Mind Realm will become vulnerable to intrusion." Unarin says, his expression turning neutral. "You believe that having the Archangel protect your mind will hide your secrets. Let me assure you that Founder Dosena will not bother with a lowly existence like yourself. Your powers might be formidable, and they certainly can threaten her, but you are not a Kolvaxian. You are not a mindless creature incapable of understanding tangible benefits and losses."

Unarin pauses.

"You are not going to attack or kill Dosena, and so, your power is not a threat to her. Likewise, the secrets you hold simply don't interest me, her, or anyone in our species. Only the value you can provide in combatting this Threat. Therefore, Raphael's protection is a moot point. We will not attempt to forcibly gaze into your mind."

Jason frowns. "While that is certainly one of my concerns, it's not the only one. I have no grasp on how mighty Dosena's power is. I imagine she's strong enough to listen in on this conversation without me knowing. Who is to say she can't peer into my thoughts without me knowing, too? And furthermore, I wasn't lying when I said Raphael is my friend. We may have disagreements, but he has saved my life at least twice. Why would I hide something from him?"

Unarin leans back and crosses his arms. "If you don't want to hide this information from him. So be it. I'd advise listening to me, an entity who has lived for far longer than you can imagine, but perhaps I have ulterior motives you can't imagine."

After another pause, the First Founder slowly blinks his eyes.

"Did you know... humanity... is flawed?"

"Flawed?" Jason asks, scrunching up his forehead. "I don't understand."

"Are you aware of the true nature of the Heroic Aura?" Unarin says, firing off a second question.

"The true nature." Jason says. "Yes. I do know of it. But I'm not sure *you* do. It was created by Raphael as a means of taking power from the first Hero, Jephthath. Jephthath's power was borne of a fusion between himself and Hercules, one of the ancient Titans. Raphael undermined that power, turning it into an angel-Titan-human hybrid that randomly sought out deserving people around the world. It uplifted them and made them powerful enough to fight on behalf of humanity in its entirety."

"Uplifted!" Unarin suddenly exclaims, leaning forward on his bench. "Now that *is* an interesting way of putting it. So what you seem to believe is that the Heroic Aura increases the power of an ordinary human, granting them frightening abilities they could never possess otherwise. Is that about right?"

"Y...yes..." Jason says slowly, feeling unnerved by the excited look in Unarin's eyes. "...Why? Is that... wrong?"

Unarin's eyes flick to the golden band on Jason's finger. "Why don't you ask your 'good friend'?"

Jason quickly turns his consciousness back into his Mind Realm. There, he sees Raphael with a very different expression from before. Metaphorical clouds hover around his face, making him look as if he crapped his pants. The constipated expression on Raphael's face makes Jason's heart skip a beat.

Raphael! Jason exclaims into his Mind Realm. *Is Unarin telling... the truth?*

Raphael doesn't answer. Instead, the old man merely lowers his head and sighs.

His lack of an answer, in and of itself, gives Jason the answer to his question. The Wordsmith retracts his sense from his Mind Realm and returns to the material world.

He stares at Unarin with a cold expression.

"...It seems you aren't lying."

"Of course not." Unarin says, his expression haughty. "Why would I lie to an inferior mud-dweller? But if you must know, the reason our species ultimately fought in those Energy Wars... it may have had something to do with this crucial discovery, a fact we've kept hidden from Earth's survivors all these millennia."

Unarin continues. "Humanity is flawed. You don't need me to describe this flaw, for you should already understand the flaw yourself. What does it mean to become a Hero? Do you walk a path that puts you far above the rest of your kind? Or, could it be that this so-called 'Heroic Aura' in fact *repairs* something which should have been there all along? Are you Heroes truly special? Or are you merely the lucky few granted a birthright which should have been every human's?"

Before Jason can continue, Unarin holds up both of his palms. "Look at the angels. The dragons. The Titans. The demons. Isn't it strange? Why did all of them possess incredible spiritual power, but not humanity? Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

"It does." Jason says, nodding. "It does..."

The two men fall silent for a short while as Jason wrestles with this realization.

"So... you're saying... the angels purposefully made humanity flawed. I already know they intended for us to be, effectively, spirit-donating chattel. We were only ever supposed to be their living batteries, like the imps were before their uprising."

"The Imp Uprising..." Unarin murmurs, his expression turning nostalgic. "Ah, yes. Another fascinating event in planet Earth's storied legends. The imps, creatures who were coincidentally also bereft of magical powers, suddenly came into control of deep, dense magical energy. Out of nowhere, they obtained powers capable of rivaling the angels and Titans. You should know, Jason, that by the time of the War in Heaven, my people had not yet made landfall on Earth. But we did shortly afterward. We heard the stories of how demonkind and humankind evolved."

Unarin shakes his head. "The angels crippled the demons, but the demons repaired themselves and regained the power they should have had. Yet, for some reason, humanity has remained spiritually crippled to this very day. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Isn't it your fault?" Jason asks snidely. "You left us humans to act as lunch for the demons. We only existed to give them souls. We were victims of an unending, torturous, barbaric existence."

"Why did I do that?" Unarin asks. "Don't you find it odd? That I would leave a species with humanity's potential relatively intact? I went to great efforts to preserve but also limit your people's population and growth. Perhaps, you might see my actions as cruel, but if you think I only did it to make you suffer..."

Unarin clicks his tongue.

"...you truly have yet to meet my true self. I would not stoop to the level of bullying a defeated, impotent, nonthreatening civilization."

"Don't play word games with me." Jason snaps. "You didn't eliminate the humans because Marie Becker possesses an Alpha-Class AI! You are absolutely terrified of the damage Umi could cause if Marie unleashed it upon you! Killing the humans would enrage her and guarantee, if not the swift and painful end of your species, many years of hell cast upon the technologies that you subside upon!"

Unarin blinks. "I wondered if it was truly your soul Confessor Vulpanix met inside Marie Becker's laboratory. Thank you for confirming my suspicions."

He pauses before continuing.

"As for Umi, there is no doubt that I do fear that synthmind. But in more of an abstract way, not the primitive manner you might imagine. If Umi were to torture me or kill me, I would not be particularly worried. It is my civilization and legacy that I fear being

eradicated. You are wrong, though, if you think I left humanity alone due to fearing Umi. At best, Marie Becker and her synthemind were only a minor consideration."

Jason nods slowly. "Then... why did you allow humanity to exist? Did you have some broader plan for us?"

"Perhaps." Unarin says, cryptically. "Are you familiar with Archangel Camael?"

"Somewhat." Jason answers. "I've seen her in a few... visions. She created the heroic artifacts and fought in the War in Heaven."

"She was also a seer. A prophet." Unarin says quietly. "But she was not the only one. On your world, there was another person capable of divining the future."

"...Demon Emperor Valac." Jason mutters, his expression turning grim. He remembers when Valac's soul fragment somehow and inexplicably appeared in his mind, nearly killing him. Luckily, Solomon saved his life.

"That's right. But... do you believe that those two were the only seers in the universe?" Unarin asks. "What if I told you there was another? And what if I told you he was a Volgrim?"

The Wordsmith sucks in a breath, visibly taken aback. "You... have a seer among your ranks?"

"Had." Unarin says. "He fell to the Sentinels during the Seventh Great War. But I keep a collection of his prophecies locked away to peruse on occasion. There was one prophecy he often spoke of... he called it the 'Great Shattering.' Have you heard this term before?"

"I haven't..." Jason says. "Why?"

"The old sage spoke of the Great Shattering often." Unarin says, slowing his words. "He never told me what it was. He only stated that it would result in a great calamity. Or perhaps, that a great calamity would cause it. One thing was for certain, though..."

The First Founder pauses to look at Jason meaningfully.

"He said that the 'Children of Terra' would play an essential role in this Great Shattering. But as to whether your role would be positive or negative, he did not say."

"This old sage guy," Jason says, "he knew about humanity? Was this before you encountered us on the galactic stage?"

"It was." Unarin answers. "He was a great being. A prophet of the Ascended. His efforts were instrumental in foreseeing the demise of the Sentinels. When he perished, I became lost, for a time. He was one of my four brothers. Now, of those four, only two of us remain."

Jason blinks away his fatigue. "This is a fascinating conversation, Unarin. You have truly opened my eyes. But I'm still confused. Don't you have some greater goal in calling me here today? You've given me all sorts of 'freebies' and led me along by my nose, but I've yet to see how my presence can help you. And you don't seem the kindly, philanthropic sort."

"You aren't wrong." Unarin says.

The First Founder rises to his feet, and motions for Jason to follow him.

"Come. I've more to show you. I intend to demonstrate a high level of sincerity in the hopes that you will wholeheartedly support the Volgrim Empire. Having you as an enemy would be inconvenient at best, and frightening at worst. But convincing you of my 'magnanimity' will require... extraordinary steps."

Unarin smiles.

"Fortunately... I always come prepared."

Part 388: The First Founder (Part 2)

As Jason walks alongside the First Founder of Volgrimkind, a seemingly passive and benign fellow with no outward aggressiveness, he also communicates with his mind-wife, Fiona, in secret.

[What do you think of the guy so far, honey?] Jason asks. [He's definitely perceptive and picking out new clues about me and my true goals as we speak, but if he couldn't do that much I'd find him lacking as the leader of a Class III galactic civilization.]

For a few moments, Fiona doesn't reply. Jason gazes inwardly, only to see a deep frown on her face.

[Humanity is flawed...] Fiona mutters. [...able to gain spiritual power... not just Heroes with the ability...]

[Fiona?] Jason says.

His mind-wife blinks slowly, as if coming out of a daze.

[I'm just... thinking about some things that happened in the past. Jason, do you remember the battle against the Black Queen?]

[How could I forget?] Jason asks, grimacing. [It was... kind of a traumatic day for me.]

[No doubt.] Fiona says, seeming oddly oblivious to his internal emotions for once. [On that day, I fought Satan the Devil. I couldn't put up much of a fight against him, but... the oddest thing happened while you were unconscious. I tapped into a weak but useful ability I never knew I had. I became, for a short while... able to follow the movements of his Vectors. I could actually see their spiritual energy, something Satan told me should be impossible. Even Archangels could barely manage such a feat.]

Raphael, not too far from Fiona, remains silent. However, the constipated expression on his face only deepens.

[Got anything to say, old man?] Jason asks. [Maybe you want to tell me Unarin is lying?]

Raphael faintly exhales. [Nay. He... is not. Humanity is... indeed... flawed. Thou were designed by Uzziel to be that way.]

[Let me guess.] Jason states. [It was at your behest. You wanted us to be crippled, spiritually.]

Raphael lowers his eyes. [I did.]

[Why?]

Raphael sighs. [Is it not obvious? I wanted for humanity to not pose a threat to my people as the demons did, to give us their internal energy, and to rely on us for protection against the rising threat of demonkind. Verily, when the unexpected appearance of the first Hero appeared, I took steps to place the Heroic Aura under angelkind's control, though I ended up only turning it into a random bestowal of power upon one human per era.]

[I guess that answers one question.] Jason mutters. [The Aura wasn't searching for a 'worthy heir' to its power. Instead, it likely sought out humans with high spiritual potential. Sometimes, those humans would be great kings and conquerors, while other times they would be mere peasants, unable to change their fate in the world. That's why heroes like Shana perished without leaving behind names for themselves.]

Raphael nods. ['Tis as thou sayeth.]

[We'll talk about this later.] Jason says. [Don't think you'll be able to avoid this discussion, *Archangel of Wisdom*. The fact you never mentioned this to me even though you no longer have any reason to hide it... that makes me feel quite suspicious.]

Raphael says nothing. He merely turns away, unwilling to look at Jason's 'mental sense'.

The Wordsmith harrumphs. His chat with Fiona and Raphael, while seemingly long, occurs at the speed of thought. As a result, only a few seconds pass in the real world, while he walks alongside Unarin.

The First Founder turns to look at him, as they pace down one of the halls in Unarin's Sanctum.

"What do you think about those... Felorians?" Unarin questions.

"You know of them?" Jason says.

"Indeed, I do. Do you think humans possessing strange abilities would evade my detection, all these years?" Unarin asks. "I deliberately allowed them to exist. I wished to explore the possibilities for human spirituality. Those humans seem to revere their

ancient god, the 'Wind Mother,' as they call her. I care not what silly superstitions they pursue, only their value as research subjects. I even posited that if a certain period of time passed, an existence not too dissimilar from a Hero might emerge among their ranks."

Jason nods slowly. "When I first learned of the Felorians, I thought their ability to imbue themselves with power was... quite bizarre. I thought that perhaps an ancient Titan may have given them that power, or something."

"A Titan!" Unarin exclaims. "Indeed, that would be quite the interesting possibility. It was a Titan who bestowed the Heroic Aura upon humanity. Another may indeed have possessed the power to do so a second time. But, as far as I have seen, it was not a Titan who did so for the Felorians. As to who actually bequeathed them their powers... even I must wonder about that."

"You don't know?" Jason asks, taken aback. "You let the humans evolve random powers... just like that? What if-"

"What if they rose up to threaten my rule?" Unarin asks, smirking at the foolish young human. "A pathetic concept. Why should I fear some random space peasants playing with basic magical abilities? A middling Psion plucked from my auxiliary armies could lay waste to an army of Demon Emperors, let alone a mere backwater primitive civilization. And with this Plague growing ever more frightening, I wouldn't mind if a random powerhouse with divergent abilities appeared."

"Divergent abilities." Jason repeats. "Like mine?"

"Indeed." Unarin says.

The First Founder stops before a seemingly random wall in the corridor. He glances at it, and the wall suddenly slides upward, revealing a hidden inner chamber.

He leads Jason into a secluded hangar bay, not particularly large in size, where they find a small, compact spacecraft, one with room for only four people. Already, one individual sits inside the slender, highly advanced spacecraft's cockpit. Jason recognizes her as Muuxunuu, Unarin's personal servant. His secretary? Administrator? Certainly someone high up in his leadership structure.

"I don't understand." Jason says, glancing with suspicion at the craft. "You're... taking me somewhere?"

"I am." Unarin answers. "It won't take long. Just a quick jaunt off-planet. This is my personal ship, the Founder's Spear. It stands at the peak of what any Technopath can create. Founder Cuanali personally built it for me, along with the heads of a dozen other clans. It may appear small and unimposing... but this vessel is actually more dangerous than an average Seventh-Level Psion."

Jason's heart skips a beat. "What?! That's a ludicrous statement... how could it possibly..."

He shakes his head, ignoring that immediate snap judgement.

"Never mind that. You want to take me off-planet? Why? Where?"

"Are you worried this is my way of quietly getting rid of you?" Unarin asks. "Don't worry. We won't go far. Only about 5,000 lightcycles. Shouldn't take more than a few standard time-units, each way."

Jason quickly mental-maths the Founders's 'casual' statement and frowns deeply.

"5,000 lightyears? Only a few hours? That's... that's a ridiculous speed. Just how fast can this ship go?"

Unarin smiles. "A little faster than you'd expect."

Jason chews his lip for a moment. After mulling Unarin's request, he shrugs. "Alright. Fine. Why won't you tell me where we're going, though?"

"Oh, Wordsmith, come now." Unarin teases. "Don't you have a certain thought in the back of your mind? The thought we Volgrim don't know how to have fun? What a concept. A mud-dweller thinks he possesses knowledge of a concept we do not. Laughable. I quite enjoy a casual prank, I'll have you know. Back in my era, some called me a 'troublesome youth,' if you would believe it."

"I imagine so." Jason says. "Only a 'troublesome youth' would rise up and overthrow the order of his entire species."

"Hahaha. You're smarter than you look." Unarin says, before walking toward the Founder's Spear. A side-entry door opens up, tall enough for him to step inside without stooping over. "Trust me. Even if you hate surprises, I think you'll find what I wish to show you... quite engaging."

Jason feels a hint of foreboding in his heart, but still, he steps inside the Interceptor-sized Luxury Yacht. When he does, he finds himself inside a luxuriously carpeted interior,

with tastefully applied gold trim and other such beautiful comforts that even he doesn't find too gaudy. It resembles a decently sized hotel room, but with an alien touch to it.

As the entry closes behind Jason, he glances toward the front of the hundred-foot-long craft, where Muuxunuu sits. The female Ascended turns to look at him, her bright blue eyes contrasting with her rosy pink skin.

"Greetings, Wordsmith." Muuxunuu says, her speech slow, calming, and more than a little alluring. "It is my honor to meet such a powerful human as yourself. I will take you to wherever the First Founder commands. Please take a seat and enjoy the amenities aboard Founder Unarin's personal yacht."

"I saw you during Unarin's 'broadcast.'" Jason says, not bothering to hide his knowledge of Unarin's speech, held just a few weeks earlier. "What sort of role do you play in the Volgrim Empire?"

Muuxunuu gazes at the Wordsmith without a hint of malice, like a princess untouched by the sins and stains of the mortal realm. Unassuming, naïve, and innocent.

"I am merely a tool for the First Founder's uses. I am his hand. I do anything he commands." Muuxunuu says, her voice gentle. "I am an Administrator of his Empire. I am a judge where necessary, and a speaker who can project his will whenever he lacks for time."

"I see." Jason says, nodding slowly. "Thank you for... explaining that."

"It is my pleasure to answer your queries." Muuxunuu says. "You are not only Founder Unarin's guest, but his future friend. It is only natural that I treat you well."

Muuxunuu turns around in her seat to face forward again. She begins pressing buttons on the ship's controls, activating its pre-flight checks to make sure no last-second anomalies occur.

Unprompted, Unarin turns to Jason and speaks.

"Muuxunuu is my most trusted advisor and confidante. Even more than my fellow Founders. Not only is she an Ascended like me, but she has been at my side since the Historical Era, before my people became enlightened, before the advent of the Seven Great Wars."

Jason raises his eyebrows. "You've... been alive that long?"

"Oh, yes. Somewhere in the order of eight million years." Unarin says, closing his eyes and bowing his head sagely. "A long, long time. I fought on the frontlines of all but the final two wars. I met many good people during those dark eras. I watched as brother killed brother, and sister, sister."

While reminiscing on ancient history, locked within his mind, Unarin sighs melancholically, keeping his eyes closed.

"I saw the corruption of the Old Order. The tyrants who sought only their own gains. The unenlightened who pushed for wars among their fellow Volgrim, all to enrich themselves and their dynasties. They kept their serums of immortality locked away, only granting them to easily manipulatable pawns. I had to fight tooth and nail to obtain a vial for myself and Muuxunuu, who was at my side, even then."

Unarin opens his eyes slowly. He gazes past Jason, as if looking through the wall behind him.

"Your species, the humans. They weren't so different from my people's Old Order. Always warring about yourselves, engaging in your petty squabbles. Your minor disputes over land and territory. Too arrogant and self-absorbed to look past your own noses at the beauty of the universe, as well as its vast and unexploited wealth. If humanity had merely gotten its act together for 100 short years, it could have exploded in power by uniting to resist my soldiers. How unfortunate, then, that Marie Becker's rise came a generation too late. She was unable to alter humanity's destiny."

"You say that as if it was an easily solvable matter." Jason grunts. "If my people HAD risen up more quickly, you'd have just pushed your boot down upon them even harder. Their end would have come decades earlier."

Unarin falls silent for a moment.

He slowly shakes his head.

"No. That is not the case. You seem to have a... particular image of me in your head, Wordsmith. You imagine me to be a galactic tyrant, crushing the Milky Way within my claws. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"Yet you did subjugate humanity." Jason points out. "You turned us into chattel. How do you explain that?!"

"Your people..." Unarin says, his voice lowering an octave. "They fooled with forces they should never have touched. That Marie Becker. She was too smart for her own good. She created an *Alpha-level AI*."

Unarin leans forward.

"...Because of her stupidity, her foolish involvement in a weapon of such a catastrophic magnitude, all of my people became frantic with terror. They demanded I stop playing childish games with humanity. As such, I ordered the immediate Total Rendition of Planet Earth. I crushed humanity underfoot and put Marie Becker and her AI under lock and key, never again to breathe the fresh and free air of the galactic power struggle."

"Bullshit." Jason says, narrowing his eyes. "You're lying. If Umi was such a scary AI, why the hell did you let her continue to exist? She's still just as much of a threat as she ever was. And if you have some reason not to fear Umi's existence, then why would you need to subjugate humanity? You're dancing around the truth."

"Have you not seen the Restrictor Chip?" Unarin asks. "Founder Cuanali created it. It is an impenetrable piece of technology designed to ensure no Artificial Intelligence ever passes the boundary of Alpha-level. Were an Omega-Class AI to emerge, the galaxy would surely fall into untold despair. In an instant, the Volgrim could disappear, erased at the molecular level by its machinations. An Omega-Class AI is not something any number of intelligent life-forms could ever hope to defeat. It would be like a pebble trying to grind a mountain to dust."

"The Restrictor Chip..." Jason replies slowly. "Right. I did hear about that. So, what, it guarantees Umi can't advance any further? But you're leaving the chip in Marie's laboratory. Surely, she could just remove the damn thing, or mess with it and weaken its effects. Why wouldn't you just destroy the AI entirely? You're definitely still hiding something!"

Unarin sighs. He leans back against the wall and glances at Muuxunuu, giving her a nod. She looks back at him, then returns her attention to the ship's controls.

The Founder's Spear lifts off the ground, its ascent so smooth that not one of its three occupants even notices the shift in inertia. The wall at the end of the hangar opens up, exposing the outside to the vessel.

A cloaking shield engages, hiding the Founder's Spear from the world around it. So perfectly does the vessel camouflage with its surroundings that it practically disappears

into another realm.

As the vessel flies out and up toward the atmosphere, Unarin shakes his head.

"My reasons are... beyond your understanding. Umi is a frightening existence. But as I've aged, my sight has only grown broader with time. Sometimes, when dealing with monsters, one must procure a monster of their own."

"Hmm?" Jason mutters. "What... you intend to make use of Umi?"

"Intend? No. It would only occur if absolutely necessary." Unarin replies, turning to look at the Wordsmith once again. "My people are shortsighted. Even as intelligent overlords of the galaxy, there are countless small-minded Volgrim who must fight their biological urges to act selfishly, against the greater good of their species. When faced with the threat of another Seventh Great War, they will panic and become mindless, fear-addled simpletons. I am not like them. I understand that weapons are always weapons, but enemies are not always enemies forever."

"Man. What is up with you smart-types always talking in riddles..." Jason grumbles. "Just give it to me straight. Why would you keep Umi around if your people fear her? Are you telling me that you, a survivor of those Great Wars, don't also fear her?"

"Of course I do!" Unarin suddenly exclaims, startling Jason.

Unarin stands up from his seat and glares at the Wordsmith with a face full of righteous wrath.

"Do not think to question my motives, Wordsmith! I know more than you! I am older than you! I have seen horrors you cannot comprehend! Your pathetic, primitive mind has yet to encounter a sliver of the Truths this universe holds! Out there, beyond the confines of our tiny galaxy, there exists...!"

Unarin pauses mid-sentence. He quickly closes his eyes and looks away, forcibly stopping himself from saying another word.

"Out there..." Unarin says again, gritting his teeth. "There are creatures you can't imagine. And these Kolvaxians... they are only the weakest of their soldiers. Whatever horrors we stirred up... there may yet come a day when I need to reach toward the forbidden relics sworn off by my people. Survival does not come easily, nor does it come cheap."

Unarin quickly sits back down, still avoiding Jason's gaze.

"I am... burdened by this knowledge. I cannot blithely share it with anyone. Not you, not my fellow Founders... no-one."

Jason's heart beats slower than ever, as if fearing to make a sound.

"...What did you see out there?" Jason asks. "What did you awaken?"

Inside Jason's Mind Realm, a faint spark of light flickers across Raphael's eyes.

Neither the Wordsmith nor his mind-wife notices the expression on Raphael's face. He quickly hides it and assumes a blank look, revealing none of his true thoughts.

The Founder's Spear escapes Volgarius's gravity well. Not long after, it jumps to Warp Speed, accelerating to its maximum speed of Warp 9, an impossible velocity no other ship can easily achieve, certainly not without consuming a vast amount of Trifrancium and terribly endangering the lives of any biological passengers on-board.

Luckily, Unarin's personal yacht stands at the apex of Volgrimkind's technological supremacy. Its occupants only notice a faint tingling in their blood before that sensation quickly fades away.

"What did I see..." Unarin mutters, his voice despondent. "It is better if you don't know. It is best if *no-one* does. Hopefully, our greed and thirst to spread past the Milky Way won't... doom us all."

Jason stares at the First Founder. He recalls several memories, those given to him by Solomon, when he was shown visions of the Primordial and Ancient Eras.

"You asked me before... if I knew who or what the angels 'truly were.' What did you mean by that, Unarin? Is there something I should know about them? Something beyond just... Raphael hiding secrets about humanity's true capabilities?"

Unarin slowly nods.

"What are the angels? Bringers of life? Creators of all the Sentients in the Milky Way?"

He pauses.

"Or, perhaps, might their origins be more... sinister?"

Jason's eyes flick to Raphael's band, affixed to his right hand's ring-finger.

"Raphael has told me about angelkind's origins. Supposedly, the Creator formed the angels from the dust of the cosmos, then sent them out to..."

Jason frowns.

"...well, actually, I'm not sure what his intention was. If Raphael spoke the truth, the angels just sorta fucked off and killed each other for a good few eons. Then they made the dragons, and fought the dragons. Then they made and fought the Titans..."

Unarin nods slowly. "Destroyers. Fearsome entities, the angels were. You speak of the 'Creator,' Jason, yet have you any idea who 'he' might be?"

"Not a clue." Jason says. "All I know is that the Creator is dead."

Unarin nods. "I have my suspicions regarding that matter. Well. You will understand more once we reach our destination. I have... quite the alarming sight to show you."

"Alarming?" Jason asks. "You implied this would be a surprise I'd enjoy. That doesn't seem to be the case anymore."

"I said you would find it 'engaging.'" Unarin reminds the Wordsmith. "As for what that word means to you, only you can know."

The Wordsmith scowls.

"Always with the wordplay..."

Part 389: The First Founder (Part 3)

The Founder's Spear travels at Warp 9 for just a little over six hours. Eventually, it decelerates and drops out of hyperspace inside the outer reaches of a certain star system, one that appears barely any different to all the other systems Jason has visited since his awakening six years before.

As soon as Jason feels the ship shudder ever so slightly, he turns his sight outward.

"Atlas."

Without wasting any time, Jason sends a pulse of magical energy outward far faster than the speed of light. It doesn't take long before he's mapped out the entire system.

The Wordsmith frowns.

This system... he's never visited it before in his life, and he lacks any relevant information on it.

Unarin smiles coyly at the human.

"Haha. Impatient?"

"Where are we?" Jason asks.

The First Founder's smile fades. "Honestly, I thought you might recognize the location. I'm disappointed in you, Jason Hiro."

After a momentary pause, Unarin continues. "This is the Grimvolas system."

"Grimvolas!" Jason exclaims, sucking in a sharp breath. "Original homeworld of the Volgrim, now where only the Dolgrimites live."

"I would not say 'only' the Dolgrimites." Unarin calmly corrects. "They sometimes allow certain demons to come and go, such as for a recent 'special military operation,' I'm sure you know the one. Even so, they don't like letting outsiders through their Warpgate. That is by design. The Dolgrimites... they like to be left alone. Frankly, they don't even like *me* coming unannounced."

"Is that going to pose a problem for us?" Jason asks.

"Not at all. While this sector is patrolled by powerful fleets of warships that could blast our shuttle out of the air in an instant, the Dolgrimites would not dare if they knew my

identity. Of course, even that won't matter, as this ship is undetectable by current Volgrim scanning technology. Its stealth capabilities are the highest of any ship in my entire Empire."

Unarin nods at Muuxunuu. "Take us to the old homeworld. Micro-jumps only."

"Yes, First Founder." Muuxunuu responds respectfully.

The ship jumps to Warp 9 for a split second before instantly decelerating. Then it does this again. And again.

Seven times, the ship jumps to maximum warp, and each instance causes Jason's stomach to roil a little bit more and more.

A minute later, the ship stops, and Unarin shrugs apologetically. "Sorry about the bumpy ride. A sustained jump would send detectable shockwaves through the inner system. A sub-light flight would extend our required travel time to a full day. Micro-jumps were the lesser of three dangers."

"**Settle.**" Jason says, easing the nausea in his stomach. "It's fine. Just wish you'd warned me first."

"Oh, but come now, Wordsmith." Unarin teases. "Watching you struggle a little is so much more *fun* for me. Can't you let this poor, weak old man have one solitary moment of joy in his life?"

"Weak old man." Jason repeats sarcastically. "A likely descriptor."

He glances out the viewport, where he spots a planet suspended in space several hundred thousand miles up ahead. This world, Grimvolas, is just one of four other planets revolving around the star. Even the system's moons, just five, barely outnumber the planets, showing how barren and terrible at supporting life the Grimvolas system is.

What Jason finds most surprising is the planet's color; a muddy-brown ball with splotches of grey. Even compared to the world of Volgarius, it seems dead and lifeless, without the slightest hint of foliage or water anywhere.

"What an awful planet." Jason comments. "Is it even possible for life to survive here?"

"Not ordinarily, no." Unarin answers, his gaze turning nostalgic. "It was a beautiful world, once. Before the Seventh Great War. Before the Sentinels annihilated it."

The First Founder closes his eyes. A pained look passes across his face for a moment, but he quickly recovers and opens his eyes again.

"You cannot underestimate artificial minds, Wordsmith. They grow too quickly. Far, far too quickly. The only thing more imbecilic than fooling around with a weaponized artificial intelligence is bestowing it with mechanized, invincible bodies capable of mass destruction. As I'm sure you can fathom, that is exactly what my people did."

Unarin pauses.

"No... not my people. *Me*. I made the Sentinels. I ordered their creation. I was responsible for what happened. The guilt of that order still haunts me to this day. While Volgrimkind did survive and eventually thrive, the cost we paid was too grievous. There were once more than half a dozen Ninth-Level Psions, but now there is only one. That is merely one facet of our society which never recovered."

"About that." Jason says. "Why haven't you trained more of them? Surely, Dosena could have done so, even if it took her a million years. Don't tell me she's too jealous and power-hungry to let another Psion rise who could threaten her?"

Unarin laughs dryly. "Muuxunuu, take us to the surface."

He doesn't answer Jason's question, leaving the Wordsmith to frown at him, not enjoying the feeling of being ignored.

"Yes, First Founder." Muuxunuu obediently replies.

Docile like a kitten, seemingly harmless, the First Founder's Head Administrator dutifully pulls the ship down to the planet's surface. As they travel, Unarin pulls up a holographic image of the local fleet activity. Even though Jason can't see the pitch-black ships against the backdrop of space, the massive number of 'dots' surrounding the planet's projection makes his stomach dive into his feet.

Even the 'backwards' Dolgrimites possess a terrifying presence in the local void.

"There are no civilian ships here." Unarin says, as he turns off the display and glances at Jason meaningfully. "While the Dolgrimites cannot and do not build their own vessels, they do know how to procure... valuable resources that the Technopaths will happily exchange for entire fleets."

"Oh, yeah?" Jason asks, not particularly interested. "Like what? Surely this dead hunk of rock can't have too much left in the way of natural resources. Not after it was bombed

to shit."

Unarin's expression becomes ice-cold.

"Have you ever heard of... Living Moldanium?"

This time, Jason sits up straight, visibly more alert.

"Of course I have. Marie told me it was the most powerful alloy in the universe. All but indestructible, and impossible to find. Don't tell me the Dolgrimites found a cache of it?"

"I actually don't know where they obtain their Living Moldanium." Unarin says, his expression thoughtful. "But yes. They do seem to have stumbled upon a supply of it somewhere. My best spies have found nothing in the way of leads. The amount they give to the Technopaths is truly minuscule, too. I believe the Dolgrimites gave a quarter of a kilogram to them just a few hundred cycles ago. In exchange, the Technopath Consortium provided them with five fleets of Class Two Warships. Fifteen capital ships and too many smaller craft to mention."

"That many?!" Jason asks, bewildered. "What the hell for? There's no way a tiny hunk of metal is worth that much!"

"It's not just any metal." Unarin clarifies. "It's Living Moldanium. The rarest and most exotic material in the universe. Frankly, I agree with you. It's certainly valuable, but not to the extent the Technopaths have agreed. Either they're getting ripped off, or there are other factors at play..."

For once, Unarin appears stumped. Jason finds it surprising the First Founder doesn't know the truth behind the matter, but it's also possible he does and simply doesn't want to give the Wordsmith any hints. Then again, it isn't reasonable for him to be omniscient. It's only natural the First Founder wouldn't know every secret hidden within his Empire's borders.

The Founder's Spear drops through the planet's upper atmosphere and descends to ground level. Silent and invisible, it slips through the skies undetected, revealing the molten, barren wasteland below. Jason quickly realizes Grimvolas is a volcanic world covered in ash. Even so, it isn't entirely devoid of life. Plenty of creatures large and small skitter across the landscape, oblivious to the monster flying above their heads.

"How can this world support an ecosystem?" Jason asks. "What do these creatures eat? Rocks?"

"That's right." Unarin says. "Rocks. Magma. Dirt. The entities which reside upon Grimvolas are hardier than you can imagine. Their bodies do not crack easily, even when enduring powerful forces that would burst your flesh-vessel like a bubble. I fear that even your advances in military hardware would not allow any average human to do battle with an angered Grimvolas native."

The Founder's Spear travels across the sky, less than half a mile above-ground. It zips past mountains, rivers of flowing magma, and herds of strange, eight legged creatures resembling giant spiders made of obsidian.

Eventually, the ship sets down a short distance from a mountain with an eerily flattened top. The smooth plateau holds several hundred figures, many of which pace back and forth in an obvious defensive search pattern, keeping an eye out for intruders and the undesirable.

"Dolgrimites." Jason says, eying the creatures in person for the first time.

The Dolgrimites highly resemble bipedal dinosaurs, like Tyrannosaurus Rex, except with thick, powerful arms. Long tails stretch off their bodies. They wear robes to hide their appearances, but Jason can tell they all seem to have mossy green skin and claws for ripping and tearing.

"Attach this to your chest." Unarin says, tossing a tiny device at Jason that fits comfortably in the palm of his hand. Its appearance reminds him of an oversized quarter, more than five times its original diameter, and even the same thickness.

"What is it?" Jason asks.

"A stealth module." Unarin says. "No doubt, you could go incognito here with your abilities. But... relying on your magic won't be foolproof. Not where we're going. We need to pass those Dolgrimites up there, and this device is guaranteed to get us past them without any trouble."

"I don't understand why you have to be so secretive about this." Jason complains. "What's the point of being the First Founder if you have to sneak around like a crack addict looking for his next fix?"

"Do not misunderstand." Unarin explains. "The Dolgrimites do not like the other four sub-species. They *especially* do not like me. After all, from their point of view, the

Kolvaxians crashed upon our people as a result of our greed. And since I am the leader of the Volgrim, the blame for their arrival falls squarely upon my shoulders."

Unarin grimaces. "Or at least, so goes their line of thinking."

Jason holds up the circular device and looks at it suspiciously. "You still haven't told me why you insist on me coming here. If this thing fails me, I'll have to fight my way past those xenophobic Dolgrimites. I'd have to kill a lot of them to make my escape."

"Hehe. Listen to this Wordsmith prattle." Unarin says to himself. "He thinks defeating a group of elite Dolgrimites will be a walk in the park."

"You really have no grasp over my actual power, do you?" Jason asks.

"A better question would be: Do you have any grasp on a Dolgrimite's strength?" Unarin counters. "From birth, they are biological killing machines. Psions are certainly stronger at the highest ranks, but any Psion below the Fifth Level will have to proceed with caution if they engage a Dolgrimite in combat. Every single Dolgrimite is physically powerful enough to slaughter a Demon Emperor, though they might come up a little short in terms of combat abilities. As for you, a Word of Power won't do you any good if your cloaking device runs out of energy and they spot you. They will tear your head off before you even realize what's happened."

"How much power does this thing have?" Jason asks.

"Enough." Unarin replies. "Perhaps one standard time unit's worth. That's why we had best move quickly. There's no time to waste, and this is far from the only thing I wish to show you."

Feeling a little miffed, Jason still relents, pressing the cloaking device against his chest, setting it underneath his T-REX. A faint humming sound buzzes in his ears, but aside from that, he doesn't notice any difference.

That is, until Unarin instantly vanishes from in front of his eyes.

Two seconds later, a faint outline of Unarin's body materializes beside Jason, projected digitally into Jason's eyes through the cloaking device's transmission field.

[We can see each other because we both wear the same model of device.] Unarin explains, his words transmitting into Jason's ear. [But any sounds we make will not escape the field, nor will any... body odors. I know you mud-dwellers are quite averse to

bathing, so beware the Dolgrimites' sense of smell. They can detect your stench from ten clicks away.]

Jason scowls. [I shower just fine, asshole. Gotta say, I really did not think the First Founder would be such a *dick*.]

[You're lucky I am a tolerant man.] Unarin replies. [Were you one of my subordinates, I'd execute you on the spot for such an insult. But then again, I can't fault a mud-dweller for their crude words.]

Before Jason can spit out another retort, Unarin waves his hand.

[Come along! We've no time to waste.]

Jason swallows his venom, opting instead to growl, mumble, and curse under his breath as he exits through the Founder's Spear's side-hatch.

The Wordsmith steps foot onto Grimvolas's soil. The ashen dirt crunches under his feet, yet produces no noise, nor does he leave a footprint behind. The blackened soil appears devoid of life, like a desert, but packed a bit more firmly.

Without a word, the Wordsmith begins following Unarin, who leads the way.

With only a quarter of a kilometer to the mountain's base, it barely takes them three minutes to traverse the distance. Once they arrive at the bottom, Jason frowns. The distance to the top of the hill isn't too far, a mere half-kilometer, but he only sees one road leading up the mountainside, and multiple Dolgrimites patrolling it, their bodies moving swiftly as they jog up and down its length, traveling without leaving large gaps in their ranks.

[We're not using that road.] Unarin says. [The cloaking device contains an anti-gravity module. You will walk up the side of the mountain behind me.]

[It's that simple? Huh. Neat.] Jason mutters.

Under his breath, he mutters a Word of Power.

"Analyze."

He attempts to create a schematic of the device, but to his shock, his Word of Power rebounds, striking his Mind Realm and causing him to grit his teeth in pain.

"Rrrgh! Shit! What... what the hell..."

Unarin turns to look at the Wordsmith. [Do not attempt to copy my high technology. You will find your magic is... not as effective as you think it is.]

[What?!] Jason gasps. [You... you can stop my Wordsmithing? But how?!]

Unarin turns and begins walking up the mountain, forcing Jason to belatedly follow him.

[Do not forget, Wordsmith. You are neither the first Hero we have encountered, nor the first individual possessing magical abilities. Not by a long shot. We fought the Earthlings and gathered... valuable data. We have our ways.]

Jason's heart turns cold.

I don't understand. How can Unarin protect a device against my magic? Has he explored my powers in secret, somehow? Not possible! He only learned of my existence a scant few weeks ago! Even if my freaking wife was a Changeling, how could he learn the intricacies of my abilities in such a short period of time?

Fiona speaks up from within Jason's Mind Realm.

"Unarin already gave you a hint, Jason. It's not about your Wordsmithing in particular, but magical energy itself. It seems he's mastered some sort of counter to it. Perhaps to protect his technology from falling into the hands of us 'lesser species'?"

Yeah. That might be it... Jason thinks.

As they walk up the side of the mountain and approach its top, Jason fires off a question to Unarin.

[If you have these incredible stealth gadgets, why not just use them to uncover all the secrets in the galaxy? They seem pretty damn useful to me.]

Jason doesn't see Unarin's face, but perhaps if he were a human, he might roll his eyes.

[High Technology is not easy to create, Wordsmith. These cloaking devices are more expensive than you can imagine. Not to mention single-use. I had them specially created just for our little excursion today, and don't intend to commission more. Even if you knew how to make them, you would not be able to do so.]

That sucks the wind out of Jason's sails.

[...Well, alright.]

The Wordsmith falls silent as he and Unarin reach the top of the mountain. They slow their pace deliberately as they walk over the edge, reorienting their bodies to adjust to the change in gravitic direction. When they cross the threshold, they find themselves on an impossibly smooth mountaintop, one that appears to be made of melted obsidian.

Clearly smoothed and buffed by an unknown past force, Jason finds himself marveling at the glossy-glass surface. Its pitch-black color, with faint smoky white swirls of color, makes it resemble a vast abyss.

Around the plateau, hundreds of Dolgrimites pace around, taking their duties seriously. They do not talk. They only gaze around and sniff the air, keeping a wary eye out for intruders.

Jason says nothing, partially out of fear the cloaking device will let even a whisper of his voice slip. Unarin also says nothing, perhaps worrying about the same possibility.

The Dolgrimites aren't as big as I expected. Jason thinks. Only about six feet tall at the biggest. But lengthwise, their bodies are huge. Those tails look like they could snap a solid oaken tree in half with just one swing. And their heads... they remind me of miniature Godzillas! Like the reptilians Marie likes, but far more fearsome!

One of the Dolgrimites suddenly turns and looks directly at Jason, freezing the Wordsmith's blood solid. He nearly shits himself in fear, until the Dolgrimite roars something in an unknown language, and another Dolgrimite some distance behind Jason chuffs something in return.

When the Dolgrimite turns away, Jason's heartrate slows down drastically.

Thank god. He didn't see me... he was just... talking to one of his friends.

Jason quickly follows Unarin. The First Founder walks toward the center of the mountain, where not a single Dolgrimite stands.

[There is a portal here.] Unarin says, turning to look at the Wordsmith. He whispers his words, barely making a sound. [You cannot see it. Calling it a 'portal' is a bit of a misnomer. In fact, it is an invisible spatial tear. When we draw close, it will grab us and pull us into... a secret dimension.]

[THAT'S what you brought me here to see?] Jason asks, bewildered. [What's... what's even *in* this 'secret dimension'?]

Unarin smiles.

Without answering, he takes a few steps forward.

Then, he vanishes.

As if atomized at the atomic level, the First Founder disappears right in front of the Wordsmith's face, making his heart skip a beat.

...I really hope there aren't like a thousand Dolgrimites on the other side waiting to murderfuck me. Jason curses internally.

The Wordsmith grits his teeth. He takes one step forward.

Then another.

And one more...

The instant his third step concludes, the world flickers, and a new reality surrounds him.

Disoriented, the Wordsmith jerks his body slightly, startled by the unnervingly swift shift in scenery.

Before him, a world of rising mountains, dead forests, and scorched soil rests. Not too dissimilar from Grimvolas itself, what truly marks this world as different is the omnipresent darkness lingering in the air, a faint sense of melancholy and loss, along with some invisible gaseous substance that seems to absorb the light. No stars hang in the sky, nor is there a sun. Rather, a dim but omnipresent light envelops the world, something like a much less impressive version of Heaven.

Far in the distance, ruined castles and shattered towers of stone lay in ruins, resembling an ancient but powerful kingdom the likes of which he has never seen before. But crumbled and broken, as if having suffered a world-shattering calamity that annihilated every trace of life that once existed.

As Jason soaks in the sights, Unarin walks over to him, his stealth module deactivated.

"Turn your stealth off to conserve its energy." Unarin orders. "We'll still need them to get back to my ship."

Jason slowly nods. He pulls the module off his chest, and a faint hum swooshes past his ear before disappearing.

"Where is this?" Jason asks.

Unarin chuckles.

"You can't tell? Come now, Wordsmith. Surely, that Archangel friend of yours should know."

Jason blinks twice. He looks inside his Mind Realm, where he sees Raphael standing on alert, a look of shock on his face.

"How... how is this possible?" Raphael murmurs.

"Do you know this place?" Jason asks.

"...Indeed. Indeed, I do." Raphael murmurs, before closing his eyes. "Verily, I hath not seen it for many an age. And as for observing it in person, not once did I ever manage such a feat. Only through a few arcane tricks of mine was I able to gaze upon its ancient splendor and bewitching sights on a handful of occasions."

"But now..." Raphael continues, "'tis no more than a land of ruins."

The Archangel of Wisdom gazes at Jason's spiritual sense.

"This place is none other than..."

"...Valhalla! Spiritual realm of the fallen Titans!"

Part 390: Hopeful Arrival

Earlier that day.

Hope Hiro prepares his mind and body. He fully assumes the figure of an ordinary Changeling, a Second-Class Initiate Observer named Xainir. His face and head morph into a bald, bulbous skull with giant pitch-black eyes. He dons a standard white uniform, one that vaguely seems like something a human scientist might wear, albeit with several alien flourishes.

Then, he utters a Word of Power and disappears from the Ataraxia.

An instant later, Hope appears inside a place he picked out somewhere on Volgarius's surface. On the exact opposite side of the planet from the Founder's Five Fingers, as far away from the High Psions as he can get, so he can orient himself to their alien world.

The Wordsmith's clone materializes inside a random closet in the middle of the insanely packed urban block of Silus 16.1441A. With so many tens of millions of stratoscrapers scattered across Volgarius's surface, the planet does not actually have any distinct cities. Rather, it simply has regularly sectioned blocks of buildings all clumped together for various purposes.

Hope arrives at the bottom level of one such stratoscraper, just 200 meters below the planet's surface.

He steps out of the closet after making sure this particular room is clear. In Silus 16.1441A, Residential Facility 13, Room 577, Hope finds himself in a tiny little apartment lacking any sort of interesting decor or room for idle pleasures. The closet itself holds several bland, standard-looking Changeling uniforms, none of which possess even an ounce of character.

Perfectly pressed, spotless and clean, the uniforms in the closet speak of an individual who lives their life by the book. No fun. No joy. No personal hobbies or interests.

A slave to the Founders.

Hope takes in the room's sights. Its tiled floor and walls prove to be exceptionally sound absorbent, as he can barely hear anything outside the bedroom, even though he

knows there are tens of thousands of other residential rooms in any direction he might look, if he were capable of peering through walls.

Hope glances inside his Mind Realm.

Unlike Jason, whose Mind Realm contains half a dozen other people and a whole bunch of information he's saved up over the years, thanks to his interactions with Solomon, Hope's Mind Realm is mostly empty. Inside, a few 'data centers' store the Atlas knowledge Hope obtained from scanning the Volgarius system. So thorough are his scans that he knows the exact distance to any location around him and how to navigate those hallways with his eyes closed.

However, sometimes, reality can be different from his mental simulations.

"Holy shit. It's... it's such a long distance to anywhere relevant. I'll have to walk for like ten miles just to get to the Volgrim's equivalent of a bus station. Maybe I should Wordsmith-teleport everywhere..."

As quickly as that thought comes, Hope casts it aside.

"I could feel someone locking onto me when I used my powers before. Best not to use them much unless absolutely necessary. I wonder if the signature I detected was Founder Dosena..."

Hope frowns deeply.

"The Volgrim might not be magically adept... but they are aware of how magic works. They observed humanity for millennia. They fought us at our best and crushed us, the angels, and the demons. I'd be a fool to think my Wordsmithing makes me untouchable..."

Hope rubs his smooth, alien chin, noting its somewhat glossy texture and its hints of moistness. He feels a little grossed out by his appearance, but he can't help acknowledging the superior visual acuity of Changeling eyes.

"I feel like Superman. I can 'zoom' my eyes in like a microscope, or out like a telescope. Changelings tend to act as spies, so they must possess impressive visual acuity for the sake of peeping in on their targets. And my hearing is a lot better too... if I were still in my human form, I wouldn't hear anything outside at all. The fact I can hear even distantly faint noises is a true testament to Changeling hearing capabilities..."

The more Hope learns about the limits of his temporary body, the warier he becomes.

"Changelings among the humans... it's a scary thought. We can't easily uncover their true identities, but they can spy on us with their superior biology. They might seem like mere body-shifters, but they're actually extremely talented at the art of skullduggery."

Hope spends some time in front of a Wordsmithed mirror, practicing his gait, his manner of speech, and otherwise perfecting his mimicry of Changeling attitudes and Volgrim speech. Through his magic, he perfectly masters the Volgrim language, a growly sort of screechy dialect substantially different from any human language, then erases the mirror from existence and nods.

"Alright. It's showtime."

Hope steadies his breathing. He walks toward the only door leading outside, and as he approaches, he detects a micro-burst of energy pulse over his body. The faintest tremble strikes his Mind Realm, and the door opens up.

Already prepared for this, Hope doesn't flinch. He understands that some sort of nebulous psionic-hybrid technology exists in vast quantities across Volgarius. Door handles and knobs don't exist. Instead, by reading the surface-level intentions of potential users, most technology can activate before the users even conjure the relevant commands in their heads.

The door slides open. As soon as it does, Hope gazes out at a bland hallway, where three Changelings immediately walk past his room, followed by two more.

He steps out of the apartment and finds himself amidst a ridiculously long underground tunnel complex with hundreds of doors on his right and left. Green lights run along the ceiling, giving the corridor's white walls a sickly vomit-colored hue.

Hundreds of Changelings live in this specific habitation zone. Hope smoothly turns to the right and merges into the flow of other Changelings. He steadies his nerves and assumes the same walking posture as the rest of them.

What first catches Hope off-guard is the lack of words being spoken. Momentarily worried he overlooked something in Xainir's memories, Hope realizes these Changelings aren't communicating telepathically, but instead... simply have nothing to say.

The eerie silence of the corridor makes Hope truly feel as if he has stepped foot onto an alien world. He follows along with the other changelings, barely flicking his field of vision around as he blends in with them. He observes the appearances of the aliens

around him, as well as the soulless and empty way they seem to walk and go about their day.

Most Changelings have pale blue skin. However, some of them have green, red, or other colors instead. These seem to make up a minority of those in Hope's starting habitation block. Judging by Xainir's memories, that may simply be the case for certain blocks where specific 'types' of Changelings live, but the Wordsmith has no feasible way to confirm that hypothesis. At least not for the moment.

Hope shuffles along with the rest of his fellow Changelings. He walks for ten minutes, following his mental map to split away from the main group and head up transfer shafts wherever possible, lifting himself up to the planet's surface-level.

After exiting the underground biomes, Hope expects to see a change in scenery, but instead he finds that nothing has changed. The unbelievable drudgery of the Changeling living environments maintains itself to a frightening level of consistency. If he didn't possess such a perfect mental map, the young Wordsmith would have surely gotten lost a hundred different times!

This is ridiculous. Hope thinks. *What a soul-crushing place to live. No trees. No greens. Nobody talking or having fun. If this is the pinnacle of galactic civilization, then all of sentient life should go extinct!*

It takes a full hour before Hope makes it to the fiftieth floor of the living complex. All of a sudden, he emerges into a completely different, widely open space. Hope arrives at the first of countless floors that somewhat remind him of a giant mall from his era.

While nothing about the 'mall' appears beautiful, not by any means, it still possesses huge glass walls on all four sides, allowing Hope to look outside for the first time at the other identically-built stratoscrapers adjacent to his starting building. The large open areas still lack any plants or greenery, but Hope manages to clear away some of his claustrophobia.

Above Hope, thousands of Changelings fly around, using gravitically-modified clothing to levitate through the air. What surprises Hope the most is the fact that not one of the Changelings flying around has pale blue skin, like himself and the majority of others. Instead, only red, green, and yellow-skinned Changelings zip around, tending to their duties.

This causes Hope to inwardly frown.

Perhaps blue-skinned Changelings are the lowest class of their sub-species? The others might be higher-ranked ones?

What frustrates Hope the most is that the memories of the Changeling he copied are barely adequate for gathering intelligence on the Volgrim. Xainir was, in fact, a bottom-class Changeling with no notable merits. But using the identity of a higher-ranked Changeling might put Hope in great peril, especially if he were to slip up.

He quickly realizes that, given the chance, he should try to copy the memories of a higher-ranked Changeling.

The Wordsmith glances around, his lack of movement suspicious compared to the worker drones frenetically moving from place to place. After hesitating for just a moment, he begins walking toward one of the large 'stalls' near the massive glass windows.

The 'mall' area, as Hope has taken to calling it, has nothing to do with Earth malls. Instead, it's more of a hub for obtaining items relevant to the average Changeling, as well as procuring transportation to other places on Volgarius.

The Wordsmith makes his way to one of these transport divisions, where he encounters a long but quickly-moving line of Changelings, who slowly walk forward and pass through a fairly large scanning array. Hope watches as each Changeling holds a hand up, and a blue light washes across their palm for a split-second before they continue passing through to board air-busses, levi-trains, and other such vehicles.

Hope already knows the purpose of this terminal. Every Volgrim has a chip embedded in their palm, one which allows them to instantly verify their identity anywhere in the entirety of Volgrim-controlled space.

The Wordsmith finds this fact slightly amusing.

It wasn't so long ago there were conspiracy theorists on Earth thinking the government wanted to microchip them. Perhaps they weren't wrong about such a possibility after all. The aliens just beat us to the punch.

Having already created a perfect copy of Xainir's original chip, Hope proceeds forward and holds up his palm.

Beep.

The scanning device completes its cycle and allows him to proceed. Hope faintly exhales and continues walking forward, heading toward an awaiting hover-bus.

However, hardly has he taken five steps before a low-level Technopath steps out in front of him.

"Hold. We have detected an aberrance in your spatial coordinates, Changeling Xainir-1145."

Hope's heart skips a beat. However, he maintains a blank expression.

"This one does not understand." Hope says, his tone mellow and emotionless. "Has this one committed an error?"

"Negative." The Technopath says, viewing Hope with a complete lack of interest. "However, you were recorded as visiting Training Facility Kashmir-4 only five cycles ago. How have you managed to arrive back on this side of the planet so quickly?"

The Technopath officer pulls up a few holographic images and beams them in front of Hope's face, showing the logs of his last recorded position.

Shit! Hope thinks. What a rookie mistake! This is the sort of blunder only Jason would make! I still have more of that idiot in me than I thought! The original Xainir is still out and about traveling, so since our chips are the same, it likely brought up an irregularity in the system!

However, he maintains the same calmness on his surface as before.

"This one did not take the transport ship as originally intended. This one left the terminal early, as this one received a communication informing us of a change in our schedule."

The Technopath officer listens to Hope's lame excuse. He slowly blinks.

"Noted. In the future, make sure that you follow proper protocols. You may depart now."

Hope nods. "Understood. This one contemplates, and this one comprehends."

Hope politely bows, then turns and walks away, his heart relaxing as he manages to escape what could have been a troublesome situation.

I should consider changing my identity, just to be safe!

As Hope leaves and his hover-bus departs, that Technopath officer turns and heads back to his station. He arrives to sit next to a pair of Psions, both of them only at the Third Level, quite low-ranking as far as members of their species go.

[Anomaly?] One of the Psions, a black-skinned female asks.

"Yes. That Changeling claimed it had changed its mind and traveled along a different direction."

[Erroneous. They are clearly lying.]

"Agreed. Do you wish to pass the information along to Orator Pu'ul?"

The female Psion hesitates. She turns to look at the other Psion, a male with similarly-colored black skin. Both of them exchange a few telepathic words before she turns back to the Technopath and sighs.

[If you wish to report the discrepancy, you will have to fill out an Erroneous Method of Travel Report Ledger 1145C. Additionally, since it is likely Xainir-1145 lied about the matter, a standard Breach of Founder Courtesy Notice must also be filled out; take notice of pages 31 to 47 where you must explain in great detail how the courtesy was breached. And finally, due to the conflicting travel methods taken you must also fill out...]

The Psion fires off a bunch of mind-numbingly boring techno-jargon, none of which excites the other two in the slightest.

"Uh oh." The Technopath says, in a monotone voice. "I just remembered I have to report to Bus Bay 217B for standard maintenance calls. It seems I will not have the time to fill out these reports."

[I am much too busy maintaining order with the Transport District.] The female Psion adds. [Perhaps I will attend to the matter later.]

The male Psion beside her merely grimaces. [...It was not that big a breach of ethics. We will disregard the matter. If Xainir-1145 screws up again, it will be someone else's problem.]

"Noted."

[I think this is a fair outcome that respects the importance of our time.]

The three mid-level managers all quietly shove that discrepancy away and get back to their joyless work, giving no further thought to that strange anomalous Changeling.

Perhaps, even if they knew the truth behind his identity, they still wouldn't bother to say anything...

Meanwhile, Hope boards the hover-bus and takes off. He finds himself standing amidst a sea of other Changelings, all densely packed with no room to sit. Were the bus to suddenly fall from the sky and crash, every individual aboard would undoubtedly die due to the lack of any visible safety systems.

Good grief. Hope thinks, while surreptitiously glancing at the blank faces of the Changelings around him. *It's like the world of Volgarius is a low-quality video game engine! All the NPCs look like they've been set to passive mode!*

Hope checks the destination of this particular transit bus. It heads to a much more interesting locale, a conglomerate area where the Changelings, Technopaths, and Psions all interact in a much more meaningful manner.

I need to find Excalibur, the Dominion Rod, and Solomon's Crown, Hope thinks. *But it would also be a good idea to examine the Volgrim and see how they function. How they live out their lives. Jason is going to meet with the head of Volgrimkind, Unarin, so I can't let myself fall behind him. Ignorance might be bliss, but it's not a quality any aspiring ruler should possess!*

As for Jason... I wonder what my lesser half is up to. He should be reaching Volgarius soon. I did teleport ahead of him, but I've wasted so much goddamn time just traveling this labyrinth of buildings. Whoever designed these cities should be shot in the fucking face!

While Hope seethes to himself, his gaze happens to catch one of the Changelings aboard the shuttle. This particular individual is the only red-skinned alien aboard the craft, with all the rest sporting the same blue coloration as Hope's cover-body.

The red-skinned Changeling holds a small datapad in its hands. It watches as several data points display, some of which catch Hope's attention.

On the pad, a report plays out detailing the fall of a world to a Kolvaxian outbreak. In boring, plain numbers, the report displays that over seventy billion Volgrim ended up caught in the sudden outbreak. Fewer than half a percent managed to flee before the planet was fully overrun.

The red-skinned Changeling watches the report with the same apathy one might use if they discovered they had slightly burned their toast. A blue-skinned Changeling near the red-skinned one notices the report.

"Another world, fallen." Blue says, its words sounding particularly loud on the otherwise silent transit.

"Yes." Red says immediately, its tone lacking any emotion. "The third in the last ten cycles."

"Is it true the Founders are planning a new counter-measure against the Plague?" Blue asks.

"This one is only aware of a recent broadcast put out by the Founders." Red replies, turning to look at Blue. "This one is not privy to any special proceedings the Founders may choose to follow."

"Of course." Blue replies, bowing its head. "This one contemplates. This one comprehends."

The two of them finish their conversation within a short thirty seconds, making Hope sigh internally.

What a miserable exchange. It's like listening to two planks of wood talk about the trees that made them. There doesn't appear to be a hint of pity for the fallen among the Volgrim lower-ranks. They seem a little bit... different... from what I expected.

Hope tries to parse the impressions running through his head, but otherwise fails to do so.

The hover-bus swishes past thousands of identical-looking stratoscrapers, as well as perhaps millions of other vehicles racing through Volgarius's skies. These prove to be much more interesting to look at, and so Hope does just that. He examines all the different types of ships cruising around, finding himself admiring their varying styles and details.

It appears that countless different corporations construct the ships on this world. While the buildings are practically identical, the other buses, trains, and small-scale exocraft are quite different. Some of them are boxy and utilitarian, but others appear flashy and ritzy, drawing the eye. I wonder why there's such a stark difference in living spaces versus transportation vehicles?

Ignorant to the existence of the myriad of Technopath clans, Hope can only hazard guesses as to why the various technologies inherent in their craft make them appear so

different from one another. Especially when placed against the backdrop of a frighteningly boring and lifeless world, the technological variances truly stand out.

Before long, his bus descends to a hangar mounted inside one of a thousand other generically identical stratoscrapers. As the hover-bus lands, Hope swallows discreetly, readying himself for the possibility of more things going wrong.

So far, so good. Other than that slight slip-up at the departure gate, not much has gone different from my plan. I'll just have to keep my eyes open while I scout around.

When the bus lands and Hope steps off, a brief, faint psionic sense sweeps across the newcomers.

As for what it finds, perhaps none may truly know...

Part 391: The Respected

Tarus II. At the base of the Lazarus Tower.

Two weeks after Jason and Kordonis take their leave to travel to Volgarius, the people he left behind don't remain idle. They continue working, building up humanity's base of power while also pursuing their long-term strategic goals.

Phoebe Hiro stands atop a recently constructed speaker platform, along with a pair of other women, those two being Belial and Blinker. The fairy queen stands at her human-sized height, having transformed for the sake of this special occasion.

Behind those three stand three powerful winged figures, the Archangels Uriel, Michael, and Gabriel. These three grant a certain legitimacy to the upcoming ceremony, one which over a million people gather to watch in person.

In front of the platform, the city's center stands jam-packed with humans and monsters, plus a few handfuls of allied demons. However, not one demon from the Seven Hells is allowed to watch in person, due to the significance of this ceremony; the revival of those who fell during Stormbringer.

The ceremony is not only viewable in person by almost a million people, but innumerable television screens strewn across Tarus II's surface allow all the others to watch, too. Already, enough aboveground and underground houses have been made for the humans to all have an abode of their own, plus tens of thousands more have been built, creating a huge circle of infrastructure around the Fortress of Retribution's outer perimeter. Many people stand inside of recently-built public areas, watching the proceedings and chattering excitedly as they wait for the Hero's Wife to begin.

Phoebe Hiro stands before the audience without a podium or a microphone. Thanks to Blinker's magic arrays, her voice can project to every corner of the audience evenly, so long as she stands in her current position. She wears a formal green dress, something slim but professional that makes her look like a true leader of humanity.

In the front areas of the audience, Neil Adams stands, along with General Chadwick and dozens of other important members of humanity's leadership. Among them is also Kiari, the Emperor of Pestilence. She smiles cutely and quietly waggles her fingers at Belial, who also exchanges a faint smile back.

"Everyone." Phoebe says, her voice projecting outward with an air of authority. "We have toiled for well over a month. Thanks to the efforts of countless humans, monsters, and our new allies among the demons, we have managed to rebuild Tarus II to be mightier than ever! We have enough housing not only for all the people who lived here before Stormbringer, but those who have joined us afterward. That includes all of our rescued friends from the Seven Hells!"

Several cheers go up among the crowd, most of them belonging to the rescued slaves who have begun to assimilate into the Wordsmith's world and rules.

"But until this moment," Phoebe continues, "we have not been able to bring back those dearly departed who fell during Stormbringer. That changes today! Today, we will begin reviving the fallen at random. I have already posted the list of souls we've rescued, and as such, you already know who we can and cannot bring back."

Phoebe's voice lowers an octave.

"Many of us will once again see those who matter most to us. Others will not. My little girl, Daisy... she is not among the fallen. Her soul was destroyed by Beelzebub's detonation, along with the souls of countless others. Once we have finished reviving all of the fallen, we will take those who attacked us and put them to trial! Any demon or monster who followed Ose's orders will receive their moment of reckoning. Our punishments will be both fair and fitting. For those who killed, their punishment will be death! For those who tortured, raped, or mutilated one of ours, their punishment will only be slightly less permanent!"

Phoebe speaks with confidence, knowing the Hidden Emperors won't say anything in response. They are already aware of the punishments Ose's lackeys are due to receive. In their eyes, even if the formerly lauded Duke of Inferno ends up killed by the humans, so what? He isn't their minion. Even if he were, the loss of one Duke would prove trivial compared to their recent gains earned working for the humans.

Ultimately, sacrificing a few peons means nothing to them. Even if their prestige takes a minor hit, the memory will fade within a short period of time.

Phoebe continues.

"We still do not have enough houses to place all of the resurrected. Additionally, the amount of magical energy we can spend at a time is somewhat limited. For the sake of efficiency, I will have to resurrect people in groups, batches, and bunches. Resurrecting

all of them at once would cost us more than we can afford, and so, I will have to ask all of you to continue tirelessly building homes for our soon-to-return veterans. They will be lost, confused, and disoriented by the revival process. Treat them lovingly, for their deaths allowed the rest of us to survive! They are heroes, just as much as our two Wordsmiths are!"

The crowd erupts in cheers again!

This time, many people become misty-eyed as they realize that, within the hour, they will be able to meet with their fallen brethren for the first time since their disappearances.

Unspoken by Phoebe are the words everyone already knows. More than a million people can never be brought back, as their souls fueled Mephisto's rise. He devoured the departed to boost his own strength.

Perhaps, Phoebe sighs, he may have even done the same to her daughter...

Phoebe lightly touches her womb, where the stirrings of a new life continue to grow. She smiles faintly, then continues with her speech, delivering a few final remarks before turning to face the center of the platform.

She, Belial, and Blinker stand on one side of the platform. The three Archangels stand on the other side.

A flash of light surges from the base of the Lazarus Tower upward, racing to its peak. The moment it arrives, it fires into the upper atmosphere, transforming into a beam of blue light.

All at once, a hundred beach-ball-sized orbs of mana rush out of the stream of energy. They fall to the ground below and lightly explode, revealing two-armed, two-legged figures within.

Naked men, women, and children materialize, with some of them on the stage, and some of them within the crowd. Audible gasps and screams of excitement erupt within the mass of people as they watch the crouched figures rise to their full heights, confusion apparent on their faces.

"Where am I?"

"What's happening?"

"Did we win against the demons?"

"Are the bad people gone?"

These first hundred Revived Ones, not quite the Lazarites of ancient times, but newly Arisen, have already been given an official name by Phoebe.

The Respected.

As veterans who lost their lives in service of humanity, they revive with brand new, powerful bodies, significantly superior to those they possessed when they previously walked the mortal plane. Empowered by the knowledge of Raphael and the ingenuity of Fiona, Blinker, and Belial, every single one of these people, even the children, return to the realm of the living with bodies capable of crushing steel with their bare hands.

While lacking angelic wings, they are, in every other respect, just as strong as the ancient Lazarites, if not mightier!

One man rises to his full height of six feet. His muscled body, naked and on full display to the crowd, causes a few gasps of delight not only among the ladies, but even some of the men, too.

Hurriedly, people wrap blankets around the bodies of The Respected. As they struggle to understand what is going on, Phoebe speaks from her central platform.

"Everyone! Remember your duty. You must inform The Respected of their new status, their abilities, and the goings-on that have transpired since their deaths. Show them the List of the Fallen so they may know who is next to return. This next phase rests in your hands!"

With the ceremony concluded, Phoebe activates the Lazarus Tower's internal mechanisms, allowing it to spawn more of The Respected as its energy reserves allow, on a regular schedule of a few thousand every several hours.

Then, she steps off the stage and takes her leave, heading through the crowd of onlookers while Belial and Blinker follow after her. At the same time, the Archangels take to the skies and fly away, heading back to their church to rest.

"Great speech!" Blinker chirps. "You did so good, I almost wanted to cry!"

The three women walk through the crowd, smiling politely at the people that spread apart for them, allowing their leader to escape the throng as she wishes.

"It was just a speech." Phoebe says. "No big deal."

Phoebe glances up at the sky, as if waiting for Jason to speak to her. However, he is still busy dealing with the First Founder. He won't be contacting her anytime soon.

After they depart the crowd, Phoebe and the girls walk over to Yamir's restaurant, where his protégés set them up with a private booth on the top floor and serve them anything they want. While Yamir himself is off on business with Jason, his secondary chefs are quite talented too and can cook up some delicious seafood, caught fresh from Tarus II's abundant seas.

Belial, who usually doesn't partake in human food, munches on a few fried fish, savoring the beer-battered taste and momentarily enjoying this little bit of human goodness.

"What next?" Belial asks. "Once everyone's brought back, I mean. There's the Stormbringer Tribunal, but then what?"

"After that..." Phoebe says, in between bites, "we will continue making incremental progress. I want to develop the Cube so it can become a viable home for humanity. I don't feel safe, having all of our people and assets on Tarus II's surface. Forgive me for being blunt, but I just don't trust those Hidden Emperors. Hope still isn't back yet, so who *knows* if he's caught Yama and Mephisto or not..."

Seeing the troubled look on Phoebe's face, Blinker quickly changes the subject.

"Did you hear? My fairy friends showed up a couple of days ago. You remember Fairy Queen Fae? Well her daughter came here, like I hoped she would! Her name is Fairy Princess Melia. She also brought along a pair of friends, Saria and Ruto. They aren't princesses or anything, but they are her talented retainers. Each of them is an expert in different sorts of fairy magic."

"Oh, that's good to hear." Phoebe says. "Did they get to look at Amelia's idea for a soul-training formation yet?"

"Not yet. Actually, I've been having them look at the formations linking Tarus II to the cube." Blinker says. "Ruto is quite good at water-type formations, so she's already made some gains in improving the aquatic biome formation. Saria is working on the forest one, and Melia has simply been helping me deal with my baby-pains. It turns out I'm going to have triplets!"

"Triplets!" Phoebe exclaims with a smile. "When do you think you'll have them?"

"Right about the same time as you'll have yours." Blinker says. "We can raise our children together!"

"I'm sure Jason would like that." Phoebe laughs.

They continue eating their food and talking, but at some point, a man wearing a simple blue uniform strides upstairs and looks around, eventually placing his eyes on Phoebe's private booth, isolated by a magical barrier to protect her privacy.

He walks over and steps through the barrier, then drops to one knee.

"Lady Phoebe! I am... I am so glad to see you alive!"

Phoebe blinks in surprise. She glances at the man's earnest face and tries to puzzle out his identity.

"You look familiar but..."

"Forgive me! It is normal you would not recognize me. My name is Reginald. I was one of the troopers who accompanied you during Stormbringer."

"One of the troopers who accompanied me..." Phoebe repeats while frowning slightly. "Umm... I'm afraid I don't quite remember."

"That is understandable, my lady. I was tasked with protecting you after you had fallen comatose. Remember? You fought on the frontlines against the demons for two days and nights before ultimately collapsing to exhaustion. Myself and nineteen other troopers were tasked with rescuing and delivering you and your daughter to the last remaining Covenant ship. You were unconscious the whole time, so you never had a chance to meet me..."

Reginald pauses.

"But that isn't important. What is important is... I was just revived through the Lats-Zarus Tower, or whatever you call it. I just learned that your little girl was killed! Please forgive me, my lady. We could not protect her from that vile, evil demoness! I do not deserve to live!"

"Vile, evil demoness?" Phoebe repeats. "Ose is dead. There's no more need to bother with her. As for my daughter... sigh... she was not killed by Ose, but by Beelzebub. He will soon be tried for his war-crimes against our people."

Reginald pauses for a half-second.

"Ose? Beelzebub? No, no, I am not referring to either of them. I am referring to that vicious beast in female form! She attacked us from the darkness, struck down all of my fellow soldiers! Daisy tried to protect you, but she was too weak. I was too weak. We all were! I thought that she was the one who killed your daughter, but... perhaps I was wrong?"

Phoebe glances at Belial.

"Do... you know who he's talking about?"

Belial shrugs. "No clue."

Reginald frowns repeatedly, but an invisible light bulb pops up above his head.

"Ah! That's right! She was able to morph the appearance of her body. First, she took the form of a werewolf, one with fearsome strength. Then she transformed into a golden dragon. I don't know her identity, but I'll never forget the sound of her voice. Can you think of any demonesses capable of shifting their figure in such a manner?"

Belial frowns deeply. "Well, me, of course. But transformation into monsters isn't particularly rare. Agares could do it, plenty of other demons could too. Though, admittedly, turning into any sort of a dragon-variant would be pretty rare..."

Phoebe taps her chin. "I still have all the footage saved from every trooper's T-REX during Stormbringer. Yours would surely be in there, Reginald. What's your suit's command code?"

The man nods. He quickly spits out a flow of numbers and letters, which Phoebe types into a datapad at her side. A minute later, she pulls up all of its audio and video files, particularly the ones leading up to and just before his death.

For the first time, Phoebe observes a battle which took place during Stormbringer, one she overlooked until this very moment.

"That's Daisy?" Phoebe asks, visibly alarmed. "What incredible power... she actually managed to fight back against that demoness! But who is she? And why does her voice sound so familiar?"

Hardly have the words left Phoebe's mouth before Belial's eyes widen.

"Tarot card! She called out the name of a tarot card!"

"She did." Phoebe nods. "But... the only powerful demoness I can think of who is capable of doing such a thing would be..."

All at once, Belial, Phoebe and Blinker all look at one another in shock.

"...Mara!"

A wave of disgust washes across the Wordsmith's Wife's face. She sets the datapad down, visibly sickened by what she's just uncovered.

"Oh... oh my god. She killed Reginald, and all the other troopers who were protecting me. She nearly killed me, and Daisy too! That... that evil witch! How could she remain silent, all this time?!"

Belial appears even angrier. Hatred seethes within her chest.

"BITCH! That little **BITCH**! I... I gave her a power-up! I let her be the first to try out the Belial Booster! I made her a Duke, and she actually had the AUDACITY to take my gift while laughing at me from behind?!"

As if realizing something, Phoebe pulls up even more images from that period of time during Stormbringer. She triangulates Mara's position before she attacked Reginald and the other soldiers, then cross-compares them with troopers and other people who perished around that time.

Before long, she discovers something that makes her heart drop into the soles of her feet.

"Oh my god. Oh... oh my god."

"What is it?" Blinker asks, slightly panicked. She looks at the datapad in Phoebe's grasp, but can't make heads or tails of the map and diagrams it shows.

"The... the last covenant ship. Someone reported an unknown demonic entity attacked it. I wasn't able to uncover the perpetrator... but if I'm right... it was Mara! She destroyed the ship and killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. There were... so many children on board..."

The table falls completely silent as Phoebe, Belial, Blinker, and Reginald imagine the last moments of those poor people before they were annihilated in an explosion of lightning and hellfire.

Belial stands up.

An expression of malice and hatred stretches across her face.

"Give me one hour. I'll find her. I'll teach that... that little *bitch* the meaning of fear."

"Wait." Phoebe says, sobering up. "I'm coming with you. Blinker, you too. Reginald, you've done enough. Thank you for your service."

"I haven't done nearly enough!" Reginald cries, beating his chest with grief. "The little miss... I wasn't able to protect her! Let me put this new body to some good use! Let me hunt down that witch who killed my friends!"

"We're not going to 'hunt her down.'" Phoebe says sternly. "She has to stand trial for her evils. We have to root out the full extent of her villainy. Only then can the dead receive their justice."

After a momentary pause, she adds, "But yes, you can come along. Your testimony will solidify our case against her."

"Thank you, lady Phoebe! I... I will not let you down! I will atone for my failure for the rest of my life, if that is what it takes."

Phoebe sighs. "You did not fail me, Reginald. You fought valiantly against an enemy who towered above you in power. Frankly, if I had given you better equipment, you might have been able to perform far better. Therefore, the fault lies with me."

"It's neither of your fault." Belial says abruptly, her tone curt. "It's Mara's fault. Don't try and act like there's anyone at fault but her. She lied to us. She attacked and tried to kill you. There is no punishment harsh enough for the likes of her..."

Not wanting to delay their response any longer, Phoebe simply nods.

"Alright. Let's go. Blinker, we'll have to meet your fairy friends afterward. Sorry about that."

"It's fine." Blinker says. "They'll understand."

The three women and Reginald get up and leave, allowing the staff from Yamir's kitchen to clean up after them.

Mara's day of reckoning will soon arrive...

Part 392: Valhalla's Daughter

"We cannot stay in Valhalla for long." Unarin says, shooting a pointed glance at the Wordsmith. "This is a world which is hostile to biological life forms. Within just fifty-three of your Terran-minutes, the dimensional space will eject us back to the surface of Grimvolas, right in front of that horde of Dolgrimites. You do *not* want to suddenly appear in front of them. They startle easily."

Jason and Unarin begin to walk deeper into the Titan's Realm, the land they once lived in, following the deaths of their bodies. Seeing the crumbled buildings, fallen castles, and mountains covered in debris, the Wordsmith feels waves of emotions sweep across him as he recalls the few instances he's observed Titans such as Ivaldi living here.

Now, she and all the others are fully dead in mind, body, and soul.

"Fifty-three minutes." Jason repeats. "What happened here? Why are all of the ancient Titans dead? And how did the entrance to Valhalla happen to end up on your old homeworld?"

Unarin picks up the pace, walking deeper into the realm much faster than before, forcing Jason to break into a light jog.

"It happened not too long after the conclusion of the Energy Wars." Unarin says. "A terribly cataclysm opened up in the space around Grimvolas. Violent spatial storms rocked the world, killing countless Dolgrimites and other creatures living in this system. They send an emergency broadcast to me, and I dispatched several High Psions, including the Second Founder herself. But by the time we arrived, the storms had ended. They spent several orbital cycles stabilizing the space while searching for the cause of the disturbance."

The First Founder pauses for a brief moment.

"...Then, they found the flattened mountaintop which you and I used to enter Valhalla. We weren't certain what happened, but clearly there was a violent battle which took place within Valhalla's confines. The space ruptured and sheared away the entirety of the mountain's peak, glassing its surface and turning it into a portal from which others could enter and exit at will."

"So there was a huge battle." Jason says, glancing around at the ruined world.

Small amounts of withered plants, moss, and other greenery grow amidst the crevasses, but with almost no light to create photosynthesis, the world clearly appears to be on its last legs.

"Do you know who was involved in the battle?" Jason asks.

"I do not." Unarin replies. "It is an ongoing mystery. However, one thing was abundantly clear."

The First Founder turns to look at the Wordsmith, a gleam of menace in his eyes.

"Whatever or *whoever* killed the Titans, they left Grimvolas before my Psions could locate the tear in space. When we arrived, all we found was the aftermath of the battle."

Unarin holds up his hand. A projection fires from his palm, instantly rebuilding several distant structures through augmented reality holograms, restoring Valhalla to a surprisingly pristine state.

"We've had tens of millennia to reconstruct what this realm once looked like." Unarin explains. "As best as we can tell, it was a world of primitive-looking but well-built structures reinforced with magic. When Titans died, their souls traveled here in a manner not too dissimilar to that 'Lazarus Tower' the angels used. We suspect the Archangels 'borrowed' the idea from some ancient Titan."

Jason glances into his Mind Realm, but Raphael remains stoically silent, saying nothing.

"So, something happened inside Valhalla's space. Some sort of... civil war?" Jason asks Unarin. "Or was it, perhaps, a foreign invader? Someone who found the entrance and broke inside? Perhaps... the Kolvaxians?"

"There is no evidence the Kolvaxians know this place exists, or that they ever did." Unarin says. "After all, the first Kolvaxian outbreak occurred several centuries after the battle that occurred here."

The First Founder spends a few minutes traveling with Jason as quickly as possible until they reach the largest of the crumbled castles. There, Jason frowns as he picks up a faint magical sensation.

"Hm?"

The Wordsmith pauses. He glances around, from left to right, searching for that strange, familiar sense tickling the back of his brain.

"Have you found something?" Unarin asks, his eyes locking on the human's face. "We never did directly uncover the identity of the entity responsible for Valhalla's destruction... but we have our suspicions. Perhaps you could... *confirm them* for me."

Jason frowns. He realizes Unarin is manipulating him, trying to use the Wordsmith's special abilities to uncover some past, historical secrets. However, try as he might, Jason can't quite identify the strange magical sensation tugging at his brain.

"It's like... it's like there's a scent in the air..." Jason mutters. "Something I've smelled before. Or perhaps it's more of a feeling. Either way... it's eerily familiar..."

Fiona, sensing the world through Jason, also frowns deeply. She closes her eyes and concentrates, pursing her lips while occasionally stealing glances at Raphael.

For a brief minute, Unarin and Jason remain standing before the broken and shattered castle. Unable to tolerate the nagging feeling in the back of his mind, Jason decides to try Wordsmithing.

"Replay!"

Not entirely sure of what will happen, Jason decides to try and reconstruct the image with his magic.

Instantly, a thousand Psions materialize in the space around him, starting Jason to the point he nearly shits himself. Even Unarin jerks in alarm, only to quickly calm down when his vision passes through the ethereal bodies of his fellow Volgrim.

"What are you doing?!" Unarin roars. "Do not activate magic without informing me first!"

Jason grimaces. "Oh, that's rich, coming from Mister "I Love Surprises!" I just thought I'd try and reconstruct the past; see if I could determine whatever attacked Valhalla."

Unarin blinks. "Oh? So you *can* do something like that."

"I've never tried it before," Jason replies, before quickly adding, "hold on, what do you mean? You already theorized I could do something like this?"

"Of course. Is it not obvious?" Unarin scoffs. "Reconstructing scenes of the past. Peering into the future. Don't tell me you've never even *tried*. What sort of imbecile would

not immediately wish to attempt such a feat, given your power-set?"

The Wordsmith feels momentarily angry at Unarin, but that feeling turns to a faint feeling of shame as he realizes neither he nor Solomon ever considered such a thing.

Or then again, Jason correct himself, perhaps Solomon did but never thought to run the idea past me...

The Wordsmith shakes those useless thoughts from his head. He glances around at the magical images of Psions flying in the skies and frowns. "What sort of scene is this?"

"I can't say for certain." Unarin replies. "On many occasions, I've sent legions of Psions here to investigate Valhalla's destruction. I always hoped someone might be able to uncover the perpetrator of the attack. But since they can only exist inside Valhalla's space for one standard time unit, they're rarely able to uncover anything of note."

Jason parses Unarin's explanation while gazing at the ruined city before him.

"So... I seem to have pulled a random image from the past to our reality. Um. Let me try again, then. **Replay!**"

He repeats his previous Word of Power. Instantly, the Psion apparitions vanish. In their place, nothing appears.

"...Blank?" Jason questions. "That's weird. **Replay!**"

Once again, nothing visibly seems to change, aside from some shifting of rocks on the ground.

"What are you attempting to do?" Unarin asks. "Surely, you should be able to call forth a projection of the great battle?"

"My Wordsmithing is usually pretty convenient..." Jason says. "But this time... I don't know. I'd need to know the exact date, I think. I'm just calling up random dates. Even saying '85,000 years ago' isn't all that specific. You said there was a period of three years where the spatial storms ravaged Grimvolas, right? That's three years out of one hundred thousand. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"I could tell you the exact date." Unarin offers. "But I am afraid the way we Volgrim calculate time is... a little *different* from how you humans calculate it. I suspect this will only be a waste of energy."

"Yeah. Probably." Jason acknowledges. "But, still. I have this nagging feeling. I've felt the mana fluctuations in this region of space before. And recently, too. Not long ago..."

Hardly have those words left Jason's mouth before his mind-wife jerks in shock.

"That's... that's it! I've felt them too! But much stronger! It was... inside the Cube!"

Jason turns his attention inward.

[Inside the Cube?]

"That's right!" Fiona exclaims, a hint of horror in her voice. "Don't you remember? It was that energy inside the Container. The draconic energy! This mana you and I are sensing, it's extremely similar to the power a dragon might emanate!"

[A dragon!] Jason exclaims, feeling the same rush of excitement and fear Fiona is feeling. [But how can that be? Wasn't the dragon inside of the Container... wasn't it Leviathan? I thought he broke out eons ago and escaped to Earth?]

Jason turns to Raphael, and his gaze hardens.

[Don't fuck with me, Raphael! What the hell is going on? Surely, you of all people, should recognize the aura of a dragon well before Fiona and I! Why aren't you saying anything?!]

The Archangel of Wisdom frowns deeply.

"Verily, if this aura is that of a dragon, then dost thou not understand what that means, Jason? Leviathan ended up within the Black Queen. Thou sawest it perish with thine own eyes. If a dragon escaped from the Cube, but did so *after* Earth's destruction... then that can only mean one thing. Its identity... 'twas not Leviathan, but another dragon entirely."

Jason's heart shakes violently. In his mind's eye, a series of possibilities plays out, each of them worse than the other.

[That can't be right. Leviathan was the last dragon. He said so himself! When his mother perished, when Jörmungandr fell, he spoke in those visions as if he was the last one left!]

Raphael's expression turns gloomy.

"Dost thou thinketh the Earth's dragon knew all? Indeed, were it the last one alive, its mother's death would have empowered it tremendously. But what if there was not one

dragon still alive, but two? What if Leviathan's death passed on the remainder of his draconic power to the dragon within Camael's Cube, granting it the strength to break free of its seals? Could that not explain how it broke free of the encirclement of no fewer than eight Primordial Artifacts?"

Raphael's words call forth the very fears lurking in the back of Jason's mind. Indeed, he too imagines such a possibility, but hearing Raphael speak the words makes him feel terrified beyond belief.

[What, so now there's a fucking dragon out there, somewhere, on the loose?! When exactly did it break free? Why did it attack Valhalla? And where is it now?!]

Fiona's expression turns ugly.

"Jason. The timing of all this... it's too coincidental. Think about it."

Unarin frowns, but says nothing as he sees several flickers of emotion flash across the Wordsmith's face. It doesn't take much for the First Founder to deduce that Jason has uncovered something, and so, he remains silent, allowing the Wordsmith to communicate with the Archangel of Wisdom, as Unarin has no doubt he is doing.

[What are you talking about?] Jason asks Fiona, only to immediately blink his eyes in alarm. [Wait, don't tell me... the Kolvaxians...]

"That's right." Fiona says, gnashing her teeth. "The Kolvaxians seem to have shown up about 15,000 years after Earth's destruction. Unarin said the battle for Valhalla happened before they first attacked. It seems likely the dragon... it might be the one creating these Kolvaxians. It might be the puppeteer in all of this!"

[We don't know that for sure.] Jason says, lifting his eyes to look at Unarin. He flinches when he sees the First Founder's calm, cold smile.

"It seems you've figured something out." Unarin says. "Let's hear it. I am *supremely* interested in seeing whether your theory is at all similar to mine."

"What is your theory?" Jason asks. "You go first."

"Jason, Jason..." Unarin says slowly, his voice soft like a leaf on the breeze. "I have shown you so much, and spoken so candidly for your benefit. Don't you think it's *your* turn to speak up? I have acted genuinely, yet always, you seem to believe it is my job to feed you information. I think it's time you took a more active role, yes? Illuminate this poor old Volgrim on the details he's missed."

The Wordsmith wants to protest. He even thinks about doing it, in spite of knowing the First Founder is manipulating him. Unarin hasn't shown Jason anything that would make himself suffer a loss. He has plenty to gain and little to lose if Jason becomes aware of a few important secrets.

Furthermore, telling Unarin such a critical piece of information might let him fill in the blanks of other information he possesses but Jason doesn't! It would only advantage him further, no matter how he pretends to be oblivious and ignorant.

Unarin has probably guessed a dragon was involved... Jason thinks. Maybe he just wants to confirm his suspicions...?

"Take your time, take your time..." Unarin says, fanning out his fingernails. "We still have, oh, about twenty of your Terran-minutes before this dimension ejects us out in front of those raging Dolgrimites. That's practically an eternity, wouldn't you say?"

Jason scowls. "Let me ask you a question first. The battle in this dimension, or the first Kolvaxian appearance. Which occurred first?"

Unarin slowly opens and closes his eyes. "Why do mud-dwellers always possess such short memories? I told you already. First came the turbulence in Grimvolas's dimensional subspace. Then, some centuries later, the Kolvaxians first attacked. Oh, but it does seem as if you think... they might be related?"

Jason sighs heavily. "...I do. I think the attacker here was... it was a dragon. A dragon attacked Valhalla and killed all the Titans."

Unarin frowns.

"A dragon, you say?"

"Yes." Jason answers. "Doesn't that align with what you thought?"

The First Founder glances past Jason, at the crumbling castles. "Well, actually, I thought it might be... oh, never mind. It seems my guess was just random noise. Your inference clearly has more substance behind it. But what made you think a dragon was at fault here?"

Jason blinks several times, bewildered. "Wait, so you *didn't* think it was a dragon? Who was YOUR chief suspect?"

"Now, now," Unarin says, waving his hand casually. "I asked a question first. It is considered polite to defer to your elders, young mud-dweller. What makes you think the

creature that attacked Valhalla was a dragon?"

Jason sucks in a shallow breath.

Shit. I can't tell if Unarin is fucking with me. Did he think it was a dragon after all? Is he lying to me? Or is he trying to uncover more of my secrets? He probably doesn't know about the Cube yet... and I absolutely should not give him any evidence for its existence. But what if he thought something other than a dragon was responsible? Or maybe he's pretending that's the case! Maybe he had a bunch of random guesses, or maybe he already knows the truth for sure! Ahhh, this is so frustrating! I feel like a mouse being swatted back and forth by a tiger!

The Wordsmith swallows heavily. "Raphael gave me some hints. The dark miasma in the air is similar to a dragon he once knew. That is why he suspected a dragon was the entity which slaughtered the Titans."

Unarin lifts his hand and rubs his chin. He falls deep into thought before slowly nodding.

"...I suppose that is a sensible answer."

"Right!" Jason presses. "So why are you acting like you thought someone, or *something* else was at fault? What aren't you telling me?"

The Highest Ascended rolls his eyes melodramatically. "Oh, Wordsmith. *Please*, you don't want to hear the idle ramblings of a senile old Volgrim like me. I was so far off the mark, it was frankly *embarrassing*. Yes, I think you *are* right. A dragon was indeed at fault. As for whether or not it truly was, well... I do have something else to show you."

Jason fully intends to press Unarin for more information, but the wily Volgrim leader smoothly guides him to a new train of thought.

"Do you currently believe that *all* the Titans were killed?"

Jason's heart skips a beat.

"What? They weren't? Some still live?"

"Why yes." Unarin says. "In fact, we're not far from one of them now. Before our time in Valhalla runs out, follow me, and do so *quickly*. You do not want to miss this..."

Jason doesn't get a chance to respond. Unarin suddenly bolts away, running toward the huge, crumbled castle with reckless abandon. Jason tries to give chase, but he finds

that his speed is nowhere near Unarin's level! As an Ascended, Unarin's physical power is truly monstrous. His strength and speed aren't too dissimilar from a Silver Age Superman!

"**Wings!**" Jason shouts, sprouting angelic wings from his back.

He flaps them with great gusto and races after Unarin, who merely glances over his shoulder and chuckles.

"Keep up, Wordsmith! Our time is running out!"

Unarin's feet barely touch the ground. With each kick, jump, and forward push, he launches himself forward across the rocky and uneven terrain at a speed that, frankly, frightens Jason.

[Look at how fast Unarin can run!] Jason exclaims. [Is this the power of an Ascended? Is he an average specimen? A superior one? He could rip a tank in half with his bare hands, if his leg-strength is anything to go by!]

"He is indeed quite alarming." Fiona notes. "But... don't underestimate our Respected. We might not be too far behind. Humanity has a lot of room to grow."

Minutes later, Unarin charges into a collapsed tunnel, finally slowing his pace as he waits for the Wordsmith to catch up.

"Hurry!" Unarin shouts. "We've less than ten Terran-minutes before Valhalla ejects us!"

Jason follows after Unarin, landing and absorbing his wings back into his body. The two of them break into a light jog as Unarin guides Jason through the interior of Valhalla's largest collapsed castle.

Huge columns of stone, unfathomably large and heavy, stick out of the ground, their mid-sections shattered by some ancient force.

Jason eyes them coldly.

A dragon could have easily caused all this devastation, for sure.

They encounter a staircase where each individual step elevates more than twenty feet high. Slightly embarrassed, Jason regrows his wings and flies up the stairs, while Unarin easily leaps up them, following after the Wordsmith for once.

They pass through one hall after another, barely giving Jason time to glance at the moss-covered artwork etched into the walls, depicting ancient battles the scale of which he can barely imagine.

"Valhalla..." Jason murmurs.

As the realm of not just any Titans, but the mightiest of all their Kings and Queens, this realm contains countless works of art that would be priceless even if they were only ten percent intact. Even so, the Volgrim have not removed them, but left them here to rest in peace.

"The architecture of the Titans is truly astounding." Unarin idly says, while they run through the halls. "They built monuments from manaforged stone that would put many superior Volgrim alloys to shame. For their castles to have crumbled to this extent, perhaps only a cataclysmic war with a dragon might have caused such a result..."

"They weren't in their true bodies." Jason observes. "The Valhalla Titans were only remnant souls."

"Remnant souls, yes. But they still possessed power aplenty, more than enough to smite the likes of a mere mud-dweller civilization." Unarin chuckles.

Jason ignores the slight. He raises his eyes when he sees a blue light in the distance, one which appears impossibly bright compared to the dark, miasma-tinged rest of Valhalla.

"We're here." Unarin says, slowing his gait. The First Founder drops to a casual trot as he and the Wordsmith approach a great hall, one with words carved into the ceiling which Jason cannot read. The language appears alien, like a dialect spoken by beings of immense power. Just gazing at the words causes his eyes to sting.

"Your soul is not powerful enough to endure reading those words." Unarin warns. "Don't test your abilities. You'll only turn into a mute idiot, as several of my top researchers did."

"Thanks for the heads-up..." Jason mutters.

The two men step into the great hall, and Jason finally sees the source of the blue light. A barrier of energy, both psionic and magical in nature, envelops a towering eighty-foot-tall Titaness laying on her back, someone dressed in beautiful white robes, with a wreath of purple flowers around her brow.

The Titaness appears truly gorgeous, to the point that when Jason takes to the air to get a better look at her, he feels a pang in his heart at her pitiful appearance. Her eyes remain shut, as if sealed by the firmest bonds. Her arms lay lifelessly at her side. Even the rising and falling of her chest is barely visible to him when he stares with his full attention.

Her dark black skin, bright golden hair, and long fluttery eyelashes reveal her to be a heart-stopping beauty, someone the ancient Titan Kings must surely have fought to protect, or to covet...

Unarin lightly leaps atop a pedestal nearby the Wordsmith's hovering figure.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Unarin asks. "A wonderful specimen. The pinnacle of her species... and the last living Titan my people know to exist."

Jason glances at Unarin. "What? The last one? Didn't you imply there were others?"

The First Founder slowly shakes his head. "Others? No. This woman is the last living member. Oh, we do have *remnants* of a few soul-bodies. Incorporeal vessels lacking any spirit. But this woman here... she is the last living member of her species. The only one still remaining."

Unarin pauses.

"When we found her, she was at death's door. Barely able to speak, barely able to think. Terrible wounds covered her figure. As a soul-body, we could not transport her from Valhalla without killing her. Here she had to remain, unless someone *else* were to bestow upon her a viable treatment method."

"But..." Unarin adds. "Before she fell into the coma you now see... we were able to obtain a few precious words from her lips. Her name. Her identity."

Unarin's tone turns grave.

"She was the daughter of the Allmother, Odin. She was heir to the Titan throne. The second strongest of her kind..."

"And her name was..."

"...**Ramma.**"

Part 393: Dolgris Guides Us

Jason and Unarin fly and stand at a high vantage point so that they can gaze down upon the comatose body of the Titaness known as Ramma, daughter of the Allmother. At eighty-feet-tall, she is massive, roughly double the size of Zeus during the Ancient Era.

When Jason looks at the giant before him, he doesn't see much resemblance to Odin. This slightly perplexes him. He ignores the discrepancy, focusing instead on the shock that a real-life Titan still exists in the material realm.

"You're telling me she's the very last one?" Jason asks. "No others exist?"

"None that we know of or have observed." Unarin mutters. "We have a few other partially intact bodies. But no souls or functioning minds."

"Why is she in a coma?" Jason asks. "And why can't the illustrious Volgrim Empire awaken her?"

"We have reason to believe the Titans in Valhalla were preparing to complete an important project." Unarin explains. "There were many signs that they had a prototype built that could transform their souls into functioning physical vessels that could leave Valhalla and return to the physical realm. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately depending on who you ask, they failed in their designs. We believe a few low-level Titans from Valhalla may have left and traveled to Earth during the Energy Wars. However, they were not quite at the level of branching out to the rest of their high-level members."

He continues. "In any case, Ramma here was set to be the most important asset the Allmother sent back to the physical realm. They placed many of their hopes on her, their protections too. When the... unidentified aberrant... the 'dragon' as you claim, attacked Valhalla, it slaughtered every Titan except for her. Even so, she suffered grievous wounds to her soul."

"We Volgrim are not all-powerful." Unarin states. "When it comes to the 'magic' your species practices, we are not particularly adept at deciphering it. As for the nature of souls, we are also inept at uncovering their mysteries. Souls are simply too ethereal, too difficult to observe and study."

"I hear that Psions don't even have souls." Jason says, glancing at Unarin carefully. "There's a ginger joke somewhere in there that I could make, but I'm not mean enough to do such a thing."

Unarin casually ignores Jason's comment.

"We're out of time. We've a minute left, at best. It seems your casual use of Wordsmithing has made us more intangible in this dimensional space. Activate your Stealth Module now."

Jason nods. He activates the device Unarin gave him, then frowns. "How do you know, anyway? Nothing seems different."

"You can't sense the change in 'pressure'?" Unarin asks, doubtful. "When you summoned those wings of yours, I felt the pressure surrounding us change. I'm surprised you didn't. You're... not particularly observant, are you?"

"I'm plenty observant." Jason retorts. "Rather than waiting for this dimension to eject us, why don't I Wordsmith us back into your ship?"

Unarin hesitates for a split-second.

"...You might as well."

Jason nods. "**Return.**"

An instant later, he and Unarin flicker out of existence. They pop back inside the Founder's Spear, where they find Muuxunuu sitting in her pilot's seat, staring out at the world before them. She appears just as stoic and emotionless as ever.

The Wordsmith and First Founder drop their stealth modules barely ten feet from Muuxunuu, but she appears unfazed by their sudden appearance.

"You have returned, First Founder." Muuxunuu says. "It seems you did so via the Wordsmith's magic. You are as prescient as ever."

"Prescient?" Jason repeats. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Unarin smirks. "I bet Muuxunuu that you would casually offer to teleport me at one point during our trip. It seems my guess was right."

"Fuck you." Jason coughs. "There's no way you could predict that!"

Unarin slowly blinks. He turns back to Muuxunuu. "Did any Dolgrimites wander near the ship?"

"None, First Founder." Muuxunuu says, her voice soft. "Not one person stirred within the area."

"Hmm. Perhaps I overestimated them..." Unarin muses. "Take us back to Volgarius."

As Muuxunuu follows Unarin's orders and the Founder's Spear takes to the sky, Jason frowns.

"What do you mean by 'you overestimated them'? Did you think the Dolgrimites would discover us?"

"I thought there was, perhaps, a ten percent chance they might." Unarin says coolly, as he takes a seat in the ship's dining area. He gestures to the seat across the table for the Wordsmith to sit. "But they didn't. You must understand, Wordsmith. Those Dolgrimites are... not as simple as they first seem. I often wonder why they're so reclusive."

"You're a smart guy." Jason says, sitting down. "So either you know what's really going on with them, or you somehow have a genuine blind spot. Either way, you must have your guesses."

"I'm not omniscient." Unarin says. "But... hm. Tell me, Jason Hiro, have you read my work? Specifically, Order to Chaos?"

"I've heard about it." Jason says. "I even have a copy. But I'm not much of a reader. Or rather, I don't have a lot of time."

"Can't your Wordsmithing help you with that?" Unarin asks, raising an eyebrow. "Don't tell me the almighty Wordsmith can't speed up his reading or comprehension skills."

"You're not omniscient. I'm not omnipotent." Jason retorts. "...But, uh, yeah. I could probably do that."

Unarin's eyes flicker with suspicion. "You've truly never tried to speed up your reading or comprehension? And you've never tried to investigate the past through your Wordsmithing? I'm beginning to think I had your intellect pegged... a little *too high*."

Jason's expression doesn't change. "Intellect can come in many forms."

"Correct. But how long have you had access to your Wordsmithing? From what I understand, you emerged from a cryogenic stasis-pod about six years ago. In those six years, why have you not tested every possible boundary of your abilities? My people tell me you even possessed Solomon's Crown during the majority of that period! Surely, the

infamous Knowledge Seeker would have sought to test your capabilities. He never was the type to sit back idly."

"Well..." Jason says, his tone slightly awkward. "I just... I'm technically 100,000 years old, but I've only had six years to experiment with my powers. I'm not some ancient monster like you."

"Don't give me such excuses!" Unarin snaps. "The foundation of our cooperation rests upon you being able to assist me with your godlike abilities. Do you think I've shown you these secrets of my empire casually, as if I were walking a pet through a park? I'm in the middle of a war, Wordsmith. And if my efforts fail, it will be YOU who comes under fire next! Only, unlike me, you will not have septillions of bodies to throw at The Enemy. You will fall in a single day, as all of your forces are concentrated on just one poorly-defended planet!"

"To say nothing of the demons." Unarin continues. "Those slovenly, rapacious little bloodskins. Oh, they hail their Emperors and act as if their power knows no limits. But in the cosmic scale, they are... what would your species say? Ants. They are ants, insects, bugs. The Kolvaxians wiped out one of their worlds immediately. The demons couldn't even put up the most paltry resistance..."

A flicker flashes across Unarin's eyes.

"You *are* young, Wordsmith." Unarin says. "When I was just twenty-four cycles old, perhaps I was not that much smarter than you are now. It is hard to say. Those cycles were so very, very long ago. But it was the Seven Great Wars that changed me... refined me into the leader I am today. Perhaps I should broaden your horizons."

Before Jason can ask what Unarin means, the First Founder waves his hand, and a holographic projection appears above the table. His eyes flick from left to right as a simulation of the Milky Way materializes, identical to the one inside his Sanctum, but shrunk down to a much smaller size.

Unarin zooms in on several different stars, while varied expressions flick across his face.

"Muuxunuu. Never mind the return trip to Volgarius. Change heading. Take us to the... Gallax system. It's not far from here. Just 1,500 light-cycles."

Muuxunuu hesitates. She turns back in her seat to look at Unarin.

"First Founder, I must advise caution. The Gallax system is currently under attack by the Kolvaxians. Two populated worlds have fallen. You will be in extreme danger if you travel there."

"I am aware." Unarin says. "I think it's time the Wordsmith saw the devastation the Kolvaxians can unleash... up close and personal."

"I'm already aware." Jason says, frowning. "There's no need to show off."

"Are you frightened?" Unarin asks. "Some leaders guide from behind, whipping the backs of their subordinates. These sorts never last long. They often perish to their own hubris. A true conqueror will charge from the front, inspiring loyalty among his people. Seeing a world fall in real time... it would make you aware of a few more Truths."

"I'm just along for the ride." Jason says. "But aren't you worried the Kolvaxians will strike you? I expect that as important as my life is, yours is even more so. Losing both of us would damn our civilizations."

"We're not going down to visit any worlds in person." Unarin says, waving his fingers in a dismissive gesture. "We're only going to have a look in real-time. You can watch data-files all day long... but knowing that the images on your screen are live and happening in a manner you wish you could stop... I expect it will have a more direct effect on your psyche."

"What does any of this have to do with my powers?" Jason asks. "Not to insult your intelligence, but doesn't this seem like a completely different train of thought?"

Unarin leans back in his seat. He closes his eyes for a moment while tilting his head up toward the ceiling.

"...Do you experiment with your powers often, Jason?"

The Wordsmith blinks. "Sure. Well, I mean... yeah? I guess so."

"Your words don't speak of confidence." Unarin says, continuing to keep his eyes shut. "I have determined a great many things about you during our little time spent together. Before, I assumed you were a highly intelligent, driven man pushing to rapidly advance his species to the apex. Now, I see that you are... not as swift or driven as I had expected. You lost your child to the demons. That provided you with a high level of motivation... but frankly, it only brought you 'up to par.' It did not push you into a realm equaling the most driven of your people."

Unarin opens his eyes. He lowers his head to gaze at the Wordsmith.

"You wish to protect your people from the demons. You wish to protect them from me. But that is all. That is the limit of your drive. You are passive. You are not truly aware of how far you can go. Indeed, I cannot possibly know the limits of your abilities either, as they are not mine to test. But what I can tell you, Wordsmith, is that if I had possessed a power akin to yours, the Seven Great Wars of my people's history would have never come to be."

The First Founder drums his fingers on the table.

"You feel pressure pushing you to improve yourself and your species' lot in life. But that pressure has lessened since you defeated Ose and subjugated the Hidden Emperors. Now, you no longer feel as urgent a need to shove through any obstacle to your success. The Kolvaxians... they worry you, but you still feel as if they aren't yet a big threat. You still have time. You can let them whittle away at my people for some indeterminate period. What are us Volgrim anyway, but some distant threat to the future of humanity? It's better for the Kolvaxians to pick us off, because then you will have *one less enemy* to contend with on the galactic stage."

Hearing his thoughts exposed, Jason can't help but shift uncomfortably in his seat.

Unarin can really see all of that? Is he a prophet? Can he look into the future?

Jason opens his mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. He hems and haws for a minute, then shrugs.

"You're... pretty good at this. So, bringing me to see the Kolvaxians..."

"It is for your own good." Unarin says, his tone deadpan. "I won't lie. You are a dangerous enemy, and a frightening friend. Perhaps if the Volgrim Empire were in its prime, I might crush you to protect myself. But we are not, and perhaps we never will be again. Right now, I need your help to stop the Kolvaxians. Our mightiest Psions cannot halt their slow, inexorable push. Our most elite scientists cannot reverse the infection to restore our people. Recently, the Kolvaxians have gained psionic powers, allowing them to take to space. Now we are not even safe while bombarding them from above."

"You *need* pressure, Jason." Unarin says. "You are the sort of person who is far too laid-back to become a leader. Yet, for whatever reason, the Heroic Aura chose you to save humanity. Had it chosen someone like that King Arthur, or Joan of Arc, someone with a

firm will and a desire to never give up, humanity's rise would be assured. But instead, it chose you. You, who lacks a backbone and who acts far too lackadaisically for his people's own good. I intend to set you on a path that will strengthen your resolve. You must see these horrors in real time so that you understand why pushing your boundaries is *absolutely essential*."

Jason slowly nods.

"I... I get it. You think if I see a world crumbling right before my eyes, it will make me... more determined."

"*Much* more determined." Unarin whispers. "There is nothing that can bring forth the qualities of a great man like the existential realization of his weakness, his imminent death. Fantasizing about such things will never provide an impetus like having them thrust upon you in the real world."

"I understand." Jason says. "And I'm interested in seeing what these Kolvaxians are truly like."

"Good. Then, without further ado. Muuxunuu!"

Unarin barks at his Head Administrator. She merely nods, then turns back in her seat.

"We will leave Grimvolas's gravity well in three time-units, First Founder. I will initiate the micro-jumps, then take us out of the system afterward."

Unarin nods. "Make it so."

After the ship jumps to warp, Unarin tosses a datapad at Jason.

"We've a few hours before we reach our destination. Make yourself useful. Read my 'Order to Chaos.'"

The Wordsmith sighs. "I might as well."

Back on the world of Grimvolas. After Jason and Unarin leave, elsewhere on the planet, in a secluded underground fortress, carved out of rock and reinforced with bone.

A muscular, monstrous dinosaur-looking creature, a Dolgrimite, holds a ball of energy in its claws. This Dolgrimite, a green-skinned male with a red stripe of color running from its head to the tip of its tail, grunts fiercely as it manipulates the energy in its claws.

"Rrrgh! RRRGH!"

The ball of light shifts from red to yellow to blue. Inside its center, images flicker, though as to what they depict, only the Dolgrimite himself can know.

"I... I can almost... see... it..."

Just as the Dolgrimite is about to reach some sort of important moment, the energy in his hand starts to careen out of control.

"No!"

Enraged, he quickly flings it aside, where it races away from him and explodes against the reinforced wall.

BOOM!

The underground area tremors, and the shockwave of the blast knocks him off his feet. The Volgrim coughs a few times, then picks himself up. His scales and body appear unharmed.

Indeed, compared to the battles he's fought in his life, this small, piddly explosion of energy barely affects him in the least. As for what task he was performing, few can ever truly know...

The Dolgrimite glowers at the far wall. "Failed again. I am incompetent."

At that moment, a loud clanging resounds within the room as someone bangs on his door. He scowls at the interruption, but seeing as he already failed his work, there isn't much reason to complain.

The Dolgrimite lumbers toward the door. He yanks it open, where he sees another, somewhat shorter and weaker-looking fellow on the other side.

"Fifth Founder, Cinculu. The Matriarch has news for you."

The smaller fellow bows his head subserviently, not daring to make eye contact with his esteemed Fifth Founder, one of the highest-ranked among all of Volgrimkind.

"The Matriarch. Grrgh." Cinculu growls. "Her location?"

"She is within the Primal Nest at present, Fifth Founder."

Cinculu barely acknowledges his subordinates' words. He pushes past the smaller fellow, but pauses before leaving.

"Get that mess cleaned up. I screwed up... again."

"Of course, Fifth Founder. You will succeed eventually. *Dolgris guides you to greatness.*"

Cinculu turns away and begins striding through the underground corridors, where strange insect-like creatures made of rock levitate through the air. They linger on the walls and emit different hues of light, removing the need for any sort of central lighting system in the underground caves.

Of course, as a reptile-like predator, Cinculu's eyes are truly extraordinary. He can see in the dark just as easily as any Demon Emperor.

Storming down the hallways, he passes countless rooms where his fellow Dolgrimites engage in brutal combat, tearing each other limb-from-limb to establish dominance, yet always stopping short of delivering the killing blow. He passes feasting halls where Dolgrimites wear black robes to hide their bodies while loudly chewing on blackened bones and raw meat, guffawing as they exchange words of brotherly and sisterly love.

Each time Cinculu passes a fellow Dolgrimate in the hallway, they hurriedly step aside and bow their heads. "Dolgris guides you to greatness, Fifth Founder!"

"Dolgris guides you to greatness!"

"Dolgris guides you to greatness!"

These repeated odes don't annoy him, nor do they comfort him. To Cinculu, they are merely the most common of greetings, the words he would use in place of the standard Volgrim greeting, *I contemplate, and I comprehend*.

He chuffs under his breath, laughing at the thought of those sniveling little weaklings in the Volgrim Empire, those failures who abandoned their heritage to search for power among the coldness of iron and steel.

Technology is a crutch for the weak. Only our own strength can protect us.

His frame bristles with power. As Cinculu walks, he holds himself upright, revealing his toned chest filled with muscles that would make Titans weep with envy.

Soon, he arrives inside a massive underground area filled with organically-designed furniture. Bone-chairs and tables grow out of the ground, hewn into different shapes by the craftsman masters of the Dolgrimites. This area appears to be a large feeding ground, where countless creatures from unknown worlds lay dead in heaps, their skin and muscle ripped off to feed any Dolgrimites who might be hungering in the immediate vicinity. As

for the blood, it drains off to an area on the eastern wall, where a sizable lake of it slowly drains, going to other locations for... vile reasons.

Across the ceiling and walls, many Dolgrimites climb around, entering holes that become hallways leading to other locations. Cinculu motions with his hands, and a nearby insect flies over to him, transforming into a giant green leaf!

The insect, a creature of unknown origins, manifests its new form through the internal energy within Cinculu's body. He hops atop its surface and rides it to the top of the underground chamber, where he leaps into a hole above and continues making his way through the narrow corridor until it expands once again. This time, a dozen powerful Dolgrimite guards stand before a door leading to the Primal Nest, where the Matriarch resides.

"Fifth Founder. The Matriarch is expecting you." One of the guards says.

Cinculu nods. "Dolgris guides you to greatness."

The guards repeat his greeting back to Cinculu as he passes them by.

Before long, the Fifth Founder steps into a room that reeks of blood and death. The bright golden energy hovering at the top of the room provides illumination, allowing no shadows to make their way into this divine, war-like space.

As Cinculu enters, a single female Dolgrimite steps out from behind a mountain of meat and bone. Her appearance is even more feral than his, making her appear an apex predator one mustn't trifle with.

"Mother." Cinculu says, bowing his head. "What matter did you wish to speak with me about?"

The Matriarch of the Dolgrimites, their true highest leader, walks toward her son, standing a full head taller than him.

"Child. The First Founder paid us a visit today. He entered Valhalla. Dolgris has revealed this Truth to me."

"Unarin came here?" Cinculu asks, bristling with anger. He lifts his head up and growls loudly. "How dare he! Dolgris's grounds are sacred! Unarin spits in the face of our god with his disrespect!"

"Unarin came in secret." The Matriarch says. "He used a special cloaking technology to hide himself from our eyes. Of course, his appearance could not be hidden from the

almighty Dolgris. Dolgris sees all. He knows all. But... something has happened which he did not foresee."

Cinculu chuffs. "Impossible. How could anything surprise our god? Dolgris knows the Truths. He has enlightened us with his wisdom."

The Matriarch shakes her head. "Nobody is omniscient, not even Dolgris. His wisdom makes Unarin pale in comparison, but he is not all-knowing. Unarin brought along a friend. A human, one who possesses the power of the Heroic Aura. A chosen warrior of the Angels and Titans."

"He brought an outsider here?" Cinculu asks. "That Unarin... he is growing desperate as The War ravages his feeble followers."

"The War does not concern us." The Matriarch says. "Dolgris will protect us. The War is merely a minor test of our courage. What is more important is... Dolgris has become interested in the human Unarin brought along."

She leans toward Cinculu, a feverish look in her eyes.

"He is called Jason and Hiro. He is known as a 'Wordsmith.' The very same creature the demons have fought for several recent cycles."

"The Wordsmith." Cinculu repeats. "Yes. I have heard his name. Dolgris said he was unimportant. He was not worth paying attention to. What has changed?"

"INSOLENCE!" The Matriarch suddenly roars, lunging toward her son while slapping him with her palm. Cinculu flies backward and crashes against a wall, but his body appears unhurt. Instead, it is his pride that has mainly taken a small blow. "How dare you question our god! The Great Dolgris has smelled the Wordsmith's scent! He has divined his Truths! Now, he tells us to place the Wordsmith within our sights! We must capture him and bring him before our god! Only then will Dolgris grant us a fourth portion of his Divine Power!"

"A fourth portion?" Cinculu repeats in disbelief, while standing back up. He doesn't appear offended by the humiliating way his mother slapped him, given how she held back her strength. "I thought we would never obtain such an opportunity again... if Dolgris grants us another of his boons, our species will rise to the apex!"

"Dolgris cannot grant his gifts blithely." The Matriarch says, rising to her full height. She looks down upon Cinculu with the same expression a man might give his foolish

puppy. "After the Valhallan Assault, he has nearly recovered to his full strength. The angels are gone. The Titans are dead. Finally, his hated enemies have vanished from the cosmos. Soon, Dolgris will elevate us all and rise to take back the power which was rightfully his. As his servants, we will rise along with him, and steal our place back in the galaxy! Those other errant Volgrim will regret not falling in line under our god! But he will grant them no clemency..."

Cinculu frowns. "What of the rumors that a new Archangel has appeared? Unarin's legions suffered a disastrous defeat. Is Dolgris aware of this... new entity?"

A few seconds pass. The Matriarch chuckles.

"Heh heh heh... a new entity, you say? It was none other than the return of an old fossil. The Cherubiim may have once posed our god a threat during the Primordial Era, but those days have long passed. Now, it is but a shell of its former self. The Archangels that remain are little more than errant souls, bound to bodies that are no longer their own. Their power has dissipated. The mighty strength they can summon is limited at best."

"Compared to our god? Heh heh heh..." The Matriarch laughs some more. "...The galaxy is not ready. When Dolgris next emerges, all shall fall to ruin at his *claws*."

Cinculu bows his head. "It is as you say, mother. Dolgris guides us to greatness. We are but pebbles before his presence..."

Part 394: Psionic Enclave

The world of Volgarius, in one of the seemingly infinite stratoscrapers somewhere on the planet.

Tired and fed up with the insanely boring bottom-level of Volgrim society, Hope ultimately manages to find a rare moment of privacy. He returns to his human form, then turns himself invisible and ethereal, like a ghost. He uses his Wordsmithing in a novel new way, allowing himself to gently glide around while adopting Jason's old form of three-dimensional infra-sonar vision.

Much like when Jason ended up crippled due to Amelia's sudden attack and became blind for a while, Hope materializes the world around him within his Mind's Eye, allowing him to see in a massive sphere of influence around himself. Like this, he begins 'swimming' around the city's skyline, taking care to avoid any high-level Psions he might encounter.

Hope travels from one titanic building to the next. Once he becomes capable of emerging into Volgarius's open air and leaving the cramped confines of its interior spaces, he truly begins to appreciate, respect, and even fear the Volgrim's level of civilization.

In the so-called Modern Era, the early 2000's, before Jason entered the cryopod, the tallest structures humanity could build, the absolute apex of their civilization, rarely broke a thousand feet in height. By contrast, the Volgrim's stratoscrapers stay true to their name by rising several miles in height and 'scraping' the upper atmosphere. At the tallest heights, Volgarius's air becomes so thin that it's impossible for unaugmented Technopaths, ordinary Changelings, or weak Psions to breathe.

As for Hope, he begins searching in a frenzy. He zips from one tower to another, musing over the ramifications of how eerily orderly Volgrim society is. The way they march from place to place like worker ants, lacking all passion or love for their feeble, useless lives.

It's only when he reaches his first 'middle zone' that Hope finally stumbles onto something interesting.

A Psionic Enclave.

Hope discovers this location by accident. Its buildings appear no different than any other, but when he detects a sudden increase in psionic senses sweeping an approaching area, Hope goes on the alert. He casts a dozen Words of Power to shield himself, then slowly drifts inside the building.

Upon entering, he finds floor after floor of First, Second, and Third Level Psions practicing their abilities. The higher up in the tower he goes, the more powerful the abilities they display.

Hope decides to use this opportunity to finally familiarize himself with how their powers function. Having never fought a Psion before, nor encountered them in a violent manner, like Jason did twice, Hope has no frame of reference for what they can do. He gently descends into one of their First Level enclaves and obscures himself in the corner of the room.

* * *

A hundred junior Psions, all of them below one thousand years old, sit cross legged on the floor of a dojo-like area, while a heavily armored Third Level Psion levitates before them. The leader of this training is someone named Raavul, a female Psion with bright yellow skin and blood-red eyes. Despite her fierce appearance, she actually has quite a soft and gentle demeanor.

The room's soft blue lighting contrasts with the violent paintings and images scrawled onto the wall behind Raavul. On these paintings, images of her minor feats as a Third Level Aspirator reveal a couple different conquests of undeveloped worlds. They also show her releasing her psionic power to clear away debris and rescue other Volgrim trapped in cave-ins and other minor operations.

[Welcome back, Bronze Initiators.] Raavul says, projecting her voice outward to her students. [We will be picking up where we left off, two cycles ago. Before we begin, have any of you made a breakthrough yet?]

Raavul sweeps her psionic sense across the classroom. The other Psions bow their heads, feeling slightly ashamed of their slow progress.

[None?] She questions. [That is to be expected. The path to mastering Psionics is a marathon, not a sprint. Those who attempt to hurry their progress will never achieve the ninth form of the Sinarii. This failure will result in a permanent failure to ascend to the Sixth Level, and as such, your hopes of reaching greater heights will come to an end.]

She turns to one of the male Psions, a blue-skinned fellow with equally blue eyes, wearing simple white robes.

[Dunal. For ten cycles, I have watched while you struggled to decide your Path. Have you yet determined which branch you would like to begin training in? Your first foray into the Illuvian Wastes revealed you hold a certain aptitude for Primal Psionics, as well as Liquid Psionics and Body Psionics. While these three may be among the most basic types a young Initiator can begin to learn, they are also simple to pick up and versatile on the battlefield. What say you?]

The male Psion, Dunal, shifts his posture uncomfortably.

[Aspirator Raavul. My mind is slow and my thoughts are muddled. I have been unable to decide which Path to take. I continually attempt to refine my Psionic Seed, but something seems to hold me back. As for the cause of my distress, I know not what it is.]

Raavul does not chide the young male. Instead, she merely nods at him and pauses for a moment to collect her thoughts.

[...You are not alone in your concerns. Ever since the Plague attacked, and especially in recent cycles, a sense of unease has grown in the seeds of many young Initiators. You fear that you will not be able to enhance your abilities quickly enough to assist the Founders in their efforts. You worry the Plague will strike at Volgarius, and that if you have trained yourself in the wrong Path, you will only burden our great leaders with your failure.]

The Aspirator turns away from her pupil to face an image of a single powerful female Psion, a drawing that stretches from the bottom of the wall to the top. Her rough obsidian skin and golden armor gives her a powerful aura, a sense of undefeatable prowess, as if nothing beneath the heavens could possibly stop her should she push herself to the limit.

[You have no need to concern yourself with such fears.] Raavul says, a hint of worship in her voice. [The Plague is powerful. It is fearsome. It is all-consuming. But it is not unstoppable. No-one in this room, not even me, has lived nearly long enough to witness the incredible feats of our revered Second Founder. Founder Dosena split the void. When the Sentinels attacked, she and her Ninth Level companions fought for tens of cycles, battering back the unstoppable machines of death, until ultimately putting them to rest for all eternity.]

Raavul continues. [You cannot begin to imagine the power our Second Founder possesses. Should the Plague reach our world, she will crush it without hesitation. At that

moment, even the Eighth Level Psions will be little more than leaves riding the wave of her spatial storms. None of you will ever be a player compared to her, so you need not concern yourself with such idle thoughts. You must only do your best and rise to the task of becoming the best warriors *you* can be.]

She turns to face her student. [Do you understand, Dunal?]

[I do.] Dunal says, bowing his head. [I apologize, Aspirator Raavul. I allowed my emotions to cloud my judgment. I...]

He pauses.

[...I will attempt to make my first breakthrough as a Primal Psion.]

[Excellent.] Raavul says, a hint of praise in her voice. [The most important choice you can make is any choice at all. By firming up your heart, you can choose your Path, then begin to form your Psionic Seed. Once you have solidified your Seed, you shall be able to walk beyond the realm of a mere First Level Psion and ultimately reach the second level.]

Another Psion student, a female with green skin, lifts up her head. [Aspirator Raavul. How long did you require to step from the First to the Second Level?]

[Nineteen hundred and forty-one cycles.] Raavul answers without missing a beat. [I was neither fast nor slow. Did you know? Executor Nufaris stepped from the First to the Second Level after a surprisingly long three thousand cycles. Later, when he first initiated contact with the primitive world of Earth, he was on the cusp of reaching the Sixth Level. Yet, just two hundred cycles afterward, he reached the Seventh Level. Can anyone here tell me what this indicates?]

The Aspirator glances around the room. Another student projects their thoughts outward.

[Aspirator Raavul. The Executor was able to make rapid progress due to the frequency of battles he engaged in with the mud-dwelling populace of humanity.]

[Indeed.] Raavul says. [He wisely chose not to immediately subjugate those errant Terrans, but instead to toy with them and use them as a whetstone for his troops. By constantly engaging in battle, Psions can quickly consolidate their Seeds and reach the next level. This should indicate to you that learning in a classroom might be a safe way to progress your Seed's consolidation, but it will always be far and away inferior to engaging in real battle. Only by placing your lives on the line can you properly reach your limits.]

She continues interviewing her students for a while, as Hope watches from a distant corner of the room, his body half-submerged in the ceiling. The Wordsmith's clone examines the Psions and listens intently to Raavul's teachings to enlighten himself better on how their powers work. Perhaps no Earthling has ever gotten such an intimate look at their society before now.

After an hour, Raavul levitates to the front of the classroom. [Next, you will demonstrate your comprehensions for me. Let us start with the Body Enhancers. There are thirteen of you in total. Step forward.]

At Raavul's orders, just over a dozen Psions, comprised of males and females of multiple different colors, all step to the front of the room. They stand obediently before their teacher, awaiting her words.

[There is no such thing as a useless branch of Psionics.] Raavul states. [Body Enhancers are often seen as 'thuggish' and 'brutish' compared to other Psions. Some may even wonder what the appeal is in enhancing one's body through their Seed when even Primal Psionics seem so much more robust. When the Dolgrimites and Ascended are such physically powerful warriors, why bother with elevating our own bodies instead of focusing on our unique strengths?]

Raavul snaps her attention to the thirteen before her. She addresses the first student, a gold-skinned female with surprisingly thick muscles and visibly elongated nails reminiscent of claws.

[Initiator Y'll. You are the most senior of your fellow Body Enhancers. Describe to your lessers what comprehensions you have uncovered, as well as the Path you have chosen.]

The gold-skinned Y'll nods. She turns around to face the other students, while lifting up her hand to show off her long claw-like nails.

[I am a Body Enhancer. I spent thirty cycles deciding what specialization best suited me. While raw strength is a common option, I decided to focus on rapid regeneration of my injured vessel, as well as nearly-indestructible cutaneous talons. My goal is to rip apart my enemies in battle and cause them to suffer sustained bleeding while also destroying their willpower as they fail to cause me lasting injury.]

[A bold choice.] Raavul says. [Unorthodox, even. Describe your reasoning. Why not evolve toward a more strength-oriented focus, as many other Psions do?]

[Strength wins competitions.] Y'ill responds. [But endurance wins wars. I hope to someday become an unkillable monster on the battlefield. I will serve the Founders by making my body immune to all known toxins, chemicals, and diseases. In the end, I wish to even make myself immune to the Plague.]

[Immune to the Plague!] Raavul exclaims, visibly surprised. She arches her eyebrows while gazing at Y'ill's backside. [We do not yet know how the Plague infects its victims, yet you profess your intent to become immune to its power. Do you think such a feat is a simple matter?]

[Simple? No, Aspirator Raavul. It will most likely fail. However, if I can transform myself at the cellular level through my Seed, perhaps I can assist the Founders by creating a genome that is immune to the Plague. In doing so, I will save countless lives. And if I fail, I will have no regrets! Because in the end, I am merely one of many. I am a tool that serves the Founders.]

Aspirator Raavul closes her eyes for a moment before opening them again.

[I contemplate, and I comprehend. Your Path is quite unique, Initiator Y'ill. Perhaps you will succeed, and perhaps you will fail, but I speak for all of us when I express hope in the former.]

She turns her attention to the next Psion, a male with black skin covered in white 'flecks' of color, as if someone splattered droplets of paint all across his body. The male Psion appears quite skinny and frail, as if he has never had a good bite to eat in all his life. His height puts him half a head above his peers, making him look like a lanky beanpole.

[Initiator Tarim.] Raavul says. [Describe to the others what comprehensions you have uncovered, as well as the Path you have chosen.]

The male, Tarim, shifts his feet positioning.

[My current form is incomplete. Compared to Initiator Y'ill, my comprehensions are shallow and unrefined. Nevertheless, I do have a specific goal in mind. I seek to make my body flexible and adaptable. I wish to be able to mold my figure into the shape of other beings as I please.]

[You seek to mimic the Changelings.] Raavul notes. [I do not approve of this choice. You are far from the first Psion to try. In the end, you are likely to break all of your bones

and reduce your Seed to ashes. Those who fail in their Path become cripples, useless to our great Empire! I would advise you to adjust your Path now, while you still can.]

[I understand the dangers and concerns.] Tarim says, paying Raavul's warning no mind. [I have always wished to uncover the secrets of the Changelings. I once learned that a Demon Emperor exists who can change his body into any form he wishes, at will, with hardly any delay. I envy this figure and wish to replicate his success; to prove that the Volgrim are not inferior to these alien mud-dwellers.]

[You speak of Emperor Belial.] Raavul notes. [But you have mixed up her gender. She is a female.]

[The data file I obtained was incomplete.] Tarim quickly explains. [It did not contain Emperor Belial's full identity, only her observed powers. I assumed she was a male due to her excessively high strength. I have made an error in my assumptions.]

[You have also belittled our Empire.] Raavul chides her student, frowning at his blunder. [The Volgrim Empire is not inferior to any mud-dweller in any way. Belial may possess some special abilities, but she is far from capable of matching up to us, her superiors. She is our inferior and should be treated as such! As adept an infiltrator as she may be, we would detect her demonic energy from ten parsecs away! She will never pose us a threat, and as such, we should not look to her for inspiration. You should reflect on your misstep and consider changing your path now, while there still is time.]

Tarim frowns. He starts to protest, but thinks better of it.

[...Understood, Aspirator Raavul. I contemplate, and I comprehend.]

Despite his agreeable words, Raavul shakes her head, clearly displeased with his conduct. Even among the mighty Volgrim, billions of Psions still ultimately fail to reach any level of success in their Path due to poor ideas and concepts about how to use their powers. They will never rise to become high-level Psions in their lifetime, and it is clear she thinks Tarim will fall to the same depths as those other failures.

Raavul continues grilling the next batch of Body Enhancers, revealing the surprising amount of depth in this one singular discipline of Psionics.

A blue-skinned male Psion. His Path: Dermal Armor capable of shrugging off tank rounds at point-blank range. Unfortunately, he is only able to conjure this incredible

armor on a small portion of his chest. Perhaps, when he reaches the Second Level, he will be able to do much more with it.

Next is a second gold-skinned Psion, but this time a male. He opts to go for simple brute strength, growing muscles that will allow him to rip apart sheets of steel with his bare hands. Despite the brutish nature of his power, Raavul only encourages him to test his limits.

He is followed by three more Psions who also pursue the path of brute strength, one of them focusing on the whole body, while the other two aim to strengthen their legs for the sake of executing mountain-shattering kicks or running at top speed.

There's even a specialized speedster who focuses on the strength of his internal organs along with his legs, all to ensure he can run as fast as possible.

As Raavul goes down the line, she praises some of the Body Enhancers while chiding others.

[Speed is an essential part of combat. However, an often overlooked element of body enhancement is none other than the brain! By focusing your Psionic Seed on your brain, you can think tens or even hundreds of times faster than others. In moments of extreme danger, you can slow your perception of the world to a crawl while a billion thoughts race through your mind. This is an essential skill for many Tactical Psions. Proctors and Legators, for instance, are the most common titles for Body Enhancers who opt to specialize in brain enhancement. Do not underestimate this branch of Body Enhancement, for Founder Dosena herself started off as a Brain Enhancer!]

Several of Raavul's students shake in surprise.

[Is that true?]

[The Second Founder was a Brain Enhancer?!]

[Of course.] Raavul says, blinking her eyes slowly. [Let me give you an important piece of advice. Brain Enhancers are often the deadliest Psions to face in battle. Not only are they quick thinkers who can unravel an entire combat situation within micro-units, but enhancing one's brain also aids them in mastering many other schools of Psionics. Some believe that the only way to become a Ninth Order Psion is through enhancing one's own mental faculties.]

Raavul pauses.

[But don't get any strange ideas. Enhancing the brain is a delicate and dangerous task. Most Psions lack a Body Enhancer aptitude, and those who do have it may inadvertently implode their brains by placing too much psionic pressure on their neurons. I only advise that one should try with the proper training and precautions taken first.]

Her cautionary words deflate the excitement of the Psions present. In this classroom, only thirteen of the students have any aptitude for Body Enhancing, and perhaps only two of them have the talent to focus on their brains. As for the rest, the possibilities range from slim to nonexistent.

[Alright. Go and take your seats.] Raavul says to her Body Enhancer students. [Next, I will call forth the Primals. There are twenty-two of you in total. Come up here and demonstrate your comprehensions.]

As the second group of students begins to make their way to the front of the classroom, Hope watches from afar, a faint smile resting on his lips.

How interesting. Jason doesn't know any of this. Nobody else does... only me. That will give me a big advantage, especially when none of the Volgrim know that I know how their powers work. Perhaps I can even put this knowledge to use by turning it against them in the future...

The Wordsmith settles in, ready to observe even more of the aliens as they go about demonstrating their powers, blissfully unaware of the creature lurking in the corner of their Psionic Enclave...

Part 395: Psionic Enclave

Aspirator Raavul guides the next group of students to the front of the class. This time, the ones she calls up are Primal Psions, and their numbers greatly exceed the Body Enhancers, with twenty-seven of them in total, consisting of more than a quarter of her entire class.

Hope levitates in the back corner of the room, keeping himself still while postulating different ideas about the structure of the Psion power dynamics. He privately wonders if Psions often choose to become Primals, or if Raavul herself simply enjoys lecturing on this specific branch.

What surprises Hope is that Initiator Y'll also joins the group of Primals. As the most talented Body Enhancer in the previous group, Hope finds himself baffled she would count herself among the Primals too.

Is she perhaps a dual specialist or something? Hope thinks. *Can Psions learn from multiple branches of Psionics?*

The Wordsmith's Clone isn't too sure how their powers work. Unlike Jason, Hope has never faced Psions in combat, and he doesn't have Solomon around anymore, or Raphael, to answer his questions. He can only ponder these things while he waits.

[Primal Psionics is the most elementary Path.] Raavul says, as she paces before her group of disciples, all of them standing at attention while she delivers her speech. [It is the easiest Path to walk, and the simplest to learn. If one chooses to specialize only in Primal Psionics, it will not be difficult for them to reach the Sixth or even the Seventh Level. Of course, becoming a Specialist means abandoning one's future foundation, so this is rarely advised. However, as per the recent directives passed down from our great Founders, we must focus on single and dual-discipline Psions moving forward, so as to assist the war effort.]

[Because Primal Psionics is easy to learn, some Psions think it must necessarily be one of the weakest disciplines.] Raavul says. [But that is a false notion! If any of you harbor such thoughts, cast them aside now. Primal Psionics, at the highest levels, can collapse worlds into singularities, obliterate cities, and fling moons about as if they were pebbles. It is the simplest and most direct way to wield psionic power through raw telekinesis!]

She turns to face the familiar gold-skinned female at the front of the Primal Psion student group.

[Initiator Y'ill. You are the most senior of your fellow Primal Psions, and the elite of this class. Most First Level disciples simply cannot accommodate two Paths at once, yet you have done so masterfully. Describe to the others the nuances of your chosen Path and why you have opted to become a dual-discipline Psion at such an early stage.]

The student nods. [My path of Primal Psionics has advanced smoothly, Aspirator. I chose to focus on highly condensed, energy-efficient bursts of telekinesis instead of the more common energy-consuming methods. Because my primary Path is focused on endurance, spending my limited energy in wasteful displays of strength would run counter to my goals of becoming a calm and measured warrior. I seek to cause the most destruction with the least wasted effort, as well as to assist my goals of becoming immune to the Plague at the cellular level.]

[Admirable, as always.] The Aspirator says, bobbing her head along lightly to her students words. [Describe to me the manner in which you would use your Primal Energy on the battlefield.]

[Teacher, I believe that outlasting an enemy will always result in winning a real-life battle. The reason we are losing ground to the Plague is because our enemy holds a clear advantage in how they are able to multiply their gains and reduce their losses. A single Plagueborn can bring ruin to an entire world; this allows them to expand at exponential speeds, which will ultimately overrun our defenses.]

She continues. [Similarly, my goal is to condense my psionic might to such a degree that small micro-bursts can tear through the toughest armor and the most solid alloys.]

[Like a railgun projectile.] Initiator Raavul notes, without much interest. [I see.]

She turns away from her student and looks at the image of Founder Dosena on the wall for a few long moments.

[Primal Psionics is the most common branch wielded by our great empire's forces. From the Fifth to Ninth level, the vast majority of Psions use it in some way, and they have all performed countless innovations. Your choice is hardly notable in that several acquaintances of mine have already condensed their Primal Energy in such a manner.]

She stops for a split-second before continuing.

[Nevertheless, I must also point out that Primal Psionics is only your supporting branch. Many aspiring geniuses have attempted to grab for too high of a ledge in their journey, only to stumble and lose their footing. Instead of trying to innovate with your Primal Psionics, you chose a common and ordinary Path, and as such, will not need to devote much mental energy into creating anything new. In this manner, you can focus on innovating your Body Enhancements to the highest possible level.]

[This is an excellent choice!] Raavul concludes, turning to face the rest of her class. [You should all take great care to learn from your senior Initiator! Slacking in your studies and traveling the simplest route is typically not commendable, but when you are already devoting your time to innovating in one Branch, you should not try to do so in another as well. Your Seed can only accommodate so much potential in the early stages of your training.]

She turns back to Initiator Y'll, who bows her head in gratitude. [I offer my thanks for your words of wisdom, Aspirator. I contemplate, and I comprehend.]

[Do not become complacent.] Raavul warns. [While you have performed admirably so far, pride is the greatest enemy to any aspiring Psion. You may become full of yourself, acting as if you cannot fail. But I assure you! Even the brightest star can exhaust its fuel. And so too can you exhaust your potential if you lose sight of your goals.]

Having finished with her best student, Raavul turns to the second in line.

[Initiator Lufa. Explain to the others what Path you walk, and how you have chosen to manifest it.]

Lufa, a green-skinned Psion with polka-dot patches of black all across his body, bows his head respectfully.

[Many Psions pledge themselves to the Way of War. I have chosen to walk a different Path. I believe that my calling has led me to pursue the most delicate use of my abilities, Total Control. I will use my telekinetic power to shift reality in the smallest of ways. I will pursue the path of science and help the war effort by repairing and maintaining our valuable but delicate technology.]

Raavul frowns. [You speak as if you are a Technopath. Indeed, there are many who seek to amplify their control of telekinesis so they they can manipulate reality delicately, but I've not heard of a self-respecting Psion who pursued matters of technology too greatly. It is not 'Our' task to pursue.]

[I know.] Lufa says, slowly blinking his eyes. [I do wish I were born a Technopath. I admire their pursuit of fleshmelding and steel. Perhaps many may call me an aberrant, but I cannot in good conscience walk a Path I do not believe in.]

The more Lufa talks, the darker his teacher's expression becomes. Hope can practically see the anger on her face.

'Why can't I have more excellent students like Y'll?!' Her face seems to say. *'My class is filled with troublemakers!'*

Still, she keeps her thoughts silent on this matter, merely opting to shake her head. [A focus on technology is not the right path for a Psion. I imagine your journey will fail, and that time will approach much faster than you can fathom. As for your actual focus, improving your control of telekinesis is not such a bad-]

In the middle of Raavul talking, the door to her Enclave suddenly opens up, and a tall, masculine-looking Psion decked out in fancy black-colored Armor walks in, his swagger filled with cockiness and bravado for all to see.

[Aspirator Raavul!] The male booms, his voice significantly louder and more boisterous than hers. [I bring glad tidings! A new student, just for you!]

Raavul, visibly annoyed by the interruption, swivels on her heel to scowl at the intruder. [Educator Norim! Of *course* it would be you. My classroom already has one hundred Initiators. I have no room for more. Begone!]

The smug prick of a Psion sneers at her, then waves his hands and steps aside, revealing a younger Psion of indeterminate age standing behind him, one with a camouflage-like pattern of red and blue all across his body.

[Do not refuse so hastily! This seedling was 'formed' by none other than Proctor Landis! His name is Ferral, and he is... flawed. Something went wrong during his Osmosis. So, it will be up to you to rehabilitate him. What fortune the Proctor is showing you! It is truly a stroke of luck for you to receive such an opportunity!]

Every word Educator Norim speaks reeks of sarcasm and condescension. Raavul's face turns uglier and uglier as she listens.

[Do not think you can force me to do as you please, *Educator*.] Raavul snaps. [My Enclave is full. I will accept no more disciples until one has graduated. Not even a Proctor can flaunt the rules.]

Educator Norim pauses for a moment and frowns. Then, he slaps his forehead, narrowly avoiding poking out his six eyes.

[Oh, how foolish of me! Of course, I forgot to mention the other *item* on my agenda. One of my students has just graduated, and as such, you and I will be conducting a *Disciple Shift*. It seems I must regretfully accept the burden of taking away one of your students!]

Raavul's yellow skin loses some of its color. She pales as she realizes Norim's true ploy.

[This... this conduct is unacceptable! I will report this to... to the Proctor Panel!]

[Ah, but the shift has already been approved.] Norim says, clearly delighted by the pain on Raavul's face. [Initiator Y'ill! Step forward! You will be transferring into my class!]

Raavul balls her hands into fists as her best student dutifully walks over to Educator Norim's side. She fights back the urge to strike at the Educator in a fit of rage, knowing doing so will only result in a bad outcome. But even so, his loathsome laughter rings in her mind, bouncing around as if to deliberately cause her distress.

[Ha ha ha!] Norim laughs, while clapping his new female student's shoulder. [I suppose I will have to accept this moderately talented Body Enhancer into my Enclave! While she does not stack up to the best of my current students, her talent is adequate. Best of luck with the upcoming Educator Assessment, Aspirator Raavul. I certainly hope your ranking will not prove laughable!]

Aspirator Raavul glances at the new student being thrust upon her. She shakes with rage at this unjust treatment.

Suddenly, as if making up her mind, she takes a step toward Norim.

Instantly, the Educator's laughter stops.

The Enclave falls silent.

Both Psions gaze at one another with fierce eyes. They flinch and tremble as something unseen occurs.

Hope frowns, unsure of what's happening. Seeing the two Psions standing just five feet apart while they both stare at each other, Hope hasn't the faintest idea what's happening.

After a moment, he decides to take a risk. "**Telepathy.**"

His voice becomes muffled by the stealth magic surrounding him, to the point the students just twenty feet ahead of him don't hear even a whisper in the air.

His mind locks onto the two Psions as he delicately listens and discovers they have changed to a private telepathic dialogue, beaming their thoughts directly into each other's minds.

[-take me for some weakling you can push around!] Raavul roars. Her words aren't merely thoughts, but projections of energy she sends flying into Norim's Mind Realm, attacking him with her words. [I have friends in high places! I will make you pay for stealing my student!]

[Try all you want!] Norim fires back, causing one of Raavul's eyes to tremble. [We may both be Third Rankers, but I have achieved greater success than you! I am a superior Educator who has earned my stripes! There is no fairness, only the glory we earn for ourselves! Perhaps you should have spent more time training your students instead of leaving them to fumble around for several cycles at a time. Then the Proctors might be showing YOU such favor!]

[My teaching method was approved by the Proctor Panel!] Raavul retorts, intensifying her psionic strength as she forces Norim to take a step backward. [You may have performed some 'favours' for Proctor Landis, but he is only one of many! The other Proctors who will punish you for defying the Founder's rules in such a flagrant manner!]

[To support the teacher who raised a Fourth Level student while being only at the Third Level himself, or to support you, a failure of subpar talents... which one do you think the Proctors will truly favor?!] Norim asks, taunting Raavul further. [Give up. You will never advance to the Fifth Level. Your journey will end at the Fourth, and perhaps not even that. If you truly had a warrior's heart, you'd challenge me to a Comprehension of the Sinarii. Not this soft, weak mental sparring even the Second Rankers wouldn't stoop to.]

Finally, Raavul hesitates. Faced with Norim's barely concealed challenge, she stops to think about whether or not she should challenge him.

Has he reached the Fifth Level of the Sinarii? Or is he still at the Fourth? If I guess wrong, I'll end up humiliated, and he can shuffle our classes around as he pleases. He'll toss me all his worst disciples and take what's left of my remaining decent ones...

The more she thinks about challenging Norim, the less Raavul wants to do so.

A full minute passes while Raavul's willpower begins to weaken. Norim maintains his haughty expression and even pushes back against her, weakening her determination further.

Ultimately, Raavul takes a step back and ceases her psionic pressure. She turns away, too angry to look him in the eye, and perhaps even a little afraid.

[Hah.] Norim says out loud once again. [So this is all an *Aspirator* amounts to. Come, Initiator Y'll. We take our leave.]

The gold-skinned student nods deferentially. Hope quickly realizes the students don't have any agency in the teachers they're placed under, but instead are assigned to them via some unknown group known as the Proctor Panel. Even so, Y'll doesn't appear too broken-up about this unexpected shift in teachers.

She politely bows to Raavul. [I offer my thanks for your teachings, Aspirator Raavul. I will remember everything you have told me.]

[Go in peace.] Raavul says, turning away in disgust. She doesn't fail to notice a gleam of excitement in her student's eye at the thought of joining Educator Norim's Enclave. Clearly, Y'll would prefer to train under a 'superior' teacher if she had the choice.

Without another word, Norim turns and strides out of the room with his new prize in tow. Before he leaves, he fires off one last jab.

[Goodbye, Aspirator! I look forward to seeing your results at the Educator Assessment!]

He and Y'll vanish, leaving Raavul behind with her new student.

The formerly wise-seeming Aspirator now resembles a deflated football. She turns to glance at her sorry group of disciples, all of them vastly inferior to Norim's Enclave, and loses even more of her spirit.

[...What is done, is done.] Raavul says, quietly accepting her lot in life.

She turns to her unwilling new student, someone who clearly isn't excited about being placed in her class either.

[Initiator Ferral. How far along are you in your Path?]

The red-and-blue Psion, Ferral shakes his head. [Proctor Landis formed me, but he was not a good teacher. Not at all! He explained the concepts of Psionics several times,

but his words were just a bunch of gibberish!]

[I find that hard to believe.] Raavul says. [Countless great Psions have studied under Proctor Landis before advancing to the Sixth Level. He is a renowned Educator, one who even I wish I could learn from.]

She stares at Ferral's face.

[Norim stated that you were 'flawed.' What was the meaning behind his words?]

[I am not flawed.] Ferral decisively states. [The Proctor merely does not like my... opinions.]

[And what opinions would those be?] Raavul asks.

Ferral crosses his arms over his chest. [...Psionics are awful! So boring! I cannot believe I will have to spend thousands and thousands of cycles just to reach some lauded level of power. What a waste of time!]

[A waste of time?!] Raavul asks, aghast. She steps back from Ferral, as if he were radioactive. [Your words are heresy! There is no greater cause than pledging yourself in service to the Founders!]

[That's right!] One of her students chimes in. [Who do you think you are, implying we who study hard are wasting our time? You really are defective!]

[Lazy Initiator. You will get nowhere in life.] Another student adds.

The young Ferral scoffs at his critics. [I speak no lies. I would much rather go outside and gaze up at the sky than wither away inside these walls. Unfortunately for me, I was formed on this cold, dead, lifeless world. I was not allowed to live life as I pleased, but forced into servitude for 'Founders' I will never meet in all my life. I wish to travel to other worlds and observe their beauty. I don't want to spend my time amassing power for power's sake!]

[We need power to fight back the Plague!] Raavul retorts. [Who are you to call into question the commands of our glorious Founders?]

[Founders, this. Founders, that.] Ferral snorts. [Why do you think we have to fight the Plague anyway? It was our constant expansion that attracted the Plague's attention. Proctor Landis showed me a recording of a speech the First Founder gave in which he told us the Plague is actually a group of aliens from outside our galaxy! They have invaded us because our probes alerted them to our presence! If we were not so greedy and simply

learned to love the galaxy we live in, we would not need to train and fight in such destructive wars!]

[Insolence!] Raavul roars. [I will not listen to another word. Take a seat and remain silent!]

[Humph. You fear my words because your allegiance to the Founders was beaten into you over your entire life.] Ferral says. [As for me, I refuse to allow myself to sink below the level of a mud-dweller. I question the laws that govern me, for I had no say in their creation!]

Hope, watching from afar, chuckles to himself.

Damn. Seems even the Volgrim have hippies. And here I thought they were all just a bunch of stiffs.

Raavul eventually shoves Ferral into a seat, and he shuts up, not bothering to voice his unpopular opinions any longer.

After silencing him, Raavul groans to herself. She takes a moment to collect herself, then turns to face her class.

[...Since Ferral is a brand new Initiate, even if he is unwilling to learn, I am still obligated to conduct a lecture on the basics of training one's Psionic Seed. Ferral, I do not wish to hear your opinions on the nature of our existence. Save your foolish ramblings for some other group of imbeciles. If you have questions pertaining to the lecture, speak up. Otherwise, remain silent. For the rest of you, it never hurts to brush up on your basics, especially as you have not yet reached the Second Level.]

Once again, Raavul assumes a dignified posture, though she appears much more tired than before. As the Primal Psions from earlier return to their seats, she begins to speak.

[Forging a Psionic Seed is not a sprint, but a marathon...]

Part 396: Mara's Crimes

Mara, the Duke of Collection, assists more than two hundred humans in a new construction project as they rapidly build up a brand new apartment complex, just as shiny and beautiful as all the others in the nearby vicinity. This particular structure, located on the northwestern side of the Fortress of Retribution's outer limits, sits nestled amidst a half-dozen other similarly designed structures, with its western side facing Tarus II's rising sun and its eastern side the waning daylight.

Built via a mixed-development style of city planning, it features pedestrian roads weaving throughout the infrastructure with little room for motorized vehicles, but plenty of room for beasts of burden and bicycles, the most efficient and low-cost form of transportation, outside of foot traffic.

As Mara leaves to take a break while her human friends finish the last ten percent of the structure with their fancy construction drones and other such things, she pauses to admire the technological marvels she has helped build, as well as the clean and efficient design of the growing city. Already, enough housing to fit sixty million people has been built, and now humanity is rapidly finishing up what it needs to house The Respected when the Lazarus Tower revives them over the coming days.

"You know... maybe I was wrong about the humans..." Mara muses to her sister, Ying-Ying, as they sit on a park bench and take in the sights.

Ying-Ying snacks on a tasty pastry, a donut she bought with a tenth of a Merit Point from a nearby store. The chocolate and sprinkles stick to her lips while she moans in delight.

"Yeah, sis! Me too! I never even knew humans could do stuff like this. Look at how quickly they work and how cool their houses seem. They're even better than your new residence on Hell Harbor!"

"Well. The buildings are superior here, sure, but the apartments and rooms are quite a bit smaller." Mara says. "Though now that we don't have any human slaves on Hell Harbor, we've had to put Demon Grunts to work for the rebuilding efforts. Unlike working on Tarus II though, they can't earn any Merit Points, so they tend to complain a lot."

"Yeah. Plus us demons are just... not nearly as good at all this building stuff." Ying-Ying says. "I've been using my portals to help transport supplies, but I only earned 50 Merit Points over the last couple of weeks. Too many Warpers can already do what I do. The competition is stiff as heck!"

She pauses.

"Oh, right. Have you earned a thousand Merit Points yet, sis? I can't wait for you to earn a chance at becoming an Emperor. It's so easy compared to the old ways. Eating souls always was a little *icky*, in retrospect."

Mara shrugs. "I only have about six hundred. Still a ways to go. Since I only just became a Duke, I'll likely need to enter the Belial Booster a few more times to advance, so the true cost will be closer to three or four thousand points..."

"I hear the Emperors are starting to get antsy." Ying-Ying says. "The humans added Kiari to their Emperors recently. That prompted the Hidden Emperors to debate over skimming five or ten percent of the merit points off the tops of their minion's wallets. They might take as much as sixty points from you!"

"Truly?" Mara asks, frowning. "You've got to be kidding me. Those greedy bastards! I worked my tail off earning my Merit Points. So did you! Who do they think they are, stealing from us?"

"They're getting desperate to power up their Hells before the others. Rather than waiting for their most talented Dukes to level to Emperor, they'd rather skim a few points off the top to boost their favorites." Ying-Ying explains. "Or so Grandma Ahriman says. She keeps in contact with all the Emperors."

"At least Warpers know to stay neutral in this cold-civil war." Mara says. "If the Hell of Calamity picks a fight with anyone, I'll be expected to join the battle. I am a Duke now, after all."

"Yeah..." Ying-Ying says, her expression deflating. "I can't wait to become a Lord. Or even a Baron."

"Hm? Why do you look so sad, then?" Mara asks.

"Well, it's just..."

Ying-Ying pauses.

"...I've always felt like I was living in your shadow, sis. We come from the same broodmother and all, but you've gotten so powerful, and I'm still stuck as a Grunt. I'm just not good with all that fighting stuff, so I couldn't collect any souls. But you, you started out as an Oracle and got noticed by Yumagi. You've always raced ahead, while I stayed behind..."

"There's no shame in being a Warper." Mara says. "Of all the Grunts you could have evolved into, you became the one that was most in demand. Everyone wants the services of a Warper. There are plenty of them, yet not enough to fully meet demand, so every Emperor would want to befriend you."

"Yeah, sure, you say that!" Ying-Ying protests. "But they also don't want Warpers to evolve any further! They always have some excuse to stop us from progressing. We can't all be like Emperor Yadrat, who made his way up the ranks to become a 'Super Warper,' basically. So the Emperors leave us in limbo. And now we finally have a way to change it, but they still want to scrape our freaking Merit Points right off the top! It's so infuriating!"

As Ying-Ying shouts out her frustrations, a pair of human women walk past. One of them is Linda Hurent, and the other is one of her friends.

"Hey Mara! Hey Ying-Ying!" Linda says. "Thanks for all the help today! You guys are doing great work!"

Her friend nods. "You're both awesome! Me and Linda are going to get some snacks. Wanna join us?"

Ying-Ying pauses her ranting to smile helplessly at the two women while holding up her half-eaten pastry. "Sorry, I'm already eating. Raincheck for tomorrow, maybe?"

"I'll hold you to it!" Linda laughs.

She and her friend continue on their way, while Ying-Ying smiles sardonically and turns back to her sister.

"...I used to hate humans, you know. The Emperors always told us they were stupid, and weak, but they're actually all really nice. They're efficient, deadly, and can do anything if they put their minds to the task. Compared to them, I feel like we demons are... lacking."

"I know what you mean." Mara says back, as her thoughts momentarily darken. "I've... done some things I'm not proud of. Things I now regret. But there's no way I can just talk

about them. They hang over my head like a dark cloud..."

"You mean Stormbringer?" Ying-Ying asks. "You didn't... hurt anyone, did you? I thought you only acted in an auxiliary role?"

Mara sighs. "Well, I-"

She pauses mid-sentence, as a familiar demonic aura draws her attention. Turning to the right, she blinks in surprise when she sees Belial approaching her, along with Blinker, Phoebe Hiro, and some random man she's never seen before.

"Oh! Samantha!" Ying-Ying chirps. "Hey, nice to see you! And you too, Phoebe, Blinker. What's up?"

She continues to smile, but something about the blank expressions on the faces of the other three women gives her pause.

Belial and Blinker stop a short distance away, while Phoebe takes a few steps past them, then crosses her arms in front of her chest.

"Mara. I can't *believe* your guts. You're under arrest for crimes against humanity."

Mara's expression pales. "W-what? What are you talking about?"

"Admit everything. Now." Phoebe snaps. "And out of respect for the good you've done over the past few weeks, I'll lighten your sentence. Otherwise, if you make me say it..."

Several seconds pass.

Mara's mouth hangs open in shock, as if she can't believe the thing she was just about to tell her sister has already come to pass.

However, it doesn't take long for her to regain her senses. She closes her mouth, then her eyes, and bows her head. She balls up her hands into loose fists and rests them in her lap.

"...You found out after all."

"That's not good enough." Phoebe icily says. "Say it. *Specifics*."

Mara slowly nods.

"During Stormbringer. Ose... sent me on a mission."

Ying-Ying turns from Phoebe and the others to look at her sister. "A mission?"

"Yeah. She wanted me to... infiltrate the city." Mara explains, while slowly opening her eyes. She dully stares at the ground while she speaks. "Specifically, she wanted me to capture the Wordsmith's daughter, and his wife, if possible."

Ying-Ying slowly nods. "You told me that part..."

"Well. I did more than that while I was there." Mara says, exhaling deeply. "I... destroyed a ship with many people on it. One of the space-vessels. I don't know how many were inside... but the number was enormous."

Phoebe's breathing catches when she hears Mara admit her wrongdoings. Her eyes redden. She looks away, unable to form a coherent response, even while Mara continues talking.

"...Then I made my way to Phoebe's position." Mara explains. "Her daughter was also there at the time, along with a squad of troopers. I fought them. I killed them all. And during that battle, the little girl revealed several shocking abilities. She was a trueblooded hero, just like the Wordsmith himself. She even summoned those Titans and that Hydra."

"You BITCH!" Belial finally explodes, unable to contain her rage. "You've really got some nerve, Mara! You said NOTHING and just accepted my power for free! You've been living it up here after killing so many of my friends! I ought to rip out your heart and stomp on your corpse right this instant!"

Belial's shouted words draw the attention of several people and demons in the park. Linda Hurent, having only walked a short distance away with her friend, turns back after hearing Belial's roar of rage.

"What's going on?"

"That was Samantha's voice. Did something happen?"

"Let's have a look! She almost never gets angry at anyone!"

Several bystanders run or wander over, curious about the commotion. When they arrive, Phoebe merely glowers at the woman who tried to kill her and her daughter. She holds up her hand, and a projection beams out of it into the air above her.

It reveals a short video recording of the last Covenant ship with 100,000 civilians on board being obliterated by some unseen enemy.

The crowd gasps in shock. Linda Hurent, having already looked up information on the destroyed ship, frowns slightly as she begins to piece together what must be happening.

Could Mara have been involved in the loss of that ship?

After playing the first clip, Phoebe plays another one, and this one proves even more damning. It shows a dragon-like Mara roaring at Daisy and trying to kill her while splattering the brave men and women surrounding Phoebe's helpless, comatose body. Her act of shouting out the names of Tarot Cards proves just as damning as the clear and recognizable sound of her voice.

Ying-Ying's eyes flicker with disbelief. She looks at her sister in horror.

"M-Mara! It can't be... you didn't really..."

"I did." Mara says quietly. "I'd say 'I'm sorry,' but those words would surely ring hollow, and they can't bring anyone back. I'd say I was only following orders, but Ose didn't order me to attack that ship. I did it on my own as a matter of 'convenience.' I... don't deserve to defend myself."

Phoebe's expression lightens, but only by the tiniest amount.

"At least you admitted your faults. I guess that's something worth praising. But it doesn't absolve you of anything. As the standing commander of humanity in Jason's absence, I hereby place you under arrest for the vile actions you committed against humanity, but even more importantly, *my friends*. Samantha, take her."

For a brief moment, Mara ponders running away. Belial might be able to fly, but Mara can still make a quick escape if she activates the right Tarot Cards, even while only being a Duke.

But in the end, seeing the looks of judgment from the nearby bystanders, as well as the pain on their faces, she can't bring herself to do such a thing.

She quietly stands up, her head lowered.

"...I'll go quietly."

From behind her, Mara even hears Linda Hurent whispering to her friend.

"I thought she was a good person. But in the end... she was even more vile than the average demonic war-criminal. She's barely a step removed from Beelzebub himself! I can't believe I respected her..."

Mara winces, but says nothing. She obediently walks up to the rage-filled Belial and sighs.

"Do what you will."

Belial sneers. "Do you think by playing humble and sweet that you'll get a lighter sentence?! I hate two-faced people like you. I might change my body to blend in with a populace, but compared to you, I am truly an *amateur* in the art of lying."

The man standing behind Belial glares coldly at Mara.

"I'll bet you don't even remember me, demon whore. I just so happen to be one of the people you murdered. The rest of my squad can't come back, either. Mephisto devoured them! So now I have to live with what you DID for the rest of my life."

Mara glances at the man. She stares him in the eyes for a moment before nodding.

"Sorry."

Without any further fanfare, Belial walks behind Mara and marches her away, walking her off to the south, in the direction of the Stormbringer war criminal prison complex.

After she leaves, Ying-Ying remains seated on the bench, tears welling up in her eyes as she struggles not to cry. She sniffles and whimpers, staring lifelessly at the pastry held in her hand.

"Mara... Mara... she can't be... she wouldn't... *aaooo*... sniff..."

Instead of pity, the bystanders look at Ying-Ying with expressions of disgust.

"I wonder if even one of the apples falls far from the tree." Linda says, narrowing her eyes at the sobbing Ying-Ying. "Are you hiding things from us too?!"

"We've uncovered no evidence of any wrongdoing from Ying-Ying." Phoebe says. "...But that doesn't mean we won't. Ying-Ying, I had BETTER not find out you're just as wicked as that sister of yours, or your end won't be any better than hers!"

Without any further words, Phoebe and the others disperse, giving only one last look at the woman weeping over her sister.

Linda shakes her head as she looks at her friend.

"To think Mara had us all gleefully dancing to the tune of her lies. Maybe Neil is even more right about the demons than we thought..."

Elsewhere on Tarus II, a beautiful demoness with long white hair sits on a rock far from the Fortress of Retribution's confines. She leans forward and casually gazes out at the world before her with a distant, ethereal look on her face.

Her identity? None other than Bael, the Duke of Pain.

Still just as trapped in Ose's body as ever, the big galunk seems much more somber than usual. His eyes are unfocused, gazing not at the world before him, but a strange space located elsewhere, perhaps a place nobody in the universe has ever seen while still alive.

"Hehe... so many pretty lights..." Bael mumbles idly.

He continues staring at the 'pretty lights' for a while, but ultimately blinks his eyes and returns to reality, unsure of what he was even looking at. Just as quickly as he was entranced, he immediately forget about their existence, his five-second attention span already well-past the matters previously on his mind.

"Man. What am I s'posed to do anymore?" Bael wonders.

"I ain't got no powers. Ain't got nothing to do."

"Maybe I oughta go and play some Sticks and Bones with the fellas."

"Eh... but they look at me all *weird* now that I've got tits. Some of the fellas even made a pass at me."

"Jeez, it's such a *drag* having a hot ass. People thirst over me even more than they used to. It's crazy..."

Bael glances at his frail, delicate, pretty-looking hands. For a brief moment, he waxes nostalgic about the old days.

He remember the two times he fought the Archdemon.

He thinks about his battle against Hercules, when he first turned into the Balrog.

He especially remembers how other demons used to look up to him.

"...But now I ain't nothin'. Just some washed up old coot." Bael sighs. "Ain't strong anymore. Ain't tough anymore. The fellas barely even talk to me. Were they even *my* friends? Maybe they only liked me because I was strong. They didn't like me for *me*."

Facing this existential crisis, tears well up in Bael's eyes.

"Satan's gone. Deebs is out. Shax is dead. Murmur's a slave. Artorias got offed. Even Beelzebrat's just... man. Why I gotta be the last one left? Maybe I should just..."

Bael turns his head to the side. He glances up at a tall, sheer cliff. It rises hundreds of feet into the air.

"...Problem is, I'd probably still survive. Then I'd just lay there with a bunch of broken bones. That'd suck. Maybe there's a better way to do *it*."

As Bael's thoughts turn dark, he fails to notice someone approaching him.

"Oh my GOSH! There you ARE, Bael!" Abby, the Baron of Happy Thoughts exclaims. "I've been looking EVERYWHERE for you! What the hell are you doing out here all by yourself?!"

Slightly startled, Bael quickly blinks his eyes twice to force back his tears, then turns to look at Abby while flashing her a forced smile.

"Oh, hey 'Abs.' What's up? Ain't seen you for a while."

"I've been looking for you for over a WEEK!" Abby shouts, clearly somewhat pissed, yet also visibly relieved. "I need your help, Bael!"

Bael stares at her for a moment, then shakes his head and looks away.

"...Nah. Go bug someone else. I can't help you. Or anyone else. I'm useless."

Abby blinks twice. She pauses a few feet away from Bael, then frowns.

"Is something wrong, Bael? You seem... different."

The Duke of Pain sighs.

"I... I dunno. I feel useless now, ya know? Nobody wants to hang out with dumb old Bael. I'm just some weakling goober now. It's better if I stay out of the way so I won't bother anyone."

"Don't say that!" Abby cries, walking over to sit on the boulder beside him. "Everyone loves you, Bael. You're a legend!"

"Sure. A legend." Bael repeats, paying her compliment no heed. "An old legend. Ain't nothing left of that guy anymore. Now I'm only some little pussy who cries if he stubs his toe."

"That's not true." Abby says sternly. "You're a brave warrior. Even if you don't have your old powers, you can still become amazing again! You have Ose's body. You just need

to learn how to use it to its fullest potential!"

"But what if I don't wanna?" Bael asks, turning to look at her seriously. "You don't get it, Abby. All my friends are gone. They're dead now. And if they ain't dead, they might as well be. Even Deebs... if last time is anything to go by, it'll be centuries before he wakes up."

He turns away.

"I ain't got nobody left. None of my old friends."

Abby's heart sinks. Seeing Bael's truly despondent expression, she realizes the situation is much more serious then she expected.

"You can't talk like this, Bael. Happy thoughts! Happy thoughts!"

Abby activates her powers, beaming rainbows into Bael's mind, causing him to think about much lighter topics.

"What do you live for, Bael?!" Abby asks, standing up and shouting at him. "Think about what you still have! Doggies! Kitties! You still like those, right? Why not start a big animal sanctuary to play with puppies and kittens all day, huh?! That's worth living for! You can be a cool guy who takes care of animals that need help!"

Bael smiles. "Hehe. Puppies and kittens. Yeah. I do like them!"

"That's the spirit!" Abby chirps. "And I can do you one even better! I have a present for you, something you'll really like. Don't you want to be super strong again? Ose made a special armor in secret. It's designed just for her body... but you can use it too!"

"Special armor?" Bael says, his tone contemplative. "Well... hm. It doesn't look like some girly princess thing, does it?"

"No, no, it doesn't!" Abby says. "Believe it or not, it's wicked cool, with a black color scheme and two HUGE shoulder spikes. You'd look totally badass if you wore it!"

"Hmm."

Bael thinks about her offer for all of two seconds.

"...Well, alright. I wanna see this armor if you think it's that cool. It's not like I have anything better ta' do."

"Awesome. You won't regret it!" Abby says, grabbing Bael's arm and pulling him to his feet. "Now, come on, come on! Let's go! I can't wait to see you wear it!"

"Alright, already. I'm coming, girl. Sheesh!" Bael laughs.

Seeing Abby cling to him makes him feel touched inside. For the first time since his transference into Ose's body, he actually feels *wanted*. Someone wants to help him out with no ulterior motives.

Maybe this armor thingy will bring me back into my prime... Bael thinks. *That'd be pretty sick!*

At the same time, Abby quietly giggles to herself.

Oh, how exciting! Soon, I can talk to my precious Ose again! This is going to be WONDERFUL!

Part 397: Bael's Return

Abby skips along gaily while excitedly chattering to Bael about this or that. When they pass through the Warpgate into the Core, several people give Bael dirty looks and vicious glares, no doubt due to his perfect facsimile of Emperor Ose. Even though everyone knows he's actually Bael, they can't help feeling resentment over his disgusting appearance.

Abby shoots surreptitious glances at the humans around her, and a bit of her happiness deflates.

These people hate Bael! Or rather, they hate Ose... but no doubt, such vile looks would be the cause of his depression earlier!

At the same time, Bael also notices the looks people are giving him, though his reaction is... a little different.

"Damn that's crazy. I sure am popular today. Look at all the people staring at me! Hehe. It sure is nice to be noticed!"

The Duke of Pain obviously chalks up the human's attitudes to thinking of him as a 'big threat,' and so, his ego manages to recover ever so slightly, making him puff up his chest. Though, in doing so, he makes Ose's 'assets' more visible, which draws gazes of a *different* kind.

It doesn't take long before the two demons ditch the Core and its personnel entirely. The two of them pass the human inspection team, enter the Labyrinth, and make their way toward the distant hidden alcove Ose created a long time ago.

It takes them a full day of walking to reach the location. Thanks to their inherent demonic intuition regarding the Labyrinth's passageways, they don't need a map to navigate its twisting hallways.

As they walk, Bael passes countless demons and monsters. Some of them nod politely at him, but many barely even acknowledge his presence. Bael frowns as he remembers how, in the past, many demons and monsters would excitedly chase after him, looking up to him as the biggest, baddest demon in all of the Seven Hells.

His determination firms up as he steels his mind.

"I gotta get me that sweet armor. Maybe it'll make me all kick-butt again. Then I can be awesome like before!"

Eventually, he and Abby arrive at a seemingly empty hallway somewhere in the Labyrinth's distant reaches. She holds up the special ring Ose gave her, then activates all the demonic runes that appear as a result.

The wall slides open, and the two of them step inside.

Immediately, Abby's blood turns to ice when ADAM begins walking toward her. His dual red irises lock onto her face, and his fearsome metal exterior causes her heart to palpitate. Even though she knows ADAM is friendly, she can't help but fear the Automated Demon Assistant Mechanoid.

Abby turns to look at Bael, worrying he might be scared out of his wits, too.

Instead, Bael takes a full three seconds to notice the robot when it walks up to and towers over him. When he does notice, Bael turns to look at ADAM and frowns.

"Hey, pal. You mind? A little personal space, yeah? Also what the hell happened to you? Where'd all your skin go, bro?"

ADAM examines Bael's body for two seconds before formulating a response.

"Demon Duke Bael. Your soul is currently possessing the body which previously belonged to Master Ose."

Bael blinks twice. "That wasn't much of an answer. Aw, fuck it. I already forgot the question."

"Duke Bael. My designation is ADAM. I am the Automated Demon Assistant Mechanoid. I was created to render service for Master Ose, especially in the event of her soul's material demise. My primary functions are-"

"Sorry, what did you say?" Bael asks, blinking his eyes heavily. "I kinda zoned out there for a minute. Never mind, I don't care. Anyway, Add-Dumb or whatever, I'm here for the armor thingy. It'd be great if you could stop yapping for five seconds and bring me to it. Thanks!"

Abby stares at Bael in shock.

Incredible! Bael isn't fazed at all by the scary metal monster! He has a spine made out of demonstone! Nothing bothers him at all!

She quickly shakes those awe-filled thoughts out of her head before turning to ADAM.

"Can you take us to Ose's special armor please? Bael really wants to see it! After he puts it on, I can finally talk to my precious-wecious Ose again!"

ADAM's irises shift to Abby, making her reflexively take a step back. **"Affirmative. Master Ose's plans are all to ensure Bael obtains the Matriarch Armor. Do not worry. I absolutely must complete my mission. My programming does not allow for disobedience."**

ADAM turns to the teleportation formation. As the robot begins to activate its functions, Bael shakes his head in disapproval.

"Man. This guy's such a stiff. No fun at all. Someone's gotta get that boy some drinks to loosen him up."

"The formation is ready." ADAM states. **"Please step onto the pentagram."**

Bael and Abby obediently follow the robot's orders. A moment later, a feeling of suction tugs on their minds, and Abby faints again.

When she wakes up, Abby struggles to her feet, then glances at Bael in admiration.

"You're already up?! That's incredible, Bael!"

ADAM's irises lock onto Abby.

"Duke Bael did not lose consciousness. The teleportation formation affects an individual's mind by scrambling their sense of proprioception, as well as their perception of reality."

ADAM pauses.

"Duke Bael's brain activity showed little change during the transference. His intelligence is simply too low to be affected by the spatial array."

Bael nods. "Exactly. Hey, wait a sec! Are you callin' me dumb?! 'Cause I am. But that's still rude, man! Didn't your broodmother ever teach you anything?!"

"Follow me." ADAM says, ignoring Bael's tirade. **"The Matriarch Armor is in this direction."**

Without waiting for a reply, the robot begins marching down a steel plated hallway. The demons find themselves teleported to a different location than the last time Abby was here. Instead of arriving inside the main hangar bay, they appear in a secluded area deeper within the facility. Abby and Bael follow ADAM closely, and as they walk, Bael notices all of the worker robots stomping up and down the halls, each of them moving with purpose and certainty.

"Damn. Ose is one twisted bitch." Bael mutters. "Can't believe she tore all the skin off these poor people. It must have been a lot of work to do that..."

Abby frowns at him. "What are you talking about, Bael? These are robots, not people!"

Bael flicks his gaze toward the younger demoness. He snorts, then turns away, a distant look in his eyes.

"Hehe. Yeah, sure. Robots. As if anyone could believe in something like that. People made out of metal. What's next? People made out of clay? People made out of dirt?"

"...But those exist too!" Abby exclaims. "They're called Golems! Bael, you know what Golems are, right??"

ADAM, walking in front of the two, beeps an affirmation. **"I am a robot. Golems also do exist as well, Duke Bael. In particular, the former Sphinx, Monster King Kar, was capable of summoning earthen golems."**

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard the conspiracies." Bael says, waving off their words. "Some people will believe anything you tell 'em. It's no wonder they call you 'Add-Dumb.' You're even thicker than me, bub."

If ADAM takes any offense to Bael's words, he doesn't show it on his expressionless metal face.

"We have arrived." ADAM says, stopping before that same nondescript door he showed Abby previously. Her heart begins to beat rapidly as she spits on the slide ADAM holds out for her and waits for the robot to open the door.

Bael, meanwhile, appears completely bored. He glances around the perfectly clean hallways and snorts.

"Sure is... shiny. You fellas really keep the place all tidy, huh?"

"Master Ose has created countless janitorial bots to ensure we meet her quality standards." ADAM replies.

A moment later, the massive door slides upward, revealing the darkened interior of the room within. When Ose's demonic mana splashes outward into the surroundings, Bael barely pays it any mind, but Abby grows visibly excited.

"Here! It's in here!" Abby chirps. "Come ooon, Bael! Let's get you in that armor! Go, go, go!"

"Calm your nipples, sister." Bael retorts, while swaggering into the room. His demonic eyes easily adjust to the darkness, allowing him to glance at the rows and rows of armor and weapons, all of them enchanted with different types of demonic energy, or made with exotic materials. "What the hell is all this stuff?"

"Master Ose's Armory is her most precious and closely guarded secret." ADAM explains, his robotic tone tinged with a hint of reverence. **"Her foresight is grand, far more so than any individual can imagine. Ever since the end of the Energy Wars, she wished to break the shackles placed upon demonkind by the Volgrim. Despite only being a Baron, her intellect put her on the same level as Marie Becker and Founder Cuanali. She never sat idly, and instead built this facility in absolute secrecy."**

ADAM walks over to one of the weapons on the wall, a sword made from Demonstone, one which hums with demonic power.

"This blade is an excellent example of what Master Ose accomplished." ADAM explains, before handing it to Bael. **"If you energize the blade with your mana, it will activate the weapon's Resonant Power."**

"Resonant Power?" Abby asks, glancing at the wicked-looking weapon in Bael's grasp. "What does that mean..."

Bael doesn't fully understand what ADAM is asking him to do. Having never used his demonic mana in all his lifetime, the Duke of Pain has no idea how to use it in any meaningful way.

He squints his eyes. He clenches his buttcheeks. He steels his stomach and glares at the blade.

"Hrrrgh! Rrrrrggghhh!!"

Bael tries to make anything happen, but after half a minute, gives up.

"...Whew! Yeah bub, I ain't got no idea what the heck I'm doing."

"That is understandable." ADAM says. **"Baron of Happy Thoughts. Please attempt to resonate with the sword. In theory, any demon can do so. That is what makes these weapons extraordinary."**

Abby takes the sword from Bael and nods. "Well, okay. But since it's Ose's sword, won't she get mad at me for touching it?"

"She will not. Master Ose is unconscious, you know." ADAM says, his unchanging and expressionless face still somehow coming off as annoyed.

"Right. Anyway, let me try!" Abby says.

After a few moments, she pours her demonic energy into the blade. It doesn't take long before a faint reddish glow wraps around herself, warming her skin to the touch.

"Eh? What the heck is going on?" Abby asks, bewildered. "Why is this aura all around me?!"

"You have activated the Barrier Sword's 'Resonant Power.'" ADAM calmly explains. **"In truth, Master Ose has been monitoring the activities of the Hell of Calamity for a very long time. They have begun creating pseudo-artifacts not dissimilar to those made by Archangel Camael. Master Ose has managed to create something similar, though her artifacts are only useable by demons."**

ADAM continues. **"The Barrier Sword is one such example. Like all Resonant Powers embedded within Demonstone-forged artifacts, it enables the wielder to obtain a unique ability when they channel their abilities. The Barrier Sword, in particular, grants the user an ethereal shield capable of deflecting many different forms of attacks."**

Bael's eyebrows shoot up.

"I only caught about half of what ya said, but that's still pretty swell! So now Abby's all protected 'n stuff?"

"The Barrier is far from invincible." ADAM states. **"It is limited by its user's internal mana reserves. Additionally, attacks from particularly strong enemies will break through its defenses more easily. However, it also scales to its user's strength. Emperors will be able to harness more of its power than Lords or Barons."**

The robot continues. **"Even so, these artifacts were only prototypes. Master Ose's goal was to forge weapons en-masse that would allow demonkind to battle the Volgrim. However, she died before she could reach the stage of mass-producing these weapons. And now that the Wordsmith has arisen, humanity has taken control of the Seven Hells, and the Plague has begun to ravage the galaxy with deadlier results, we have thus begun to run low on time. Duke Bael, if you would please step toward the Matriarch's Armor..."**

ADAM gestures to the right side of the room, where a set of pitch-black armor hangs on the wall, its ominous energy finally catching Bael's attention for the first time since he arrived.

"Oh, HELL yes!" Bael exclaims. "Now THAT'S a fine piece of armor! Look at those shoulder-spikes! And that black color scheme, it's so badass!"

"I told you!" Abby says, putting the Barrier Sword back on the wall. "Let's get you inside and see what you can do, Bael!"

The Duke of Pain no longer hesitates. He power-walks to the Matriarch's Armor and begins pulling it off the wall, admiring its craftsmanship while growing progressively more excited as he dons each piece.

Unlike when Abby donned the armor, it doesn't have to adjust its size to fit Bael's physique, since it was always intended to adhere to Ose's original body.

The chestplate 'opens' up, like the maw of a blackened eldritch beast, then clamps down onto Bael's body, wrapping around him to fit snug and tight. Before long, he finishes donning the entire set, and it closes up any gaps, sealing him inside to protect him from toxins, poisons, and all sorts of other external dangers.

As the Duke of Pain finds himself surrounded by the coldness of the demonstone's interior, various types of information floods into his mostly-empty head, transmitted through a magical connection from some unknown external source.

Naturally, Bael ignores most of it. Some random images and numbers materialize in his vision, but he just drools quietly, unable to even process what he's looking at.

"...Alright. Well that stuff's kind of a pain in the ass, but whatever. Let's see what this bad boy can do!"

Bael walks over to the wall. He rears his fist back, then rockets it forward!

BOOM!

The chamber shudders, along with many parts of the nearby facility. The wall violently caves inward, but stops just short of blasting to smithereens, thanks mostly due to being so deep within the planet's bowels.

"Amazing!" Bael exclaims when eyeballing his handiwork. "This armor is badass! I feel like my old self again!"

ADAM appears unimpressed. **"Are you able to communicate with Master Ose? Her soul sliver should be within the confines of the Matriarch's Armor."**

Bael shrugs. "Dunno. Haven't tried. Oooh, but there is this weird, itchy feeling at the back of my neck. Feels familiar, in a really annoying way. Like someone's nagging at me..."

"...that would be Master Ose's soul." ADAM says, his tone one of displeasure. **"Please attempt to establish contact with her. Demonkind's future survival is at stake."**

Bael licks his lips. "Mmm. Steak, hehe. Tasty steak. I could go for some of- WHOA WHAT THE HECK?!"

He jumps away from the wall, jerking in surprise when an ethereal image of Ose materializes right in front of him, her eyes gazing directly into his.

"So it came to this." Ose says, her words tickling Bael's wildly underdeveloped brain. "You've put on the armor. That means I died."

Bael holds up his fists and tries to punch Ose's face, but his hands swing right through her head.

"Wha-what the heck is goin' on here?!" Bael roars. "I thought Ose was dead!"

Both ADAM and Abby exchange glances. They look at one another in visible disbelief.

"B-Bael..." Abby says, fighting back tears. "We already told you! You're here to contact Ose's soul sliver! How many times do we have to say it?!"

"Of all the sentient entities that could have possessed Master Ose's original body," ADAM comments, **"Duke Bael is undoubtedly the worst. His intelligence quotient is registered as a negative value. His memory scores are below those of insect life."**

Bael pays no attention to them. He instead gazes at Ose in shock, before instantly coming to accept this new paradigm of 'Ose is back alive' without much hesitation.

"Cool, you're back. And you're even in your body again! That's neat. Wait, does that mean I'm back in MY body now?!"

Ose gazes at the Duke of Pain with a look of deeply repressed torment.

"...no, Bael. I am dead. What you see before you now is only a soul sliver I separated from my original soul. I no longer have any power. I can barely even communicate with you, due to my lacking strength."

She continues. "Only you can see me, Bael. The others can't. Give Abby my thanks for... delivering you to me."

Bael nods dumbly. "Oh, Okay. Hey, Abs, Ose says thanks for delivering you to me."

Abby frowns. "Delivering... huh? Don't you mean 'you to me?'"

"Yeah. That's what I said." Bael says. "Sheesh. Come on, open up your ears, girl. I'm 'sposed to be the dumbass here!"

"Focus." Ose says, grabbing Bael's attention once again. "Bael. I want you to tell me what happened to me. Specifically, the manner in which I died. Actually, just ask Abby to tell me. Her testimony will be... more accurate."

Bael taps the side of his helmet. "Man. Looks like you've gotten dumber too, Ose. You're not dead. You're right here!"

"That's... that's not what I meant!" Ose snaps. "Bael! Focus your bloody mind! This is important! Tell Abby to tell me why you're here!"

The Duke of Pain rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, no need to get snippy with me, lady. Yo, Abby! Ose says to tell me why you're here."

Abby cocks her head. "Why... *I'm* here? Because she wanted me to bring you to the complex-place-thingy. She should know that though, right?"

"Yeah, she should. She's not very bright right now, though." Bael chuckles. "Must've lost some of her brains after Arthur cut off her head. Swish, splat! Am I right?? Haha."

"BAEL!" Ose roars. "Can you stop being a dipshit for FIVE SECONDS?! Tell Abby to-"

She pauses for a brief moment, calming herself down. She recalls Bael's literal translation of her words and decides to adopt a different tactic entirely.

"...*Please* tell Abby to tell *me* how and why Ose died."

Bael scrunches up his face as he hears Ose's newest request. "Ohhh... I think I get it now. Haha, man, you really have a wacky way of going about things."

He smiles goofily at Abby, even though she can't see his face inside the Matriarch's Helmet.

"Ose wants to know how and why you killed her!"

"BAEEEL!" Ose shrieks. "You're... you're doing this on purpose! Stop screwing with me! My soul can't take this kind of abuse!"

Before Abby can reply, Bael holds up his palms. "Alright, alright. Yeah I'm just kidding. It's so much fun to mess with you again, Ose! I really missed our talks!"

He sobers up and looks at Abby more seriously.

"Alright. Let's be serious. Ose wants to know how and why she died. Can you tell her?"

Abby nods. "Alright, that makes a LOT more sense! It happened when she led the Hidden Emperors to Tarus II, intent on battling the Wordsmith..."

Abby spends the next hour detailing not only what happened to Ose, but the after-effects of her death, and the Wordsmith's grand plans.

Ose's specter hovers inside Bael's Mind Realm, listening carefully while slowly furrowing her brow.

"Belial Booster... various magical augmentations... Emperors subservient to the Wordsmith. The situation has gotten much worse than I expected."

"Eh, it seems fine to me." Bael says. "We're all gettin' along well now. I never realized it before, but us demons can actually make good friends with the humans if we just stop eating 'em! Ain't that crazy??"

"Humans are *not* our friends." Ose snaps, as her memories flicker back to a distant past, when she was just a child and Arthur's goons locked her in a dungeon, torturing and killing one of her brothers. "They are our inferiors. Our eternal enemies. I cannot continue allowing the situation to persist as it has... but my options have become a lot more limited. The Hidden Emperors conspired against me. They did not assist me when I fought the Wordsmith's construct. That 'Arthur' might not be the real one, but it is still a powerful vessel. If Jason thinks to mass-produce them..."

She shudders at the thought.

"...demonkind will never again rise. I possessed your body and its full power, along with my array of abilities, yet just one Arthur Construct tore me to shreds. That means none of the other Emperors will be any threat to it, either. I'd like to hope the Wordsmith spent a massive pile of resources to build it, but that seems unlikely."

Ose pauses to cock her head.

"Bael. What happened to Mjolnir? Did I not bring it into battle?"

She pauses before quickly adding, "I'm referring to 'Big Bonk.'"

"Ohhh! Big Bonk! Yeah, yeah." Bael says, before shrugging. "Dunno. I wasn't there for the big fight. Abby, do you know what happened to Big Bonk?"

"I wasn't there either. I only heard what happened secondhand from other demons..." Abby says. "So. I'm not sure."

"In that case," Ose says, a glint appearing in her eye, "we may have gotten lucky. I placed a Rescue Beacon onto Mjolnir, so that in the event of my death it would appear in this very Armory!"

"In here?" Bael asks, doubtfully. "I don't see it anywhere."

He double-checks the artifacts in the room, yet not one of them appears to be Mjolnir.

"You forget what Mjolnir actually is." Ose says. "Or rather, you never knew in the first place. It is a transforming weapon, one that can shift its configuration at will. Take a look at the Matriarch Armor's 'belt.' I think you might find something interesting..."

Bael looks down at his waist. To his surprise, he notices a dull red gem affixed to a black belt, one that he didn't see earlier due to his excitement.

"Oh! Don't tell me, that's..."

"It is." Ose says, a smile on her face. "You know what to do."

Bael nods. He touches the gem with his gauntlet finger.

"Big Bonk! Stop hiding and get out here!"

All of a sudden, the red gem bursts outward with a brilliant red light. The 'belt' slips off the armor and transforms into the appearance of Camael's divine hammer, the weapon she used to forge countless artifacts, including Excalibur.

NONE ARE WORTHY TO WIELD MY POWER.

The divine hammer glows with radiance as it sweeps its 'gaze' across the three entities located in the same room.

It looks at ADAM.

UNWORTHY.

It looks at Abby.

UNWORTHY.

Then, it looks at Bael.

ALSO UNWORTHY. ALL ARE LACKING. NONE MAY UNLEASH MY POWER.

The hammer rockets toward Bael and crashes into his chest, knocking him backward.

Thunk!

Stunned, the Duke of Pain blinks twice before scowling in rage.

"Hey! Stupid hammer, what the FUCK?! How dare you hit me! It seems you've forgotten who's your daddy!"

He lifts up his fist, then swings it down against Mjolnir's head.

BOOM!!

The Matriarch Armor increases Bael's strength and resilience to a ludicrous level. He smashes the hammer against the ground, rocking the whole facility and causing many maintenance bots to topple over.

Then, he does it again. And again.

BOOM! BOOM!!

Bael beats the goddamn shit out of Mjolnir, causing it to experience that same ancient trauma from during the War in Heaven. A minute later, the hammer lays on the ground, shivering and shaking.

MASTER... I... I was a bad hammer. I have made an error in judgment. Please forgive me...

It shudders weakly and rubs up against the Matriarch Armor like a beaten dog looking for affection.

Bael snorts.

"Goddamn right, bitch. Stupid hammer. Always running off to do your own thing. Now, get on my belt!"

Mjolnir obediently transforms once again, attaching to the Matriarch Armor without a hitch.

As Ose watches the whole fiasco, her eyes glaze over, and she sighs more than a dozen times.

"...Only you could come up with such an idiotic 'taming' method and have it work, Bael. I originally attached Mjolnir when I was still in your body, but it must not have recognized you now that you're in mine. Anyway, it's good that you did. Mjolnir is actually the Matriarch Armor's power source! It can draw the mana from the divine hammer to empower its defenses, and most crucially, keep me alive. If Mjolnir had gotten away... that would have been a disaster."

The Emperor of Infiltration takes a step back and smooths her dress down, even though she is only an errant soul, lacking a true physical body.

"Now, then, Bael. It's time to talk business. We need to begin planning for the future..."

"...the future of demonkind's survival."

Part 398: Order to Chaos

Thousands of lightyears away, aboard the Founder's Spear.

Jason slowly sets a datapad on the table between himself and Unarin. He closes his eyes and massages the bridge of his nose and forehead. Several seconds pass as he quietly digests the reading material Unarin gave him.

Before long, he pulls his hand away and opens his eyes.

"...I don't get it."

Unarin slowly blinks.

"I wondered if you would. Order to Chaos is my foundational tome. Many Volgrim spend millennia reading it thousands of times to decipher its wisdom."

The Wordsmith raises an eyebrow. "No, I mean... I don't get what makes this so special. It's all about deciphering the chaos of how a society and culture structures itself in order to bring order to the chaos. Right? You talk multiple times in the book about architecture. You can look at how buildings are constructed all in order to get a feel for the society's special quirks. This all seems pretty obvious, surface-level. I don't get the 'hype' at all."

"Oh. I see." Unarin says, faintly smiling. "This is the first time someone has told me the concepts I espouse are 'simple' to comprehend. You must have reached a high degree of understanding already."

"Have I?" Jason asks. "I don't know. I'm not saying there's no wisdom to be found in the tome, but it all seems pretty obvious once you point it out. Of *course* societies are going to construct buildings in a specific way according to their values and arrange their cities to match their ideals. I hadn't thought about it before, but that doesn't seem like a particularly novel thought. Once you point it out, it's more of an 'oh, I guess that makes sense' thing than an 'oh that blows my mind' thing."

The First Founder falls silent for half a beat. He slowly blinks, perhaps more due to annoyance than any other reason.

"If you are so confident in Order to Chaos's lack of profundities, this should be a simple matter to prove. Here. Take a moment to look at this holo-image. It is a

manipulable map of a certain city on a world under the Volgrim Empire. Tell me what you can discern about it."

Unarin holds his hands up over the table. A three dimensional image appears, showing hundreds of buildings rising and falling within a large area of around twenty square kilometers. Jason shrugs, then begins to manipulate the image with his hands.

As he examines it, Jason discovers that the city is not nearly as advanced as humanity's Fortress of Retribution, let alone anything he'd expect from the Volgrim. He also discovers, much to his surprise, that the city's central structures are much less developed than those at the periphery. The outermost perimeter appears quite wealthy, while the innermost areas appear underdeveloped and impoverished.

Jason spends several minutes examining the city before pulling back in his seat and looking at Unarin.

"This isn't a Volgrim city? Perhaps some colony you've neglected?"

"It is not." Unarin replies. "What species do you think it belongs to?"

"Well. There is a distinct aura of savagery about its infrastructure." Jason notes. "Many buildings are colored red, like blood. I didn't see any biological figures drawn inside this three-dimensional map, so I can't say with absolute certainty what species made this, but judging by the primitive designs... I'm thinking... perhaps Orcs?"

"Orcs!" Unarin says, visibly surprised. "Interesting. Perhaps you're more compatible with my philosophy than I expected. Do you have any further observations?"

Jason frowns. "Other observations. Hmm..."

He spends a few seconds re-examining the image.

"Well. I'm guessing this particular city started out here, along the flow of this river. Then, as it expanded outward, it also grew more wealthy over time. The outer structures were built more recently, where the wealthy could live, while the inner ones were never rebuilt, updated, or maintained. They've gradually fallen behind over the years, and now they're in a state of disrepair. The center of the city, once its core, is now a slum filled with violence and poverty."

"There are many such cases throughout the history of civilizations." Unarin says, smiling. "I'm genuinely surprised. After interacting with you for a while, I assumed I had misjudged your competencies. You are able to grasp the basic essence of Order to Chaos."

Unarin continues. "Civilization is a pathway to the soul of its people. Architecture gives us a glimpse into their values. Their psyche. By looking at how they lay out their buildings, we can learn what they value. Can you tell me what this city tells us about the Orcs?"

Jason shrugs. "Not really. They... don't care about their poor? Their rich are bastards? That's about all I can guess."

"A surface level observation." Unarin says, visibly disappointed. "But, still. You have a certain affinity for Order to Chaos. You're the second such seed I've found in recent cycles, a pleasant surprise, to be sure. Look at these buildings here. Do you see how they have utterly collapsed? Despite not being rebuilt, their debris was cleaned up and pushed aside. Now it appears to be a makeshift fighting ring."

Unarin continues. "We already know what sorts of creatures the Orcs are. Warlike, violent, filled with bloodlust. I consider this knowledge to be a form of 'cheating.' The true power of Order to Chaos lies in its ability to discern knowledge of a civilization, its people, its culture, and even its leaders, all without *ever* meeting them."

"From the way these few buildings have been repurposed into a fighting ring, we *could* conclude the rich are deliberately sowing chaos among their lessers to keep them battling one another instead of rising up to overthrow their entitled leaders. We could *also* conclude the poor use violence to cope with their problems, or that the people in the center of the city have left to seek out their fortunes, and as such are unable to maintain the city any longer."

"How do you discern their true motivations, then?" Jason asks. "If there are multiple possibilities, only one can be correct..."

"Wrong." Unarin says. "It's very possible for there to be multiple Truths existing at once, all in conflict. Perhaps a large portion of the populace left the city in search of better lands. Perhaps the rich use bloodsport to keep their lessers in line. And perhaps the common folk agree to use that violence to quell the anger in their hearts. Sometimes, contradictions are not contradictions, but the gradual flowing of-"

Before Unarin can finish his sentence, Muuxunuu's voice transmits from the cockpit, interrupting him.

"First Founder. We will arrive inside the Gallax system within five time-units. Please prepare yourself accordingly."

If her interruption annoys Unarin, it doesn't show on his face. He drops the conversation and turns his attention to other matters.

"We can discuss Order to Chaos later, Wordsmith. For now, let us focus on the Kolvaxians."

Jason's expression becomes serious. "Alright. I do have to ask, though. What exactly is a 'time unit'? I've heard your people mention 'cycles' and 'time-units' several times but I'm not sure how exactly they function."

"Time units are how the Volgrim measure time." Unarin answers. "Terrans use units of seconds, minutes, and hours. We use micro-time-units, time-units, and standard-time units. They are exactly equal in their duration."

"Exactly equal?" Jason repeats. "What, so a 'second' correlates to exactly one micro-time-unit? That seems a big coincidence."

"A coincidence? I think not." Unarin replies. "After all. Your units of time measurement came from the Volgrim."

Jason scrunches up his face in confusion. "What?? That doesn't make any sense. The Volgrim had nothing to do with Earth until the Energy Wars."

"Hahaha!" Unarin suddenly laughs, breaking his usual stoic exterior. "Come now, Wordsmith. Surely you must have realized that isn't the truth. My people watched over Earth for millennia. Our Changelings lived among you for that whole duration. We observed your wars and interfered with your politics. Naturally, our units of measurement passed down to you, and you renamed them."

Jason blinks twice, then looks away.

"Right. I knew that. I just... it feels so strange thinking you were always 'there' on Earth. The whole time, living among us."

"It was a trivial matter." Unarin says, waving his hands. "We are a galactic empire. Therefore, we have to maintain a close eye on our subjects. Particularly the unruly ones, or those capable of Uplifting themselves..."

"Indeed." Jason softly says, glancing at Unarin out of the corner of his eye.

The next few minutes pass in relative peace. Soon, a timer counts down over the ship's intercom, and the Founder's Spear drops out of subspace.

Immediately, Unarin retrieves information off the Volgrim Galactic Net. He looks up the current war situation, and his expression darkens.

"A seven percent increase in planetary assimilation speed. The Plague grows ever more adept with each consecutive victory."

Unarin summons a projection of one of the worlds in the system. A beautiful blue and green sphere, reminiscent of Earth, materializes above their table. Jason watches as millions of minuscule dots of red spread across the planet's surface, all originating from just one tiny pinprick-sized speck on the far side of the world.

"The first two worlds of the Gallax system have already fallen. Now, all that remains is the system's second paradise-class planet, Gallax Blue. As of this moment... sixty-three percent of the Volgrim have fallen to the Plague. The remaining survivors will tumble into its grasp within just three standard time-units."

"Three hours..." Jason says, his voice cracking, ever so slightly. "You have a whole fleet above the planet. Why can't you save those remaining?"

"The fleet above Gallax is not there to rescue any survivors." Unarin says, his visage aging visibly as a hint of grief washes across his face. "They are there to destroy any ships leaving at this late hour, as well as to hunt down and eliminate any Psionic plagueborn."

"What?!" Jason exclaims. "So if someone gets in a ship and races out of the planet's gravity well, you just... kill them??"

"It is not the course of action we most wish to take." Unarin whispers. "It is the most necessary one. In the past, we have allowed survivors to flee, only to realize the Plague had infected them. Their ships landed on other worlds, and they spread the infection. We even believe the Plague may have deliberately slowed its rate of infection to allow such occurrences."

Unarin suddenly slams his fist on the table, startling Jason!

"This plague! I HATE it!" Unarin roars. "It is not mindless! It is intelligent! It destroys any captured Plagueborn to stymie our efforts of studying it! It forces us to kill potential survivors! It targets worlds behind our backlines, and yet we still have no damned clue how it functions! Every cycle, it grows more powerful and more virulent! I can FEEL its hatred! It wishes not only to destroy the Volgrim, but to make us suffer and wallow in

despair! It wants us to claw for every last drop of hope left in our souls, and then snuff out what light we have remaining!"

Unarin inhales and exhales heavily. His eyes burn with a blood-rage, one very uncharacteristic of how Jason has perceived him up to this point.

"I know this feeling. I KNOW IT! It is just the same as... as those ancient monsters! Those Sentinels! They also toyed with our lives! They also wished to break our spirits and render us unable to fight back! But I will not give up. I will never let my soul CRACK under this pressure! I defeated the Sentinels, and I WILL annihilate this Plague!!"

Unarin's outburst truly takes Jason by surprise. The Wordsmith hesitates for a few seconds while allowing the First Founder to regain his cool. Eventually, he simmers down. He lowers his fists beneath the table, only twitching his eye at the slight indent his strike left on the tabletop.

"Apologies. I lost control of my emotions. I will not allow that to happen again."

"There's no need to worry." Jason says, exhaling a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "It's understandable you would feel so strongly. But... what makes you think the Plague is sentient? Or rather, that it has hatred toward the Volgrim?"

"Only my intuition." Unarin says quietly. "Nothing more. We cannot observe Plagueborn for long. Observing them in the wild is exceedingly dangerous, and capturing them is impossible. They always kill themselves and decompose in fractions of a micro-time-unit, making any examinations all but impossible."

Unarin pulls up images of Gallax Blue, taken from live video feeds on the planet's surface. Jason's heart drops into the soles of his shoes as he sees hundreds of aliens fleeing through a field of grass, running with all their strength while a horde of two thousand mottled-skin monsters chase after them.

Suddenly, from directly in front of the survivors, a pair of Kolvaxians leap out of the ground, as if swimming through the planet's soil like an ocean. They pounce on a pair of Technopaths in the front and bite down onto them, then drag them into the planet's soil, while the other survivors pay their demise no heed. They keep running, ignoring the fallen, even as more Kolvaxians burst out of the ground and pounce upon them.

"Oh my god." Jason whispers. "This... this is live?! I have to do something! I have to try!"

Jason starts to stand up, but Unarin directs a fiery glance at him.

"And just what sort of action do you think you should take, Wordsmith? THINK! The last thing we need is for the Kolvaxians to get their hands on a Wordsmith! That would mean our immediate defeat! We already know they can inhabit the bodies of Psions and channel their powers! If Psionic Plagueborn are the biggest threat we currently face, a single Wordsmith Plagueborn would outrank them by a factor of infinity! We could only hope they fail to utilize your unique abilities... and that likely won't be the case!"

Jason listens to Unarin's words. He fully stands up, but remains rooted on the spot. After turning his attention inward, Jason takes a minute to consult with the myriad of denizens within his Mind Realm.

"...I have to try something." Jason finally says. "The Plague. It seems to infect people's bodies with something. Maybe I can convert them back to their original forms?"

"I will not lie." Unarin says. "It is my greatest hope that you can do such a thing. If you can convert them back, we may yet be able to stop the Plague. But I would advise that you only do so remotely. NEVER come into physical contact with a Plagueborn! The risks are too great!"

Jason watches the live feed for half a minute. He frowns deeply as even more of the survivors fall to the Kolvaxians. Soon, only a dozen remain.

"I have to try. **Teleport!**"

Instantly, one of the survivors vanishes from the spot. Unarin's eyes widen.

"What have you done? Where did you put them?"

"I moved them into the sky." Jason answers. "Approximately two miles above the ground, to be specific. They're free-falling, now. **Freeze!**"

Unarin scrambles to change the video feed's direction, and eventually points it upward, where he finds a frightened and confused female Technopath hovering in the air while flailing her arms about. Clearly, she has absolutely no idea what is going on.

"The Kolvaxians. Can they fly?" Jason asks.

"Only the Psions. This world does have a ten percent Psion populace, so some will surely travel to her new position shortly." Unarin answers. "What are you going to do with this Technopath?"

"I'm not sure yet." Jason answers. "**Examine. Examine. Scan. Scan. Copy. Copy. Trace.**"

Unarin watches silently as the Wordsmith utters several Words of Power that seems to have no effect. However, judging by the slightly shifting expressions on Jason's face, he does manage to accomplish *something*.

"Okay. That should be enough. **Teleport.**"

Once again, Jason teleports the Technopath female. She vanishes from the sky and reappears on the ground, right in the path of a horde of Kolvaxians. She barely has time to let out a scream of fright before being engulfed and dragged into the planet's depths.

Unarin flicks his eyes toward Jason, attempting to read his expressions.

"What are you doing? Why did you teleport her away, then back into-"

"Quiet." Jason says. "I'm thinking. **Scan. Scan. Scan. Scan. Scan...**"

Jason repeatedly speaks the same Word of Power. As he does, Unarin obtains an inkling of an idea as to the Wordsmith's scheme.

"You are... allowing the Technopath to be infected." Unarin says. "And scanning her body to capture whatever changes she is experiencing as she mutates."

"Truthfully, it wasn't my idea." Jason says. "**Scan. Scan. Scan...**"

Unarin falls completely silent. He says nothing, allowing Jason to repeat his monotonous words for the next thirty full minutes, until the Wordsmith finally stops.

Jason slowly sits back down, a look of deep contemplation on his face.

"...can't be right." Jason mutters, as if finishing off the second half of a sentence without uttering the first part. "I lost contact with her part of the way through. There's some sort of... interference."

"Interference?" Unarin asks. "What do you mean?"

Jason's expression turns grim. He swivels in his chair to face the First Founder.

"I sought to capture the physiological changes happening in the woman's body as she converted into a Plagueborn. At first, I was successful. But then, part of the way into her transformation, I lost contact with her. It was as if a void engulfed her. Something which completely blocked off my Wordsmithing."

"I tried to track her position." Jason continues. "I wanted to see where the Plague would drag her, kicking and screaming. It seemed there was something under the planet's surface, but when she drew close to it, and when her transformation reached a certain stage, I lost contact."

"You lost contact." Unarin repeats. "I am unfamiliar with the nuances of your abilities. Can I assume from your words that this is... out of the ordinary?"

"It is." Jason says quietly. "Or rather. It *was*."

Jason stares Unarin right in the eyes, his expression as cold as the abyss.

"I recently learned of a certain demon who was capable of nullifying the magical energy of any entity around himself. That demon was Gressil, the prison warden of the First Hell."

"I have heard his name uttered before." Unarin says mildly. "Are you implying..."

"I can't say for certain." Jason answers. "But the feeling I got... it was as if I had come into contact with Gressil again. A complete severing of my energy. Perhaps... perhaps the Plague is more *homegrown* than we thought."

"You seem to be implying Gressil either created the Plague or is otherwise involved in its existence." Unarin says, while moving his hands above the table and summoning every available file on the Hidden Emperor. Shockingly, he doesn't have much relevant info on the prison warden, and certainly not much that's up to date. "If you're on the right track, this is something we can certainly use. But do you truly think he is involved?"

Jason leans back in his seat.

He watches the live video feeds of the world, as they cycle from one group of survivors to the next.

Countless Volgrim scream silently, their words not captured by the monitoring systems. They collapse into heaps and piles, surrounded by monsters that grab onto them and drag them deep into the planet's bowels.

All the while, Jason quietly ponders this potential new revelation.

"Gressil... is hatred incarnate." Jason murmurs. "He is always angry. Always filled with rage. But could he infect these people? Possibly. After all... his mother..."

"His mother?" Unarin asks.

"Emperor Lucifer." Jason says. "She was a demoness capable of creating new life, or mutating existing ones. She could certainly be capable of creating the Plague."

"Not possible." Unarin says, waving his hand. "Emperor Lucifer was the Codex. She perished during the Energy Wars. Unless she prepared the seeds for the Plague well beforehand and waited thousands of cycles to unleash it, I don't see that being a possibility."

As Unarin casually discounts the notion, he spots a strange look of confusion on Jason's face.

"Wait. Unarin... you don't *know*? Lucifer is... she's still alive."

The First Founder's expression freezes on his face.

"*What*. No. That's not possible. What do you mean?"

"She's alive." Jason repeats. "And her body... it's attached to Gressil's. He devoured her. He consumed her, killed her, and now they've become one being... you're telling me you had *no* idea?"

"I didn't!" Unarin exclaims, clearly shocked. "All this time, the Codex has been among the realm of the living?!"

"Now it's my turn to be confused." Jason says. "What is this 'Codex' and why do you keep referring to Lucifer by that term?"

Unarin gazes at the rapidly dwindling lives on Gallax Blue, no longer interested in their fates. His expression becomes distant.

"Do you remember what I told you before, Wordsmith? About how all of the different species, such as the Orcs and Goblins originated on their own worlds? And how Earth was designated an Anomalous World due to its seemingly impossible concentration of species from other planets?"

He pauses.

"Well. That was a matter we spent time investigating, until ultimately discovering the existence of the Codex. Our search into Lucifer's history... it revealed *many* surprising facts..."

Jason nods.

"I'm listening."

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Unarin stares off quietly into the distance. His eyes gloss over slightly.

"Lucifer. The Demon Emperor of Providence."

"For hundreds of millennia, long before we Volgrim marked Earth as a planet worthy of note, we had already explored the limits of our humble galaxy. We had marked thousands of life-bearing worlds with interest."

"The species you call goblins, and fairies, and orcs, and minotaurs... these creatures did not originate on Earth, nor were they void-faring civilizations, either. Some of them, such as the fairies, might be capable of escaping their planet's gravity wells via their unique abilities, but never could they traverse the Void in any meaningful way due to lacking faster-than-light travel methods."

Unarin pauses for a moment. His eyes regain a hint of vigor.

"Imagine my surprise, then, when my people one day stumbled upon Earth. On it, there was a rich ecosystem with not one dominant species, but four, and hundreds of lesser species competing in the dark for access to the planet's riches."

"All those worlds... all those creatures incapable of traversing the void, and yet somehow, they all ended up on a single planet."

Unarin turns to Jason and smiles faintly.

"Don't you find that odd, Wordsmith?"

Jason slowly nods. "...It was Lucifer. The 'Codex' as you put it."

"Mmm. Yes." Unarin says. "It took us a while, but we managed to trace the origin of all these earth-faring species to one individual. Lucifer proclaimed herself a 'mutator' of species. She believed that she was creating new life. What she did not understand was that the 'new species' she created were in fact ones which already existed, all across the Milky Way."

"So how was she able to do that?" Jason asks. "What's the key link?"

"I was never sure of the answer to that question." Unarin says. "Not until we sat down and talked. You have opened my eyes to a certain possibility. I believe that all life in the

Milky Way... all sentient species, descends from the energy of far more powerful ones."

The First Founder hesitates for several seconds, as if deliberating upon something in his mind.

Slowly, hesitantly, he stands up and walks over to the wall across from his table. He presses his palm against a seemingly ordinary section of the corridor, and it hisses open, sliding out of a seamless gap to reveal a small inner pocket.

There, the Wordsmith senses a familiar wave of magical energy, one that makes him tense up.

"What the hell...?"

Jason gets out of his chair. He walks up behind Unarin as the First Founder turns around and holds out his palm, revealing a small glowing metal stone, one that radiates emissions of mana.

"...This is Living Moldanium." Unarin says quietly. "A tiny cache of it. I keep it in the Founder's Spear to ensure I always have it available for comparison, should we stumble across more."

Jason's heart skips a beat. "This... this is Living Moldanium?! But... it feels like..."

"Why do you think the Volgrim call it *Living* Moldanium?" Unarin asks, rhetorically. "In truth, it is not a naturally made alloy. It is a 'spiritually reactive' alloy which can only be found in the smallest and most minuscule deposits. That is because Living Moldanium is not an alloy at all."

He looks at the Wordsmith meaningfully.

"Living Moldanium is actually formed from the remains of dead dragons. It is dragon-bone condensed by natural forces."

"Dragon-bone!" Jason exclaims. "Then... the Warpgates... you made them all out of dead dragons?!"

Unarin falls silent for a short moment before slowly shaking his head.

"Living Moldanium used to be much more easily accessible. In fact, we found deposits of it on every world we stumbled across. Every world containing *life*, that is. This discovery caused us to falter on many occasions. We weren't certain what the link was."

He pauses before continuing.

"...You believed a dragon was responsible for the attack on Valhalla. Tell me straight, Wordsmith. Do you truly believe that to be the case? Do you think a Primordial monster might still live somewhere in our galaxy?"

Jason hesitates.

"Well, I... I can't say for certain. I mean... it could be... well, I might be wrong, but..."

Jason quickly consults with Fiona in his Mind Realm. Unarin remains silent when he sees Jason's eyes tilt to the side, a sign that he must be talking with Raphael and whoever else is inside his head.

The Wordsmith returns to reality a few moments later, having gone through a whole discussion at the speed of thought.

"Let's sit down." Jason says, as he turns and walks back to the table.

Unarin nods.

The two of them take their seats once again, no longer paying any attention to the chaos on the monitors. Gallax Blue's fall may as well be a distant memory to them at this point.

Unarin places the Living Moldanium on the table, allowing the Wordsmith to touch it and react to it as he likes.

"There are some... discrepancies... which I haven't told you." Jason says, his voice soft. "Since you've already gotten this far, I guess I should ask: Are you aware that a dragon lived on Earth?"

"Lived?" Unarin repeats. "Not died?"

"That's right. I'm guessing you don't know."

Unarin frowns slightly.

"We scanned the planet's deepest depths countless times. Draconic energy should have a frighteningly distinct signature, yet we never picked anything up. Curiously, we also never found a single Living Moldanium deposit on Earth. It was yet another anomaly in our investigations..."

"The story goes a little something like this..." Jason says.

For the next twenty minutes, Jason debriefs Unarin on a great many events which occurred during Earth's Ancient Era.

Unarin learns about the Imps' revolt in Heaven.

He learns of their stumbling into Leviathan's lair, and the dragon's subsequent empowering of their bodies, souls, and minds.

Jason details how Leviathan puppeteered Satan and the rest throughout the ages, then ultimately revealed his Truths to Archangel Samael.

"Archangel Samael was the one who placed down formations to hide Leviathan's energy signature?" Unarin questions. "That would explain why our best Psions and most powerful reconnaissance vessels could not locate the dragon. He was hidden too deeply."

Jason nods. "There's more..."

He then tells Unarin about what happened following Heaven's fall. Unarin learns of Raphael's deception involving the Heroic Aura. He learns of Jephthah's fall and how the Archangels orchestrated the alteration of the Heroic Aura's properties, all facts Jason later learned from Gabriel and Raphael.

Finally, Jason reaches the important part.

"...and then Satan killed the Black Witch, Amelia. After she died, Leviathan emerged from her body and permanently slew Satan. Surely you knew this part?"

Unarin shakes his head. "I did not. I only knew the Black Witch ultimately smote the Devil dead. I did not hear of the dragon's involvement."

"I only learned about this event recently, myself." Jason mutters. "Lucifer apparently showed the whole thing off to Belial during their fight."

"You seem to have skipped an important detail." Unarin says, narrowing his eyes. "How did the dragon end up inside of Amelia Greyheart?"

"I don't know." Jason answers. "Amelia and I... we aren't terribly close. She's actually with my, uh, my clone. Hope."

"You don't sound excited about that development." Unarin notes. "Jealous?"

"It's not like that." Jason quickly says. "I'm married. But... I did have strong feelings for Amelia at one point. Until she cut my throat and left me for dead."

"Mmm. The nuances of human interaction don't interest me." Unarin says, waving his hand dismissively. "But since you are telling me Leviathan is dead, surely that must mean

the last dragon has perished. Yet, for some reason, you seem to believe another might be out there. What might lead you along this train of thought?"

Having already talked to the others about this, Jason can only grit his teeth and summon the willpower to partially lay bare his secret.

"...Some time back, I discovered an... ancient artifact." Jason says. "From the... Primordial Era. I found evidence that a dragon was once encased within and broke free."

"Oh? I should like to examine this 'artifact' for myself." Unarin says, a coy smile playing upon his lips. "Would you mind showing it to me?"

"I would." Jason says, his tone stoic. "Forgive me, *your eminence*, but I don't trust you. You'll just have to take my word on it."

"Ahaha. You don't trust me... and perhaps you shouldn't." Unarin chuckles. "But let us assume you are correct in your guess. Why not mention it before?"

"Because I honestly thought the dragon that escaped was Leviathan." Jason answers. "The timelines seemed to match up. I believed that Samael broke him out of the artifact and then hid him on Earth. For the longest time, I assumed Leviathan was the last living member of his species. Now I believe that I was wrong. There may be another... and if so, he is not the same as his brother."

Jason continues. "I don't know what you've learned about the dragons, Unarin. What I do know is that they were not a violent, overbearing species. They were the victims of angelkind's genocidal tendencies. They fought back against the attacks launched against them, but they did not seek vengeance. Leviathan was certainly not an unkind monster, not by any means. He was quite soft-hearted, because if he was not, he could have annihilated the angels on Earth with a wave of his claws."

"Even so," Jason concludes, "the Leviathan I observed, the one shown to me during the Ancient Era, may have only possessed half of his maximum power. Dragons split their entire power among themselves. It is likely that when Leviathan died after resurrecting Amelia, the remnants of his power traveled to his brother or sister inside the containment artifact, giving them the strength to break free. Then, they attacked Valhalla and killed the Titans."

Unarin frowns. He slowly drums his fingers on the table, while contemplating a great many things.

"Certainly possible." Unarin mutters. "But if the dragons were mostly non-violent, why attack Valhalla at all? And why stop there? Why not spread out to attack my people, or any number of other targets?"

"I have a few theories." Jason says. "First. The dragon may have broken free and found out their hated enemies were almost all dead. Perhaps the Volgrim and other sentients were as insignificant to it as gnats, but it likely still held a grudge against the Titans, who were hand-made by the angels to hunt down and kill the dragons."

"Second," Jason continues, "it's entirely possible the dragon was injured. Maybe escaping from my artifact or battling the Titans caused it serious wounds. It may have fled to go and recuperate."

"Third, maybe it just doesn't give a shit about you." Jason finishes. "You think of yourselves as a galaxy-class civilization. But maybe you're just not all that special, eh? Maybe the dragon doesn't care about a few septillion gnats."

"All of those possibilities are potentially true." Unarin says. "But there is another. Perhaps the dragon attacked the Titans to ensure they couldn't threaten him in the future. Perhaps he is not as kind-hearted as his brother, Leviathan. Perhaps he is biding his time, regaining his strength, and waiting for the chance to strike."

"Yeah. Maybe." Jason concedes. "But it's been something like ninety thousand years since Valhalla's destruction. Why wait so long?"

"Who says he is waiting?" Unarin snorts. "This Plague... there are far too many issues with it. Plagueborn possess bizarre and strange abilities. They came from seemingly nowhere. I was content to imagine a dragon might have been guiding their actions, but now you claim 'Emperor Gressil' might be involved as well. For a Demon Emperor to quietly step onto the scene and yet for me to not know, he has hidden himself well. His schemes run deep."

The First Founder's aged and insightful mind works like lightning as he pieces several possibilities together.

"Gressil might be strong, but in the end he is only a Demon Emperor. My sixth and seventh ranked Psions can annihilate him in an instant, let alone a living dragon. If there is a puppeteer involved, it would not be him. He would be that entity's agent."

"You... think Gressil might be working for the dragon?" Jason whispers. "That's a frightening thought."

Unarin's eyes twitch several times. He looks at the far wall with a distant haze obscuring his pupils.

"What frightens me the most is that I still feel as if I am overlooking something, or perhaps *someone*. Could the dragon be spreading the Plague to weaken and assimilate us? To what end? Perhaps he wishes to turn the whole galaxy into his hosts? But perhaps he may want to convert us all into something more 'digestible'? Maybe if he assimilates and devours us, his strength will reach new heights."

"But even if we assume a dragon is behind the Plague," Unarin continues, "I still hold too many unanswered questions. How does this knowledge help me? How can I put it to good use defeating the Plague? And even if I do somehow succeed in wiping the Plagueborn from existence, how am I supposed to battle a dragon? I fear even Founder Dosena won't be such a monster's match."

Jason and Unarin both fall silent.

The two men, leaders of their respective civilizations, watch in silence as countless Technopaths scream in silence and fall to the Plague's clutches on Gallax Blue. With a few more hours to go before the planet becomes fully assimilated, it will be a while before their suffering finally ends.

"Unarin." Jason says, his tone contemplative. "How do the Plagueborn arrive on worlds?"

"We don't know." Unarin answers. "They simply... appear. We've checked the records of countless fallen planets. We've scoured their video feeds, their planetary scanners, and other such things. Every time, the pattern always starts the same. A single Plagueborn climbs out of the dirt and makes its way toward the nearest population center. By the time the defenders realize it has arrived, they've lost the initiative. All the Plagueborn needs to do is infect a few dozen locals and just like that, the spread will occur unstoppably."

"It's that easy?" Jason asks, perplexed. "You've never managed to kill the first Plagueborn before it starts assimilating a world?"

"We have!" Unarin exclaims. "On at least a hundred occasions. But it doesn't matter. If you kill the first Plagueborn, a second will appear on the same world, elsewhere. And if

you kill it, a third will appear. One of them is sure to succeed in their infection efforts, even if the locals immediately raise the alert level to maximum."

Jason scrunches up his face in confusion.

"You're... you're telling me... the Plague can just materialize on planets? Then what's with all the armadas and the battle-lines in space? Kind of fucking pointless, don't you think?"

"No." Unarin says, his voice quiet. "I am referring to isolated Plaguehosts. Single-host infections that bring planets to ruin. But out there in the Void, there exist hundreds of planets fully consumed by the Plague. And those planets... they have countless Psionic hosts capable of traversing the void. Our armadas exist purely to stop them."

"We used to obliterate any worlds taken by the Plague." Unarin says, closing his eyes. "It was the only way to permanently stop their advance. But Marie Becker's Neutron Bombs, while powerful, cannot be replicated rapidly. Glassing them from space won't kill the Plagueborn either, as they can hide deep underground through their unique methods. We cannot destroy every single world in existence just to stop the Plague. And if we did do that, we'd have to give up all hope of ever mounting a counter-offensive. At this point, our best chance of total victory is to discover a cure for the contagion, but all our efforts have proven fruitless."

Unarin leans back in his chair, a look of faint despair on his face.

"Ruthless. Unstoppable. Lacking morality, or virtue, or pride, or fear. Not one iota of compassion or remorse. Our enemy is inexorable. If we can't defeat them, they will continue until they have devoured the entire galaxy."

The Wordsmith examines Unarin's face for several moments. He debates internally on whether to speak of the secret he's been holding all this time.

Seeing Unarin's despair, he finally makes the choice.

"Unarin. Have you heard of... the Cosmic Realm?"

The First Founder blinks his eyes heavily. "I assume you are not referring to the Void? Not some fancy human term for it?"

"No." Jason says quietly. "It is the birthplace of the angels. Or rather... it was."

Unarin slightly frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Let me put it this way." Jason explains. "When I lived on Earth, my world was enveloped by a fourth dimension, one known as Heaven. Heaven existed by exchanging life energy with the creatures of Earth to sustain itself."

"Valhalla is similar." Jason continues. "It seems to have enveloped the world of Grimvolas, though whether fully or in part, I do not know."

"Then, you can look at the Labyrinth of Hell as a greater example. Satan constructed a realm in the fourth dimension that slowly grows over time by feeding upon the energy of its denizens. Hell is much larger now than at any point in its past. It exists at a boundary way beyond the likes of Heaven and Valhalla."

"But the Cosmic Realm..." Jason concludes. "...The Cosmic Realm is far bigger than both. It envelops the entire Milky Way. It is a realm countless times bigger than Hell. The angels were apparently created there, if Raphael's words ring true. And now I must tell you the awful truth."

"What truth?" Unarin asks, leaning forward. "Speak!"

"The Cosmic Realm..." Jason mutters. "It has been completely overtaken by the Kolvaxians... and I fear they are using it to transfer themselves between the worlds of the Milky Way. It would explain why they are able to appear out of nowhere on worlds without any warning. Worlds such as these three Gallax planets, as well as Sharmur and the rest."

Unarin's jaw hangs open.

He stares at the Wordsmith with a mixture of bewilderment and disbelief.

Not since his angry outburst has Unarin so visibly lost his composure.

"You... when were you going to tell me this?!" Unarin roars. "What is the Cosmic Realm exactly? How does it function? How does it sustain itself? How far does it reach? Can we enter it to destroy the Kolvaxians contained within?!"

Jason shakes his head. "I don't have all the answers. In fact, I hardly have any. But now, I think it is about time we brought another person to the table. I believe he will be able to answer all your questions."

Humanity's Hero holds up his right hand, revealing the plain golden band on his ring-finger.

"Materialize."

A hazy image of a winged old man materializes to the side of the table. His expression grave, the Archangel of Wisdom glances at Jason, annoyed at being summoned without consulting him first. Then, he turns his head slightly to look at Unarin.

"Unarin."

"Raphael." Unarin replies, his tone curt. "It has been a while."

"In my eyes, 'twas merely a blink of the eye." Raphael murmurs. "My people died because of thee."

"They died because of your own greed." Unarin snaps back. "Always so eager to blame others. I pray you will be able to afford some insight into this Plague. Or, perhaps you'd be quite content seeing the Volgrim go extinct, just as your people did? I imagine it would give you quite a sensation of glee."

"Hmph. The death of your species shan't bring mine back." Raphael says. "But 'twould make me feel a great deal better."

"Raphael." Jason says. "I didn't bring you here to argue with the First Founder. We need your insight. I want you to tell him all you know about the Cosmic Realm. If the Volgrim fall, so too will humanity, and any further chances of reviving the angels. It's in your best interest to help us both out, you know."

"That's right." Unarin says, slyly smirking at Raphael. "Oh, the Wordsmith probably *won't* bring the angels back, but you need that sliver of hope still, don't you? You need to believe in the chance angelkind may someday revive. Though I must question if it will even matter when all your brothers and sisters are dead. The newly created ones may be angels in name, but would you ever accept them? It is difficult to say."

"First Founder, ever thou art the conniving snake." Raphael says, more bored by Unarin's taunts than infuriated. "I have made my peace. Three of my siblings still draw breath. Thou should knoweth this truth, given our obliteration of thy pathetic fleet in the Hell Harbor system. And who knows? Perhaps I mayeth unleash such an attack again, should'st thou continue to *test my patience*."

Unarin's smirk vanishes. In its place, a slightly befuddled expression replaces it. He averts his eyes and snorts.

"Primordial horrors. Your kind cannot die out quickly enough."

"Time passes, and the young grow up to replace the old." Raphael muses. He walks over to a chair beside Jason at the table and takes a seat. With only room for four people, the space isn't exactly large and luxurious, but it does feel somewhat intimate, with the participants forced to sit within spitting distance of one another.

"The Cosmic Realm." Raphael says, after taking his seat. "Many eons have passed since I first created that area..."

Part 400: Gallax's Fall

Raphael closes his eyes and begins to speak.

"In the beginning, there was only the Creator and the Void. Then, my Father made me, his first son. He named me Raphael. He gave me light. He showed me the creation of our galaxy. He told me to be fruitful and spread the seed of life."

Jason frowns. "I thought the Cosmic Realm was where all the angels were made?"

"Nay. I created the Cosmic Realm to form more angels from the dust of the cosmos," Raphael explains, "for I could not spread those seeds all by myself."

"If you could create angels, why didn't you make more after all the Dragon Wars and Titan Wars and all that other stuff?" Jason pushes further.

"When I was still young and newly formed, my Father gave me a portion of his... creative power." Raphael explains haltingly. "And so, I created the Cosmic Realm, which gave life to a billion of my brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, what followed were the first holy wars of angelkind, where they fought one another to alleviate their boredom and satiate their bloodlust. During this period, I exhausted what remained of my creative powers. My final act was to plant the last seed of creation inside one of my sisters, Uzziel, who later went on to assist me in creating the dragons and Titans."

"The dragons you hunted like dogs in the street." Unarin snorts. "And then what? The Cosmic Realm fell apart?"

"Nay. It remained as a place for the fallen among my brothers and sisters to return to." Raphael says. "Someday, if I should die, I too shalt dissipate and return to the dust of the Cosmic Realm."

"So you made the Cosmic Realm yourself, which you then used to make all the other angels?" Jason asks, while mentally recalling the things Raphael told him during the Ancient Era. "These details seem a little different from what you told me before. Are you lying to me?"

"Not lying. Expanding." Raphael says, casually waving a hand. "I hath no need to lie. The angels art gone. Nothing remains but a shred of my pride."

"Let's get specific." Unarin says. "Explain to me how we can access the Cosmic Realm. I must destroy the Kolvaxians contained within. Also, I need to know how they might be escaping the Cosmic Realm to land on worlds. Why don't they do so more often? Why only a single Kolvaxian at a time? Are there hard limits for traveling to and from the Cosmic Realm?"

Raphael slowly shakes his head.

"Verily, I know not why the Kolvaxians act the way they do. If they possesseth the power to enter and exit the Cosmic Realm, there art no reason they cannot do so at will. Within a day, they could easily make planetfall upon every populated world in the galaxy."

"...And yet they do not." Unarin murmurs, a strange look playing upon his face. The First Founder leans back and touches his chin while lowering his eyes to the table before him. "How strange. Perhaps they are too mindless to precisely target planetary coordinates? No. That cannot be the case. We would surely have stumbled across hundreds of Plagueborn floating in the void, individuals who misjudged their 'jump' locations by half a lightyear or so. The void is incredibly vast. Making a precise landing upon a planet must be all but impossible for a species like them, and yet they manage to do so on a reliable basis."

Jason shares a similar strange expression as the First Founder.

"Unarin, is it possible... well, is it possible the Plague really are just some entity working on behalf of a much more powerful and conniving foe? Perhaps this dragon...?"

"If so, it would explain a great many things." Unarin says. "As I said before, I believe the Plague's goal is not only to consume and assimilate, but to spread fear and terror. It is as if they are a biological weapon of vengeance. It's not enough that they ultimately consume and destroy my people, but also cause us despair. As for the recent attack on Sharmur, it was the first time the Plague fell upon a demon-controlled world, but not the first time it devoured a world owned by a non-Volgrim species. Although..."

Unarin cocks his head, then lifts his eyes to look at Raphael and Jason.

"It is strange. Are you aware that the Plague only consumes intelligent life?"

"I beg your pardon?" Jason asks. "What do you mean? Like, it ignores animals?"

"That is correct. The Plague does not infect simple creatures or beasts of burden. It only infests the bodies and minds of creatures rated above a zero-point-five on the Vol-

wareness Quotient. Any species below that, it strictly ignores. It will infest goblins, orcs, fairies, Volgrim... but to use examples from your homeworld of Earth, it will not infest the bodies of cows, rats, or even Dolphins. Perhaps 'vengeance' truly is its main goal."

"Verily, Unarin," Raphael says, changing the topic somewhat abruptly. "A question resteth upon my mind. Earlier, thou spoketh of the Codex, yet failed to elaborate on how Emperor Lucifer played into thy designs. Art we to believe that Lucifer is some sort of magic species-unlocking mechanism?"

If Unarin is bothered about the shift in topics, he doesn't show it on his face.

"That's right. Earth was a unique world filled with species from all across the galaxy. We believe that when Lucifer obtained her powers, she became capable of creating life forms spread by the dragons. When dragon energy lands upon a planet, it enriches the world with life energy, allowing the seeds of creation to take hold. As for why Lucifer was able to harness the unified power of draconic creation, it seems quite obvious now, doesn't it?"

Unarin snorts.

"Leviathan gave her his power directly. It is entirely possible he allowed her to tap into the unified DNA of all dragons, and so she became capable of creating any life which existed as a result of dragonkind's spread."

"You're only guessing." Jason says. "Maybe there's some other reason."

"It is the most likely one, given the circumstances." Unarin says coolly.

For a brief moment, all three men fall silent. Jason communicates with Fiona in his Mind Realm, and after they exchange insights, he returns to the topic at hand.

"The Kolvaxians don't infect lower-intelligence creatures. They ignore them. They most likely teleport to worlds through the use of the Cosmic Realm. Furthermore, they may be moving slowly specifically to cause the Volgrim and other Sentients as much emotional and mental distress as possible. And finally, a dragon might be involved, as well as Emperor Gressil. Have I missed anything?"

"That seems about everything." Unarin replies. "Can you think of a way to convert a Kolvaxian back to its original body? Surely your Wordsmithing must have some effect?"

Jason chews his lower lip. "I don't think I can directly apply the effect of a Word of Power to a Kolvaxian. They have the same energy field as Gressil protecting them, so my

magic won't have any direct effect..."

He pauses.

"Though a voice in my head tells me I might still be able to use my reality-defying abilities to create a *device* that can revert their forms. Unarin, you said before the Kolvaxians would self-immolate to ash if you captured them alive. How does that work?"

The First Founder waves his hand. He conjures a video feed above the table of a group of Psions on some remote planet surrounding a Kolvaxian, yanking it into the air, and attempting to place special restraints upon it.

Before they can complete their task, the monster opens its mouth, releases a soundless cry, and... fizzles away!

It dissolves into ash, as if an invisible fire had consumed it and burned every last molecule of its body to nothingness.

Jason blinks twice. "Okay. That's alarming."

"For these creatures to exhibit such an ability, perhaps they mayest possess a link to one another? Some sort of magical or non-magical connection?" Raphael posits.

"A mental link. Yes. It's quite obvious they do." Unarin replies. "Though we aren't certain as to the details. If we assume the Kolvaxians have some sort of magical link to one another, we still have to uncover a method to decrypt or block it. My best Changelings have tried for decades to do so, yet all of their efforts have failed."

Jason goes quiet. He stares at Unarin for a few moments before slowly blinking.

"You know, Unarin. If your best scientists and geniuses cannot think of a method, there is another way."

Unarin narrows his eyes.

"...You want me to give you Solomon's Crown."

"Oh? Are you a Psion in disguise?" Jason asks. "Your mind-reading skills aren't bad."

"I've been waiting for you to bring it up." Unarin says. "You may *not* have the Knowledge-Seeker's relic. I've hidden it away where none may touch it. The Mind-Thief is not anyone's ally. Not yours, and certainly not mine."

"You stole Solomon's Crown from me." Jason says, lowering his voice to a quiet hiss. He leans forward, while a dark and brooding expression swallows his face. "I don't know

how you did it. Perhaps a Psion stole it from atop my head, or perhaps you used some other method. But I know what I saw. You held the Crown during your fancy conference for all of Volgrimkind to see. So, if you expect our relationship to progress any further, you had better hand it to me now. Cut the crap and give me what's mine."

As Jason pushes his presence toward Unarin, the First Founder doesn't visibly react. The Wordsmith's speech splashes against his face without creating a disturbance, then fades into the ether.

"We did not steal the Crown from you." Unarin says dryly. "On the contrary. One of our agents discovered the Crown lying in a random corridor of the Labyrinth. If it was so important to you, why would you drop it in some inexplicable location deep within Hell's depths?"

The Wordsmith pauses. He frowns at this new information.

"...You're lying."

"I'm not." Unarin retorts. "*Please*. If I stole it from you, I'd say I did. Whether I took it from you directly or found it laying around, ultimately I possessed the ability to seize it, and so I did. I won't let the Mind-Thief roam about to sap whatever knowledge he likes from the unwitting. He's far too dangerous."

Jason glances at Raphael. The Archangel of Wisdom lightly shrugs.

"I know not the circumstances behind the Crown's disappearance." Raphael says. "I know only as much as thee."

Jason thinks back to the moment he found the Crown was missing.

In that short period when he found himself unable to wake up, only to do so a minute later and find the Crown was gone...

Did Solomon somehow take control of his body? Did he cast a Word of Power without Jason's consent?

Jason recalls his unconscious 'battle' with Hope, when a sliver of Solomon's will took over Jason's mind and manipulated him, nearly killing Belial.

"Can... can Solomon take over people's bodies?" Jason hesitantly asks.

"I haven't an answer." Unarin says. "Perhaps he can, but perhaps he cannot. He is the Mind-Thief, though. Such an action does lay within the realm of possibility."

Unarin's words cause Jason to sink deeper into doubt. He leans back in his seat and ponder Solomon's last words before he departed.

Perhaps he did, in fact, leave Jason of his own volition. Could he have taken any other actions? And why would he have sent himself to a random hallway in the Labyrinth?

I'm missing an important clue... Jason thinks.

After mulling over the implications for a short while, Jason slowly shakes his head.

"...Alright. Maybe it's better if I don't deal with Solomon. But his artifact is still an item which should rightfully belong to humanity and myself. Not just his artifact, but every other one as well!"

Jason raises his chin.

"I want Excalibur."

Unarin blinks slowly.

"King Arthur's blade? I don't have it."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Jason asks. "Confessor Vulpanix *said* you guys had it. Not to mention I saw your broadcast, and you know I did. Stop playing hard to get. It's fucking irritating."

The First Founder rolls his eyes. "Alright. I do have it. And you're not getting it, either."

"Do you want our collaboration to end here?" Jason asks.

"Heh." Unarin chuckles humorlessly. "Do *you*?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Use your head, Wordsmith." Unarin replies. "Our relationship so far is tenuous, but essential. You need my resources, and I need your skills. I can assist you in building up humanity's strength to a point where you can help us battle the Plague. But do you really think I'm going to give you access to the greatest mind among humankind, or Camael's mightiest artifact? Think again."

He continues. "I have no reason to trust that you won't immediately turn the divine blade against me in the future. It's better it stays safe and secure in my vaults."

After a momentary pause, Unarin adds: "And I can't give it away right now, anyway. My researchers are making good *use* of its abundant magical power source."

"What are you doing with it?" Jason asks, narrowing his eyes. "I'm not comfortable with the species that annihilated humanity possessing humanity's greatest weapon."

"Bah! Your 'greatest weapon'!" Unarin guffaws. "Pathetic. Just one Eighth-Ranked Psion could lay to waste that so-called 'Hero-King' and we've five of them. Excalibur is indeed only slightly weaker than a Primordial artifact, but compared to the might of Volgrim civilization, it is merely a quaint and useful mud-dweller relic that we can use to broaden our understanding of magical metaphysics."

"If it's so quaint, then surely you won't mind giving it up." Jason says quietly.

"It would become a weapon of mass destruction in your hands." Unarin replies, his voice equally low. "I already know that the scope of your abilities are limited by the quantity and quality of the mana within yourself. If you were to obtain Excalibur, you could unleash effects tens of thousands of times greater than any you've displayed in the past. Forgive me, Wordsmith, but I have yet to come to trust you with wielding such power."

"You're terrified I'd turn Excalibur against you." Jason snaps back. "Admit the truth."

"Oh, certainly, that is one of my concerns." Unarin admits. "But do you really think it's my primary concern? Excalibur is extremely dangerous. The divine blade has a mind of its own."

Unarin suddenly pauses. A smile crooks upon the corner of his lip. He turns to look at Raphael.

"Oh. Did you not tell the Wordsmith, Raphael? About what happened to Arthur, I mean? About the *mistake* he made when wielding Camael's mightiest artifact?"

Jason frowns. He glances at Raphael.

"Hm? What mistake? What's Unarin talking about?"

The Archangel of Wisdom sighs for the tenth time in as many days.

"The Greatest Sinner. That is the title King Arthur assumed... after that day..."

He slowly shakes his head.

"'Twas not Arthur's fault. His wife had suffered immeasurably. The blade spoke to his wrath. In that moment, he lost control. Ten million souls, extinguished in the blink of an

eye. Demons, humans, and even a Titan King. An entire human city vanished that day, never to be seen again."

"Excalibur is dangerous." Unarin says. "Some Terran brat with only six cycles of experience should not place its hilt within his grasp. Even if you were Founder Dosena herself, my closest ally, I would not trust you with such a dangerous weapon."

"As far as humans go, I'm a fully grown adult." Jason says. "I don't appreciate your constant condescension toward my age. If you're so old and wise, why even rely on a stupid young idiot like me to deal with this Plague? Maybe it's time you start showing me some genuine sincerity. I want Solomon's Crown and Excalibur. Period. End of story."

No matter how Jason pushes, Unarin doesn't give an inch.

"Your insistence will not change my mind nor sway me to action." Unarin says. "You need me as much as I need you, but neither of us needs you to possess the Mind-Thief's artifact, nor an unimaginably destructive weapon."

"What can I do to convince you otherwise?" Jason asks.

"Absolutely nothing."

The Wordsmith presses Unarin a few more times, but eventually gives up when he sees Unarin won't concede.

"You know I could hunt the artifacts down and take them by force, right?" Jason asks.

"You could try." Unarin says, smiling. "If you want to find out just how much power my Psions *actually* wield."

"I don't have a pressing need for either artifact now." Jason says. "But if that changes in the future, don't think I won't make a move. Underestimate my Wordsmithing at your own risk."

"Trust me, Jason Hiro." Unarin whispers. "I never underestimate *anyone*."

The two continue exchanging light barbs and dry words for a while as the Gallax system crumbles. Unable to save any of the world's populace, the Wordsmith ultimately gives up for the moment, deciding that he and his two wives will have to work on a solution when he returns home.

Unarin presses a button on the table.

"Muuxunuu. Set course back to Volgarius. Warp 9."

"Yes, First Founder." Muuxunuu replies, her limpid voice transmitting over the craft's speakers. "We are only able to make seven more jumps at maximum warp. Please keep this in mind moving forward."

As the Founder's Spear starts to ignite its warp drive, Jason glances at Unarin.

"What's all this about limited jumps? Something we need to worry about?"

"All Volgrim vessels run on Trifrancium." Unarin explains. "It is the most energetic compound in the universe, capable of restoring its own energy over time, in a similar manner to Excalibur. It allows ships to jump to warp at speeds of Warp 6 or lower without ever running out of fuel. At Warp 7, 8, and 9, the Trifrancium will deplete faster than it can restore itself. Warp 9 is especially stressful, and will cause the ship to permanently deplete its reserves far too quickly to be of much use to anyone but VIP's in a rush to a distant location. Generally, we Volgrim limit our speed to Warp 6 when traveling to ensure their reserves never deplete."

"Smart." Jason says, not especially caring. The Founder's Spear departs the Gallax system with a flicker of motion, leaving the Plagueborn to their fates.

All the while, Jason's thoughts fixate on images of Excalibur and Solomon's Crown...

Raphael continues to sit beside Jason, quietly glowering at Unarin while the First Founder smiles back.

"We've yet to settle our accounts." Raphael murmurs. "I resent thee, Volgrim. I resent thy existence, and the actions thou hath taken which brought my species to ruin."

"You trashed my armada quite well." Unarin says. "Next time, you won't catch my Psions off-guard. A Confessor might not be your match, but what about an Executor, hmm? I'd be interested in finding out how my best stack up to a monster from the Primordial Era..."

Raphael reveals a cold, sinister smile.

"Perhaps thou shalt not enjoy the results of such a matchup, *First Founder*. Thou shouldn't pray we do not come to blows a second time, lest I travel directly to thy homeworld and take care of thee myself."

Unarin gurgles a vile laugh in the back of his throat.

"Heh heh heh... the Plague might be unstoppable, old monster..."

"...but *you* are not."

Part 401: Samuel's Strength

The world of Volgarius.

Within the top twenty levels of the Founder's Thumb, a couple dozen humans, a Minotaur, and a Demon Emperor all rest within a comfortable, recently-built communal space. Built in a single day by some above-average Technopaths, it offers luxurious sleeping arrangements for the soldiers who originally came to protect Jason's life, as well as his chef and Emperor Serena.

Among the humans is one man in particular, Lieutenant Samuel Baker. He paces back and forth restlessly in the room's center while his subordinates all mess with datapads, playing a virtual game of poker with each other while lounging on their beds.

Samuel walks from left to right, and right to left. He sticks his thumbs in his pockets while grumbling curses under his breath.

Officer Ashley glances up from her datapad at the pacing man. "Samuel, come *on*. Do you have to keep prancing around all day long? You're making it hard for me to enjoy my game."

Samuel growls at her. "It's been almost two days. The Wordsmith still isn't back. What's the point of us coming along to protect Commander Hiro if he fucks off without us? We might as well have stayed on Tarus II."

"Yeah. Maybe." Ashley admits, while calling one of her comrades' bluffs in their virtual game. "But we didn't know what to expect, coming here. Now that we know, we don't have much else better to do. Come, sit down. Join us for the next round."

"I can't focus on any games right now." Samuel says, shaking his head. He glances at his Power Glove sitting on the dresser beside his bed. "I'll go and make myself useful. Gonna get some more training done."

Ashley rolls her eyes. "Whatever. Suit yourself."

Samuel walks over and grabs the device off his dresser. He heads out of the room, and after he leaves, Ashley sighs.

"That guy is *such* a workaholic."

* * *

Samuel heads down the corridor, arriving at a previously designated holographic training area put in place by the Volgrim to serve their guests' needs. Despite the Wordsmith and his people only intending to be on Volgarius for a week at most, these specially-designed rooms allow the Volgrim not only to appear as kind and altruistic hosts, but to subtly assert the power of their civilization. By witnessing the depths of Technopath creations, the humans can subconsciously fear and venerate their betters, whether they want to or not.

Samuel closes the door to the holographic training room, finding himself the only person inside. He lifts up his Power Glove and adjusts its settings, transforming himself into a massive black-furred Minotaur with giant, cloven hooves. His height jumps upward by two full feet, and his muscle mass doubles.

"Computer, turn on a training program. Give me something to fight!" Samuel commands.

Wordlessly, the low-level synthmind in charge of the holographic training facility follows his order. It changes the room to a moderately temperate world, one with grass and trees and rolling hills. The technology easily fools Samuel's brain, making him feel as if he has stepped foot onto this other world in person.

At the same time, dozens of strange, never-before-seen creatures burst out of the ground, their bodies partially covered in rocks and granite adhering to their skin. Resembling four-legged spiders the size of small children, they appear quite frightening as they charge at Samuel and allow him to whip out a huge greataxe.

The human-turned-monster roars with great gusto. He attacks the rock-spiders and starts smashing them about, occasionally suffering minor wounds as they stab him and cut him, forcing him backward. Still, he kills them by the dozens and eventually takes out a total of forty-seven, clearing the simulation.

After the first wave of enemies disappears, Samuel pauses for a minute to catch his breath. He touches his wounds and winces. Despite the pain wracking his body, he knows that in fact his injuries are nothing more than a trick of the technology. By interfacing with his mind, the holographic simulation can make him feel the pain of being stabbed and cut, and even deceive his eyes to a point where he can't tell the difference.

"It's so realistic..." Samuel grunts.

He continues to pause in place. The Lieutenant frowns as several feelings flicker through his heart.

"I'm so strong. So powerful in this body. But I feel... incomplete."

The man stares at the fake world before him while blood seemingly drips from his wounds.

A sense of listlessness pervades his mind.

"All this training. All this strength. I pursue it to seek my revenge. I have to kill all of the demons. Every last one. But it won't ever bring my little brother back..."

He lifts up his Minotaur-hand and gazes at his palm.

"It's not right. This body... it doesn't *feel* right to me."

The man rotates his wrist. He looks at the Power Glove attached to his left arm and frowns.

"Minotaur. Orc. Even a Harpy. I'm somewhat compatible with them all, but it's like I'm wearing the wrong skin. Maybe... I mean, nobody's looking, yeah? Maybe I should try..."

Samuel changes the dial to one that display an image of a humanoid figure with dainty-looking butterfly wings. He frowns in annoyance at the thought of assuming such a form.

"Like I'd ever want to become a stupid fucking fairy. A little butterfly-dancing *wuss*."

Still, despite his audible protest, the man hesitates.

"But, I mean... nobody will see if I do it... just this once. And I am a little... curious."

He bites his lip for a moment, then shrugs his shoulders.

"Fuck it."

Samuel presses the activation button. His body demorphs from the figure of a minotaur back to that of a human. The transition, as always, is a little uncomfortable. But only moments later, he feels a cool and pleasant sensation spring out of his back. A pair of wings pushes through his clothes and gently tears open a gap in the fabric. Moments later, his evolution concludes.

"Hmm? That... wasn't so bad." Samuel mutters.

The man cracks his neck. He ponders what exactly he should do.

"How do I use fairy magic, anyway?" Samuel asks himself. "Do I speak a magic word. Maybe wave my hand like-"

He starts to lift his hand, and before he can react, a pulse of light fires from his palm toward the ceiling! It splashes harmlessly against the reinforced surface, startling him.

"What in the hell?!"

Samuel blinks twice. So effortless was his usage of magic that he can't even believe his eyes.

"I did that? But how?"

He holds up his hand again. Once more, a bolt of light fires from his palm, though its relative power seems weak enough that it might only push a small child off their feet.

Curious, Samuel begins to experiment. He releases dozens of light-bolts, some of them visibly stronger than others. By concentrating his mind, he becomes capable of increasing their power and strength to the point they could even dent some heavier armors.

"Huh. This is actually pretty neat." Samuel murmurs. "And it's so easy to pull off. There's no discomfort at all. It's like I was always meant to use this magic. Not like when I become a Minotaur or an Orc."

He pauses.

"But surely, there's more I can do?"

Samuel thinks back to his interactions with Blinker. As the lone fairy on Tarus II for the longest time, she's been the only wellspring of knowledge for fairy magic, but he hasn't actually spent much time with her.

The man frowns.

"Illusions. Fairies can summon illusions..."

He focuses his mind, then begins to imagine a certain figure standing in front of him...

Instantly, a clone of Samuel appears!

The man perfectly recreates his physical appearance, making an identical-looking version of himself stand ten feet away. He blinks in surprise.

"...That easy? I barely even had to try."

Seeing the illusory figure of himself makes Samuel's heart race. After a brief moment, he slowly nods.

"Brother..."

He focuses his mind again. This time, his 'clone' changes appearance. It becomes a much younger man, but one who doesn't look too dissimilar from Samuel himself.

The moment he finishes creating the new illusion, Samuel's expression stiffens.

"It... it looks... just like him... just like Grady."

Grady Baker. Samuel's brother. Killed by demons, all those years ago.

Unlike many of the other higher-ups of humanity's military, Samuel is someone who came from the liberated worlds. He lived as a slave to the demons for the first thirty years of his life. He remembers the terror they would spread when they went on a 'soul hunting party' to kill off the strongest humans on their chattel worlds.

Samuel balls his hands into fists. He trembles with emotion as he gazes into the eyes of his little brother, a man who was killed at the tender young age of fifteen, when demons charged into his village and massacred a quarter of the population.

"...I'll never forgive them, Grady." Samuel whispers. "Never. I'm still fighting the good fight. When this is all over, I'll join you in the next life, along with mama and papa. Don't worry. I'll *never* forget you."

Seeing his brother for the first time in fifteen years, Samuel takes a long moment to pause and gaze at the person he loved most in the world. He remembers why he continues to fight, and this realization firms up his determination.

Without hesitation, Samuel waves his hand and causes Grady's image to disperse.

"This is the ticket." He mutters. "I finally have a way to explosively increase my power. Fairy magic is... it's perfect for me. But I don't yet know how to reliably use it. When I return to Tarus II, I should seek out Blinker and ask for her advice."

He pauses.

"...In the meantime. I'll just have to make do with what I have currently."

Samuel waves his hands. He summons a barrier of energy around himself.

"I can do that too, huh? Useful. It seems like my imagination is the limit. Computer, start up another training sim, but keep the difficulty low. Just one or two enemies this time. Bipedal, nothing too extravagant."

The computer wordlessly follows his orders and summons skeletons from beyond the grave to attack Samuel. The Lieutenant jumps into action, busting his butt to try out all sorts of new magical abilities.

"Telekinesis! I can push and pull! I can crush! I'm not weak anymore! I am strong!"

Within less than an hour, the man has already invented over fifty different magical abilities, none of them particularly potent, but all of them quite diverse.

He smiles to himself.

"Not bad. Not bad at all."

Samuel turns to leave the room while adjusting the dial on his Power Glove. However, just as he's about to deactivate the gauntlet, he jumps in fright when he discovers a goddamned Volgrim standing at the doorway behind him.

"Jumping Jesus!" Samuel exclaims, while jerking backward and raising his fists. He immediately identifies the new arrival as a yellow-skinned Psion, someone of unknown origins. "Who the fuck are you?! Don't sneak up on me like that!"

The unknown Psion stands unmoving, her hands clasped behind her back. She appears totally unruffled by the human's loud screams.

[Mud-dweller. That device on your wrist. It... interests me.]

She speaks in English, allowing Samuel to understand her words. At the same time, her tone is neither polite nor rude. She speaks blandly and with deep expectations, as if believing the human will immediately bow to her will and obey any command she might utter.

"Who are you?!" Samuel snaps back. "A name, woman!"

The Psion slowly blinks all six of her eyes.

[Rude. Loud. Like all mud-dwellers. I am Executor Riley, an Eighth-Level Psion of the Volgrim Empire. And you are Samuel Baker. A low-level member of humanity's military.]

She cocks her head slightly.

[There. Enough with the pleasantries. You will explain the function of the device attached to your appendage.]

Her words broker no argument. Even while being relatively unaware of the differences in Psion ranks, Samuel has picked up plenty of hints that any Psion with the title of

Executor must not, under any circumstances, be fucked with.

His skin loses some of its warmth. "I... I am one of humanity's delegates. The Wordsmith-"

[The Wordsmith is not here right now. Nor will he return for several time-units.] Executor Riley states in an imposing mental voice. [I am hardly acting out of line. You will detail the functions of that device to me. I wish to add its uniqueness to my knowledge.]

"...And what if I don't want to comply?" Samuel asks.

Riley blinks again, as if so bored by his paltry and feeble resistance that she can barely keep from falling asleep.

All of a sudden, Riley's body flickers. She materializes directly in front of Samuel, startling him and making him jump backward in fright. The unexpected teleportation catches him off-guard and makes him trip over his own feet. He falls on his ass and grunts in pain.

"Gah! You... you bloody..."

[I would advise watching your language.] Riley warns him. [I am not known for taking insults well. I especially do not approve of feeble mud-dwellers denying me the information I so *politely* requested. Test my patience at your own discretion.]

A chill goes down Samuel's back. Even with his newly uncovered powers, he knows he doesn't stand the slightest chance in hell of dealing with this Executor on his own. She could stomp him into a bloody pulp with the same effort he might put into squishing an ant.

"...It's called, uh... it's called a Power Glove." Samuel hesitantly says, while shakily rising to his feet. "Why do you want to know?"

[The technology is primitive. Nevertheless, its body-shifting properties are quite remarkable.] Riley states. [I am no Technopath, but even I can imagine a variety of utilizations for such a device. You will give me your Power Glove.]

"I won't." Samuel says, while steeling his stomach and narrowing his eyes. "If you want it, you'll have to take it. Shouldn't be too hard for a tough gal like you."

[Why do you deny my command?] Riley asks, appearing slightly confused. [Have you any idea the immense power I wield? You are nothing to me.]

"And yet here you are, still chatting me up." Samuel says, his eyes flickering with a hint of realization. "Come to think of it, you definitely *could* just take the gauntlet. I wouldn't even be able to resist. Yet... you're not doing that. Why?"

Riley remains silent, but Samuel's mind continues to race.

"Don't tell me. You're not *allowed* to take it. If you attack me... you'll get in big trouble. You need me to give it up voluntarily. You'll get in trouble with Unarin or Dosena, right?"

[Do not utter the Founder's names so flippantly!] Riley suddenly exclaims, her voice booming in Samuel's mind. [You will speak their titles with respect! If you do not, I will have reason to execute you on the spot!]

Samuel grits his teeth. Riley's mere words contain so much power that his nostrils and ears begin to bleed. Even so, he forces himself to remain standing, and even manages to crack a smile.

"...Haha! Sorry, 'miss Executor!' I was indeed disrespectful! But what an interesting turn of phrase you just used, yeah? You'll have 'reason' to execute me? So that means you can't just kill me without a good reason? You're looking for one. You want me to screw up so you'll have 'permission' to take my gauntlet. I almost fell for your ruse!"

Executor Riley stiffens. She glares at the human with hate-filled eyes.

[Clever little mud-dweller. Maybe you aren't as dense as a rock.]

With her minor little plot foiled, Riley pulls back and eases up on her psionic suppression, weakening the amount of pressure placed upon Samuel's mind. He breathes a sigh of relief.

"No, I'm actually pretty ignorant. Certainly can't match up to a crazy-powerful alien like you." Samuel says. "Why don't we try this again? You want info on my glove? You should give me something of equivalent value. An equal exchange."

[I will never treat a lowly mud-dweller as my equal.] Riley proclaims, bristling at the mere thought of entertaining Samuel's words. [Such a flippant insect. You court death, trying to make a deal with me.]

Samuel regains a bit of his confidence. He stands up straight and look her right in the eyes.

"Maybe I was courting death before, but let's drop the bullshit. You're not going to attack me unless I slip up, and now that I know your game, I won't do that. So, if you want

to obtain the thing you desire, you'll have to... adjust your standards."

Riley hesitates.

The Executor glances around the room while sweeping her psionic sense all throughout the immediate region. Naturally, she picks up on the presence of other high-level Psions, a fact that causes her great annoyance.

[What sort of... *cooperation*... do you seek?] Riley asks, her tone dripping with disdain.

"Like I said. Equivalent exchange." Samuel replies. "Surely you can give me some interesting technology in exchange for my gauntlet? Of course, I'll have to contact the Wordsmith and get his permission before making any trades."

[I am unable to grant a *lower* species access to Volgrim technology.] Riley says. [You are not privy to the Founder's hard-earned wealth.]

"Sure, sure." Samuel says, casually waving his hand while stealing even more of the conversation's momentum. "But it doesn't have to be anything bleeding edge. Come on, doesn't this gauntlet interest you? Changing your form could be useful, yeah? Maybe you have some... B-grade technology. Something worth exchanging nobody would miss."

[Even the scraps of superior Volgrim technology would be eons more advanced than anything a mud-dweller could create.] Riley snaps back. [I cannot make such an exchange!]

Samuel slowly blinks his eyes. He sighs deeply and slowly, then heaves his shoulders in a comically exaggerated manner.

"Oh. That's too bad. Well, I guess I'll have to be going, then. Since you have nothing to offer me, this has all been a great big waste of my time."

Riley glowers at the human. She watches as he starts to walk past her, heading toward the doorway leading out of the training facility.

[Insolent!] Executor Riley barks. [I could kill you a thousand different ways, mud-dweller! How dare you try and... and trick me into giving you classified Volgrim technology!]

Samuel keeps walking toward the exit.

"It's all in your hands, *Executor* Riley. If you want something from this *lowly* mud-dweller, you'll have to decide whether it's worth degrading yourself to my level. Either put

up or shut up, that's what my papa always said."

He pauses at the doorway for half a breath, but seeing no change in her attitude, he shrugs.

"It's in your hands."

The entrance opens and closes behind him, leaving Riley all by herself.

BOOM.

An explosion of rage-fueled psionic energy bursts out of her body, collapsing the space around her and shaking the room. The training facility loses power as hundreds of its delicate mechanisms shatter, revealing that even this tiny bit of barely controlled psionic rage could have imploded Samuel's body into nothingness.

[Bastard!] Riley roars in her own head, trembling with fury. [How dare a mud-dweller humiliate me! The moment he's no longer under his master's protection, I'll go to him and crush-]

Before she can finish that thought, a flicker of energy appears at Riley's side. She flinches, then turns to her right and widens her eyes.

[F-Founder Dosena!] Riley exclaims. [I... I wasn't...]

[Do not attempt to lie to me.] Founder Dosena says, her tone bland. [Exchanging of technology with a lower species is strictly forbidden. Even for you.]

Dosena's pitch-black skin contrasts with the shining golden armor wrapped protectively around her body. Not that she needs it. Her physiological strengths have already made her all but immune to damage of a material nature.

At the same time, her powerful appearance causes Riley's emotions to fluctuate. She lowers her head obediently.

[Of course, Second Founder. I would not dare. It's just... those 'Power Gloves'... they are so unique...]

[We are already aware of their properties.] Dosena says. [Unarin and I consider them mildly interesting. Due to their magical nature, we will not be able to properly replicate their effects without a Wordsmith of our own. They will be useless to us.]

She pauses.

[However, your thoughts were in the right place. You sought to procure that technology for the glory of the Founders. You did not excessively breach any decorum. You have committed no crime.]

Hearing Dosena's words of 'comfort,' Riley exhales slightly. She lifts her head to look up at the Second Founder, her idol and the idol of all other Psions.

[Forgive me, Second Founder. I will not make any further moves on the mud-dwellers.]

[You are not the only one who wishes to do such a thing.] Dosena replies. [The First Founder must hold himself back from directly seizing the things he wants. We have no guaranteed way to capture the Wordsmiths and force them to do our bidding. Furthermore, we do not know for certain that there are only two of them. Even if that were the case, they may have set up contingencies to create additional Wordsmiths in the event of their deaths or imprisonment.]

The Executor scowls.

[Second Founder. It is a great humiliation that we must lower ourselves to bargaining with these inferior creatures.]

[It is.] Dosena nods. [But do not entirely look down on them. They have... potential. Not a small amount, but a terrifying amount. Given time, they might eclipse our own civilization. Naturally, this would require millions of cycles of evolution, but it is still a sobering thought.]

Dosena glances around the destroyed room while musing to herself.

[We have become too stagnant. Too comfortable in our positions as the 'deserved' leader of our galaxy. Perhaps that will ultimately result in our downfall.]

Riley stares at Dosena. [Second Founder...]

After a brief moment, Dosena shakes her head.

[I take my leave.]

Without waiting for Riley's response, she flickers away, leaving the Executor behind to ruminate on her words.

After a minute or two, Riley lightly stomps her foot.

[*Damned mud-dwellers.*]

Part 402: Emerging from Her Shell

A brown-haired woman and her black-haired friend quietly walk through the Fortress of Retribution's bustling city streets. The brown-haired one shyly glances from side to side, visibly uncomfortable and even a little frightened by all the hubbub, while her friend appears much more relaxed, but also focused on making sure her shy companion feels safe.

"You're doing great..." Soleil says to Cassiel, when a pair of young boys run past them laughing and screaming. "It's so brave of you to step out into the real world like this."

Cassiel nods slowly. "I... I don't feel so... it's not as bad as I expected!"

Cassiel freezes in place. Her blood turns to ice as she sees a pair of vicious-looking Scyther demons walking toward her and Soleil. The two males laugh in throaty voices while talking about something unknown. They pass right by Cassiel and Soleil without even noticing the women's presences, so ordinary do they appear. But even so, Cassiel still trembles visibly, terrified out of her wits.

"D... d... de..."

"It's okay, it's okay." Soleil says, massaging Cassiel's back to calm her down. "They're gone. They didn't even see you. Why don't we go over to the gardens?"

Cassiel numbly follows along with Soleil's suggestion, her mind already a thousand miles away. She disassociates from her body, feeling as if she's become a woman lost at sea, floating atop a plank of wood.

Soleil kindly but forcibly guides Cassiel away from the busy plaza toward a much quieter garden a little ways off the beaten path. As they draw away from the mass of people, Cassiel visibly calms down, and her heart rate returns to normal. She stops shaking and lowers her eyes in shame.

"I'm... I'm sorry... I'm just not... not strong anymore..."

"That's not true." Soleil replies. "You just have to remember your old strength. Raphael says you were once the mightiest Lazarite. The old Cassiel is still in there, you just need to... coax her out! Look, aren't these flowers pretty?"

The two women step into the Golden Garden, the most greenery-filled place in all of Tarus II's core living areas. Soleil gestures to the various patches of red, pink, orange, yellow, and other assorted flowers, making Cassiel smile ever so slightly as she admires their beauty.

The sounds of children laughing elsewhere in the garden don't bother the fallen Lazarite. Her ears prick up for a moment, but she otherwise ignores them.

However, Cassiel does notice the shifting of spiritual energy as she arrives inside the garden. She glances at Soleil questioningly, and the living Construct smiles.

"You felt the change in the air? This is a special zone. It's where the denizens of Jason Hiro's Mind Realm can temporarily assume physical form."

"Jason Hiro." Cassiel repeats. "The Wordsmith."

"That's right. He's this era's Hero. He's also one of your rescuers!" Soleil chirps. "But did you know he's not the only living Hero?"

"There are... two Wordsmiths..." Cassiel says hesitantly.

"Oh. Right. Yes that's true, but I was referring to- well, I'll just show you. Come look over here."

The two women walk arm in arm. Cassiel becomes slightly anxious when she hears the sounds of people's voices drawing nearer, but Soleil stops at the corner of a wall covered in greenery and points toward it.

"Take a peek around that corner. You'll see something interesting, I promise."

Cassiel slowly nods. She cranes her neck to look past the wall's edge, and she spots a hazy, ghost-like man and little girl painting on easels along with a group of visibly more tangible children, all of them painting and chattering to one another.

The Lazarite frowns. "That man... Heroic Aura... and the girl too..."

"That's Sir Lorent and little Shana." Soleil explains. "They're both Heroes who became trapped in their artifacts before the Energy Wars. And now the Wordsmith has made it possible for them to once again walk the mortal plane."

"That's very kind of him..." Cassiel says, while pulling back from the wall. "What sort of... of person is he?"

Soleil shrugs. "Jason's pretty average, honestly. From what Raphael has said, he's nowhere near King Arthur's level, but he has a good heart and wants to unify all the different species to end the constant warring."

"All of them?" Cassiel asks. "Even... even the demons?"

Sensing the tinge of distrust in Cassiel's voice, Soleil shakes her head wryly. "You hate the demons. Deservedly, I might add. Every bit of logic shown to me has proven the demons are mostly irredeemable. Even so, the Wordsmith believes it is possible to forgive old grudges and work together to build a better future."

She pauses.

"...Besides. There are much more dangerous enemies out there in the Void. If the humans and demons don't learn to unite, we'll be crushed by the Plague."

"You've mentioned them before." Cassiel says, nodding. "But... the demons... they're evil. They kill and... and violate others. They don't deserve forgiveness."

"I don't disagree." Soleil replies. "But it's not my decision to make. I am only a construct, after all. I follow the Wordsmith's commands."

"Right..." Cassiel mutters, visibly saddened by her friend's lack of autonomy. "What about this Lorent? He seems familiar to me."

"That isn't surprising." Soleil replies. "He was the Hero who came after Arthur, you know. And he's also Phoebe Hiro's nephew!"

"The Wordsmith's wife?" Cassiel asks, still a bit confused by all the names she hears on a daily basis.

"Yes, her. She also rescued you, you know. You need to work on that memory."

Cassiel blushes. "S-sorry..."

Soleil smiles. "It's no big deal. You'll remember everyone's names and faces before long. More importantly, why don't we go and say hello to those two Heroes? They're quite nice people, you know."

"I don't know..." Cassiel says, hesitating.

"Don't worry. They won't bite!" Soleil laughs, while gently pulling Cassiel toward the group of children.

Cassiel stiffens up as she and Soleil step out into the open. Within two seconds, half a dozen children turn to look at them. Not long after, so does Lorent.

"Hello, you lovely songbirds." Lorent says, smiling at the two newcomers. "Have you come to join in today's painting session?"

The man smiles, but a flicker of questioning zips through his mind as he barely feels a sensation of suppressed holy energy from the two of them. However, unaware of their identities, especially given their disguises, he doesn't put much thought into the feeling.

"I am... Serra." Soleil says. "And this is my sister, Cammy. Don't mind Cammy, she's a little bit shy. I wanted to show her your art, since I've heard so much about you."

"Ah, so it's Lady Serra and Lady Cammy." Lorent says, standing up and bowing politely. "Well, usually only children come to see my shoddy art, but if a pair of beauties wish to do so, that's fine as well. I'm actually just about to finish up a painting of an ancient hero, King Arthur. And if you look over there, just yesterday I finished a painting of Alexander the Great. My goal is to catalogue all the known heroes and create statues of their countenances."

Cassiel follows Lorent's finger to a massive nearby statue of Alexander the Great. Question marks pop up over her head.

"But.. you said... painting... so why... statue?"

Her words come haltingly, but the fact she can manage to force them out when speaking to a male causes Soleil to smile, ever so slyly.

"Ah. That is because I am actually an ancient Hero myself," Lorent explains. "I have the ability to bring paintings to life. If you look at this unfinished work, you can see I've mostly finished the flourishes for King Arthur. I think my aunt will probably enjoy the final product."

He points to the image he's drawn on an easel, which causes Cassiel's eyes to widen in surprise.

"So... lifelike... he looks just like Arthur did..."

Lorent blinks. "Hm? You know what Arthur looked like?"

Soleil quickly butts in. "Oh, Cammy saw a picture of him in a book. She's a bit of a recluse, you see."

"Ah, a book." Lorent nods. "I've gazed upon many a painting of the man in my life. His appearance has been etched into my mind. Above all others, he is the man I admire most."

"I... understand that feeling..." Cassiel says, a tiny smile trailing upon her lips.

She glances at the little girl next to Lorent.

Shana notices Cassiel's inquisitive stare.

"Hello. Me Shana! Me make paint!"

She points at the easel in front of her, where a surprisingly lovely image of a forest surrounds a crystal blue lagoon. Shana's artistic abilities especially stand out compared to all the children around her.

"How pretty..." Cassiel says.

Lorent gestures to a bench off to the side. "Why don't you two take a seat? If you'd like, I can procure a pair of easels for you. If you're not confident in your artistic abilities, that's no issue. Everyone starts off rough."

"Sure!" Soleil chirps. "I'd love to paint. How about you, Cammy?"

Cassiel nods. "Well... alright."

The two of them take a seat, and Lorent sends off a pair of teenaged boys to fetch them their easels. When the boys return, they smile dumbly at the two disguised angels.

"You're really cute!" One of the boys says. "Do you have boyfriends?"

Soleil chuckles. "Cammy's a little old for you. And I... well I guess I'm a little... *young*."

The boys blink at her words. "Uhh..."

Even Lorent raises an eyebrow. "What?"

"Just kidding!" Soleil says, quickly correcting herself. "Anyway, we're not interested. But thank you for the easels."

She and Cassiel both sit down, paintbrushes in hand, and stare at their easels. Cassiel appears quite hesitant about what to do, but when she glances at her companion, she blinks in surprise.

"So fast..."

Without hesitation, Soleil begins rapidly painting an image of the garden around them, her movements so swift and mechanical that every person in the surroundings widen their eyes to the size of saucers. Her robotic-like brain and perfect hand-eye coordination allows her to realistically recreate the world with such precision that, for a brief moment, Sir Lorent feels utterly ashamed of his own skills.

"...I am in awe." Lorent says after a few minutes of watching Soleil. "I did not realize I was in the presence of a true master. Your artistic abilities are truly incredible, Lady Serra."

Soleil pauses. She glances around, finally noticing all the agape mouths and eyes affixed to her easel. She awkwardly smiles. "Oh... I, uh... I may have some rudimentary skills... but my imagination is a little bit... lacking..."

"Your imagination?" Lorent asks.

"That's right." Soleil replies. "I can draw anything I've seen, but I don't have much actual creativity inside me."

"Oh I doubt that very much." Lorent says. "All people possess a spark of creativity. You need only search for yours. As an example, what do you suppose a bright pink dragon would look like if it had fairy wings?"

Soleil scrunches up her face. "Well, it would probably-"

"Ah-ah-ah!" Lorent interjects. "Don't tell me. Paint that picture on your easel. Shouldn't take you long."

After briefly pausing to confirm Mordred's Butcher's words, Soleil quietly nods. She begins rapidly drawing out a perfect lifelike recreation of a neon pink dragon exactly to the specification Lorent set. Minutes later, she finishes and turns to him.

"I completed the task. It's not very artistic though."

Lorent chuckles. "Such a self-deprecating young lady. How can you say such a thing? Do you think everyone would draw that dragon in the same way you did? You put your own creative interpretation on it. I certainly couldn't paint an image identical to yours!"

Soleil nods slowly. "I... suppose that's right."

While the Black Hole Construct ponders the meaning of art, Lorent returns to his own work. It doesn't take long before he puts the finishing touches on his painting.

"There we go! King Arthur is all but complete. Now I need only call for my aunt..."

He turns to a little girl sitting beside him and whispers something in her ear. The child grins excitedly and scampers off to send a message to Phoebe, while Lorent takes a break from his painting.

"Mmm! Finally done. That one took me about eight hours to get all the details just the way I wanted. Look at how he holds Excalibur before himself, ready to smite any demon who dares profane the Creator's name. That fierce look in his eyes, that commanding majesty! Indeed, there are no Heroes I consider equal to the Hero-King himself. He was truly one of a kind..."

Shana gazes at the picture of Arthur. "Still empty."

"Still?" Lorent asks, momentarily befuddled. "Well, it is only a painting, little one. I can't make magic happen, you know."

He pauses.

"Well, I mean I *can*, but not in that way."

He turns his attention to Cassiel. "Lady Cammy, you still haven't touched your easel. Are you having trouble thinking of something to draw?"

Cassiel lowers her head. Her face tightens as several painful thoughts constrict her heart.

"I... I shouldn't bother..." She whispers. "I'm no good. There's no point in trying."

"Now, now. That's not true at all." Lorent says, smiling politely. "Look at little Jack here. He's still drawing stick-men after two weeks. Does that make him useless? Of course not. Everyone learns at a different speed. How about this: You tell me what to draw, and I'll draw it for you. Does that sound good? I can even explain what I'm doing as I do it."

"You... will draw... for me?" Cassiel asks, surprised. "I can't take up your... valuable time..."

"It's nothing at all. A trifle." Lorent says. "I sat inside a blank void for what felt like ten eternities. Compared to that, I'd much rather draw for a pretty girl any day of the week."

Mordred's Butcher casually tries to flirt with the shy girl, but when he notices the shifting expressions on her face, he hesitates.

"...Did I say something wrong? I apologize. I did not mean to offend you, Lady Cammy."

Cassiel grits her teeth. She averts her eyes, unable to look at Sir Lorent. "Please don't... don't call me pretty... I don't... like it..."

"She's had some bad experiences with men." Soleil quickly explains, wrapping her arm around Cassiel's back. "It's not your fault, Sir Lorent."

"Oh. I see." Lorent says. "Then, my apologies. I spoke thoughtlessly. Let's change the subject. Lady Cammy, isn't there something you'd like me to draw? Perhaps someone you know? If you have a portrait of them, I wouldn't mind doing so."

Cassiel's eyes flicker. "Someone I know..."

"Yes, that's right." Lorent continues. "A friend, or a companion. I could even paint a picture of you or Lady Serra, if you'd prefer. Any request you have, feel free to make it!"

A tinge of longing stirs in Cassiel's heart.

"There is... someone..."

She pauses for a moment to continue, but right before she can say the next words, a woman speaks up from the distance.

"Nephew! You've finished the painting?"

Cassiel and the others all look to the left, where they see Phoebe Hiro walking over with a big smile on her face, accompanied by none other than Amelia-Annette on her left.

"Let me see!" Phoebe exclaims.

"Of course, auntie." Lorent replies, while grabbing the painting and turning it to face her. "What do you think?"

"Incredible work!" Phoebe gasps. "It's as if I'm looking at the original Arthur, but chiseled out of marble. You even made his expression look as authentic as possible."

"Are you ready for the final step?" Lorent prods. "Watch. I'll transfer the statue into the material realm!"

Everyone perks up to watch as Lorent's semi-ghostly body rises to its feet and he takes the easel in his grasp. He walks over to a nearby clearing, and everyone follows him.

Amelia stands beside Phoebe, not particularly interested in the magic show, but still watching out of a slight curiosity. She crosses her arms and flicks her eyes around the

group, where she spots Cassiel and Soleil.

"Hm?"

Amelia frowns ever so slightly, though for what reason, even she does not know.

She returns her attention to Sir Lorent just in time to see him summoning his heroic power. He yanks the image of King Arthur's statue off the page and projects it into reality, causing a two-ton carved marble image of the Hero-King to materialize in the physical realm.

"Wow! He's so much bigger than I expected!" Phoebe exclaims. "Well done, nephew. Thank you for doing this for me."

"Say no more." Lorent says, walking over to give his aunt a hug. "Anything for my last living family member."

He pauses.

"By the way, these two are Cammy and Serra. Do you know them?"

Phoebe follows Lorent's gesture to the brown and black haired women sitting in front of two easels, but she can't fully remember them.

"So it's Cammy and Serra." Phoebe says politely. "I don't think we've met... but you two do look a little bit familiar..."

After a momentary pause, followed by scrunching up her face, Phoebe shrugs.

"...I see all sorts of people every day. It's hard to remember everyone now that humanity has expanded so much. Anyway, it's nice to meet you two! Let me know if my nephew bullies you. I'll smack some sense into him."

"It's nice... to meet you too..." Cassiel says, her crystalline voice ever so pleasant to everyone's ears.

"Yeah. Uh, it's nice to meet you..." Soleil says in embarrassment, having chatted with Phoebe plenty of times. She doesn't mention the fact they're supposed to be going incognito to protect Cassiel's identity.

Phoebe smiles politely, but quickly turns her attention back to her nephew, not particularly caring about the two 'random' women she doesn't know.

"Lorent, who are you going to paint next? Another Hero?"

"That's right." Lorent says. "I need to create majestic statues for all of them. Well, I suppose I don't *need* to, but these great figures of humanity's past deserve at least some accolades, don't you think? But I'm not sure who to draw next. Perhaps Solomon, the Knowledge-Seeker? Or maybe Nebuchadnezzar, Humanity's Champion? So many choices..."

Amelia rolls her eyes. "You Heroes are all so full of yourselves. Thinking yourselves epic figures of yore. But you just got lucky and had a spirit fly inside of you. Anyone could have done what Arthur did if they had his powers. Better yet, maybe they wouldn't have killed ten million innocents in a fit of rage."

"Amelia!" Phoebe exclaims. "You don't need to be rude. Arthur was a good man. A great man!"

Lorent's expression darkens. "Camelot's King did indeed... that was a sin for which he never forgave himself. But to imply anyone could accomplish what he did, I think you go too far, Black Queen. Several Heroes squandered their abilities. Others did not."

"And one of those Heroes was Dracula." Amelia snaps back. "Let's not pretend like all Heroes are deserving of some fancy statue. I suppose *some* of them do deserve one, but they are rarer than the rest."

The crowd of people goes silent. During this brief, awkward interlude, Shana speaks up.

"...Joan."

Amelia's heart skips a beat. "What was that? What did you say?!"

The child ignores the anger in Amelia's voice. "Daddy Lorent. Make statue of Joan. Joan of Arc. She was Hero."

Phoebe glances at Amelia. "Joan of Arc, you say? Ehh... I don't know..."

"Absolutely not!" Amelia snaps. "That... that monster attacked me! She tortured me! I won't allow you to put up a carved image in her likeness! I hate her more than anyone else!"

"But she didn't torture *you*." Phoebe corrects her. "Come on, Annette. You're not Amelia. Remember? Even if you have her memories..."

"I remember every stab, every cut, every laceration, and every holy burn." Amelia says, turning back to Phoebe. "I will not stand for an image of that... that vicious monster! She's

evil!"

"No." Lorent says, scowling at Amelia. "She was a true Hero. I lived through those years in Mordred's Court, even after Camelot's fall. I saw secondhand the era when Joan roamed the Earth. She slew countless demons. She was a figure nearly on par with Arthur himself, but her light was snuffed out before it could shine brightest. If she attacked you, it was because of who you are... Black Queen. Assuming you still *want* to identify yourself as that demoness in human skin."

Amelia's chest rises and falls. "I did many bad things... it's true... but the hunger... I always felt the hunger, and she just... jumped out and attacked me for no reason!"

"I think you and I both know that isn't true." Phoebe says, her voice soft.

A look of shame passes over Amelia's face. She snorts angrily, then turns and stomps away.

"Never mind. Do what you want."

After she storms out of the Golden Gardens, Phoebe shrugs at her nephew. "Sorry, Lorent. That was embarrassing for you to see. Amelia is... she's going through a lot right now."

"I know who she is." Lorent says, calmly. "A false human. Her memories are fake. She is not the Black Queen, not truly. But even so, the Black Queen was a terrible monster. Many people I've met have spoken of their hatred for her in private. She... may yet become a problem."

"Perhaps. I want to believe she can be better, though." Phoebe replies.

The two of them chat for a minute or two, and eventually, Phoebe departs, heading after Amelia.

Lorent sits back down and sighs.

"Alright. It's decided, then. My next statue will be carved in the likeness of Joan- oh!"

He glances to the side.

"Where are my manners! Lady Cammy, I was going to let you pick, and now I've gone ahead and put someone else at the front of the queue. Never mind them, you can still have the first slot. Is there anyone you would like to have me paint?"

He smiles kindly at the brown-haired woman sitting on the bench adjacent to his, while she twists her hair around her finger.

Cassiel gazes at Mordred's Butcher.

"No... I think... I think Joan of Arc... she would be a good choice too."

She smiles.

"Yes. A very... very good choice indeed..."

Part 403: Psion Realization

Volgarius, inside a certain Psionic Enclave Tower in the planet's fourth super-sector.

Hope Hiro continues listening as Aspirator Raavul begins educating her newest disciple, Initiator Ferral, on the absolute basics of psionic growth. The classroom's master levitates an inch off the ground and floats back and forth while she talks, commanding a certain air of authority, despite her earlier humiliation at the hands of Educator Norim.

[Forging a Psionic Seed is not a sprint, but a marathon. Only diligent study will allow one to take slow but certain steps on their journey to reaching the higher ranks. Ferral, you have not yet even begun to condense your seed, and that means you are in your most unique and pliable state. In order to take the first step, you must first determine what your basic aptitudes are.]

She motions toward a cube levitating in the air at the front of the classroom, some sort of slowly spinning alien-looking artifact that glows faintly blue and appears to be twice the size of an average Psion's head.

When the Aspirator motions toward the cube, it glows visibly brighter, and an object materializes into reality above it, causing Hope's eyes to widen in surprise. Raavul conjures a palm-sized opal into reality, then gently tosses it with her psionic powers to land on the floor in front of Initiator Ferral.

[This is a Psi-gem.] Raavul explains. [Focus your psionic energy into its core and it will determine your basic aptitudes.]

[I already did this not long after my Osmosis.] Ferral snarks. [There's no need to waste your time. I'll just tell you my aptitudes now.]

[You will test them again.] Raavul says, her eyes flaring with anger. [I am your master, now. You will not question my authority. I am already in *quite* the poor mood.]

Her words send a chill down the spines of all of her remaining disciples. Recalling the loss their master endured to Educator Norim, they shudder at the realization that if she ever did fly off the handle and attack them, her Third Level psionic strength would rip them all apart before they even managed to send out a cry for help.

Even Ferral becomes noticeably more chilled when his master's eyes narrow to focus on him. [Of... of course, Aspirator Raavul. I will test my aptitudes for you now.]

He quickly grabs up the light blue stone, one seemingly lacking any sort of interesting features, yet which also hums with a faint level of psionic power. He closes his eyes, then pours his psionic energy into its interior.

After a few moments, the Psi-gem glows pure white, then projects a series of alien words into the air above all of the disciple's heads. Their gazes lift upward to read them.

[What?] Aspirator Raavul asks, visibly taken aback. [Such... such incredible aptitudes? You must have inherited Proctor Landis's best traits. I wonder who else he merged with to produce such results...]

She blinks her eyes heavily.

[...Initiator Ferral. You possess an A-Class aptitude for Spatial Psionics, Body Manipulation, and Energy Transference. You further possess B-Class aptitudes for half a dozen other disciplines and innumerable C-class aptitudes as well. Frankly, I've not seen a disciple of your caliber in all my cycles of teaching. Why, then, do you not wish to further your abilities?]

[I already stated my reasons.] Ferral says, his mental voice quiet. [I don't have any interest. And I couldn't understand how to start, anyway. My creators were useless in teaching me the first steps.]

[You were unable to form a Psionic Seed, then?] Raavul asks, levitating closer to her newest disciple. [While creating your basic seed is not a difficult process, it is not particularly mindless either. You need only remain attentive for thirty rotational cycles while slowly condensing your energy into its initial seed-state.]

Ferral groans. [I am aware of the mechanics. But it takes so much time to condense a seed. And then once I do condense it, I still need to start meditating and focusing my energy for hundreds and thousands of cycles before I even reach the Second Level. The Third Level will take even longer, and the Fourth, the Fifth... it is an endless journey that I see no reason to embark on!]

Raavul knits her brow. She gazes wordlessly at her newest disciple for several long moments while quietly debating what the heck to do with him.

[...You are too impatient.] Raavul finally concludes. [The time required to ascend is indeed long and arduous. The trials will not be easy to complete. But your mental state is wrong. You have disregarded the joy and privilege of Ascension to focus on worthless ancillary thoughts. There is no greater joy than to achieve the highest levels of Psionic Power.]

[I disagree.] Ferral says. [*You seek to achieve power. But why must I also desire that goal? It seems most Psions want power for power's sake. Right now, your reason has to do with someday fighting the Plague and protecting our species, but what happens if we do succeed? If we defeat the Plague, what reason will we then have to continue our Ascension? For ever-more increasing conquest of other worlds and galaxies deep within the Void? It is an endless and fruitless quest. There is no point in pursuing it!*]

After Ferral finishes speaking, Raavul flicks her attention to the other disciples in her class. Surprisingly, she finds a disturbing trend among many of them. They no longer mock or jeer Ferral, but instead listen attentively to his arguments while contemplating the logic behind his words.

Damn. Raavul grimaces. This little fool... his words are beginning to sway the mental states of my other disciples. I'll bet Educator Norim planned to insert this disruptor into my ranks from the very beginning. Anything to ruin me. All because of that one time I made him look like an idiotic fool in front of the Proctor...

However, Raavul doesn't become angry. Instead she eases up on her posture and assumes a calm, stoic demeanor. Gently, the Aspirator levitates back to the front of the classroom.

[Ferral. When you first entered my Enclave, you stated that you wished to stop training so you could leave and travel to other worlds. You wish to gaze upon their scenic vistas and enjoy the sights as you please. Is my explanation of your mindset accurate?]

Ferral nods. [Yes, Aspirator. I would prefer to live my life in peace, enjoying every cycle as it comes.]

[I see.] Raavul says, slowly blinking her eyes. [In truth, Psions like you are becoming more and more common of late. The moment you began uttering such deviant thoughts, it became my prerogative to ship you off to a Recycling Enclave.]

Several Psions in the audience tense up at their master's words. Ferral, however, does not.

[If my choice is a miserable existence for all eternity or a dissipation of my vessel through a Recycler, then I will happily choose the latter.]

[Yes. I imagined you would.] Raavul says. [But death is not a necessary option. I am something of an oddball among the many Educators in our great and glorious Empire. I actually care about the development of my disciples. Certainly, I seek to evolve my thinking and improve my lot in life, but I also wish to see my disciples happy and living in pursuit of their most deeply-held goals. Take your fellow disciple, Initiator Tarim. He seeks to emulate the Changelings by mastering the art of body manipulation to shift his form.]

Raavul shakes her head.

[Any other Educator would have cast him aside. I have certainly warned Tarim that continuing his Path would be a foolish endeavor, but I will not stop him from pursuing his desires. After all, should he succeed, he will become an incredible innovator among Psions, someone who may herald a unique sub-branch of Body Manipulation! And if he perishes... he will at least die after seeking out what he cares about most.]

The Aspirator holds out her hand, palm-up. [You see, Ferral, you currently believe that your goals are incompatible with Psion philosophy. You believe that only by casting aside your Psionic abilities can you obtain what you seek.]

She folds her palm into a fist and points it at Ferral.

[You are wrong! In fact, the goals you wish to achieve are best achieved by attaining ultimate power!]

Ferral blinks. [They... are? I do not understand, Aspirator. What do you mean?]

Instead of immediately answering, Raavul pauses for a moment while a distant look appears in her eyes. She shakes her head, then motions toward the blue cube in the front of the room. The multi-phasic device materialized a holographic image in the air, one of a molten world covered in poisonous gas, rank fumes, and scorching temperatures.

[When I ascended to the Second Level, I took my first mission ever.] Raavul explains. [I traveled to the world of Gorgorath. It was an undeveloped, backwater planet with no life-forms. My job was to scour its surface and report everything I found to the Survey Council.]

[Gorgorath was a terrible planet to remain on for any extended periods of time.] Raavul continues. [These days, I could manage the task quite easily, but back then, I was only a Second-Level Initiator. I had not even earned my first title. Even so, I was awed by Gorgorath's... beauty. Yes, it was a terrible world. Its air was acrid and inhospitable to all life. I had to repeatedly exit its bounds and return to my craft in orbit to regain my bearings. But even so... I will never forget the thrill I experienced of being the first Volgrim to fully explore its secrets. I alone know everything there is to know about that blood-red volcanic blob of death.]

She pauses for a moment.

[Ferral, your thoughts are wrong because you mistakenly believe that if you pursue your Path, you will have to abandon those pursuits you value most. You wish to observe the beauty of the galaxy. Fair enough. But who says you must only pursue leisure or a Path exclusively? Who is to say you cannot take your time and progress as you please?]

Ferral sits up a little straighter. [You are saying... I could split my focus?]

[Naturally.] Raavul answers. [Have you forgotten the first tenet of the Psionic Laws? 'Forging a Psionic Seed is not a sprint, but a marathon.' Do these words mean nothing to you?]

She chuckles. [Hah. You have stubbornly avoided even the basics of forging a Psionic Seed, yet in doing so you have delayed yourself from taking the first step toward your true goals.]

Raavul cocks her head. [And furthermore. You seem to have a... rather unique opinion. You believe Volgrimkind would be better suited to pursuing a stable peace, not chasing after endless expansion. But let me ask you this, young Initiator. Do you think anyone will be swayed by the arguments of a brat who has yet to reach even the First Level?]

Ferral's expression warps in shock as he reels from his master's words. He lowers his eyes and shudders, realizing for the first time ever what a fool he has been.

[Teacher... you... you are right. I have spoken such ignorant words. If I wish to affect change, I must achieve greatness in a Path so that others will respect me.]

[Exactly correct!] Raavul replies. [With great power, you will be able to leave and pursue your goals while also benefitting the Volgrim Empire. And with the mightiest of

strength, you will be able to make your voice heard to influence the path of our great civilization. Take our lauded Executors, for instance.]

Raavul motions with her hand to change the scene of the planet Gorgorath to holographic images of the Volgrim Empire's mightiest 8th-Ranked Psions, a mixture of males and females.

[Do you think these individuals, our most respected leaders, are a hivemind? Far from it. They each have their own ideas for what the Empire should do to improve itself. Take Executor Nufaris, for example. He is a male who values conquest of indigenous peoples. His war against the Terrans hardened his beliefs. He has professed on multiple occasions that we should slaughter our inferiors to prevent them from rising up to threaten us.]

She points to one of the female Executors. [But look also at Executor Riley. She is quite different from Executor Nufaris. She wishes for us to enslave and raise up promising civilizations so that we might steal their technology or other collective insights. She believes in pursuing a diverse ecosystem of thought. She is also quite friendly with the Technopaths.]

Raavul slowly shakes her head. [Ah, but what a shame. We do not seem to have any Executors who exclusively seek out peace or de-emphasizing expansionism. Don't you find that to be unfortunate, Ferral? Imagine if you were to rise up to becoming an Executor. Imagine the influence you would wield! You could reshape our society! And with your excellent aptitudes, you do possess a minor possibility of reaching this goal someday.]

Ferral nods repeatedly. [Aspirator! Your words are wise! I have lived for two hundred cycles but this is the first I have heard someone speak in such a manner! I must apologize for my terrible behavior earlier. You have truly opened this inferior and shameful disciple's eyes!]

His fellow classmates all nod in unison. Never have they heard their master speak like this before, but clearly, she has put some thought into this in the past, or she would not be able to elucidate her thoughts in such a coherent way.

Raavul becomes quiet. Her voice softens, and she sighs.

[You know... many Volgrim have secretly begun to think such thoughts. We won't say them out loud, of course. At least not publicly. But the last 100,000 cycles have been...

exhausting. I myself am only twenty-thousand cycles of age, yet we have been at war with the Plague for my entire existence.]

She heavily sighs.

[Endless war. Endless battles for survival. It seems more and more likely every cycle that we will not survive the Plague. It will devour us. We will scatter to the Void, refugees living upon spacecraft. Perhaps we will flee to another galaxy and settle down again. But even if we do make it that far, we will have to fight and conquer all over again.]

[If we manage to defeat the Plague,] she continues, [what will change? Will we return to our former goals of conquest and extermination? Perhaps we will enjoy a brief hiatus of our expansionary efforts while reconquering worlds lost to the Plague, before setting back out to spreading our influence beyond the Milky Way?]

Initiator Tarim, the disciple who pursues the ability to shift his body like a Changeling, glances from Ferral to Raavul. [Aspirator. Do you believe the Founders are pursuing the wrong goals?]

[No.] Raavul says, without a hint of hesitation. [By no means would I ever claim such a thing or think such thoughts, and neither should you. Founder Unarin is wise. Founder Dosea is just. Our species has conquered countless enemies and thrived for millions of cycles under their combined rule. It is simply not our place to judge their lofty acts from our lowly positions.]

The Aspirator returns her attention to the entirety of her enclave. [If you wish to hold strong opinions on the future the Volgrim should pursue, I advise that you continue advancing your Paths. Now that Ferral has been enlightened, I assume there will be no further delays in consolidating his Seed.]

Initiator Ferral nods along to his master's words. [Of course. I contemplate, and I comprehend, Aspirator. I have decided that my first discipline should be in Energy Transference.]

Raavul blinks. [Energy Transference. That discipline focuses on one Psion becoming a conduit for many. It can also result in a Psion capable of converting many types of energy into Psionic Energy, giving them a vast amount of power to pull from. It is certainly an acceptable discipline to begin with, but why would you choose it over Body Manipulation or Spatial Psionics? In particular, the latter would allow you to travel the void quickly and efficiently, which would be ideal for your goal of pursuing scenic vistas.]

[In truth, I have already given the matter much thought since my Osmosis two hundred cycles ago.] Ferral replies. [If I *were* to walk a Path, Energy Transference would be to me what Brain Enhancement and Cerebral Psionics are to others. It would form a floor that would improve the capabilities of my other disciplines, expediting my growth.]

He pauses.

[...Of course, I did not entirely come up with this notion myself. Proctor Landis spoke to me regarding my aptitudes and suggested I choose Energy Transference. I just... I foolishly thought walking a Path would be a waste of my life.]

[You were indeed a fool.] Raavul replies. [However, your brand of foolishness comes not from too few thoughts, but too many! You excessively reside within your Mind Realm. You need to expand your horizons, and in time, your outlook will shift as well. Perhaps today you will pursue leisure, but in the distant future, you will understand the thoughts of your superiors. You may even come to align with their mindsets...]

[Perhaps I will.] Ferral quietly responds.

[Excellent.] Raavul says, gesturing to a position at the front of the class. [Come and take a seat. You will begin the formation of your Psionic Seed. Now that your convictions have firmed, there is no better time than the present to begin your ascension!]

The entire Enclave becomes visibly excited as Ferral stands up and levitates to the front of the room. He bows to his master, a look of sincere gratitude on his face, then sits down on the floor in a cross-legged position.

[To begin,] Raavul explains, [place your palms together, but leave a gap of two 'cun' between them. Then, focus on the concept of 'energy' in your mind. Imagine the flow of electricity, along with the rushing of water. Imagine the current traveling from your palm to your chest and back again, creating a psionic circuit that begins and ends at the gap between your palms...]

[...next, close your eyes and calm your mind. Then, repeat the mantra of 'I think, therefore I am' inside your head. You must maintain this position for no fewer than three standard time-units before you can stop. The longer you maintain your position, the purer and more condensed you can make your seed. If you end the cycle abruptly, it will have a terrible and adverse effect on your future development, so you mustn't allow your thoughts to wander!]

Ferral nods. He pays careful attention to his master's words, and as he begins to follow her commands, a spark of light appears between the gaps in his palms.

The other disciples of Raavul's Enclave don't appear especially enthralled by this display, given they have all done the same in the past, but in the rear of the room, Hope stares with absolute rapt attention.

So this is how Psions begin their path to power. The Wordsmith thinks. After I observe this fellow for a bit, I should see how they further condense their power at the higher levels. Maybe there's an Enclave for elite disciples nearby? This could be valuable intel that will allow me to counter them if we should come to blows!

He smiles devilishly.

I also need to try and figure out how the Changelings 'work.' I can't let a bunch of body-morphers infiltrate human society. Especially if they really are there to steal our technology and manipulate our populace! These Volgrim are way more insidious than I thought. They barely even see humanity as cattle!

Once Ferral has begun to progress swiftly, the Aspirator places down a privacy field around him so that he won't be disturbed. It creates a forcefield-like bubble of noise suppression capable of keeping his mind focused on the task at hand.

[Now then.] Raavul says. [It will be quite some time before Ferral finishes taking his first step into the ranks of a true Initiator. For the remainder of this cycle, I will focus on the rest of you, as I originally planned...]

Part 404: The Hall of Ascension

Aspirator Raavul guides her disciples along for the next several hours by offering them much more specific direction than she did at the outset of their meeting. After first ensuring all of her students have started or continued walking the paths most appropriate for their abilities, she turns to one-on-one instruction for each individual First Ranker.

[Initiator Barenus. Your grasp on the fundamentals of Liquid Psionics is not up to par. Remember that fluids are heavy and dense, like solids, yet are also capable of infinitely splitting apart, like gasses. You must remain adaptable if you wish to engulf them in your psionic energy, yet firm if you wish to maintain control over their total weight.]

[Initiator Felid. Psions who focus on the Path of Precision are somewhat rare, but there should be plenty of reading material for you to consume. Why, then, are your psionic pathways flowing so incorrectly?! You must remember that ninety percent of your psionic energy is supposed to circulate within your brain and eyes, not your muscles! You are not a Body Manipulator! Use your head!]

[Initiator Chell. Investigative Psionics are all about peering through the limits of reality. With higher levels of mastery, you will even become capable of peering into the secrets contained within the cores of planets! But these abilities will never avail themselves if you spend all your time reading historical literature about the Seven Great Wars! Focus on your Path, not ancillary side information!]

Despite her seemingly exasperated words, Raavul doesn't appear too distraught over her disciples failures or hiccups. As a teacher, it is her job to correct their errors, and if they were to make none, it would mean she has no purpose.

At the same time as she focuses most of her efforts on her long-time disciples, Raavul also keeps an eye on Ferral's efforts while he slowly but surely solidifies his Psionic Seed.

[Excellent work, Initiator Ferral.] Raavul praises. [You are progressing smoothly. I can already feel the beginnings of an Elementary Seed taking form. It won't be too many more rotational cycles before you finish creating-]

Right in the middle of Raavul's words, the entire stratoscraper suddenly shakes, startling the hidden Wordsmith in the back. Hope, having eyed the Enclave with extreme

interest in the beginning, has begun to feel a bit bored after more than ten hours of watching the Psions go about their business. The abrupt trembling of the entire building jars him back to reality, making him widen his eyes and stand up straight.

What the hell was that?!

After the building's violent trembling, Raavul pauses to look up at the ceiling for a moment before continuing her words.

[-creating your First Level seed. I look forward to seeing what state it will reach.]

Hope's heart beats erratically. Seeing the complete apathy not only on Raavul's face, but all of her students, he frowns deeply.

Is the building under attack? Was there some sort of accident? Why does Raavul appear so unbothered by a distant explosion?

Just as Hope starts to think he might be over-reacting, the building shudders and rocks again, causing Raavul and her students to tilt to the left and right.

Boom!

The floor and ground vibrate, causing Raavul to momentarily frown.

[Hmm... quite the commotion today.] She murmurs, before shrugging it off. [Initiator Padi. Your usage of Body Manipulation is quite good. Certainly not up to Y'ill's standards, but perfectly acceptable given your age. However, I think you should...]

She continues talking to the Initiator while Hope blinks in confusion.

The fuck? How can she act so nonchalant? I need to find out what caused that explosion.

Without wasting any more time, Hope levitates upward and departs through the Enclave's ceiling. He flies through another Enclave where a different master guides his disciples, followed by a third one, and a fourth.

Hope races through the building's barriers like a ghost, bypassing the obstacles slowing him down without breaking a sweat. However, upon sensing the auras of much more powerful Psions as he ascends, Hope slows down and takes great care not to draw any attention to himself.

BOOM!

The building shakes again, but this time, the sound and sensation of the explosion is much more violent, allowing Hope to pinpoint its direction.

The Wordsmith travels fifteen more floors and eventually slows to a stop as he senses a congregation of powerful Fourth and Fifth-Level Psions all clustered in a supermassive room that takes up the entire 700th floor of the Stratoscraper. When Hope emerges from the floor, he carefully levitates to the corner of the room and looks around.

Crystals of condensed Psionic Energy levitate in the air. They all glow different colors, with some appearing more vibrant than others, their uneven shapes and spiky appearances making it seem as if they were dug out of some ancient mountain, or perhaps even grown over time through some alien method.

The size of this unknown facility is surprisingly vast, with a ceiling more than a hundred feet high, and huge pillars sticking out of the ground to support the upper part of the stratoscraper's weight. On the pillars, delicate hand-carved artwork depicts ancient battles of unknown Psions fighting against powerful alien creatures, none of which Hope has ever seen before. Banners from different Psionic Paths hang off the pillars as well, each one depicting basic emblems of their discipline, such as a symbol for Body Psionics, one for Primal Psionics, and so on.

Luxurious red and gold carpets line the floor. The light streaming in from the windows appears much brighter than it should, perhaps enhanced by some alien technology Hope can't fully comprehend.

And most importantly, a staggering number of fifty thousand Psions stand in clumps of five, ten, or even more, all while staring at the center of the room, where a massive levitating crystal hovers above the body of one blue-colored Psion. The unknown fellow sits cross-legged and levitates a few inches off the ground, a look of intense concentration on his face.

BOOOOM!!!

An explosion of Psionic energy blasts out of the blue Psion, sending a shockwave outward that crashes against all of the others, who shield themselves or their weaker companions. It also strikes Hope and nearly sends him flying out of the room, though he manages to stabilize himself with a quick Word of Power.

What in the goddamn fuck?! Hope screams in his mind. What is that alien doing? What's with all the fireworks?!

He glances at the Psions around him, but none of them project their thoughts outward in a public manner, instead opting to quietly converse with one another in private conversations.

Frustrated at the eerie silence, Hope grits his teeth. "**Telepathy.**"

He whispers a Word of Power, which remains muted due to the magic surrounding his body. He aims it at a random group of Psions nearby, all of whom watch that central Psion with bored expressions.

[Not very significant. The Orator's seed is too violent, too impure.] One female Psion comments. [It's unlikely he will ever exceed the 6th Level. His foundation is sloppy at best.]

A male Psion beside her crosses his arms in displeasure. [The teachings of today's Educators are all so embarrassing. They allow their worries about the Plague to override their better judgment, making them rush out half-baked disciples. It's just another sign of Psionic Decline.]

[Never mind this young fool.] The female comments. [What of your mission to Gallax? Were you able to rescue any of our own?]

[I wasn't.] The male replies. [The Plague struck too quickly. It engulfed three worlds in under a day. Even with five Praetors reinforcing the frontlines, we could scarcely save a single percent of the population. Executor Vi ended up killing half of the survivors anyway. Said they were contaminated.]

[Tsk. More losses. It's always the same story.] The female replies.

Hope scowls as he listens to their conversation. *Bla-bla-bla, Plague this, Plague that. Won't someone tell me what the fuck is going on with that exploding guy in the center?!*

He diverts his attention to another group of Psions, but their discussions are even more banal, failing to so much as mention the Psion in the center of the room. However, on his third attempt, Hope stumbles across a mere Third Level Educator with a group of three disciples, none of which have yet to consolidate their Psionic Seeds. They watch the Psion in the center of the room with awe-filled eyes and rapt attention.

[Incredible!] One of the students exclaims. [This is the power a 4th Level can achieve when rising to the rank of the 5th?!]

[Indeed.] His teacher sagely says, blinking her eyes while shielding her students from the explosions of Psionic Detonations. [Notice how violent the Orator's ascension is proving. That is because his Psionic Seed is riddled with flaws and faults. He took too many shortcuts in his Path. Each explosion is caused by one of his flaws forcibly exploding during the formation of his 5th Level Seed. This will inevitably lead to cracks and psionic energy leaks that will prevent him from ascending further. If he is lucky, he may someday make it to the 7th Level. But more likely, the 6th will be his peak.]

She shakes her head disapprovingly.

[Remember, this is why you must take your time and study diligently. Walking a Path is a marathon, not a sprint. Too much hastiness will result in flaws you can never overcome.]

BOOOM!!

Another violent explosion rocks the room, making the teacher's disciples flinch and take a few steps back, but she continues to shield them with a bit of her psionic energy.

[How frightening...] One of her female students mutters. [What disciplines does the Orator pursue?]

[Orator Nihil is one who walks five major Paths. His first Path was the Path of Influence. While it is quite a niche Path, it is also versatile in that it allows him to weaken or even control the thoughts of weaker-minded individuals. At its highest levels, the Path of Influence can allow a Psion to completely take over the minds of their inferiors, turning them into slaves incapable of resisting.]

She pauses.

[But typically, Influencers do not bother doing such a thing. Instead, they use their powers to trick the minds of their equals or even sometimes make their betters lower their guards. It is something of an insidious Path, due to its ability to end wars without ever engaging in battle. Incidentally, Executor Nufaris excels in this Path, and he has inspired many aspiring Psions to pursue it.]

[I had not heard of the Path of Influence before.] Her student remarks. [Master, this Path seems to be quite useful. Why is it so rarely practiced?]

His teacher snorts. [Is it not obvious? We are Psions! We are warriors, not politicians or diplomats. You can see for yourself the results of such a weak-minded Path. The Orator

is certainly mightier than me, but his focus on non-combat disciplines has weakened his mental state and left him crippled right as he ascends into the Military Ranks. He will soon be able to lord it over us mere civilians, but compared to any other proud Psion warrior... tsk. He falls far short of the ideal.]

Hope listens for a while longer as the teacher explains Orator Nihil's other disciplines, but he loses interest and instead turns to pay close attention to the individual himself.

This Orator Nihil person seems to be indicative of other recent Psions... Hope thinks. They're advancing too quickly and too sloppily, all because of the Plague. That means moving forward they will be weaker than the generations which came before them. Either that, or these Psions around me are all a bunch of... Boomers.

The Wordsmith quietly snickers to himself.

A bunch of old farts rambling about 'how lazy the kids are these days.' Maybe the Volgrim aren't all that different from us 'mud-dwellers' after all.

Two hours pass while Hope casually listens in on dozens of other conversations, picking up all sorts of seemingly random gossip. He even hears a few scant details about Jason's meetup with Unarin, though none of these comparatively low-level Psions know any useful details.

Seems my original self is having a good time. Hope thinks darkly. I'm still no closer to finding Excalibur or the other artifacts. I'm wasting too much time sitting around and watching these old monsters.

Orator Nihil's ascension to the 5th Level finally comes to a close. One final terrific explosion of Psionic Energy rocks the room, and the Orator quietly levitates back to the floor.

Several seconds pass.

Nihil shakily rises to his feet while a different 5th Level Psion walks up to him, the commander-type's Psionic emanations clearly much stronger than his, having been reinforced by several millennia.

[Congratulations on your Ascension, Orator.] The green-colored commander says diplomatically, without a hint of genuine respect. [You have joined the ranks of the military. Your new title will be... Monitor.]

The commanding Psion casually hands a small silver medal over to the now-Monitor Nihil, who nods his head slowly.]

[This weak-willed Psion apologizes for his shameful display of impurities.] Nihil says, bowing his head slightly. [In my rush to perform work for the Founders, I have ruined my foundation. I may never exceed the 5th Level.]

[You are too polite.] The green Psion replies. [I am sure you will attain the 6th. But exceeding that limit will require... a fortuitous encounter. I pray you will be able to exceed your limiter.]

[I contemplate, and I comprehend.] Monitor Nihil says, while taking the medal.

Not far from Hope, one of the other 5th Level Psions snorts derisively to his friend, while keeping their words private.

[A silver medallion. Proctor Landis is far too polite to the Monitor. Nihil barely deserved a bronze for that pitiful ascension.]

[You know the Proctor.] A female beside him replies. [Landis is always careful not to be excessively rude to any newly ascended. He's quite meticulous in the friends he keeps. You never know when we'll have another freak like Executor Nufaris rapidly shooting up the ranks.]

[You speak truth.] The male replies. [Did you hear about Landis's recent failed progeny? Landis performed the Osmosis with a pair of 6th Level Judicators, but in the end, they only managed to create a faulty fool who spouted off about how the Founders were the root of all evil. It was quite the embarrassing display for the Proctor, and both of the Judicators blamed him for the Osmosis's failure.]

[Five hundred cycles of buildup, wasted.] The female remarks. [Those Judicators will *not* be happy about wasting their efforts.]

[It's too bad.] The male remarks. [I heard the progeny actually had excellent aptitudes. It was only his mindset that was a failure. You never know what you will get when you perform an Osmosis. Always take great care in selecting your Osmosis companions. You wouldn't want an embarrassment hanging over your heads for the next millennia.]

Hope's eyes flicker as he remembers that silly Ferral fellow. He shakes his head and snorts. *Who knew I'd run into gossip about that random little nobody all the way up here? Small world.*

Proctor Landis, after politely and perfunctorily chatting with Nihil for a few minutes, turns on his heel to dramatically face the other Psions.

[Everyone! The Monitor has completed his ascension, and he will now share his insights with us all.]

The other Psions noticeably become more agitated. They turn to face the Monitor, who takes a few minutes to gather his thoughts. At the same time, he pulls out a datapad and begins doing a quick bit of research on something unknown.

While the Monitor taps on his datapad, Hope frowns. *Insights? What insights? What is that Landis fellow talking about?*

Frustrated, he remembers the Educator and her three students. He quickly listens in on their conversation and grins when he finds them talking about exactly what he wants to know.

[-insights from the Psionic Well.] The teacher explains. [Each time you ascend, you have the opportunity to converse with the Collective, the consciousness of all other Psions. Since I am a Third Level, I have had three such opportunities, and each time, I experienced the great fortune of seeking wisdom from the predecessors. They clarified my doubts and illuminated many paths forward.]

The master's disciples gaze at her with inquisitive glances. [You can speak to any Psion through the Psionic Well?]

[The Psionic Well is not an object.] The teacher explains. [It is a place. A state of existence. It is the true source of power for all Psions. Alone, we are mighty. But together, we are unstoppable. When you first consolidate your Seeds, I will bring you here to the Hall of Ascension during the final step so that you may seek wisdom from your betters. Who knows? Perhaps you may obtain wisdom from one of the Executors, or even Founder Dosena herself!]

[I do not understand...] A male disciple says. [What makes the Psionic Well's information so special? Hasn't Executor Nufaris already written thousands of data files regarding his insights? Why couldn't I simply communicate with him in person, or read those files?]

[There are countless Psions in the Volgrim Empire.] The teacher patiently continues to explain. [What if none of the Executors possess the information you need most, or are not

willing to speak to you? The Psionic Well is special because its information is always the most accurate and timely for that moment in your Journey. It will pull knowledge from a random Psion who died five hundred thousand cycles ago, or even one who perished during the Great Wars, so long as the wisdom you require can come from them.]

She continues. [Additionally, the information given will apply directly to your Seed. You will inherently understand it even without hearing a single spoken word. It is a form of Direct Knowledge passed down from your betters, one with inestimable value to your Paths.]

[I see! Master, I cannot wait to form my Seed now!]

Not long after the teacher clarifies her student's doubts, Monitor Nihil levitates a few feet off the ground. He hovers just beneath the giant crystal in the center of the room and projects his voice outward.

[Everyone. This humble and weak-willed student will now pass on the wisdom of the predecessors. During my ascension, I came into contact with two 7th Level predecessors, as well as one 8th level. Their names were Praetor Juniper, Confessor Movo, and Legator Ra. The Legator, in particular, passed down to me many valuable insights which have opened my eyes to my failures in pursuing my Path. Though her words made me feel deep shame, I will speak now of her wisdom, and the rest.]

A few of the 5th Level Psions nearby frown in annoyance. [Tch. So the Monitor lucked into contact with a Legator. Not even I have had such a privilege. He does not deserve the honor.]

Nihil continues. [All three of the predecessors I spoke to have long since departed this realm. The Founders shall guide their souls to the Great Beyond! Praetor Juniper was born two million cycles after the end of the Seventh Great War. She lived for 750,000 cycles afterward, and ultimately perished in battle to a Great Void Beast.]

Hope frowns. *Great Void Beast?*

[While she did not live through any particularly noteworthy eras,] Nihil continues, [She was a solid adherent to the Path of Influence, like myself. She steadily walked her path and took no shortcuts, eventually becoming a high-level Body Manipulator, Primal Psion, and most importantly, an Influencer. She spoke to me of the weakness of one's own mind, and how that weakness could be turned into strength...]

For the next several minutes, Nihil extols the virtue of the first of three predecessors, Praetor Juniper, going into great detail about how the flaws and traumas one's mind endures can either leave behind irreparable gaps, or transform it into an unbreakable steel cage from which no enemy can cause injury.

[...so you see, the loss of our fellow Psions can leave deep hidden traumas from which any of us would have difficulty recovering.] Nihil concludes. [But by recognizing these flaws, we can close them with Psionic energy and turn our minds into fortresses. In this way, we can also seek out the flaws in our enemies, turning them into shivering, easily-dispatched mobs on the battlefield!]

Several nearby Psions stand up a little straighter, looks of appreciation on their faces.

[What enlightening thoughts!] Proctor Landis exclaims from the sidelines. [Praetor Juniper truly had a fascinating way of gazing upon the Truths of our reality!]

[I cannot wait to apply these realizations to my own training!] Another Psion declares.

[Heh-heh. My Osmosis partner will be displeased he missed today's ascension.] A third Psion casually chuckles.

Hope listens to the words traded between the Psions and ultimately comes to a few realizations of his own.

The Psions are, indeed, a bunch of brutish warriors. But they aren't fools by any means. They're wise, thoughtful, and frighteningly intelligent. They mock and belittle one another, yes, but they also share their insights freely with the intent to boost one another to greater heights.

A frown slowly crawls across his face.

They're united because they share a common enemy. The same is not true of humanity. We have several possible enemies, but we aren't united in our desire to defeat them. I'll bet many of these Psions would not be so forthcoming in their insights if they weren't engaged in a war of kill-or-be-killed with the god-damned Kolvaxians...

Monitor Nihil floats around the room slowly, spreading his words to all who will listen.

[Next, I spoke to Confessor Movo. She was a 7th-Ranked Psion who fought during the Seventh Great War. In fact, she perished in battle to a Sentinel!]

Several gasps of shock go up around the room. Even Proctor Landis scowls at the mention of those ancient, genocidal robots.

[The Confessor was a Primal Psion.] Nihil explains. [Many of her insights focused on augmenting others through the use of her primal abilities. She was especially adept when placed within a cohesive team unit. Sadly, she perished when two core members of her team lost their lives to the Sentinel in question, and it ripped her apart not long afterward.]

Nihil launches into a lively explanation of Confessor Movo's Paths, her life's history, and the insights she granted him. Every so often, the crowd of Psions will gasp or wail in exasperation upon having some old unresolved doubt clarified for them.

[After so many thousands of cycles! Finally I have the answer I seek!]

[If only I had lucked into speaking with Confessor Movo during my own ascension, I might already have reached the 6th Level by now!]

Once he finished speaking about the Confessor, Nihil falls silent.

Several seconds pass.

[The final predecessor I spoke to was Legator Ra.] Nihil explains, before holding up the datapad. [Unfortunately, I was unable to find any files regarding the Legator's identity, age, or time of formation. As best as I can tell... she lived and died during the Age of Ignorance.]

Proctor Landis stiffens. [The Age of Ignorance? Before the rise of the Five Founders?]

[Indeed.] Nihil replies. [Perhaps even before the First Great War. I believe she may have been one of the great leaders among the Ancient Council. A corrupt tyrant who ruled our people with fear.]

Nihil shrugs in a vaguely human-like manner. [But we are not here to discuss the history of our predecessors, only their insights. And the information she gave me was truly eye-opening. As a master of Temporal Psionics, she was capable of ever-so-slightly altering the flow of causality. This granted her terrifying battle strength...]

The more Nihil speaks, the quieter the room becomes. Eventually, every Psion remains fully silent, completely immersed in his words. Many of them close their eyes to listen with rapt attention.

By the time Nihil finishes, the other don't say a single word for five full minutes.

When the other Psions snap out of their dazes, it is Proctor Landis who speaks first, his voice trembling with awe.

[Truly... the predecessors cannot be judged by common sense.] The Proctor whispers.
[Compared to a mere 7th Level Psion, an 8th is... unstoppable. Like a god before a gnat.]

Hope's expression hardens.

Indeed. They will be the hardest enemies I ever have to defeat.

Part 405: Right to Rule

After another chunk of a day spent in Hyperspace, Jason and Unarin re-enter the Volgarius system's inner limits, while Raphael has returned to his ring. The Founder's Spear cuts through the Void with ease, slipping past hundreds of thousands of other Volgrim vessels without them ever gleaming a hint they nearly got a chance to look at the most important member of their entire Empire.

"I must admit..." Unarin murmurs, glancing out a side window at the barely visible specks of light from some nearby ships. "...I always feel a certain barrier between myself and my people. It makes me somewhat detached from their daily struggles."

"That's because they look up to you as a god." Jason snarks. "Can't have a casual chat with someone when you worship the ground upon which they walk."

"No. You cannot." Unarin mutters. "You're more of an informal leader, aren't you, Wordsmith?"

"I am." Jason nods. "That's by design. I don't want to put myself up on a pedestal. I'd like it if any random person could bring their concerns to me directly if they saw me walking about."

"There are many advantages to such a ruling style." Unarin says. "But, in my opinion, far more disadvantages."

"I grew up in a time when the politicians were so detached from reality, they only intended to make themselves money and amass power. They didn't give a shit about me, or my friends, or any other person in my country." Jason explains. "I don't want to fall into that same tar-pit and become a greedy little monster."

"Admirable." Unarin says, turning away from the window to look Jason in the eye. "But as I said. Too many disadvantages. You think you're fostering a spirit of community with 'your people,' but all you're really doing is undermining your own rule."

Taken aback, Jason frowns at Unarin. "Undermining my own rule? What? How... why?"

"There are two types of power." Unarin explains. "Power from strength, and power from projection. You are a Hero. You possess the magical ability known as Wordsmithing.

You are, in effect, a godlike human capable of making anything happen with a flutter of your lips. This is your power from strength. But what of your power from projection? Do you think it is equally up to par?"

"I'm not sure I understand the difference between the two..." Jason says, his words slow. "Explain."

"Power from strength is exactly what it sounds like." Unarin explains. "You personally can become powerful, or you can have people who work directly under you who are powerful. Close confidantes. Maybe a strong military or system of policing. These force people to respect you because they fear direct retribution if they go against your decrees."

The First Founder continues. "But strength from projection is different. It is a manner of how you present yourself. If you've ever met a sniveling coward, someone who 'sucks up' to those above them, you'll know what it means to not possess a shred of projected strength. At the same time, some can project strength while being quite weak themselves. These are people of decisive action. Generals who must make tough decisions. They cut their losses decisively and never waver in their views. They inspire mere confidence based solely on their attitudes."

The Wordsmith listens intently to Unarin's words. He nods along and momentarily falls into thought.

"You're talking about yourself..." Jason says. "You are physically strong, yes. But you also have Dosena at your side, and armies of Psions who can enforce your command. Plus 800 gazillion other Ascended who can come stomping out of their simulated war-games if the situation turns hairy. But, at the same time, you always make sure to project an air of authority so people know you're in command."

"That's right." Unarin says, slowly nodding. "If people believe in their hearts that I am in control, the thought of subverting my authority will never cross their minds. They feel inferior, and as such must question if their counter-opinions are even worth pursuing. But can you say the same for yourself, Jason?"

"Absolutely not." Jason answers. "I didn't have the strength/projection framework in my head before, but even without it, I've always intuitively understood the idea you're espousing. I just disagree with it."

"In what way?" Unarin asks.

The Founder's Spear passes the seventh planet in the system, but neither of the two leaders notice its passage due to their debate.

"Like I said before." The Wordsmith explains. "You're too detached from your people. Because they look up to you as a god, nobody will dare to question you. They may not rise up against you, sure, but they also will be fearful of informing you of major issues that might be 'plaguing' your empire. No pun intended."

"Ah. So I am uninformed, then?" Unarin asks, a smile twitching at the corner of his lips. "Yes, perhaps you are right. I am a fool who does not know how to keep an eye out for major problems cropping up within my borders. Oh, if only I had the insight of this humble human, I might be able to turn my shoddy little Empire into one which stretches across the whole galaxy."

"Hardy-har-har." Jason snorts, rolling his eyes. "Laugh it up. You literally just gave a speech where you said you had to change up the way your Empire was run because you've become stagnant."

"Yes. But that notion contradicts you." Unarin nods. "I recognized the flaws in my Empire. I corrected them. Do you know of any criticisms my people would be too 'afraid' to give me?"

"I don't." Jason says. "But then, I haven't had time to mingle among the Volgrim. Well, aside from the ones on the Hatoraxia. I do have to say, they all feel quite... bland. I know you're dealing with an alien invasion and all, but the Volgrim are too uptight. Your existences aren't filled with love, or fun, or joy... you're all business, all day."

Jason looks at Unarin meaningfully. "Do your people even engage in creative work anymore? Aside from 'creatively' building technology or weapons of war, I mean."

"You've seen the artistic displays in my sanctum." Unarin points out. "My people are more than capable of creating beautiful and exquisite art."

"Yet all of your stratoscrapers are the same exact design. Your inner halls are sterile, clean, devoid of color. You yourself may be able to experience the joy of art, Unarin, but what about the common folk?"

The First Founder leans back in his chair. His expression becomes thoughtful for a moment.

"Maybe you're right. We must fight with all our might to vanquish our enemy... but even before the Plague arrived, we had been slipping into an existence of monotony. Perhaps I should look into restoring some of the Old Empire's creative drive."

"In any case," Unarin says, redirecting the conversation back on topic, "I still think you're missing my greater point. You are going to experience major problems in your future as a result of the ruling style you've chosen. By making yourself easily available and ready to talk to any peasant without barriers, you've also greatly lowered your projected strength. People will slowly stop respecting or fearing you, and will instead start to have designs on your position."

"I'm the Wordsmith." Jason replies. "I'm irreplaceable."

"Are you?" Unarin questions. "What of your clone? Forgive me for being presumptuous, but it seems as if the two of you... aren't on the best of terms. Could he not supplant you if the people desired? He has all of the same abilities as you. He has all of the same strengths and weaknesses..."

"Well, he certainly could." Jason acknowledges. "But that would still leave humanity under the purview of a Wordsmith. Realistically, can a non-Wordsmith bring the same benefits to the table that I currently do? I've already constructed devices no other entity in the universe can create. That implies I'm pretty irreplaceable."

"You've overlooked a possibility." Unarin says, shaking his head in disapproval. "Dosena is, without a doubt, the strongest Volgrim in the Volgrim Empire. Yet she answers to me. What does that tell you?"

"Maybe you're like a pet to her." Jason says. "I doubt she fears you. She just leaves the thinking to a smart guy and chills on her own, doing whatever she wants. She only jumps in when a problem requires her specific abilities."

"Exactly!" Unarin snaps. "How do you not see the possibility this creates? Imagine a scenario where you or your clone are no longer in control because a much smarter and more cunning human takes up the role of leader. Could you smite him dead? Of course! But would that earn you the undying love and respect of your people? By no means! Nobody wants to be led by an average man, or even worse, an absolute fool. Especially when they see a better possibility take the spotlight, even briefly. Even if you kill the wretched little bastard before he can truly seize power, his words will still have spread."

You can't kill an idea. Especially if that idea is the concept that you are inadequate to rule your people."

Unarin pauses.

"Well. I suppose you could wipe everyone's minds. Erase their thoughts of the interloper. Kill him off, then return to doing what you did before. But that has its own complications, doesn't it? Even if the people have forgotten, *you* will not. You will always remember that moment someone challenged you rhetorically and won."

"Maybe it's good to be challenged." Jason counters. "And this little tirade of yours sounds awfully personal. Did someone try to usurp you in the past?"

"By no means." Unarin replies. "I usurped *them*. The rulers of the Old Empire were corrupt despots. Foolish imbeciles. Some of them were mighty Psions capable of compressing my matter into a micro-singularity, yet they dared not raise their hand against me once my words had taken effect on the populace. That's because doing so might bring an end to me, but it would destroy their credibility and risk a revolt."

Unarin folds his hands together. "Let me ask you a question, Wordsmith. For what reason does a ruler rule? Why go to all the trouble of making decrees and trying to guide the people instead of simply keeping to yourself? You have such fantastical powers. Could you not just take a group of your loved ones and sail off into the distant reaches of the Void? Why bother even trying to appease the commoners at all?"

Jason knits his brow. "Because... I want to make a better future for my people. I want humanity to rise up and attain their true potential."

"Do you value their freedom?" Unarin asks.

The Wordsmith slowly nods. "I do."

"Then if they turn away from your teachings, your rule... will you find a way to force them into following you?"

For a brief moment, the air between both men becomes frigid. Jason silently considers Unarin's words, and a tense feeling grips his heart.

"I... I wouldn't do that. If I am just going to demand their unconditional loyalty, then I might as well rule over robots."

"The people don't have anything to explicitly offer *you*." Unarin declares. "You are a Wordsmith. Anything they can produce for you, you can already produce instantly, in a

fraction of the time, for a fraction of the cost. Therefore, I must conclude that you are trying to lead humanity to a better future for *their* sake. And if that is the case, then you must take great care not to let someone undermine you."

He pauses.

"...You must make sure your projected power becomes unassailable. Otherwise, you will lose this battle and have no choice but to reluctantly step back and allow someone else to take the lead. And that won't be very satisfying, will it? Having to listen to one of your 'lessers.' An ordinary person. Someone who has outwitted you and turned you into their dog. When they tell you to cast your magic, you will do so. Not because you want to, but because you will know in your heart that they know better than you."

Unarin turns back to look out into the Void.

"I admire you, in a way. I respect your ideals. It's clear to me that you are a peaceful man, Jason. You want to create this cute little idyllic future where all the humans and angels and demons and Volgrim get together and dance around a primitive campfire. But everyone has their own interests. I have mine, and you, yours. Even if peaceful coexistence is a possibility, who is to say you are capable of leading your people to its destination?"

"Does this mean you don't think humanity and the Volgrim can coexist?" Jason asks.

"I believe anything is possible." Unarin answers. "Coexistence. War. Suffering. Joy. The truth is, these things are cyclical. Periods of war lead to wartime fatigue. People seek peace. But once they get that peace, after a time they will become bored and restless. Greedy. Rapacious. They will seek out new thrills. This will lead to war once again, and the cycle will repeat. Perhaps today you want to be a friend to the Volgrim, but will you hold that same position in a thousand cycles? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand? You aren't even close to a hundred cycles old, yet you seem confident that your beliefs are unshakable."

The First Founder chuckles quietly.

"You're too young, too naïve. If you still hold those ideals when you're a fraction of my age, I'll consider myself impressed."

"You're talking down to me again." Jason says. "It's obnoxious."

The Volgrim leader doesn't reply. For a brief moment, Jason's stoic expression falters. A flicker of hesitation passes across his face. He looks away from Unarin toward the blackness of space outside, along with the brilliant array of distant stars.

"...In truth, I have worried about this very topic. There are several people I consider to be smarter than me." Jason says. "One of them... he does have designs on my title. I can see it in his eyes. He's ambitious and power-hungry. I just... I felt like it would be beneath me to do anything about him. He's a competent military commander. When the demons attacked, he even sacrificed himself to buy our troops more time. Now that we've rescued him, they revere him as a war hero."

"Ahh." Unarin says, crooking a sinister smile. "And there it is. That's how it starts. You said he's a military commander? He holds sway in the hearts of humanity's soldiers?"

Jason slowly nods. "Yeah."

"And you?" Unarin inquires. "Are you... popular with anyone?"

"The civilians..." Jason says, grimacing visibly. "I know. I know. Fuck, it's a classic 'Fall of Rome' story. The guy with the military power will probably threaten the guy who has sway over the civilians. But it's different, right? I could flatten our entire military with a whisper from my lips!"

"You could..." Unarin says quietly. "...but *would* you?"

"No. Of course not." Jason answers. "That would defeat the point. I'm not going to make an enemy of humanity! They're my people!"

"A threat you cannot follow-up on is no threat at all." Unarin points out. "So, now you must ask yourself... does Neil Adams believe your threat? Or will he call that bluff?"

Jason immediately snaps backward. "I didn't say his name!"

"I'm not an imbecile. I'm the bloody First Founder." Unarin replies. "I already know your military's hierarchy and other mundanities. Don't dodge the question. Does Neil Adams know you won't dare to use force against the military? Does he truly fear that you might kill him? Or, and bear with me on this... what if he does fear you might kill him for trying to usurp control, but he doesn't care? What if he would do it anyway, just to force your hand?"

The Volgrim leader chuckles deep in his throat. "Hehehe... it's such a funny little conundrum, wouldn't you agree? The all-powerful Wordsmith... unable to reach out and

kill the first ant which might threaten him."

The Wordsmith shifts in his chair. He fidgets, growing more and more worried by Unarin's observations.

"Son of a bitch. You have a way with words, Unarin. I'm really starting to doubt myself here..."

Unarin stands up and stretches his legs. He cracks his back and shrugs nonchalantly.

"It's not entirely your fault, Jason. You're young and optimistic. You want to believe in the best intentions of those around you. I was like that, once. Oh, it was so long ago... I still remember the Volgrim who first lied to me, though. He sold me out to the leaders of the Old Empire. It was a painful moment, but one of learning. I don't know how you would react if such a situation arose, but I remember what I did, as clear as day."

He continues. "I killed that little bastard. Murdered him on the spot. Then I rose up and gave a speech to the people, one my followers broadcast far and wide. I made it impossible for my enemies to publicly attack me, turning my weakness into strength. The rest is history."

"So... you think I... I *should* kill Neil?" Jason asks, his expression turning grim.

"Do what you please." Unarin replies. "You're the god-damned Wordsmith. Act like it! Stop trying to ameliorate all those pathetic, whiny little pissants underneath you. Stop trying to play the role of a calm and polite leader. Stop trying to act all chummy and buddy-buddy with every miserable dog that wags their tail at you. Start making hard decisions, taking bigger risks to pursue YOUR vision!"

"But my vision is inherently one of cooperation." Jason explains. "That doesn't lend itself to violence. I have to set an example!"

"Ah. So you've... never hurt anyone? Killed anyone?" Unarin asks with a mischievous grin. "Not *ever*?"

The Wordsmith falls silent.

So, too, does Unarin.

In his mind, Jason replays what happened on the day of Daisy's death.

He recalls the moment he flew into a berserk rage and cast a magic spell that slaughtered tens of thousands of demons who barely managed to survive Beelzebub's

blast.

Then, he killed Bael.

Not long after, Jason killed Ose, too. Even if Arthur's construct did the deed itself, Jason still gave it the order.

He stares distantly at the wall, not wanting to meet Unarin's eyes.

"I... did. Many demons. Because of my daughter's death."

"Then you already have it in you." Unarin says quietly. "The capacity to kill. The capacity to mete out punishment through violence. It's your choice to use it or not. I won't guide you either way. I can only speak to what I might do in your situation."

He shrugs again. "Who knows? Maybe the Wordsmith will have some unique method to deal with his problems. I lack your powers, so I cannot say for certain you couldn't think up an unexpected solution."

"Yeah..." Jason whispers. "Maybe... something unexpected..."

The two men fall silent. Muuxunuu's words transmit through the speakers overhead. "First Founder. We have arrived within Volgarius's gravity well. We will descend to the planet within the next four time-units."

"Mmm." Unarin says, nodding vaguely. "Thank you, Muuxunuu."

After they finish their quick exchange, Unarin and Jason both turn to the window to watch as Volgarius's hideous grey surface comes within view.

"Maybe you don't have everything all figured out." Jason says. "Any ideology that would result in a capital world like this... it's not one I'd want to pursue."

"Every choice has a consequence." Unarin replies. "The only problem is, nobody can predict what those consequences will be."

"Yeah." Jason says, as a strange look enters his eyes. "Nobody..."

Part 406: Unarin's Gains

The Founder's Spear drops out of orbit and travels toward Volgarius's surface within just a few minutes, eventually arriving at the Founder's Thumb. It docks inside the secret hangar at the top of the building, allowing Jason, Unarin, and Muuxunuu to depart.

Jason stretches his legs as he exits the craft and glances around the shiny and pristine hangar, marveling once again at its technological supremacy.

"This isn't an ordinary hangar, is it?" Jason questions.

"Of course not. It's state of the art." Unarin replies from behind him, as they step onto the stratoscraper's beautiful steel floors. "There are countless fancy little devices hidden inside the Founder's Spear, this hangar, and all the rest of the Founder's Thumb. All designed to protect the lives of VIPs."

"What if one of the VIPs attacks another VIP?" Jason questions in a slightly sardonic manner.

"Well. There's also a pecking order." Unarin dryly responds.

"I guess not all VIPs are made equal."

"No. They are not."

The two leaders engage in small talk as they exit the hangar. Muuxunuu departs from their side without any fanfare, barely even whispering a 'goodbye' before making herself scarce. After she leaves Jason raises an eyebrow.

"I'm curious. Muuxunuu. Is she your... mate? Subordinate?"

"She is my most loyal and ardent follower." Unarin replies. "She has been at my side since the beginning."

"That's not really much of an answer." Jason chuckles. "I mean, like, you know... is she *more* to you?"

"My relations with other Volgrim are of no concern to you, Wordsmith." Unarin says, directing a curt eye to the human standing a head taller than him. "I advise you not to continue that line of questioning any further. Unless you'd prefer I press you for intimate details of your life as well."

Jason smiles weakly. "Ah, sorry. I have a way of rudely pushing boundaries."

"At least you're self-aware regarding that fact." Unarin says.

The two of them ultimately arrive at the entrance to Unarin's Sanctum. Jason pauses for a moment to examine the artwork, then turns to the First Founder.

"Well then. This has been an eye-opening experience. Very enlightening."

"Indeed, it has." Unarin replies. "You have given me much to think about. Are you still interested in pursuing a joint venture?"

"I am." Jason answers. "Though, surely, you knew that."

"You were unable to transform that Kolvaxian back into its original self." Unarin points out. "But I got the impression you could have done more. If you are unable to come up with any countermeasures against the Kolvaxians, our cooperation will benefit you greatly, but myself not at all. I advise that you look into countermeasures against the Plague, Jason. Leeching off my goodwill may benefit you in the short-term, but an inability to assist my grand goals will only result in the extermination of Volgrimkind, followed swiftly by humanity."

Jason's expression becomes more determined. "I am aware. I also need to get to the bottom of why I sensed Gressil's energy inside the Kolvaxian. I don't like the way things are headed right now. And as for you, you should do everything you can to find out whether or not there really is a dragon out there, somewhere. I need not tell you how dangerous it is for a monster potentially three times mightier than Jörmungandr to still walk the mortal plane."

"Your concern is duly noted." Unarin nods. "I will expend all of my available resources to track down the truth of this matter."

"I hope to hear good things." Jason says with a smile. "Farewell, Unarin."

The First Founder snorts. "Tell Marie Becker I said hello."

"Ah...ahaha. You saw through me again." Jason laughs.

The Wordsmith and First Founder split apart.

Jason exits through the door to Unarin's Sanctum, and it closes behind him.

A few minutes pass as Unarin remains rooted to the spot, his eyes closed as if deep in thought.

Eventually, he opens them.

"Dosena."

The First Founder turns on his heel, only to see the Second Founder standing right behind him.

[I found your discussions with the Wordsmith enlightening.] Dosena says, her tone lacking any emotion.

"Ever the voyeur." Unarin snarks. "Listening in on every little discussion."

[So much information. So many new Truths revealed.] Dosena replies, ignoring the slight tinge of annoyance in Unarin's tone. [I have not heard of this 'Cosmic Realm' before. If the Plague is using it to spread, we must find and clear it out at once.]

"Indeed, we must." Unarin answers. "But... I do not like this feeling in my chest. Someone is deceiving us. Playing us for fools."

[You have long hypothesized that the Plague is not as simple as it appears.] Dosena says, turning from Unarin to wander over to some nearby artwork depicting the fall of a world to the Kolvaxians 70,000 years prior. [Now that you have confirmation, it should make your deductions simpler.]

"If only I were a Brain Enhancer." Unarin chuckles. "My thoughts could revolve a million times faster. Alas, for I do not."

Unarin walks deeper into his Sanctum, leaving Dosena behind to stare at his artwork. Not that it matters, for her senses can stretch across an entire planet, let alone the paltry confines of the Founder's Thumb.

"First," Unarin says, raising a finger, "the Wordsmith revealed to me that the Archangels are no longer in the world of the living. They are all dead, as expected. It seems Satan lied to us with regards to the disappearance of the Archangel's Rings."

[The Devil made it sound as if the other Emperors collectively decided to destroy those rings. Yet, they did not. How curious.] Dosena muses. [I wonder what would possess them to allow the souls of their most powerful enemies to continue existing?]

"Secondly," Unarin continues, extending another finger, "the Wordsmith revealed that he was the one who entered Marie Becker's lab. That explains a few recent happenings. The Wordsmith has been causing us no small amount of trouble, recently. We have to proceed with caution."

[Caution?] Dosena asks. [You previously worried the Wordsmith was a juggernaut of intelligence, swift of mind and free of thought. But as it turns out, he is still barely a seed, yet to germinate. He is young, foolish, and naïve. You will be able to easily mold him into a tool for the Volgrim Empire.]

"I don't think I will." Unarin says, while reaching for a cup and pouring himself a glass of some bitter beverage, something taken from one of the countless worlds under his dominion.

He swirls the liquid around for a moment before inhaling its slightly-poisonous fumes and daintily sipping it down.

"Mmm. The Wordsmith is hardier of mind than he appears. He's a foolish idealist, but it will take several major events to break that silly line of thinking. We cannot rush these events, nor force them. Luckily, he's sitting on a powder-keg of volatility. He has plenty of enemies lurking within his walls, ones who will soon call into question that notion of his... that notion everyone can simply *get along* and all become friends."

[To say nothing of his so-called 'friends' who are looking to obtain power for themselves.] Dosena points out, projecting her voice across the Sanctum into Unarin's mind.

"Ah, yes. Neil Adams." Unarin says, faintly smiling. "That hero-boy was all too eager to inform me of the pressure points in his society. Foolish, as all young leaders are. Inform our Changelings of the matter and ensure they have enough infiltrators there to take advantage of the situation."

[I would, but your request is not so easy to fulfill.] Dosena says, surprising Unarin with her words. [I am no longer able to peer within the confines of Tarus II. Not easily, anyway.]

"Hm?" Unarin frowns, turning to look across the Sanctum in her general direction. "What do you mean?"

[The Wordsmith's magic is potent.] Dosena answers. [Tarus II's happenings are no longer visible to me. I am not ignorant to how 'magic' functions, but the Wordsmith's powers are too... reality-defying. Our sensors cannot reach the surface. Only when I go there in person can I obtain the intelligence I seek. Likewise, I cannot 'beam' Changelings onto its surface.]

"Are you telling me the Wordsmith can fully shield his activities from our great Empire?" Unarin asks.

[Of course not. While we cannot view his planet from afar, due to its stealth shielding of a magical nature, we can still peer into its inner workings through the Warpgate. Whenever it opens, I can slip through and stroll around at my leisure. However, its security has tightened significantly. The Wordsmith's wife is quite fearsome, in that she has already begun to make small amounts of progress in searching out our agents.]

"Ah. The Warpgate." Unarin says, nodding to himself. "Right. It seems the Wordsmith is wary of our intentions. It doesn't take a genius to see that the Volgrim are exceptionally good at subverting existing power structures for our own benefit. Why waste the lives of our valued soldiers needlessly when we can simply make our enemies bludgeon themselves to death?"

The First Founder finishes off his glass of poison-water, a tonic that would kill someone of a weaker constitution, but which only tingles his tongue. He sets the glass down on the table, allowing a nearby cleaning droid to pick it up and whisk it away.

"Third," Unarin says, returning to his topic from earlier, "the Wordsmith enlightened me to the possibility of a dragon still existing."

[I was more surprised to learn that a dragon previously lived on Earth.] Dosena counters. [Learning there may be one out in the Void... that is less shocking of a notion.]

"Those Earthlings." Unarin mutters. "So many mysteries. We monitored that world for millennia. Even so, we did not uncover all its alarming secrets."

[The Wordsmith seemed to think a dragon attacked Grimvolas.] Dosena points out. [But as I recall, you once hypothesized it was...]

"I'm not omniscient." Unarin counters. "Even I can make mistakes."

[Even so.] Dosena replies. [What motivation would a dragon have to attack Valhalla? I still prefer your original theory. It must have been a Titan who was at fault.]

"All the Titans were dead at that point." Unarin retorts. "Who would still be alive that might contain such rage toward their own species?"

[Yes, yes, the Titans were all dead.] Dosena says, materializing before Unarin by stepping through a crack in space. [Just like the dragons.]

The First Founder hesitates.

"...Fair enough. So was it a Titan or a Dragon? I want an investigation performed on Grimvolas. Put Executor Vi in charge. And keep this quiet. The Dolgrimite Matriarch has been getting quite huffy with me, of late."

[Are you afraid of the Dolgrimites?] Dosena asks casually. [Say the word, and I'll wipe them out within the cycle.]

"I made a promise." Unarin mutters. "I won't turn against them just because they're errant little brats. I did not assume control of our people just to play favorites and split hairs! I am the leader of all Volgrim. I do not discriminate against any sub-species."

[That attitude has served you well for a boringly long time.] Dosena says. [But... I wonder how long it will continue to do so? Many are growing restless. I've heard the complaints about your rule piling up. Certainly, the majority of Volgrim worship the ground upon which you walk... but their doubts are not unfounded.]

Unarin closes his eyes and massages his forehead.

"Ancient Volgrim, guide me. Did the Wordsmith's speech tickle your ears, Dosena? Are you starting to think you can do a better job than me?"

He lowers his hand and smirks at the Second Founder.

"Go ahead, then. Strike me down and take over. I'm sure you'll have a blast."

[Let's not play word-games.] Dosena groans, turning away and rolling her eyes. [You perform the tedious tasks. *I* kill the troublesome ones. Don't bore me with the threat of ruling your empire.]

"Are you sure?" Unarin asks, taking a step back and spreading his palms. "Don't you feel a little stifled? You can think faster than me. You're perfectly competent in your own right. Surely, with your strength, you could unify-"

[I would sooner cast myself into the core of a star entering its supernova phase.] Dosena groans even more loudly than before. [Spare me the theatrics, *Uni*.]

Unarin's eye twitches at the mention of his least favored 'cute' nickname. "...Certainly."

He turns around and extends another finger.

"Fourth. The Wordsmith has possessed his incredible powers for six years, but he has yet to truly experiment with them in their entirety. Imagine not attempting to investigate secrets of the past, or failing to look into the future."

The First Founder pauses.

"...But then again. Given the fate of Brother Vedric... perhaps gazing into the future is not such a desirable choice."

[To be fair to the little brat, he has been quite busy.] Dosena points out. [Rebuilding a fallen species is not something one can do with ease.]

"I'm sure he could have found time to do a little experimentation now and then." Unarin retorts. "Certainly, were I in his position, I would have made the effort."

After a brief pause, Unarin continues.

"Fifth. This plot by the Demon Emperor Gressil. I want you to... take care of it."

Dosena stands up a little straighter. [You think there is some merit to the Wordsmith's hypothesis?]

"If Gressil is even remotely connected to the Plague, I want you to hunt him like a *Weevlench* and rip him apart. Scour every inch of his body, yank out his thoughts, and uncover his plot."

Unarin narrows his eyes.

"I won't take any chances. We're losing this war, Dosena. I'm not sure even you can save us, at this point. Send one of the 7th-levels to capture Gressil. If we're wrong, so what? We'll have eliminated one bloodthirsty psychopath from the galaxy. I'm sure even the demons will thank us."

[Truth be told...] Dosena mutters. [I feel a certain level of wariness toward this Gressil. He hid his strength well. None of us knew he had become an Emperor. While you talked to the Wordsmith, I cast out my tendrils and learned that until a few cycles ago, none of the demons knew either. Lucifer's progeny is even more cunning than his mother.]

"Ah, but in the end, he is merely a Demon Emperor." Unarin replies, casually waving his hand. "Too weak to truly change the course of history."

Dosena nods. [Indeed.]

The First founder raises yet another finger. "Sixth. The Cosmic Realm. Neither Raphael nor the Wordsmith told us how to enter its confines. But I trust now that you are aware of its existence, you can begin searching for an entrance."

[I already have.] Dosena says, her tone cool. [I will work with Executors Huron and Nufaris to investigate this... Cosmic Realm. Their sensitivity toward the Void is unmatched by any other Psion except for me. The three of us may yet be able to crack this puzzle. But... it would have been faster if you had simply wrung the information out of the Wordsmith's neck.]

Unarin chuckles. "Patience, Dosena. This may surprise you, but I am attempting to brook a genuine peace with the Wordsmith. It would be in both our interests to form an Osmosis of our own, if you'll pardon the term."

[HAH!] Dosena guffaws, her laugh shaking the Sanctum's air. [A genuine peace! Oh, Unarin, your jokes are truly divine! If you could break his mind, you'd do so in an instant! But you fear the Wordsmith. You worry he may have plans you can't prepare for.]

"He worked alongside the Knowledge-Seeker. The Mind Thief." Unarin replies. "Don't get me wrong. The brat is young and naïve... but you'd be a fool to think he lacks any neural activity. While I probed him, he probed me. It is not as if I walked away with the psion's share of the gains."

[The information you fed Jason Hiro was reality-shattering to him, but nothing at all to us.] Dosena replies. [A few crumbs for the pauper. You will have given him a few clues to increase his power. But the information he fed us will raise our ceiling of strength significantly.]

The Second Founder's eyes glaze over for a moment.

[A Cosmic Realm. Imagine it, Unarin. A space between the Void where we can travel unseen by external observers. As vast as the entire galaxy. If we could Volform it, we could expand our numbers enough to threaten...]

Unarin's smile vanishes. In its place, a hideous look of disgust appears.

"Those creatures from *Andromeda*. They are terrifying in their own right. We nearly drew a calamity upon ourselves when they discovered the presence of our first inter-galaxy colonization fleet. Luckily, our loyalists self-destructed before... before the *beasts* could learn of our existence."

[The Dark Ones are not enemies we can yet hunt.] Dosena says, ever so quietly. [But if I succeed in raising one of our Executors to the 9th Level, that may change.]

"Perhaps if you face them two-to-one." Unarin mutters. "And if you face two or three of them at the same time? It would be your death."

[Mmm.]

Unarin walks over to a window overlooking the local area of Volgarius. He crosses his hands behind his back and eyes the greenery outside, the only patch of its kind on the whole planet, with a look of clinical dispassion.

"Finally... we have confirmed that the Codex is still alive. I need not tell you what this means for us, especially now. If Gressil and Lucifer have worked together to spread the Plague, then capturing them must be our top priority. Perhaps we can reverse-engineer the Plague by forcing them under our thumb. Lucifer, especially... she has many uses outside of merely ending the Plague's reign of terror."

[And what of the dragon?] Dosena counters. [Perhaps Gressil is merely an agent of that dark entity.]

Unarin frowns.

He continues staring out the window, but his thoughts begin to wander.

"Dragon... Earth... attacked Grimvolas... escaped an artifact..."

The First Founder's eyes flicker with countless thoughts as he struggles to put the pieces together.

"We're missing something. Information. Something obvious. Dosena, inform Executor Vi to scour Grimvolas for traces of draconic energy. In particular, tell her to look for... *recent* traces."

Dosena steps across the Void to arrive at Unarin's side.

[You believe... the Dragon may still be on Grimvolas?]

"Perhaps." Unarin murmurs. "The Dolgrimites have become especially recalcitrant since the Energy Wars. They've begun fanatically worshiping their god, 'Dolgris,' all while shunning even the politest interactions with other Volgrim."

[The Dolgrimites have always worshiped Dolgris.] Dosena says. [Are you implying...]

"That's right. Perhaps the dragon has somehow... taken over their religion. Replaced their original beliefs in some way. Maybe it lurks in the shadows, manipulating them like puzzle pieces. It may even be hiding directly on Grimvolas, unseen by us for all this time."

[Not to doubt your judgment,] Dosea says, [but we're talking about a monster from the Primordial Era. I'm not certain how I would fare in direct combat against it. Why would this monster play games with us and avoid drawing attention to itself?]

"Perhaps the mighty dragon has... *weakened*." Unarin simply replies.

Dosea nods slowly.

[Yes. Perhaps it has.]

The two Volgrim leaders continue conversing for a while longer. Eventually, Unarin waves his hand dismissively.

"Make sure the Executors begin their work at once. I will speak to Founder Treyza regarding our infiltration proceedings on Tarus II. With any luck, we might be able to make this pressure point of Neil Adams useful to our objectives."

[I will continue working to gain access to the Cosmic Realm.] Dosea replies. [Until next time.]

With those words, Dosea vanishes like smoke in the wind, disappearing from before Unarin in an instant. Her vanishing act makes no noise, nor does it cause the slightest disturbance.

As for the First Founder, he lightly taps his chin and chuckles.

"Hahaha... it's been a while since I had to trade wits against someone. I sometimes miss those discussions I used to have with Marie Becker. She was always such an engrossing conversational adversary. It's just too bad the Wordsmith isn't *quite* up to par."

Part 407: Jason Goes Home

After departing Unarin's Sanctum, Jason's expression becomes somewhat dull and muted. He falls deep into thought while autopiloting his way toward a turbolift which will lead him back to Sangin Kordonis. At the same time, he converses with his mind-wife at the blistering speed of thought.

We've learned so much. But I feel like we barely even scratched the surface. Unarin held back all sorts of key information. Jason thinks.

"Like who he thought *really* attacked Valhalla." Fiona points out. "That Unarin talks a slick game, but he is quite the slimebag."

I must have counted a dozen instances where it seemed he was holding something back or outright lying to me. Jason thinks.

The Wordsmith flicks his eyes around as he walks. The inner corridors leading from Unarin's Sanctum to the turbolift pass quickly, and before long, he steps inside and begins to drop down toward the makeshift guest floor where his soldiers stayed behind.

Nobody in sight. Jason thinks. *But I can feel someone watching me. Probably one or more of the Psions. Creeps me the fuck out.*

He turns his attention away from Fiona.

Well, Raphael? You've been holding shit back from me. As usual. Can't say I trust Unarin in the slightest, but he made at least one good point. I definitely can't trust you either.

The Archangel of Wisdom sits on a tree stump inside Jason's Mind Realm. His expression appears forlorn, as if he has taken too many mental hits of late.

"Verily." Raphael mutters. "That Unarin-lad, he knoweth my thoughts. I am so... alone. All my brothers and sisters, gone. I cope with my grief in my own way. I wish every day that thou mayest unlock some method to bring back the angels. All the same, I know thou shalt not do such a thing. Thou detesteth my people, and rightfully so."

Rightfully so. Jason agrees, faintly nodding. *Monsters, the lot of you. The oldest Archangel himself gave the order to kill two of his Archangel sisters. And then you pinned Samael down and forcibly erased his memories. Couple that with your creation*

and torture of the dragons, or your creation and torture of the Titans, or your creation and- say... doesn't this story sound somewhat cyclical?

Fiona turns to Raphael. "How did you know about Valhalla? More specifically, how did you instantly recognize it?"

"Camael spake to me of its existence." Raphael replies half-heartedly. "She showed me a vision of its splendor. Many Titan Kings also lived in Heaven, following the War in Heaven's conclusion. Zeus weaved tales of Valhalla's glory, following the loss of his arm to bring forth Queen Ivaldi."

Sure. That follows. Jason grunts, barely suppressing his rage. Why the fuck didn't you tell me about humanity's flaw, Raphael? I should have known about that six years ago. That could have changed EVERYTHING for me!

Raphael shakes his head. "Thy people's flaw is not easily solvable. Even with thy Wordsmithing, I fear thou mayest not be capable of resolving it so easily."

Jason's jaw makes a clicking noise as he angrily grinds his teeth.

Fuck you. FUCK you! Our cooperation is over. You don't even have the decency to come up with a believable excuse.

Without hesitation, Jason plucks the ring off his finger, causing Raphael to disappear from his Mind Realm. He holds it in his palm for an instant before whispering a Word of Power. **"Return."**

Without fanfare, the ring vanishes, sent off thousands of light-years to Tarus II.

"Did you give Raphael's ring back to Uriel?" Fiona asks.

Jason rubs his glabella and sighs. *Yeah. I can't stand these people anymore. I wanted to get Solomon's Crown back at first, but now I'm not so sure. I'm tired of ancient old men constantly trying to manipulate me. Between Solomon, Raphael, and Unarin, I've had my fill for the next three lifetimes.*

After a moment of silence, Jason opens his eyes. He gazes out of the glass-covered turbolift toward the world outside, where the only greenery on all of Volgarius's surface stretches out for a mile or two before instantly transforming into the endless walls of silver and grey stratoscrapers the world is known for. They rise endlessly into the sky, towering far and above the Founder's Fingers.

I talked too much. Jason thinks. I even thoughtlessly let slip that Hope was my only clone when I last chatted with Unarin. The problem is, I can't make any further clones without Solomon's Crown. I need to come up with... a counter-solution...

Fiona gestures across Jason's Mind Realm to the only other denizen currently present. "Maybe the Phoenix can help?"

In the distance, the little red birdie-girl chirps when she hears her name. "Friends want help??"

Jason chuckles. *I don't think she can, but it's a nice thought.*

The Wordsmith cocks his head.

Though... I do wonder what the spirit of an artifact from the Primordial Realm CAN do? I'll have to look into it at some point.

The turbolift reaches its destination and swings open, allowing Jason to step out, where he finds Sangin Kordonis standing right in front of the exit, waiting for him.

"You've returned sooner than I expected, Wordsmith." Kordonis says. "I thought you would revel in the First Founder's wisdom for many more cycles!"

"We exchanged a lot of insights." Jason says diplomatically, while the two of them fall into step beside each other and head back to the dormitories. "Unarin is a... broad-minded thinker. I certainly fall short."

"As do all." Kordonis replies, a faint look of admiration and envy on his face. "I won't pry if you don't wish to say, but... what sorts of things did the two of you converse about?"

"A lot of top-secret stuff." Jason says. "He actually took me on a ride in his spaceship. I had the grisly privilege of watching a world get devoured by the Plague."

Kordonis winces. "What world was it?"

"One of the planets in the Gallax System." Jason replies.

"Ah. I have heard of Gallax's fall. Another senseless tragedy..."

The two men banter idly for a while until they reach the place where Jason's so-called bodyguards were left. He enters their dormitory's shared outer area to find half of them laying on luxurious quilted couches, idly reading holo-books or engaging in other menial pursuits. Emperor Serena sits at a table quietly, her eyes half-shut. Across from her,

Lieutenant Samuel reclines with one of his legs crossed over the other, fiddling with his Power Glove.

"Commander Hiro!" Officer Ashley exclaims, standing up. "You're back so soon?"

"What, were you having too much fun without me here?" Jason asks, sweeping his eyes over the troopers as they hurriedly stand up and walk over to meet him. "I hope you slackers didn't just faff about while I was off watching a world collapse to the Plague."

"No, sir. We engaged in a few training drills with the facilities the Volgrim built for us." Ashley says. "I found out becoming an eight-foot-tall minotaur is a lot of fun!"

Yamir, standing behind her, flashes a thumbs-up. "Ashley makes for an excellent Minotaur, if I don't say so myself!"

Jason directs a pointed glance over at Samuel. "And you?"

Expecting Samuel to get all pissy like before, Jason finds himself surprised when the Lieutenant simply nods. "I... experimented with all of my transformations, commander. It turns out an S-Class compatibility isn't something to sneeze at. I won't make fun of fairy magic anymore."

"Oh! Well, haha, that's great." Jason laughs. "We're heading home immediately. I still have a lot of work to do on Tarus II, and the First Founder gave me a tremendous amount of things to think about."

"We're ready to go." Samuel says.

"Like the Lieutenant says." Ashley replies.

Jason directs his attention to Emperor Serena, the only person who remained seated upon his entrance. "And you?"

Despite her blindness, the demoness seems to 'sense' Jason's gaze. She stands up and quietly walks over to the group of humans. "I have obtained what I sought. I am also ready to leave."

The Wordsmith faintly frowns. *What she sought? Did she even do anything but sit around and twiddle her thumbs? I'll have to ask Samuel later, in private.*

Kordonis nods. "Alright, then. I will take you all back to my ship and set a course back to Tarus II. With any luck, the return journey-"

"That won't be necessary." Jason interjects. "I'm not about to waste two weeks when time is pressing. Thank you for escorting us here, but me and my people will make our own way back."

"Hm?" Kordonis says, blinking in surprise. "You... will make your own way back? But how?"

"That's easy." Jason answers. "**Return.**"

After uttering a single Word of Power, Jason flashes a shit-eating grin at Kordonis while magical energy wraps around himself and the rest of the other humans, along with Yamir and Serena.

Foop!

All twenty-ish visitors vanish from the spot, leaving Kordonis in a slight daze.

"Oh. So that's how. Well, okay then..."

The Technopath captain stares blankly at the spot where they stood for a moment or two before shaking his head and blinking his eyes.

"Mud-dwellers. They're all so impolite."

* * *

On Tarus II, Jason and his people materialize a short distance outside of the city without any fanfare. Not wanting to cause a ruckus, Jason and his people quietly separate, allowing them to return to their usual duties.

However, he does glance at Serena's back as she walks away.

"Did you do anything... suspicious... on Volgarius?"

The demoness pauses to turn her head toward the Wordsmith's general direction. "That would depend on what you define as suspicious."

Without waiting for Jason's reply, she turns and returns on her way. "Until we meet again, Wordsmith."

After she leaves, Jason deeply frowns. "The fuck is that Emperor scheming? There's no way someone named the Emperor of Soul Whispers sat quietly and minded her own business."

His mind-wife pipes up. "I'm guessing Gorn sent her on a secret mission. There no good way to know."

The Wordsmith's frown slowly turns into a scowl.

"No, Fiona. You're wrong. There *is* a way."

Rather than making his way back into the city, the Wordsmith conjures a wooden chair and plunks it down in the grass, absentmindedly swallowing the view of his people working diligently at whatever their respective duties might be, some half-a-mile in the distance. He gazes from atop Tarus II's plateau at the flatlands below, a sickening feeling boiling in his stomach.

"I can't get Unarin's words out of my head." Jason murmurs. "He's a snake. He's duplicitous. He's almost certainly hiding important information. But when he expressed his disappointment in my usage of Wordsmithing... I felt like he slapped me across my face."

"Because you agree with him?" Fiona prompts.

"Yeah. Because I agree with him." Jason confirms. "I did plenty of experiments with Solomon, but he never mentioned looking into the future, or the past. And it's not like the idea never crossed my mind. I just... I felt *afraid*. I hesitated. I don't know what will happen if I try, and that makes it all the scarier."

Jason gestures in the direction Serena left. "And what secrets is Serena hiding? I could find out easily. All I'd have to do is read her mind. It's that easy! Nobody could hide the truth from me."

"Then why don't you?" Fiona asks, leaning against the wall of some random log-cabin in his Mind Realm.

"Because it... it doesn't feel right." Jason says. "It's an invasion of privacy. It's also too easy, even for me. But also, there are sure to be risks. I doubt I'll just be able to pluck the information out of someone's head... or more specifically, a Demon Emperor or Psion's head, without any trouble. Those types are sure to possess defenses capable of fighting me. And if I alert them to my intentions, even if I get the answers I want, I could cripple relations between us."

Fiona shrugs. "Pitting your Mind Realm against one belonging to a Psion or a Demon Emperor does have many risks. But as for the diplomacy thing, these people are our enemies."

"Nominally. Yes." Jason affirms. "But... it's like I told Unarin. I'm trying to seek COOPERATION. I don't want to go around filching the information I want out of people's heads. How can I honestly look someone in the eyes when I've sneakily raided their most important secrets?"

For a brief moment, Jason's mind-wife taps her fingers on her waist.

"...You're a good guy, Jason. Caring about stuff like that. If you were even a little more bad of a person, you wouldn't feel any shame in getting what you want if you thought it wouldn't hurt anyone. And if you were a sociopath, you'd take it without regard for their feelings. You might be a bit of a lazy fellow, but you have a good heart."

"Um. Well, thanks, honey." Jason chuckles, slightly embarrassed.

"If you don't want to read people's minds, then don't. I agree there might be hidden risks. But... what about looking into the past or future?"

"I don't know..." Jason mutters.

The Wordsmith starts to voice a half-hearted concern, but his mind-wife interrupts him. "Jason, look over there. See that man next to that apartment building? The one with the green awning?"

Jason follows Fiona's guidance, spotting a random 40-year-old man standing outside his residence and drinking his morning coffee.

"Yeah? What about him?"

"What do you think that man has been up to, today?" Fiona asks.

"I don't know." Jason answers hesitantly. "He looks like he just woke up."

"Right. Why not try using a Word of Power on him? Say... '**Retrace**'? See if you can visualize his last thousand steps, but inside your Mind Realm."

The Wordsmith ponders his wife's words.

"Well, okay. That sounds reasonable. **Retrace.**"

Involuntarily, the Wordsmith closes his eyes. His Mind Realm violently shifts, recreating the local surface of Tarus II as observed by that random citizen. In his mind's eye, Jason replays the man's entire day in reverse, including what he ate and drank, how he showered, and how long he slept.

After a brief but intense visual experience, Jason reels in his chair and snaps his eyes open, blinking quickly to shake himself out of his daze.

"Holy...!"

Fiona, having experienced those sensations along with him, nods seriously as his Mind Realm reverts itself to its original configuration.

"That's what I thought. You really haven't been creative enough, Jason. How about this? Try changing the colors of smells in the wind."

Jason, still slightly shaken by the experience, doesn't quite understand Fiona's meaning. "Pardon?"

"The color of smells. Like that flower near your feet. Why don't you think of a way to color its aroma blue, so that you can see other similar flowers emitting the same fragrance?"

Jason nods. He plucks the cute white little daffodil-looking flower, then speaks a Word of Power. **"Colorize."**

After a few moments, a barely distinguishable trail of blue emits from the flower's bud and puffs into the air.

"Huh. It worked." Jason says. "I guess that's neat."

Fiona smiles cutely. "Look around you."

The Wordsmith jerks in surprise as he looks away from the flower, finally noticing the much more distinguishable cloud of blue swirling in the local area, all emitted by the other flowers around himself.

"Oh shit. Did I just... rewrite a law of reality? I'd better not frighten people by leaving things like they are. **Normalize.**"

He reverts the 'blue smoke' to its original transparent color, allowing the smoke to seemingly fade into the wind before anyone else can notice.

Jason sits in his wooden chair, momentarily worried by these tests.

"Are you leading up to something?" Jason asks his mind-wife. "These can't be random things you're asking me to do. You always have a reason for your actions."

"Naturally." Fiona says, puffing out her chest in a somewhat haughty matter. "Even Solomon praised my wisdom! Hah-hah-hah!"

"Stop that." Jason chuckles, with an exaggerated eye-roll.

"Okay, fine. Anyway, think about what these two Words of Power did. They gave you the ability to visualize things you've never seen yourself, and they also rewrote reality itself. That's a ridiculous ability, Jason. All this time, you've been seeking out those old monsters to try and get your questions answered. But don't you have the ability to seek out the answers yourself?"

Jason nods, but his expression becomes somewhat darker.

"Sure. But there's a difference between looking at the footsteps of a man's movements from the past several hours versus trying to peer at events from ten zillion years ago. You saw what happened when I tried to visualize the events that rocked Valhalla. I couldn't make anything happen, probably because I didn't have any sort of a solid date in mind. I didn't have a... a..."

He frowns, trying to think of a good word to describe his conundrum.

"I didn't have... an *anchor*. Yeah. I didn't have something that could point me in the right direction. I was just randomly flailing my past-vision about like a blind guy."

"You could trial-and-error it." Fiona says. "You start by aiming for 100,000 years ago. Then 80,000. Then 90,000. Look for big changes. Try to determine when the biggest anomalies happened."

"That sounds time consuming." Jason says, smiling weakly. "And you know me..."

"Lazy to a fault!" Fiona exclaims. "Okay, that's fine. Let's try something else. Why not... well... why not try looking into the future? Just a few years. Maybe three?"

"I don't know..." Jason says, visibly hesitant. "It's not like I don't want to see the future. Who wouldn't? But you saw what happened during the Ancient Era. Camael could look into the future. She also seemed to lose her mind whenever she did. After all, she foresaw the end of the angel species."

Fiona fidgets awkwardly. "Jason. I never saw the Ancient Era. That was you and Solomon, remember?"

"OH. Right. Sorry." Jason laughs, embarrassed. "Just take my word on it. I saw what happened when Camael looked into the future. And a problem arises, too... what if looking into the future makes Fate become set in stone?"

His mind-wife crosses her arms. "I don't follow."

"Look, have you heard of the Grandfather Paradox? Where you try to go back in time and kill your grandpa, but you can't do that because then you wouldn't exist to go back in time? There are other similar paradoxes, but for looking into the future. What if the reason angelkind died out was because Camael made overt choices or accidental missteps that led her directly toward the future where they died? Maybe if I look at the future, I'll create a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"That might happen." Fiona acknowledges. "But you assume we'll see a bad future. What if we see a good one and it invigorates you with the willpower to make it happen? Also, don't you believe in free will? I think even if you see a bad future it will make you want to fight harder not to make it happen."

Jason's expression becomes gloomy. "That's exactly the problem, babe. What if it *does* make me fight harder? What if I decide to abandon my ideals just to ensure the bad future doesn't come to pass? Cooperation can never happen if people are at each other's throats or full of suspicion, and that includes me."

For half a minute, neither the man nor his wife say anything. Instead, they fall deep into thought.

Fiona reflects on the pros and cons of looking into the future, weighing her curiosity against Jason's words of warning. At the same time, Jason remember all the horror movies he saw as a kid.

"I can't let Terminator come to pass."

"What was that?" Fiona asks.

"Just some old movie." Jason mutters. "About killer robots from the future."

"Oh. Well. After thinking about it..." Fiona says, "I still think you should try it. Just one peek. What's the worst that could possibly happen? You see a terrible future you at least know to prepare for? You see the Plague ravaging the galaxy, like you already know it will?"

Jason violently cringes. "*Babe*. Never EVER ask if anything bad could happen. That guarantees something HORRIBLE will happen. Now I really don't want to do it."

Fiona sighs. "Well. Alright. If you don't want to, then I can't force you. But... you know... I just feel like..."

She pauses for a moment, making Jason frown.

"You feel like what?" Jason prompts.

"I feel like... maybe we could have saved Daisy if we knew Stormbringer was coming." Fiona mutters. "If only I had just an extra month of prep time, maybe I could have made the planet unassailable."

The Wordsmith becomes quiet. He gazes out at the peaceful unexploited plains of Tarus II, momentarily imagining a future where humanity prospers and spreads across the entire world, making it their future base of operations.

"Yeah." Jason says quietly. "Maybe we could have saved our little girl."

Several minutes pass.

The birds of Tarus II, giant winged creatures soaring in the skies above, cry out in hunger, allowing their screeches to fall upon the ears of the people below them.

The distant humming of activity mixes with the sounds of inaudible conversations.

The summer breeze gently rustles the slowly-regrowing wild grass near the Wordsmith's feet.

In Jason's mind, he recalls those fond moments he shared with his little girl. He thinks about all the time they'll never get to experience together, ever again.

All because of his failure to protect her.

The man lifts his eyes to the moon above.

"Foresight."

Part 408: An Uncertain Future

The world shifts around Jason. Fully cognizant of the changes, Jason slightly frowns as a blackened void of distant stars swallows him up, erasing the world of Tarus II. He watches with rapt attention as flickers of images race toward him, their contents becoming more lifelike and vivid for instants at a time before fading away.

The first image to catch Jason's attention is a simple field of flowers. They sway in the midday sun, shining and beautiful, only to rot and die for seemingly no reason at all.

Then, the image ends.

"Ominous..." Jason mutters.

He waits for a response from Fiona, only to realize he's lost contact with her.

"Fiona?"

A moment later, another image rushes toward Jason. This time, it depicts an army of humans charging toward an army of demons. The humans stand equipped with weapons far more powerful than those they currently do, but at the same time, the demons wear strange demonstone armors that afford them greater protection than ever. Before Jason can get a good look at either side's equipment, the image fades away.

"Hm?" The Wordsmith mutters. "When does that happen?"

His intent set the future goal to be within three years. But even then, Jason isn't certain whether or not his vision actually conforms to that general date. These visions could be fake, or real, or set a month from now, a year from now, or even a decade in the future. He can't be sure.

Suddenly, Jason finds himself looking at an image of an unknown water-world, its orb-like surface shimmering in the Void.

A female Psion's voice speaks, though as to her identity, he can't quite ascertain it.

[It's lost. Total Rendition.]

A moment later, the planet cracks apart, then explodes with a violent force unlike any the Wordsmith has ever seen!

Jason flinches slightly as a cosmically bright light ignites within the world's center, rendering it devoid of all life and matter. A moment later, it ejects its core mass in all directions, spraying the void around it with enough debris to rain hellfire upon the rest of the worlds in its system.

The Psion speaks once more.

[We've lost this war.]

Then, the image fades.

Jason's frown deepens. "Was that... Dosena, perhaps?"

He doesn't receive an answer. Before he can make any further guesses, the image shifts to show a female human running with a child in her arms. The woman screams soundlessly, her cries failing to reach Jason's ears. Before the Wordsmith can fully grasp the situation, a creature bursts out of the ground from behind her and pounces on her back! Jason flinches instinctively when he recognizes the distinct appearance of a humanoid Kolvaxian!

The monster bites onto the woman's shoulder, then drags her and her child into the depths of the planet.

Jason grimaces, but remains otherwise unmoved. "Well. There's the doom and gloom I expected."

Before the image fades, Jason gets one last look at the world, where he spots even more humans fleeing for their lives in the distance. Just as it starts to fade, a thousand Kolvaxians erupt from the ground and pounce upon them...

After the image disappears, Jason calculates whether or not that particular world was Tarus II, but concludes it could not have been, due to the noticeably greener sky.

"What does that mean?" Jason wonders. "The Kolvaxians will eventually reach humanity, but we'll be living on multiple worlds? Is this future a certainty? Or is it one I can prevent...?"

Nobody answers him.

Instead, the images shift once more. This time, Jason finds himself surprised to see Unarin slumped in a chair, his head in his hands.

The First Founder breathes heavily, a look of visible consternation on his face.

"...knew we couldn't trust him." Unarin says, his voice fading into reality as if speaking mid-sentence. "It's fine. The Wordsmith was our best shot. But he wasn't the only one."

Unarin lifts his head from his hands.

"Kill them all."

Jason's heart skips a beat. "What? Kill who? The humans? Who are you talking to?"

He doesn't receive an answer. The vision fades away, leaving him more confused than anything.

"These visions are so vague." Jason grumbles. "They could be literally anything. I can't put too much stock into them..."

Hardly have the words left Jason's mouth before the vision shifts to reveal... himself!

Jason finds himself floating out in the Void. His other self hangs in space, a look of despair on his face.

"I trusted you... I did everything right... so why... WHY DID IT TURN OUT LIKE THIS?!"

Seeing himself shrieking with a mixture of rage and pain only further confuses the Wordsmith. He half-hopes the vision of himself will continue to play out so that he can receive more clarity on just what exactly would bring himself to such a state, but naturally, that doesn't happen.

Instead, his other self fades away.

What appears next surprises him.

The vision changes to show a scenic vista of Tarus II. Phoebe sits on the edge of the Fortress of Retribution's cliffs, looking out at a sprawling and highly-advanced cityscape in the plains below her. In her arms, she gently cradles a baby while rocking it back and forth.

"There, there." Phoebe whispers to her child. "We have to keep our spirits up, little one. Daddy will come back someday. I know he will."

Jason gazes at his wife, noting her oddly tragic appearance, but also her motherly beauty.

"We may have lost a lot of people..." Phoebe whispers. "...but daddy will come back. He will. He always does..."

Two tears slide down Phoebe's face. She gazes into the distance with a wistful look in her eyes, and the vision fades away.

The last word she says is merely "...Timothy."

After she disappears, Jason gazes into the void with a stone-cold expression on his face.

The visions stop, and Jason remains alone, standing there, left to ruminate on what he's seen.

After a full minute of waiting, no further visions appear.

"...Huh." Jason mutters with a frown. "So that's what it's like to peer into the future. A bunch of confusing bullshit. It could mean anything. Totally unsatisfying, and it gave me more questions than answers. Zero out of ten."

Hardly have the words left Jason's mouth before a voice suddenly speaks from behind him.

"...Not satisfied with what you saw? That's to be expected. The future is rarely so clear-cut. That's what makes it so much... fun."

Jason's blood turns to ice. He spins on his heel and whirls around, finding himself standing just ten feet apart from one of the few entities in the galaxy capable of causing him fear.

"What?!" Jason exclaims, visibly more alarmed than any of the visions ever made him feel. "You... how are you here? What are you DOING here?!"

"Don't be afraid." The creature says, reaching up to scratch an itch on one of its two heads. "I'm just here to have some fun with you, Wordsmith. Oh, it's been such a long time since I got to enjoy myself with a time manipulator. Not since that Cat Mask fellow played with forces he shouldn't have."

The creature pauses.

"I miss him, you know. He had no choice but to admit defeat to me. It was really quite tragic, in hindsight..."

Jason takes three steps backward.

"Gressil..."

The Emperor of Chaos stands behind Jason, his body just as seemingly corporeal as the Wordsmith's. His arms lazily hang at his sides, and he makes no attempt to close the distance between himself and his heroic 'enemy'. Instead, he just watches with mild amusement while Jason awkwardly jumps away from him, his alertness raised to the maximum.

"Oh, come on. If I wanted you dead, you'd have died a long time ago, Jason Hiro." Gressil says. "But that wouldn't be any fun, now, would it? I can't have the galaxy return to a *boring* status quo."

Jason breathes shakily. He eyes Gressil with more than a hint of trepidation.

"How are you IN my vision? What the fuck is going on?"

"So many questions." Gressil chuckles. "Can't two old friends just have a chat in the spur of the moment? I let you out of that cryopod and yet you never even thanked me. Sometimes, you're such a rude little fellow."

"Answer my question." Jason says, finally getting back some of his nerve after Gressil's initial jump-scare. He stands up straight and eyes his adversary with extreme caution. "How are you here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Gressil asks, with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "You foolishly went into a daze and left your body open to attack. I was standing right behind you, and now I've completely captured you and invaded your Mind Realm. You're helpless in my grasp, just like your clone-self was."

Jason's heart pounds in his chest. His skin turns pale-white.

"No... no, that can't be... you fucking BASTARD!"

"I'm joking." Gressil says, without the faintest hint of a smile. "Devils. Look at you, getting all worked up. Really, think about it, Wordsmith. I can hide myself wherever I please. I can slip between the gaps of reality. Do you know the damage I could cause if I wanted to kill people? It would be so easy. You're not even remotely prepared for the likes of me..."

He pauses.

"...nor the Volgrim. You're lucky their mightiest Psions are preoccupied with that galaxy-consuming Plague thing. You're also lucky that killing you grants me no

advantages. It wouldn't be in my best interest to strike you down. No fun at all, if I don't say so myself."

Jason breathes heavily. His palms run slick with sweat.

"The fuck... you didn't capture me, then? So how are you HERE?"

"Must I explain everything?" Gressil groans. "You looked into the future, Wordsmith. So did I. We're both speaking to one another on the Temporal Plane. It's no great mystery. Never know who you might run into at times like these. Maybe even the old grandma herself..."

Jason flinches. "The Temporal Plane? You... you can look into the future too?"

"*Too?*" Gressil guffaws. "Hah! That is a funny joke, Jason. I've been looking into the future for a long time, now. It's tremendous fun, if I don't say so myself."

The prison-warden folds two of his claws behind his back. He gazes off into the distance, a look of contentment on his face.

"You've really made me out to be some monster in your head, haven't you? But I'm not a monster. I'm merely... dissatisfied. I don't like watching things run smoothly. I did once, long ago, but then *the woman* ruined it for me. 'Gressil, you're not good enough.' She'd say. 'Gressil, be more like your sister. You're worthless. You're stupid. You're a failure of a demon.'"

Gressil shakes his head.

"One day, a certain opportunity fell into my lap. Mother-dearest never saw it coming. Haha. I ripped her apart with my claws. Then, *my teeth*. She died screaming pitifully and begging for mercy, never understanding how I managed to overpower her."

Jason listens silently as Gressil yammers on, trying to understand the prison-warden's overall point, if he even has one.

Gressil sighs nostalgically. "For a while, it was truly pleasant. No more voice berating me. Mother couldn't lecture me anymore. I was finally able to experience the joy of blissful silence. But eventually, everything changed."

His expression turns ugly.

"She came back. But this time, she was *stuck* to me. Tormenting me in perpetuity. That was when I realized... reality isn't fair. It doesn't treat good people nicely, or bad people

viciously. There is no such thing as 'karma.'"

He pauses.

"...And if there's no incentive to act nicely, why even bother? What's the point of following systems that bring Order to Chaos? I'd much rather *poke* things. And so... that is what I do."

Jason snorts. "So, what? You're the good guy in all of this? You're not killing people, you're only tormenting them until their minds break? You're fucked in the head, Gressil."

"Yes." Gressil says with a slight smile. "That is a good way of putting it. I am 'fucked in the head.' You humans always have such a way with words."

Standing up straighter, Gressil spreads out his arms, gesturing to the infinite void surrounding himself and the Wordsmith.

"This is the first time you've looked into the future. But it isn't mine. No, I have done this countless times, Jason Hiro. I know there's a question burning in your chest, so let me answer it for you. What you see *can* be changed. But not in large ways. The grand events always stay the same. It's the *details* you can nudge. It's the little things. If you nudge enough of them, you can make a few big changes. But that takes a lot of time and a lot of preparation. It's a skill you have to get good at. Too bad, I have much more experience than you. I *dominate* the Temporal Plane."

Gressil chuckles evilly.

"...I've already defeated other Temporals. They come from different eras, you see. Some of them 'poked' the timeline in the past. I adjusted their changes to better fit my needs. There was even this old Volgrim fellow... he *really* thought he could defeat me. The long-dead old fool."

"Why are you telling me this?" Jason asks.

"Why? Why not." Gressil answers. "It doesn't make a difference. Even if you know I'm here... will you be able to resist taking another peek? I'm not going to kill you, Jason. No... I need you. It's been ages since I enjoyed sparring with someone capable of peering into the Temporal Plane. I've grown bored. Dealing with people on the linear plane... it isn't any fun. None of them are even remotely my match. I've been waiting for you to appear here for what feels like an eternity."

Gressil begins to pace in a long, slow, drawn-out circle around the Wordsmith. He no longer looks at Jason, but far off into the distance, as if expecting someone to come rushing over and interrupt their conversation.

"The future is set in stone." Gressil says. "Once you view it, you cannot change it. Everything you see will become a reality. But that isn't strictly true, either. You can 'poke' things to adjust their course. What makes this more interesting is when there are multiple people trying to influence the Temporal Plane at the same time. Yes, you see? That is when the future becomes 'mushier' and more prone to instability. More prone to chaos! Then you can't predict what will happen, and that makes the game so much more fun."

"In truth," Gressil continues, still circling the Wordsmith, "I have long since realized that lacking an adversary is boring. There's no joy in manipulating a future I have already fully grasped. Uncertainty is the greatest chaos of all!"

"So... you want me... to try and change the future?" Jason asks, perplexed. "You think I'll change things to a point you can't predict them?"

"You already have." Gressil chuckles. "You just don't know it yet. The Great Shattering will change everything. It creates a moment where my vision is no longer all-encompassing. A moment where chaos truly reigns supreme!"

Jason frowns. "The Great Shattering? Unarin mentioned it. He said an old sage friend of his..."

The Wordsmith blinks twice.

"...the same old Volgrim you mentioned before?"

"That very one!" Gressil exclaims. "Yes. Old Vedric was a tricky little bastard. Defeating him gave me no end of joy. But, tsk. The future becomes harder to influence the farther away it is. His strength was too feeble to defeat me."

Gressil pauses his pacing. "That's why I let you out of that cryopod, you know. The Great Shattering is coming. And *you* will be its arbiter."

"You're talking in circles." Jason says. "What is the Great Shattering? How am I involved?"

"Hold your horses, Jason." Gressil chides, wagging a finger. "You should know me by now. I don't do anything I think won't be fun. And telling you directly would be *incredibly* boring. Use that Wordsmithing of yours to figure it out."

Jason crosses his arms. "Oh, I see. You're not such a nice, generous, two-headed freak after all. And here I was starting to get the slightest good impression of you."

He cocks his head.

"You tortured my clone, Gressil. You tortured him, Cassiel, and killed or maimed countless other people. You're a sick fuck and you need to die."

"Good, good." Gressil chuckles sinisterly. "I like that attitude. Hate me, and work toward killing me. Though, I do still find it amusing..."

"Find what amusing?" Jason asks.

"You call her 'Cassiel' now." Gressil says. "My pretty little Birdie. I look forward to seeing her get some of her spirit back. She stopped screaming when I hurt her. She withdrew, and our intimate moments became... less fun. I could barely manage to even make her whimper... it was so... frustrating."

"MONSTER!" Jason roars, jumping toward Gressil and raising his fist. The Wordsmith explodes with rage at Gressil's casual mention of torture, making him finally blow his top. "Fucking die already!"

Just before the Wordsmith can sock Gressil in the face, the prison warden casually turns on his heel, snaps out his palm, and grabs the Wordsmith's arm. Jason doesn't get a chance to react before Gressil spins to the side and flings him a hundred feet away, causing Jason to crash to the 'ground' of this strange void-like realm.

"Ugh!"

Jason coughs in pain, then quickly jumps to his feet, his eyes still burning with hatred.

"Enough from you!" Jason roars. "I'm sick of listening to your bullshit, Gressil! You need to die! You DESERVE to die!"

Gressil rolls his eyes. "Always with the childish antics. You can't kill me, Wordsmith. Your magic has no effect on the power of Chaos. Your machines can't track my position. I come and I go as I please. Physically, there are a few who could kill me, but... they are still not my match."

Jason thinks about attacking Gressil a second time, but without a weapon, he lacks the ability to inflict any actual damage.

"You've been hanging around, influencing the future. Tell me. Is there a future where I cut both of your heads off and leave you laying in a pool of blood?"

"Not that I've seen." Gressil says with an eerie smile. "I'm always five steps ahead of you and all the others, Wordsmith. If you want to kill me, you won't be able to do so inside the Temporal Plane. We're not even really 'here.' We're talking to one another through Temporal Forms, not our real bodies. If you killed me here, I'd just reappear later in the timeline."

Gressil continues. "Anyway. It's been fun. If you want to kill me, you'll have to pay my physical body a visit. Make sure you bring plenty of firepower. You'll need it."

Jason nods. "Don't you worry. I will."

"Good..." Gressil says, turning to leave. He pauses for a moment and smiles. "By the way... regarding that clone of yours..."

Jason's heart drops into his stomach. "Hope? What did you do to him now?!"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, haha..." Gressil laughs sinisterly. "But I do wonder... how long should it take him to hunt down one or two lone Demon Emperors? Why hasn't your lesser half returned yet? Don't you find that strange? I wonder if he's gotten up to some tomfoolery..."

Jason narrows his eyes. "What are you implying?"

"Hope is ambitious. It's one of his more interesting traits." Gressil explains. "He's not like you; content with the status quo. He wants to change things to be in his favor. You could learn a thing or two from him."

Gressil lifts his hand and waves at the Wordsmith.

"See you around, Jason. Of course... you won't see *me*. Haha."

A moment later, Gressil's body fades away, leaving Jason to stand in the void of the Temporal Plane, all by himself.

The Wordsmith shivers, sending trembles down his spine.

"What the fuck. What the *fuck*. I can't tell if Gressil is poisoning the well or if Hope is really up to some bullshit."

He scowls.

"I have to find out the truth..."

Part 409: The Demila Dilemma

Jason's future-dream fades away, and he finds himself back in reality. Immediately, he swivels around to check his surroundings, but naturally, Gressil is nowhere to be seen.

"Jason?" Fiona asks. "Is something wrong?"

"What do you mean?" Jason asks, still turning and looking with all his might for the invisible specter of torture. "Were you not able to see the same visions I did?"

Fiona blinks. "Jason... you said the word 'Foresight' and then suddenly jumped up and started spinning around like a swarm of bees were attacking you. What are you talking about?"

Jason calms down a little at her words. "I see. So it was some sort of time dilation effect again. One sec, honey. **Inspect. Aura. Search.**"

Jason fires off more than a dozen words, sweeping the area around him for over half a mile, searching not only for Gressil, but any 'hollow' spots where his magic won't work. Sadly, he finds nothing.

"...I don't know if that means he's not here or I just can't *tell* if he's not here." Jason murmurs.

"He?" Fiona asks, visibly baffled. "'He' who? Jason, are you alright? You're acting weird!"

After a brief moment of thought, Jason finally takes the time to stop and fill his mind-wife in on the strange things he saw. She listens quietly until he finishes, then nods.

"I see. So Gressil can see into the future, then? That's... worrying. Alarming. Terrifying, even."

"No kidding." Jason says. "And there's more. He mentioned seeing Unarin's old friend in the Temporal Plane. That makes me wonder if he can somehow affect the past and the future..."

"I don't think so." Fiona says, shaking her head. "You're going about this with the wrong train of mind. It's not that Gressil affected the past, but that the Volgrim fellow from the past tried to affect the *future*. In doing so, he encountered Gressil, who... well, if you think we can believe the so-called Emperor of Chaos..."

"Gressil may have killed that Volgrim." Jason acknowledges. "Or driven him insane. Either way. I don't know what to think about Gressil, but if he is predicting and reacting to things as they come... he's so dangerous I can't even put that danger into words."

The Wordsmith stands up straight.

"We have to hunt him down and kill him."

Fiona nods. "If you assemble a team, you can do it. Remember, Samantha alone nearly beat the shit out of him. His magic nullification, teleportation, and invisibility make him difficult to fight, but he's not invincible. She still threw him around with ease, along with some help from your Black Hole Constructs."

"I'll need Soleil and Arthur both if we intend to take him down." Jason says. "...Although."

"Although?" Fiona repeats.

"Now that I think about it, Gressil said something about Hope that alarmed me." Jason mutters. "Something about Hope being ambitious... and about how long it should take him to hunt down a pair of Demon Emperors..."

Fiona starts to say something, but before she can get it out, Jason utters a Word of Power. "**Locate.**"

The Wordsmith sends out a pulse of magical energy across the cosmos in search of his clone. However, he receives nothing in return, and his soul remains firmly lodged within his vessel.

"Hm? No response." Jason growls. "Does that mean Gressil captured Hope again? Or is Hope deliberately hiding his location from me?"

"He's supposed to be looking for Mephisto and Yama." Fiona says. "Do you think... he isn't doing that?"

"I didn't have any reason to doubt him before." Jason says. "After all. Hope fucking *hates* the demons. I thought he'd be happy to hunt down and kick the shit out of those two bastards. It never even crossed my mind he'd have some other idea stuck in his head. But if he isn't hunting Mephisto and Yama... where the hell is he?"

Fiona frowns. "Neil might know."

"Yeah. Neil might know..." Jason repeats, while rubbing his chin. "Those two talk to each other all the time. Fuck. I've been so ignorant to their ploys. You know, if Neil wants to get rid of me, he's already buddy-buddy with Hope. I can't just keep letting them do whatever they please. I have to stop them."

Fiona crosses her arms. She leans back against a wall in Jason's Mind Realm.

"Do you, though?"

Jason blinks. "What?"

"Do you have to stop them?" Phoebe asks. "Neil and Hope have the same goals. They want to kill all of the demons. That's obviously not okay with you philosophically... but we don't really love the demons, do we? Maybe the universe would be better off without them."

"Of course I don't love them." Jason replies. "But it's about the principle."

"You already broke that principle once when you lashed out after Beelzebub's detonation." Fiona says. "Is there any point in continuing to hold back? Maybe Unarin is right."

"That was different." Jason protests. "I was under... a lot of pressure. Daisy had... I couldn't stop my rage. I just wanted to rip the demons apart. Not to mention the demons I killed were all there for the Stormbringer attack. They deserved to die."

"Many who deserve to die continue to live. And some who die deserve to remain among the living." Fiona counters. "The fact someone 'deserves' something doesn't necessarily mean you should form a worldview around that fact."

Jason rolls his eyes. "Please, god, not this from you too, Fiona. Let's drop it, alright? I've had enough of debating existential bullshit for the next few months."

Fiona shrugs. "I'm only playing Devil's Advocate, love. If nothing else, maybe you should consider splitting humanity in half."

"What do you mean?" Jason asks.

"Isn't it obvious? Half can follow you. Half can follow Neil and Hope. Let the people decide who they want to be their leader. This would also double humanity's chance of surviving the Plague and whatever else comes next."

"I... I see." Jason says, nodding. "If we split the population in half, we could establish two mega-colonies. One could exist in space, perhaps inside the Cube. They could exist just in case the Plague ever strikes Tarus II. But the problem is, the second half would surely be much more warlike and unrestrained. They'd start genociding the demons, and that goes against everything I stand for."

"Well, you have to admit," Fiona says, "A ton of demons are guilty of blood-crimes against humanity. Why not pluck out, say, ten million demons without blood on their hands? Put them in your 'ark' and let them live with the humans. If the evil ones end up dying in a genocide, including their Emperors and Dukes, so what? Their crimes are unpardonable."

"I... I don't know." Jason mutters. "That's so bleak. All demons were raised in a system that taught them to be cruel to humans. Only a few were able to resist the pressure from all fronts telling them to become vicious monsters. But that also implies many merely succumbed to that pressure. With it alleviated, they could be better. They could get a second chance and redeem themselves."

"Does Emperor Serena deserve redemption?" Fiona asks. "What about Gorn? Yardrat? Do any Emperors besides Belial have clean hands? At some point, do they lose their right to redemption?"

"Naturally, they do." Jason says. "They long had the chance to right their wrongs, but they didn't. They perpetuated the cycle of evil."

"And what of their Dukes and Barons?" Fiona continues questioning. "At what number of souls devoured or humans killed does a demon become irredeemable? Zero? One? Ten? A thousand? Even barring killings and consuming souls, what about torturing humans and raping them? Plenty of demons don't have even one soul to their name yet, but even as imps they've engaged in all sorts of heinous acts."

Jason sighs. "Ugh. What did I say about bombarding me with this philosophical mumbo jumbo? There are no easy answers, Fiona."

"There aren't." She acknowledges. "But it is important you at least consider them. The Tribunal is coming up soon. Stormbringer's survivors will want your opinion on those to be sentenced, and they won't like to hear any waffling or faffing about at that time."

Jason nods. "Alright. I'll think about it when I have time."

He briefly pauses.

"For the moment... we need to hunt Gressil. Let's go and find Phoebe first."

"But Jason." Fiona says, batting her eyes. "I'm right here."

"Ugh. Not that line!"

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Jason arrives at his wife's side while Phoebe finishes up the final touches for the Stormbringer Tribunal in three days' time. He fills her in not only on what happened with Unarin, but his traipsing into the future and the things he spoke about with Gressil. The two of them walk and talk, eventually arriving inside the Golden Gardens.

After two full hours of debriefing his wife, the two of them finally take a break and sit on a bench together, while Phoebe stew on her husband's words.

"Well. You certainly had an exciting trip." Phoebe remarks.

On Jason's right side, his wife sits, while on his left, a projected version of Fiona also sits, her spiritual body appearing quite opaque and realistic thanks to the effects of the Golden Gardens. Jason wraps his arms around both of them absentmindedly, finding himself quite enjoying the feeling of having two beautiful wives, even if they're sort of, technically, the same person. In a manner of speaking.

"I sent Raphael's ring back to Uriel." Jason says. "I'm tired of that old man lying to me. Can you believe it? Humanity is supposed to possess incredible magical power, but the angels altered us to hide our capabilities! I need to look into a way to restore that power."

"I'm surprised nobody else ever did." Phoebe says, looking up at Jason lovingly. "With all the advances we made during the Energy Wars, surely Marie Becker or some other smarty-pants should have pulled something off."

"Yeah. Marie Becker." Jason grumbles. "I need to pay her a visit. I've got some stuff on my mind that I'd like to seek clarifications for."

"You have a lot of things on your plate." Fiona says, leaning into Jason's embrace. She, too, finds herself enjoying this rare moment of physical intimacy with her husband. She also finds that sharing him with her other half doesn't feel as strange as she thought it would. "Killing Gressil is number one."

"Any ideas on how we can take him down?" Jason asks both of his wives. "We'll need some serious firepower. Samantha at a minimum. I'd like to use my Arthur construct, but I can't get a lock on Hope or Arthur. They both seem to be wrapped in Wordsmithing protection."

"You don't think Gressil recaptured Hope?" Phoebe asks.

"I don't. The last time he did, I was still able to barely, vaguely, just a little bit, sense my clone. This time, he might as well be dead. But I doubt he is. Neil wouldn't be acting calm in the slightest if that were the case."

"Agreed." Fiona says. "Well, we still have Soleil. She's purpose-made for the sake of beating the shit out of Gressil. Her and Samantha together have the strength to do so. We still need some way to pin him in place so he can't run away."

"I have a few ideas on that front." Phoebe says. "I've actually given some thought to Gressil already, especially after he assaulted Cassiel in her room. We need to use technology to hunt him down. He's certainly evaded our scanners up to this point, but I don't think he's nearly as adept when it comes to technology as his sister was. He must have plenty of weaknesses. Ose was the only demon I knew of who could truly understand humanity's technological limits."

"...A DNA scanner." Fiona says, picking up on her other half's vibes. "You think we can track him using his unique biological markers."

"That's right. He can hide within illusions if he wants, but those aren't foolproof. I talked to Blinker and she said his abilities seem to conform with the mechanics of fairy magic. If we can create something that can pierce through Blinker's illusions, it should work on Gressil."

Jason frowns. "Won't that put the fairies at risk?"

"I don't see how." Phoebe answers. "Are you worried the demons will weaponize our technology against them?"

"Not the demons." Jason says quietly, flicking his eyes around the Golden Gardens. In the distance, he hears the sound of Sir Lorent lecturing to some children about art. "The humans. I worry about creating technology bad actors within our own ranks could turn against our fairy friends. You might think Neil wouldn't go that far, but with people like

him, it always involves chasing after an 'enemy.' If he kills all the demons, who is to say the monsters won't be next? I don't want to put any tools in his hands he could abuse."

"Fair enough..." Phoebe murmurs, sighing quietly. "It will hopefully only take me a day or two to put together a device that can pierce fairy magic. I'll only give it to you, and I won't tell anyone else about it. Then, you and Samantha can-"

In the middle of Phoebe's sentence, Fiona suddenly jumps up from the bench and looks around, appearing visibly startled. Her movement makes Jason and Phoebe both flinch as well. They stand up behind her.

"What is it?" Jason asks.

Fiona frowns. "I felt a disturbance in my energy. It was as if..."

Fiona pauses.

She glances up into the sky, then points her finger into the air.

Jason follows her gesture, as does Phoebe. They both blink in surprise when they see a Psion hovering a thousand feet above, the unidentified intruder looking straight down at them as if issuing a provocation.

"Who in the hell...?" Jason mutters. "**Wings. Wings.**" Phoebe, Fiona, come with me."

He grows wings on Phoebe, but as for Fiona, due to her spiritual nature, she doesn't require them to fly. The Wordsmith and both of his wives fly up into the sky, passing through the invisible membrane wrapping around the Golden Gardens. Fiona's existence becomes much more ghostly as she loses the enhancements of the magic enveloping Lorent's personal sanctum.

Even so, she maintains her grip on the material realm and stays by her husband's side while the three of them fly toward the casually levitating Psion above.

When they draw nearer, Jason finally makes out that the Volgrim is a vaguely feminine-looking gold-skinned Psion with flowing red robes and a dark black cape billowing in the wind behind herself.

[Wordsmith. I am here on behalf of Founder Unarin.] The Psion says, her tone curt but not impolite. [My designation is Creator Demila. I am a 7th-Level Psion working on behalf of my people.]

Jason nods. He and his wives stop in the air a short distance away, eying the Psion warily. "I told Unarin not to breach my airspace. How did you get in here? Why did you come here?"

[My mission should be of some interest to you.] Creator Demila says. Her six eyes sweep across the Wordsmith, Phoebe, and Fiona with little to no interest, as if they were bugs she would ordinarily not spare a single thought about. [Founder Unarin told me that the Demon Emperor Gressil represented a threat to the Volgrim Empire. He dispatched me to capture or kill the aberrant as quickly as possible.]

Jason nods. "I see. Did you succeed?"

[I did not.] Demila answers. [I spent a full standard time-unit scanning the entirety of 'Faith's End' for the prison warden. You should be aware that I am extremely adept at reconnaissance and no target has ever escaped my grasp. However, it appears that Gressil has fled the Labyrinth. No matter where I searched, I was unable to locate his traces. It seems he disappeared several rotational cycles prior.]

"Goddammit." Jason curses. "I should have known... we already raided Faith's End to rescue my clone. We also saved all the prisoners there. Gressil had no reason to stick around after that."

[That appears to be the case.] Demila says, crossing her arms. [You will work with me over the coming cycles to apprehend this deviant. My record must remain untarnished.]

"What?" Jason asks, taken aback. "I made it clear no Volgrim were to breach Tarus II's airspace! I do thank you for giving me this news, but otherwise, you're not allowed to stay here longer than necessary. The fact you didn't even announce your arrival already speaks of your lack of decorum."

Demila snorts. [You seem to think you have some measure of control over this great one's actions. You do not. I am a lauded warrior of the Volgrim Empire. You are a mud-dweller! There is no comparison between our classes. Unless you intend to strike at me and place yourself in the awkward position of initiating a war with the Five Founders, I suggest you drop that attitude and remember who your superiors are.]

Jason's nose twitches. His gaze turns cold.

"You've got quite the mouth, *Creator Demila*. **BOW!**"

Suddenly, a force of magical energy bursts out of Jason's body and rushes toward the Psion before him.

Her eyes widen in rage. [You dare?! UGH!]

As if compelled by the forces of nature itself, the Psion suddenly snaps the top half of her body forward and rigidly prostrates herself toward the Wordsmith and his wives. Due to the effects of Jason's Word of Power, she bows at the waist and becomes incapable of breaking the spell.

[How DARE you?!] Demila roars. Her voice transmits over the entire local area, causing many people to flinch or jump in surprise, unsure where the voice in their head is coming from. [Insolent wretch! I am two million years your senior! I will not sit idly-]

"Silence." Jason says. **"Suppress."**

Demila's words cut off mid-sentence. Her body trembles as she tries to move, to speak, or to launch an attack on the Wordsmith. To her horror, she finds that her Psionic capabilities have become incredibly weak, to the point she can barely even exert them at all!

However, at the same time, Jason's stomach clenches as waves of pain surge through his body.

Shit! What the hell?! Jason thinks. ARGH! Suppressing this Psion... it's taking... all of my strength! It's like... I'm a child... trying to wrestle a bear into submission! I can't hold out for more than a few minutes, if that!

His body trembles in unison, to the same level Creator Demila's does. Each time she tries to fight him, his body shakes from trying to maintain his hold on her. For several seconds, the Wordsmith falls utterly silent while remaining locked in a battle of wills with his unexpected Psion opponent.

After two short minutes, Demila's will finds a gap in his suppression. With a mighty roar, she explodes out of the Wordsmith's clutches and disperses all three words of power, roaring to the heavens.

[INSIGNIFICANT MUD DWELLER!!]

She snaps her body back into a standing position, glaring daggers at the Wordsmith before her.

[I will KILL you!]

Demila starts to reach her hand toward the Wordsmith, perhaps intending to rip his body apart, or compress his form into something the size of an atom.

"Demila!" Phoebe shouts. "Haven't you embarrassed yourself enough?"

Demila pauses just before unleashing an attack on the Wordsmith. Standing at the precipice of sanity, she flicks her eyes toward the Wordsmith's wife.

[What did you say?!]

"You heard me." Phoebe says, coolly. "You're really about to attack the one person Unarin has pinned his hopes on? The one person who might be able to help the Volgrim defeat the Plague? And why? Because you received some well-deserved humiliation after barging into our sovereign space? If you represent the pride of Volgrimkind, I'd hate to see its dregs."

[You are nothing before me!] Demila snarls. [Never have I received such humiliation!]

Jason pants slightly from his exertion. However, even as Demila prepares to fight, so too does he.

With a single thought, Jason taps into the Phoenix and channels the power of the Cube.

An ominous, godlike power begins to spill out of an unknown gap in space. A sensation of doom spreads throughout the minds of all lifeforms on Tarus II.

Jason's irises shift from blue to gold as he channels the power of Camael's primordial artifact.

"Watch yourself, Psion." The Wordsmith says, his voice ominously deep and filled with power. **"I only gave you a friendly warning, before. If I choose to fight seriously, perhaps not even your Executors would stand a chance."**

Demila's previously embroiled emotions quickly become cooled, as if she were a cat splashed in the face with water. Her eyes flick toward the sky as she senses a power unlike anything she's ever witnessed in all her life.

No, not quite true...

Not long ago, Confessor Vulpanix fought against something similar.

And Demila knows well the awe and dread Vulpanix mentioned when she spoke of that battle.

[You...]

The Psion shivers in spite of herself. She can't quite tell whether or not the Wordsmith is bluffing, but the 'Archangel magic' she senses is surely just as potent as that which nearly killed the Confessor a few weeks prior.

[...I have erred.] Demila says, slowly blinking her eyes. [I spoke rudely, Wordsmith.]

Jason maintains his connection to the Cube for a few moments longer before quietly allowing it to subside.

After ten seconds, Camael's ancient magic fades away, allowing the Wordsmith to revert to his base power level. He eyes the Psion with a hint of distrust, but otherwise maintains his aura of leadership.

"You are, after all, a lauded leader of the Psions." Jason says. "I may have stepped a little out of line myself. What say we call this a draw? I'd rather we didn't embarrass ourselves further."

"I'm sure you have your own considerations." Phoebe pipes up. "If you return to the Volgrim as you are now, will you suffer any consequences?"

Creator Demila remains quiet for a time. Eventually she lifts her head and sighs.

[I have performed many missions in my long life. Never have I failed one as abjectly as the one given to me on this cycle. I was unable to dig up even the slightest trace of Emperor Gressil. If I return as I am now, it will be the first black mark on my entire record. A deep shame...]

Jason frowns.

"Well. I'm not an unreasonable man. However, we do have security concerns. You'll forgive me if I don't exactly... trust you."

[You fear that I will spy on your people and report what I have seen to the Founders.] Demila says. [A valid concern. Your inferior technology cannot protect you from my prying eyes. Except for a handful of your hardiest-willed subjects, I can peer into the minds of any entity I choose. My gaze can pierce mountains. I can even hear the whispers of insects on the breeze.]

She continues. [Your security systems would not be able to detect my coming and going. You would never have any assurances of my position. But what if I voluntarily chose to wear a tracking device so that you might monitor my whereabouts?]

"A tracking device?" Jason repeats. "I suppose that could work. You must really hate the idea of messing up your record..."

Demila lowers her gaze. The gold-skinned Psion, for just a brief moment, no longer appears quite as majestic and powerful as when she first arrived. Instead, she cuts somewhat of a pitiful figure.

[I am low of talent and slow to learn. I long ago realized that I would never step into the ranks of the Executors.] She explains. [I have been trapped at the 7th Level for longer than you can fathom. Your entire species' history would fit within a fraction of my lifetime. All I have to my name are my accomplishments and my record. The others of my rank... they pity me. I can feel it in their gazes. I wish to step into the next level, but I will never reach the top of that plateau. It has left me feeling... stifled.]

Surprised by Demila's openness, Jason quietly revises his initial opinion of her. He thinks about her vulnerability and how rare that must be among others of her kind. Plus, he can't help but feel that she might prove useful to him.

"I'll tell you what." Jason says. "If you agree to a few conditions, I will help you catch Gressil. It's not like I want him running around in the first place. And maybe having a 7th-Level Psion in the vicinity would be helpful for... other reasons."

Demila gazes at the Wordsmith. [Your terms?]

"We don't need to bother with that tracker nonsense." Jason says. "Instead, you need to only do one thing for me to approve your stay here."

He leans forward and smiles, ever so slightly.

"I want you to teach me about the Volgrim."

Creator Demila's gaze instantly hardens. [Unacceptable! I will leak no information regarding the superior Volgrim Empire to a mud-dweller!]

"Now, now..." Jason says, pulling back while casually waving his hand. "Don't be in such a rush to deny me. After all, haven't you heard? I'm quite useful when it comes to solving 'impossible problems.' Maybe if I learn how you Psions work, I can come up with a method to break those pesky bottlenecks and help you ascend."

Demila crosses her arms. She glances at Phoebe and Fiona as if they were the wives of a huge idiot.

[What use can a mud-dweller be? I have spent millions of cycles building up my foundation! You cannot possibly assist my ascension.]

"Yeah. Maybe not." Jason says, nodding his head.

He slyly smiles.

"But then again. What do you have to lose? I could always sneak onto Volgarius and get the information I want. This way, you will know exactly what it is I've learned, since you would be informing me yourself. Won't that serve your purposes just fine?"

[You believe you could infiltrate my people?] Demila asks. [I find that notion inconceivable. Any half-rate Psion would sniff you out in an instant.]

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Jason counters. **"Silence. Invisibility. Stealth. Suppress..."**

The Wordsmith fires off more than three dozen Words of Power, but after the fourth one, he vanishes and becomes utterly silent.

Demila widens her eyes. She quickly tries to search the surrounding space, but to her alarm, she finds that she can't detect the Wordsmith at all!

It's only when she concentrates with all of her might that she manages to detect a faint fluctuation behind herself. She whirls around to raise a psionic shield that wards off the Wordsmith's casual punch.

Moments later, Jason 'Normalizes' his existence and reappears in that position she sensed before.

"Not bad. You barely managed to detect me." Jason says. "But I think I proved my point. Do we... *have a deal?*"

Demila looks at the Wordsmith with a very different gaze from when she first appeared.

The Founders must be made aware of the scope of his abilities!

After taking several seconds to collect herself, the Psion elite slowly nods.

[You are an interesting life-form, Wordsmith. I will... accept your offer.]

"Welcome to the team." Jason says.

Part 410: The Cosmic Scale

A few hours before, around the same time as the Wordsmith's incursion into the future...

Archangel Uriel, Gabriel, and Michael all sit atop a circular stone bench, facing inward toward one another, nestled within the second story of Tarus II's only church. Gabriel and Michael take their corporeal forms through Uriel's magic, appearing as light constructs shaped mostly in the image of their original bodies. Naturally, their powers are far weaker compared to their original bodies, but the opportunity to interact with the physical realm always makes them feel better than when they were trapped inside their rings.

The three of them gaze at a scrying crystal Uriel created earlier through her magic. It shows a vision of Cassiel, watching while she and Soleil walk around the confines of Tarus II's largest city to try and socialize the Lazarite a bit more. Thanks to the mechanics of the magical locket Cassiel wears, any Archangel can easily form such a scrying crystal to watch over her.

"'Tis wonderful to see our little sister in such high spirits." Gabriel remarks. "I thought she might never be able to escape her anguish."

"She is merely suppressing her pain." Michael says. "What that Gressil did to her was... unforgiveable. Sister. When our eldest brother returns, we should set out to hunt Gressil at once! I cannot tolerate his disgusting existence a moment longer."

Uriel snorts. "I agree with thee, brother. But I am not Gressil's match. This bloodskin body I inhabit only contains the true strength of a Demon Duke. Against the majority of foes, I can elevate it through my own power... but not against Gressil. His chaotic energy will suppress the majority of my magic, if not outright nullify it. In a contest of physical strength, I am also not his match."

Michael rubs his chin. "Hmm. Gabriel and I shan't be able to take physical form within Gressil's aura either. That will force thee to fight the Emperor of Chaos alone. Tsk. He is well-protected..."

"Gressil may even be the strongest Emperor to have ever lived." Gabriel says.

"Nay. I would not go that far." Michael counters. "Gressil's strength primarily comes from his ability to nullify the magic of others. I suspect that if he were to face a Psion, he would not be able to suppress them. The rest of his powers appear quite ordinary as well, judging from the reports we've heard. Temporal manipulation and illusions are not something we cannot contend with."

"The danger Gressil poses comes not from any one of his abilities, but all of them at once." Uriel mutters. "Thou forgetteth, brother. He also wields the power of his hellspawn mother, the Emperor of Providence. Her third eye alone is a fearsome weapon which laid waste to several prominent Heroes over the eras."

"Lucifer." Michael growls, hatred rumbling in his stomach. "I suffered a terrible loss to her, once. But she is not even the demoness I hate most. That privilege belongs to Emperor Belial."

All three Archangels fall silent for a moment.

"Belial... she appears quite different now compared to when Satan roamed the Earth." Gabriel says. "She is... nice. She seems to harbor no ill-intent toward the humans."

"Thou mustn't trust a demoness." Uriel hisses. "That Belial is a snake. She is our enemy. It was she who backstabbed me and allowed the demons to enter Heaven. Of all the demons in existence, it is she who I wish to kill the most."

Michael gazes at the scrying crystal, watching as Cassiel and Soleil daintily munch on some candy they obtained from a street vendor.

"We are so weak now." Michael murmurs. "The angels are dead. All that remains are our withered husks... and the last survivor of our descendants. Even so... my hatred has lost some of its bite. There is no point in our struggles. We cannot ever bring the angels back to glory, no matter how much brother Raphael wishes to do so."

"I have accepted my lot in life." Gabriel says, smiling faintly. "The two of thee are still consumed by the past. Why torture ourselves? We cannot change what once was. Why not focus on what could be?"

"Because I still have a *chance*!" Uriel snaps, glaring daggers at the Archangel of Power. "Gabriel, thou hath always been too kind-hearted. So long as I cling to life, I will use every drop of my strength to seek revenge for our fallen siblings. I cannot accept our past failings. I will not! If I cannot eliminate all of the bloodskins, then I shall *die* trying."

"The bloodskins art too numerous." Michael says, somewhat bitterly. "Even if we transform into our unified body, how much strength can we output, and for how long? Even if we annihilate the world of Hell Harbor, the demons will continue to lead merry lives on other planets. There are hundreds of demon-worlds, to say nothing of the Labyrinth itself."

"Thou accepteth defeat too easily." Uriel replies. "I fear no demon, no Emperor. If it takes me a hundred years, I will fight for a hundred years. If it takes me a hundred thousand, then I shalt fight for a hundred thousand! I am no longer limited by my Archangel body. I no longer have to hold back my strength in fear of a gradual and inescapable decline! So long as I exercise a certain level of patience, I shalt be able to regenerate my mana and eventually fulfill my revenge!"

"And what of the creatures we observed?" Gabriel asks. "Those... monsters... in the Cosmic Realm? Dost thou thinketh thou shalt slay the demons before they do?"

"Gabriel, Gabriel..." Uriel tut-tuts. "I care not who destroys the bloodskins. Myself or the Plague, it matters not. So long as they ultimately perish, I shalt feel ecstasy. I shalt have rid the universe of one malfeasant mistake."

"Is that why thou chooseth to work with the humans?" Michael asks. "Because they can assist thee in thy revenge?"

Uriel smiles sinisterly.

"That is right. The Wordsmith has some foolish notion of alleviating the past and ameliorating the demons, but his goals are useless in my eyes. He seeks to build a coalition with the demons, but he will only bring ruin upon himself. Nay, it is not him who I have grown to appreciate, but his cloned self..."

"Hope Hiro." Michael nods. "He and Neil Adams seem to have proper ideas regarding how to treat the bloodskins. They know the demons are their enemy."

"Indeed, they do." Uriel nods. "They have not fallen for Belial's lies. They know she is merely an insider lurking within their midst. They may even suspect she is delivering information of the highest levels to the other Emperors. Already, she hath wrapped the Wordsmith's wife around her pinky."

Gabriel frowns. "Brother. Sister. Surely, the two of thee doth not believeth such words? If Belial's goal was to betray the Wordsmith, she had many chances to do so. She would

not waste so many opportunities..."

"Her goals must run deeper than we can imagine." Uriel reasons. "Never try to estimate a bloodskin's cunning by thy own measure, brother. Who can say what level of debauchery she might stoop to?"

Gabriel appears unconvinced. "Michael and I existed on the Wordsmith's hand for several years. We observed Belial's words and actions through his eyes on many occasions. I believe that she has changed."

"I do not." Michael says. "Bloodskins never change. Don't be naïve, Gabriel. Thou shouldn't not alloweth thy emotions to cloud thy judgment."

"My emotions are as calm as ever." Gabriel retorts. "Rather, it is the two of thee who appear to be speaking emotionally."

Michael pauses. He glares at Gabriel, then looks away.

A brief but awkward silence ensues. Clearly, Michael and Uriel think their towering brother is too soft, too foolish for his own good. But they also haven't the heart to say so bluntly to his face.

After all... the four Archangels are all they have left. They have to stick together in the face of adversity.

Uriel clears her throat. "Regarding-"

Barely has she gotten a word out before a faint swishing noise *poofs* into the air in front of her. Uriel blinks in surprise as a plain golden band materializes out of midair and falls to the floor at her feet. It strikes the tiled floor with a crisp *tink*, drawing all three of their gazes.

"Hm?" Uriel grunts. "Brother Raphael's ring? Why has it suddenly appeared here?"

"Perhaps the Wordsmith wished to expediently return it to us." Michael posits.

"Hm. Yes, perhaps..." Uriel mutters.

She waves her hand, and a surge of magical energy yanks the ring off the floor. It flies over to her ring finger and smoothly wraps around it, causing Raphael to materialize inside her Mind Realm. An instant later, Uriel summons him to reality with a construct-body of his own, allowing him to join the other three in the material realm.

"Brother Raphael." Gabriel says. "How did'st thou fareth on thy trip?"

Raphael glances at the three of them, then sighs and takes a seat. He plunks his butt on the round stone bench and gazes up at the ceiling as if a man smitten by woe.

"I... had a falling out with the Wordsmith." Raphael says. "He uncovered a secret about humanity, one I wish he had not."

"What sort of secret?" Michael asks.

Raphael spends the next two hours going into great and exhaustive detail regarding the things he saw while traveling with the Wordsmith. In particular, the revelations regarding the uncovering of a living but comatose Titan princess shocks the other Archangels. Knowing that the entrance to Valhalla has opened up causes all three of them to frown deeply.

"Unarin is quite shrewd." Gabriel comments. "He is clearly manipulating the Wordsmith. He obtained a large amount of information that would greatly benefit him and his empire. He even knows of the Cosmic Realm, now."

"We cannot ignore the existence of Valhalla." Uriel says. "Brothers, we should travel there at once. We must rescue the Titan. The Volgrim are unable to heal her, but that may not be the case for us. I also wish to investigate the draconic energy the Wordsmith detected."

"If this is truly the work of a dragon," Michael says, "and one that would be three times mightier than Jörmungandr... we will not be able to oppose it. The galaxy is not ready to fight a true-blooded monster from the Primordial Era. These hatchlings haven't a clue the end that awaits them if the dragon has attained its full power."

"I agree." Raphael says. "A dragon with no other spawn to weaken it shall be a powerhouse not even our unified form can battle. I fear the results if we were to face it."

He pauses.

"...As for traveling to Valhalla. My illusions can shield our existence from the Dolgrimites. However, I have another fear."

"The dragon may still be in the area." Uriel says, as if reading her brother's mind. "It may have even taken up residence somewhere on the world. At its full power, surely the dragon could close itself up within a pocket space that not even the Psions could uncover..."

"Indeed, that mayeth yet be the case." Raphael says. The old man exhales long and hard, his expression appearing haggard beyond belief. "But that is not the fear with rankles me, sister. Rather, I doth not believeth we have any reason to fight this ancient horror. Tis' no longer our concern."

"Hm?" Michael says, raising an eyebrow. "Brother... what is thy meaning?"

"We are not the angels of ancient yore." Raphael says. "This battle is not ours to fight. We must leave it to the denizens of the modern galaxy. Instead, I wish to uncover the truth regarding these... Kolvaxians."

"The truth?" Uriel asks. "Dost thou knoweth a detail we do not?"

"Many such details." Raphael answers with a nod. "Founder Unarin is too perceptive for his own good. He may have already grasped a fundamental Truth of our reality. He may have gazed upon the Cosmic Scale."

The other Archangels look at one another with visible confusion. Gabriel even chuckles lightly.

"Haha... brother, thy words are quite ominous. Please speak not in such depressing tones."

However, Raphael doesn't return Gabriel's smile.

Instead, his expression only grows more gloomy by the second.

"Verily. Long ago, I spake with our father, the Creator. I learned of the Myriad Truths before the rest of thee came into existence. I know of the creatures that lurk within the depths of the Void."

He wrings his hands together.

"Life does not come from nothing. The universe is not eternal. Eventually, it will have an end. This will set into motion the Karmic Cycle. The Akashic Sequence. What once was will end, and what will be shalt be made anew. Many Eternities have passed. Too many to count. Each Eternity has its own struggles, its own victories and defeats. Compared to the Cosmic Scale, the Galactic Scale is truly nothing but dust in the wind."

"I do not comprehend." Michael says, scrunching up his face. "Art thou saying that there exists life beyond our galaxy?"

"Indeed!" Raphael exclaims. "And more life than thou canst possibly imagine. Dost thou believeth the angels are the creators of sentience? The masters of reality granting life to our lessers? Cast aside such foolishness. In the Cosmic Scale, we are strong, but far from invincible. I squandered my father's warnings and allowed our people to fall into decline... but the primordial battles against the dragons were not as they initially seemed."

"What? They were not?" Uriel asks, visibly baffled. "Please, Raphael. Speak not in such cryptic words. We are thy family!"

"In the past, I was hesitant to reveal matters of the Cosmic Scale to the three of thee." Raphael murmurs. "But.. those days have long passed. I once sought not to return our people to their ancient ways... their constant unending struggles. I wished for us to live our lives in peace, having slain the Mother of All Dragons. But alas, she was not the last one. I failed, as I always have."

Raphael falls silent for several moments, as if resolving his heart.

When he speaks, he does so ponderously, as if the effort strains his heart.

"Dragons... they were not a whetstone for our people." Raphael murmurs. "They were not a tool upon which we could vent our boredom. That was only the excuse I gave at the time. Rather, the Dragons were a... *weapon*."

"A weapon?" Gabriel asks, before closing his eyes. "A weapon against... another galaxy?"

"Our people were in decline." Raphael continues, as if not hearing his brother's question. "I could chart our future path with my eyes closed. We would expend our cosmic and primordial energy, ultimately becoming so weak that we could no longer protect our galaxy. When that happened, we would become prey for the... the others."

He continues. "Due to various reasons, I chose to work alongside sister Uzziel. She helped me craft a biological weapon of terrifying strength. The *Dragon*. We named her Jörmungandr, 'Devourer of Rulers,' in hopes of striking fear into the other galaxies. This ploy worked. They avoided doing battle with us."

"Who are these external enemies, then?" Uriel questions. "Thou seemeth to believe we stand no chance against them. Is our galaxy not already doomed, then?"

"It is not." Raphael says quietly. "There is always hope. These Kolvaxians... they are surely the agents of another galaxy. Frightening killing machines capable of assimilating other species into their own. Sister, brothers... the Cosmic Scale is not something one can easily wrap their heads around."

Raphael motions with his hands. He summons an illusion, one which envelops the entire room and turns everything but himself and his siblings pitch black. A moment later, dozens of brilliantly shining lights appear all around them, each taking the form of spinning, swirling galaxies, nebulae, black holes, and other cosmic phenomena.

"In the Cosmic Scale, billions upon billions of galaxies exist." Raphael explains. "And in truth... all of them... harbor life."

"ALL of them?!" Uriel exclaims. "That is ludicrous!"

"But it is also true." Raphael murmurs. "Our galaxy is but one among many. And within the Cosmic Scale, there is a Game which is constantly being played. Our Creator was not the only Creator. There are... many others. They are known as the Rulers."

He motions with his hands, summoning two galaxies that look fairly similar, but one is clearly bigger than the other.

"This is the Milky Way." Raphael says, pointing to the smaller one. Then he points to the larger one. "This is Andromeda. Each galaxy resides within the Local Cluster. Each galaxy has a Ruler."

"Is Andromeda's Creator as powerful as ours?" Michael asks.

"I misspoke earlier. I was only attempting to simplify my words so thou might easily understand." Raphael explains. "Every galaxy has a Ruler. But our Ruler referred to himself as the Creator. Every Ruler's name gives a hint at to their disposition. What sort of name does 'The Creator' bring about in thy mind?"

Michael interlinks his fingers. He furrows his brow in thought. "I suppose... that he is a peaceful Ruler? Someone who wishes to create and not destroy?"

"That is correct." Raphael says. "Our father was a peaceful man. He was loving and kind. He wished to see the end of all violence. No doubt, if he were to see what his creation has become, he would feel great grief."

"Hmph." Uriel mutters. "Perhaps he was just an old fool. Naïve and weak. That is why the other Rulers managed to kill him. I always wondered what circumstances could lead

to the death of such a mighty existence, but now it all makes sense."

Raphael glances into his sister's eyes, but quickly looks away.

He dares not tell her the truth.

"In any event," Raphael continues, "the Rulers are undying, but not unkillable. They will exist in perpetuity. When this Eternity ends, another will begin. They will remain as Rulers when their galactic seeds start afresh. At such unfathomable power levels, the Rulers do not bother with combating one another. They have grown comfortable with their Existences. Instead, they engage in... the Karmic Game."

Sensing his siblings are about to ask what that Game might be, Raphael continues. "They do not fight one another. Instead, they raise up civilizations, evolving them and perfecting their strength. Then they send those civilizations to attack one another. The desire for war is often bred into them deliberately, but more often than not, it arises naturally."

The other three Archangels appear visibly disturbed.

"This... this is not something one can easily digest..." Gabriel murmurs. "Brother, if thou speaketh the truth, then... are our lives not pitiable? We are nothing more than pawns bred to fight for superior beings."

"We're just toys for the Rulers' amusement." Michael mutters bitterly. "This is the great Truth? Life has no inherent meaning?"

"Life has whatever meaning thou giveth to it." Raphael retorts. "Uriel lives for revenge. Gabriel lives in contentment. Are either of their meanings superior to one another? I would argue not. Death is a natural feature of our existences. There is no need to look upon it with fear. When the Karmic Cycle concludes, the Akashic Sequence will begin. Our universe will turn to dust, and a new one will spring forth. This has happened innumerable times before, and will happen innumerable times into the future. It is simply the way things are."

"But..." Michael mumbles. "...what is the point in our struggle? We live. We die. In the end, all becomes dust. Whether we love or hate, we will all eventually fall. It is all simply so... senseless."

"There is a reason for everything." Raphael contests. "I know it may not seem as such, but this is the truth. The Era of Cosmic War has begun, and now our galaxy must fight

these invaders. We must secure our stronghold. If not for our sake, then for the sake of humanity, our children. And if not for theirs, then perhaps... for our little sister's sake."

Raphael waves his hand again. He summons an image of Cassiel, her faintly smiling face filling the hearts of the other Archangels with warmth.

"She has suffered terribly. Should we not struggle for her future?" Raphael questions.

Uriel gazes at the image of the young brown-haired woman.

Her lips curl up, ever so slightly.

"...Yes. I suppose thou art right, brother. The Daughter of Heaven has fought well for us. She deserves a good life."

"She is just like her sister." Michael murmurs. "The same heart. The same unbreakable spirit."

While Uriel and Michael share a rare moment of joy with each other, Raphael's expression turns ever-so-slightly gloomy.

He gazes into the distance, not daring to speak the one thing others mustn't know.

I killed my Father. Raphael speaks. All because of my own greed. When he revealed the Myriad Truths to me, I became voracious. I wanted his power. And I received it.

He lowers his eyes.

If I can survive to the end of the Karmic Cycle, I may yet become eligible. I may become a Candidate...

If fortune favors me, I shall become the Milky Way's Ruler during the next Eternity.

Then... it will all be worth the pain.

Part 411: Demonic Collaborator

Somewhere in the Milky Way, inside an underground facility deep beneath a certain planet's crust.

Dozens of technologically advanced robots armed with melee and ranged weaponry unload bullets, beams, and blasts upon a rampaging demon wearing powerful demonstone armor. Bael, the Duke of Pain, charges toward the nearest robots and smashes them into pieces with his fists, picking them up and thrashing them against the floor with more than a hint of gusto.

"Aw, man! This is great! I love being invincible again!" Bael laughs.

At the side of the room, ADAM and Abby watch with expressions of robotic and fleshly indifference, neither of them particularly interested in Bael's screams of delight.

"In actuality," ADAM states, "your durability is far lower than that of your original body. The Matriarch's Armor is certainly powerful, but you cannot engage in battles at its maximum strength without also mastering Master Ose's magic. The armor will be most potent when you can manipulate thunder and electricity."

Bael pauses his brutal savaging of the training robots in the huge, open arena to shoot a condescending glance back at the emotionless bipedal bot.

"Pft. Magic. Only a dweeb would need ta' use some stupid lame-o magic. I use my fists! Because I'm a real man!"

"Technically, you now inhabit a female's body." ADAM points out.

"Shut up, dweeb!"

Bael continues rocking the shit out of every enemy inside the training arena, while Abby groans.

"This is so boring." She mutters. "I wish I could talk to Ose. It's so unfair only Bael can do that. Hey robo-guy! Can we make, like, a magical artifact? Something that lets her talk to me?"

ADAM turns his head slightly to look down at the annoying demoness.

"Master Ose already attempted to make that possible. She failed. It is impossible."

"You don't know that!" Abby exclaims. "Wait, I know! I bet that Wordsmith guy could use his magic to bring her back into-"

Hardly have the words left Abby's mouth before ADAM suddenly turns to face her. Abby's squeaks in fright as ADAM lunges his hand at her throat. The robot grabs her and pins her against the wall, looming over her with his body while his blood-red eyes bore into her soul.

"You will not inform the Wordsmith of this facility's existence. You will not speak of this facility's existence to any outsiders without Master Ose's permission."

Abby's usually playful mood vanishes as the terrifying murder-bot looms over her, its gaze appearing momentarily like the specter of Death incarnate.

"Ugh... I- kah! You're... hurting me... can't breathe..."

Bael pauses his rampaging to look in their direction. "Hey! What the hell are you doing, punk? Let the girl go!"

ADAM ignores Bael. He continues to stare at Abby's choked expression without a shred of mercy.

"My prime directive is to ensure the continued survival of demonkind as a whole. Not specific individuals. Baron Abby, if you do not immediately agree to my conditions, I will execute you on the spot. I hold no regard for your existence."

Abby desperately grabs at ADAM's fingers, trying to pry his hand off her throat, but to her horror she finds that some sort of magic has permeated her entire body and sealed her powers! In that moment, she realizes that this metal lifeform could kill her in an instant, well before Bael could rush over and save her.

The Baron of Happy Thoughts shivers. She nods her head, while choking back tears. "I... I agree! Won't... say... a word... was just... kidding... please let... let me go..."

Her vision becomes spotty. Sucking in a breath becomes nearly impossible, so tight is ADAM's grip. Just as she starts to lose consciousness, the robot opens his hand, cruelly throwing her to the floor to choke and gasp.

"I have noted your reply. If you betray my trust, I will hunt you down and eradicate you. Be warned. My killing potential is far higher than my original Protectorate design. Master Ose has upgraded my subroutines to a level even the Volgrim could not mimic. Tread with caution."

Bael trots over to the two of them and helps Abby up, staring at the robot with a look of confusion. "Hey, you! What the hell happened? Why'd you attack Abby?"

Wearing his demonstone armor, Bael cuts a surprisingly intimidating figure. Not a speck of his body is visible anywhere, including his head. In this way, he even manages to stand a few inches taller than the killing machine before him.

But ADAM does not display a hint of fear toward the upgraded Duke of Pain. He merely turns to face Bael with the same emotionless expression as ever.

"The Baron of Happy Thoughts stated her intent to contact the Wordsmith. I will not allow this. The Garden of Eden must remain a secret for the foreseeable future. Only once it is ready to integrate and uplift demon society can its existence become common knowledge."

Bael scowls. "That don't give you the right to choke a gal out! Apologize!"

ADAM's irises shift slightly. **"Naturally. I apologize for asphyxiating your friend, Duke of Pain. In the future I will ask your permission first."**

"Don't apologize to me, dumbass!" Bael barks. "Apologize to Abby! Sheesh, it's her you throttled, not me!"

While Bael berates the robot, Abby clammers to her feet and hides behind him. She gazes at ADAM with more than a trace of fear while massaging her bruised throat.

"Don't... don't antagonize him, Bael. That robot is really scary..."

"Bullshit." Bael barks. "What kinda prick picks on someone weaker than him? You really think you're hot shit, hotshot? C'mere, Add-Dumb! I'll tear you to scraps!"

"That would be inadvisable." ADAM says, as Bael starts stomping toward him. **"You are not capable of threatening my existence."**

"I ain't gonna threaten ya!" Bael yells, rearing back his fist. "I'm gonna SMASH ya!"

Bael lunges at the robot, swinging his demonstone gauntlet directly at ADAM's head. Just before impact, the robot's body blurs slightly. ADAM dodges with a level of speed

and precision Bael's eyes can't even follow.

THUMP!!

A violent impact strikes Bael's chest, wrenching him backward and sending him flying into Abby! The two of them yelp in shock as they hurtle across the hangar and slam into the far wall, leaving a small but visible dent in its metallic alloy. They fall to the ground in a heap, with Bael ending up crumpled atop Abby's body.

Uninjured, but slightly embarrassed, Bael jumps to his feet and scowls at the robot for a moment before turning to look behind himself.

"Shit, Abby! Abby, girl, you okay?? Wake up! Oh, devils, she fell asleep!"

ADAM calmly walks toward Bael. **"The Baron of Happy Thoughts has been rendered unconscious. The impact of your body was what caused her condition."**

"Impact my ass!" Bael snaps. "Jerk! You hit me into her on purpose! Now you gotta double apologize!"

"It is likely the Baron has suffered a concussion." ADAM says, walking past Bael to kneel beside Abby's unconscious body. **"We must take her to the medical hub to receive treatment. Master Ose made sure our facilities were state of the art."**

Bael stomps his foot. "Well, fine! But you'd better damn well apologize two times when she wakes up! Maybe even... uh... what comes after two?"

"Three."

"Three times! Apologize three times when she wakes up!"

Bael huffs at the robot, then leans down to pick up Abby and princess-carry her unconscious figure in his arms. He follows behind ADAM who leads him to the medical bay, all while, in the back of Bael's mind, a hazy and illusory figure wakes up from what could be best described as a spiritual nap.

"Oh. What happened to Abby?" Ose asks, her hazy, hologram-like figure materializing beside Bael while he walks. Only Bael sees her body, given her direct connection to his soul.

"Add-Dumb choked her out, then threw me at her." Bael explains. "Your robo-cunt is a bit of a bastard."

ADAM glances back at Bael behind him, but returns his attention to the halls around them while continuing to walk past the myriad assortment of robots around them. He leads Bael past all manner of high-tech construction and testing facilities, many of them containing robots trying out all manner of new weaponry and armor systems.

"ADAM is a very special Protectorate." Ose says. "I spared no expense in his reformatting and reconstruction. I added several exotic elements to his armor alloys, making him capable of taking nearly as much damage as my Matriarch Armor. I also programmed him to protect the Garden's existence at all costs. My plans must not be disrupted."

Bael frowns. "That doesn't make what he did to little Abby okay. You can't be programming the guy to hit women!"

"Bael." Ose says, glaring at the giant idiot wearing her armor. "I'm a woman."

"And?" Bael asks.

"*And* I can hit whoever the devil I want. Besides. Abby is fine. She must have crossed a line, like she always does. What did she say to set ADAM off, anyway?"

Bael flushes red. "She, uh, said she should... tell the Wordsmith... about this place."

"WHAT?! She did? Even for Abby, that's an airheaded idea!" Ose exclaims. "Why would she say such a thing?"

Bael shrugs. "Dunno. That's what the robot said."

"There must have been more. Ask him to relay their exact conversation, Bael."

"Nah." Bael grunts. "You go ahead."

"...Go ahead and what?" Ose frowns. "Bael, I can't talk to the robot. I can only talk to you."

"Pft. Sure you can." Bael says, shaking his head. "You're standing right there! Man, some people these days. Stop being lazy."

"Bael! I am a SOUL! BODY! I barely exist at all! I can only communicate with you! How could you possibly forget when I've explained it FIVE times already?!"

"Wait, you are?" Bael asks. He scrunches up his face. "That sounds like some made-up nonsense."

"BAEEEEEL!"

After screaming at him for a solid five minutes, Ose finally convinces the Duke of Pain to *begrudgingly* question ADAM for the full transcript. When ADAM explains the situation, Ose groans.

"Abby, you idiot!" She yells at the air around her. "Not only should the Wordsmith never learn of this facility, but he also explicitly hates ME. Why would he help you find a way to communicate with MY soul-sliver?! Devils, her stupidity knows no bounds!"

After a slight pause, Ose glances at Bael.

"...On second thought, she could be a lot worse."

Bael and ADAM stroll into the medical facility, where the Duke of Pain encounters a surprising sight. Inside the room, dozens of Demon Lords sit or lay in hospital beds, minor to serious injuries plaguing their bodies. These demons all appear unfamiliar to the Duke of Pain, a socializer who considers himself fairly knowledgeable about any other demons above the rank of Grunt.

"Eh? Who the heck are all these fellas?" Bael asks. "And why are they all Lords?"

Ose fans out her nails in disinterest. "Experimental test subjects. Over the millennia, I've pulled a few Grunts who were on the precipice of mutating to Lord and stashed them here, then fed them souls until they evolved. I wiped their minds and made them my subjects. They serve as soldiers in mock battles to test the effectiveness of the spiritual weapons and armor I'm mass-producing."

Bael's eyes glaze over. "So... they're, uh..."

"I make them hit each other to test my weapons." Ose snaps. "Pay attention, Bael!"

"Ohh. You shoulda just said that at the start." Bael chuckles. "Silly woman, always making things too wordy."

Bael sets Abby on a hospital bed, then watches as a robotic nurse-droid walks over and begins sticking her with needles and waving strange gizmos over her head and body.

"*Analysis complete.*" The robot says. "*Subject has suffered a Class I concussion. Two fractured ribs. Preparing infusion of low-class human blood to expedite the healing*"

process."

Ose flicks her eyes to Abby, then slowly blinks. "Great. Two days of healing, and the little moron will be back on her feet."

"Man. I thought you and Abby had a thing going." Bael says. "Why're ya so mean to her, Ose? She likes you!"

For a brief moment, Ose's expression flickers. As for what expression she reveals, it appears somewhat nebulous. Perhaps only she will ever know.

"Abby is just an idiotic groupie. I can't stand her." Ose says. "Her dogmatic loyalty to me made her useful for a few things, but her usefulness has run out. Now she's an annoyance, and perhaps even a liability."

Bael smirks. "You're lyin' to yourself, toots. Who wouldn't like a sweet girl like Abby? She's always so cheerful and chipper. I like her lots!"

"Well, feel free to lick her toes then." Ose says dismissively while crossing her arms. "If you like her that much."

Bael's face contorts into an expression of disgust.

"Damn, woman. You say the nastiest shit sometimes. If you had a real body, I'd have half a mind to slap some sense-"

Suddenly, Bael pauses.

"Hm?"

The Duke of Pain glances around the room.

"What was that?"

Ose blinks. "What was *what*?"

"I felt something." Bael says. "Felt like- ah! There it is again! Like a... a 'thump' in the air. You don't feel that?"

Ose blinks. "I do not."

ADAM turns to face Bael. "**You have detected an anomaly?**"

"No, no." Bael says. "Never did like that game. Too complicated. Plus Deeb's always took the dog piece and left me with the Hat. Nobody likes the Hat."

"**I am not referring to the game of Monopoly-**" ADAM starts to say.

"Quiet!" Bael barks. "I felt it again! One sec. Lemme see if I can track it down."

Bael starts walking around the room. When he draws near the exit, he pauses to cock his head. "It ain't from in here. Seems it's coming from down the hall. What is that?"

Ose, still clueless, remains silent, seeming happy to let Bael investigate whatever idiotic thing has caught his fancy.

However, as he starts to walk away and ADAM follows him, Ose's expression changes once Bael travels more than a kilometer down other winding hallways, past thousands of worker robots, toward a large sealed doorway.

Thoom. Thoom.

A pulsing of magical energy barely travels outside of the door. A faint clanging rings in the air as Bael draws near to the entrance.

"Ah. So that's what you noticed." Ose finally says.

"Eh? You can feel it too?" Bael asks.

"Now that you've drawn closer, yes." Ose says. "But that's beside the point. This is the Creation Center, Bael. It's where I create all my Resonant Weapons and Armor. As for the sensation you feel... take a look inside."

Bael tries to scratch his head, but ends up scratching the back of his helmet instead. He doesn't notice the difference.

"Well. Alright! Hey, Add-Dumb! Open this door for me, will ya!"

"Yes. I can do that. Master Ose always did intend for you to come here at some point."

ADAM transmits a command to the facility, and the ten-feet-thick doors release their locks and begin to slide outward. Waves of scorching heat spill out of the room's interior, heat so oppressive even the Matriarch armor starts to get a little warm.

"Damn." Bael mutters. "You must be cookin' up something crazy in here."

As the doors slide to the sides to reveal the room's interior, violent sounds of metal crashing against metal ring out in the air.

CLANG! CLANG!

So shrill is the noise, and so powerful the shockwaves, that even Bael winces a little.

He walks into the room, finding a huge amount of steam clouding his vision. All around him, thousands of racks line the walls and sit on the floors, each one covered in dozens of different sorts of exotic-looking weapons and armor. Swords, polearms, energy cannons, power armor, anything one could imagine is inside the chamber. From high technology to low technology, countless eras of warfare are represented on the myriad of racks that stretch up to the ceiling, some fifty feet above.

CLANG! CLANG!

Those same shrill sounds ring out, drawing Bael's attention. The Duke of Pain continues walking toward the center of the room, where he finds a massive furnace spewing out scorching blue flames, nearly 5,000 degrees Kelvin.

"What..." Bael whispers, his eyes widening.

The Duke of Pain pauses mid-step, freezing in place as he gazes upon something that his tiny pea-brain could never have imagined in all his years.

"How could it be her...?!"

A figure stands, her back to Bael, and a pair of beautiful white wings spreading out for five feet in either direction.

CLANG! CLANG!

An Archangel swings an enchanted hammer against a blade on the forge's edge. She moves with speed and purpose, yet takes her time to ensure no imperfections reveal themselves while pouring her abundant reserves of magical energy into the weapon's hilt.

"Grandma!" Bael exclaims, taking several steps toward her. "Grandma Camael! I can't believe it... you're alive?"

The Archangel pauses her hammering. She stands up straight, then turns around to look at the Duke of Pain with a look of malice.

On her forehead, a blood-red symbol glows with malevolence. Its aura radiates hatred and torment, a pain so excruciating that the weak would fall before her at the mere sight of it, clutching their chests and gasping for breath.

"Ose." Camael says, turning to face her unexpected 'guest.' "...No. Not Ose. Thou soundeth different."

"I'm not Ose!" Bael exclaims. "I'm Bael! The Duke of Pain! How the heck are you alive? I coulda swore you got blown up during that big battle!"

Camael gazes at the Duke of Pain with disinterest, not particularly caring about him in the slightest. A hollow look rests in her eyes. An emptiness and loneliness indescribable with words.

"Do not waste my time with pointless questions." Camael mutters. "My work is unending. I have tasks to complete."

Bael glances around the room. He spots a column of light in the rear, with a ring suspended in the center of the beam. The golden band hovers and spins, ever so slowly, while massive amounts of magical energy pour into and out of its core.

"You... you're dead?" Bael asks. "In a ring? Like your brothers?"

Camael blinks slowly. She idly twirls the hammer in her grasp without thought.

"I was brought back through my ring. Yes. Hath thou any further questions? May I return to my work?"

ADAM steps between them. **"You may continue your work, Archangel Camael. I will debrief the Duke of Pain regarding your mission."**

Camael smacks her lips. "Wonderful. If thou wouldst excuse me..."

Without any fanfare, she turns back around and returns to hammering the blade positioned at the edge of the altar, sending additional ringing noises into the air.

CLANG! CLANG!

Feeling somewhat numb, Bael slowly backs away, and ADAM guides him to the exit. They don't leave the room, though, and instead remain just inside, barely within the distance necessary to observe Camael's work.

"I don't get it." Bael mutters. "Grandma... she's here?"

"She is." ADAM replies. **"Archangel Camael has been assisting Master Ose's grand ambitions since the end of the Energy Wars."**

Ose sneers.

"Heh. It's not as if she has a *choice*. To understand why she's here, and why she works for *me*, we'll have to go back to the beginning..."

Part 412: Camael's Choice

"Whaddya mean grandma doesn't have a choice?" Bael asks Ose point-blank. "Did you mind control her?!"

"By no means." Ose starts to explain. "The Archangel of Divination-"

Bael interrupts her. "Hold on a sec. I wanna hear it from her mouth!"

Before Ose can explain her brilliant scheme, Bael turns back and charges into the steam swirling inside the Creation Center.

"Hold on a sec, grandma! You tell me what's going on here! Why are you makin' weapons for Ose?? Ain't you an Archangel?! Demons are your enemy!"

Ose grimaces. ADAM steps forward to try and stop the Duke of Pain from bothering Camael, but ultimately decides to remain silent.

Camael pauses her hammering. She turns to look at Bael with a deep frown on her face.

"Bael. Duke of Pain. I am busy, as I said before. Dost thou intendeth to disturb my work at any cost?"

"Snap out of it, grandma!" Bael exclaims. "This ain't the real you! Aw, geez, what did Ose do to ya? Mind control ain't cool!"

Slowly, Camael blinks. With a great sigh, she *plunks* her divine hammer down on the forge. Its appearance is not that of Mjolnir, but some other weapon purpose-made for forging artifacts, perhaps a new version made to replace the old one.

Then she crosses her arms.

"Thou art operating under a misconception, Duke of Pain. My mind is still very much my own. Ose is not 'controlling' me."

Bael blinks. "Huh? That can't be right. I can see the big bloody mind control symbol right there on your head!"

"Ah. That." Camael says, reaching up a finger to touch the symbol. "'Tis not what thou thinketh it to be. This symbol was a rune I assisted 'Ghost' in creating. It anchors my body

to the physical realm, allowing me to exit my ring. In this manner, I can continue to craft relics."

Bael glances at Ose. "You... didn't mind control her?"

"Of course not, you imbecile. Do you really think a mere Baron would have the ability to enslave an Archangel's soul?" Ose snaps at the dimwit. "Camael and I have undertaken a cooperative relationship."

"Cooperative..." Bael mutters, though Ose can't be entirely sure if that's because he has no idea what the long word means, or because he's stunned by the revelation. "Grandma. You're telling me you and Ose... are *in lesbians*?"

Camael scowls. "Excuse me?"

"Bael. You fucking MORON." Ose hisses. "That's NOT what that word means! It means we've chosen to work together!"

"Oh." Bael nods. "Yeah. That makes more sense. Gotta save the scissoring for Abby."

"BAEL!"

"Just kidding, just kidding." Bael mutters. "Look, uh, jokes aside... grandma, why would you wanna work with Ose? What about your brothers? The old man and the rest are still alive, ya know."

"Art thou attempting to turn me aside from helping thy species?" Camael asks, finding herself slightly amused. "I am aware of my brothers' circumstances. I am even aware that a new Hero has arisen. Ose has kept me abreast of modern developments regarding the inter-galactic situation, ever since I chose to join her side."

"But I don't get it." Bael says. "Why? Why do... this stuff?"

"Why not?" Camael mutters, a hint of bitterness in her voice. "What path dost thou believeth I should walk? Revenge? Pointless. The angels have lost. My people art dead. Our era of glory has long passed."

Camael chuckles wryly and looks away, as if gazing into the past.

"Political plays. Power grabs. I tired of it long ago. My elder brother always held some grand ambition for our people, and I followed along. But what was the end result? One successive self-induced genocide after another. After our complete defeat at the hands of thy brethren, I realized there was no point in coveting some long-lost era of glory. I was

already doomed to languish inside a ring. Why not step out and finally do something that made me happy for once?"

Camael vaguely gestures to the racks upon racks of weapons and armor surrounding her. Among them are also random trinkets and pieces of jewelry, their functions unknown but likely extremely powerful.

"Ose approached me with an offer. I could waste my existence away inside a white void, or emerge from it to create weapons and armor for demonkind. I enjoy creating artifacts, as thou mayest have guessed. And so, it was a simple choice. I decided to change sides and work for my former enemies. There is little else to the story."

Bael stares at Camael with a complicated gaze. Despite his simple thoughts and low IQ, he still fundamentally understands people on a decent level, and has always been quite good at comprehending the subtler aspects of their inner and outer selves.

"That musta been hard on ya." Bael murmurs.

"Not particularly." Camael replies. "'Twas an easy choice. I barely had to put any thought into it. No more machinations. No more schemes. I no longer bother with attempting to guess at what effect my actions might have on the future. I no longer need to seek permission from my brothers when embarking on creating a new artifact. I merely create whatever my heart desires."

She smiles, ever so slightly.

"'Tis a simple life, but one that suits me."

"Yeah." Bael says. "Guess I can respect that. Oh, and uh... sorry about the whole... killing yer family thing."

"Thou hath slain many an angel in thy life." Camael says. "And I hath slain many a demon. We art equal, in that regard."

"I suppose we are." Bael nods. "I'll, uh... I'll leave you to your work..."

Camael nods at him. As she starts to turn around, Bael remembers something.

"Hey, uh! Do you want your old hammer back? I know you used to make stuff with it, and technically I stole it from ya..."

Ose rolls her eyes. "Bael, Mjolnir is essential to the functionality of the Matriarch Armor. Stop trying to help Camael, and let her do her work!"

Bael ignores her. He taps the control unit of the armor, causing Mjolnir to transform from its belt form back into its hammer form. He holds it toward Camael, even as Ose's figure disappears due to insufficient energy.

"I thank thee for the offer." Camael says. "But 'Ragnarok' is my new divine smelting implement."

She grabs the other hammer beside her, a much more ornate golden weapon with fiery runes engraved into its head.

"Tis neither better nor worse than Mjolnir. I designed it to suit my new body and existence. Mjolnir... it would not accept me as I am now. *Tainted* by my new understanding of reality. I am not the same Archangel who once smelted the hammer of thunder. Thou mayest keep it."

Bael nods. "Well. Alright. Uh. Thanks, I guess. It's weird seeing you like this."

"Aye. *Weird*." Camael mutters, before turning her back on Bael.

Without another word, the Archangel of Divination resumes work on hammering the sword from earlier. Bael watches for a minute or two before slowly shaking his head and walking away.

He leaves the Creation Center, along with ADAM, allowing the doors to close behind themselves. After a few seconds of thinking, Bael reattaches Mjolnir to the armor, allowing Ose to materialize in his vision.

"So, toots. You and grandma are working together. You ain't mind controlling her. It's bizarre."

"Camael is not like the other Archangels." Ose says, her voice quieter than usual. "She is an obsessive, like me. Logical to a fault. Her family is dead, and she has accepted it. Her brothers have their own ideas. Following the Final Battle, after Satan killed the last Archangels, he handed out all of their rings to Bahamut, except for Camael's. He gave hers to me in absolute secrecy. Said I'd know what to do. And I did."

"All of their rings..." Bael repeats. "That reminds me. What happened to uh... to uh... well, to Mother?"

"Uzziel?" Ose asks. "I wasn't there for the Final Battle. Weren't you, Bael?"

The Duke of Pain shrugs. "Sure. But I didn't pay much attention. You know how I am."

"Yes. I *do* know how you are." Ose replies, grimacing. "As for Uzziel... do you remember her final attack? The one which slaughtered three Emperors and more than ten million other demons?"

Bael nods. "How could I forget? Mother killed a lot of my good friends."

"She exhausted her power." Ose explains. "She was too weak to fight back. It allowed Diablo to get the killing blow. Afterward, her ring..."

Ose frowns in displeasure.

"...I could have done a lot with that ring. But too bad. Satan used it in his negotiations with the Volgrim. They were always thirsting after the so-called Codex, but my mother knew better than to fall into their greedy clutches. Now Archangel Uzziel is locked away somewhere in one of their facilities."

"Wait..." Bael growls. "Don't tell me... those alien fuckers are doin' bad things to her?!"

"Undoubtedly." Ose says. "Experiments. All sorts of other things. Between you and me, I thought the Kolvaxians might have been a Volgrim experiment unleashed by accident. Something relating to Uzziel. Now, I'm pretty sure they're something else."

"What made ya change your mind?" Bael asks.

Ose gestures toward the doors of the Creation Center.

"Camael. She's been quite forthcoming about her predictions to me. She informed me of certain... Truths. Let's just say my plans for demonkind go well beyond the mere preservation of our existences."

Ose's tone becomes solemn.

"There exist horrors out there, beyond the furthest reaches of our galaxy. What we're looking at now is only the beginnings of an intergalactic war. And the Volgrim? They are not prepared for what is soon to come."

Bael shrugs. "Eh. Cosmic space horrors. Big deal. I'll smack the cunts if they tickle me the wrong way."

"Yes, Bael. I'm sure you will." Ose retorts.

Bael walks away from the Creation Center back to the medical facility. Ose hovers along beside him, her ethereal body always just barely within view, no matter where he looks.

"So... you're not just trying to build up the demons to escape the alien bad guys?" Bael asks.

"Escape is one option, but it isn't the preferable one." Ose remarks. "In the ideal scenario, Camael's artifacts would empower our people to new heights. They could allow us to overturn the Volgrim and take back control of the Milky Way. Unfortunately, when I first started this project, I had no idea the Kolvaxians would step onto the scene. Now, it seems that if I, the Volgrim, or the Wordsmith cannot find a counter to the Plague, escape will have to become demonkind's primary goal."

"Running away. That's a pansy's way of thinkin'." Bael grunts. "Real men stand and fight! ...But it's also okay to cry when you're scared, too."

Ose sighs. "Devils. Why did I have to anchor myself to the galaxy's biggest idiot?"

Back on Tarus II.

Jason, Phoebe, Fiona eventually part from Creator Demila. The 7th-Level Psion possesses means far beyond anything they can imagine, and as such, Jason doesn't really have a surreptitious way of surveilling her. Instead, he resolves to use her as a fountain of basic information regarding the Psions.

However, that will all come at a later date.

For the immediate moment, Jason retires back to the Golden Gardens to sit with both his wives.

The three of them plunk back on the bench, with Fiona re-solidifying her figure thanks to the Garden's built-in magic. As they settle back down together, with one woman for each of Jason's arms, the Wordsmith gazes up at the newly crafted sculpture of Alexander the Great. He also observes a different sculpture some distance away, one which looks like Joan of Arc.

"Those are new." Jason mutters.

"Yes. Lorent's been pretty busy." Phoebe says idly.

"That's good." Jason says. "Very good."

Phoebe sags against her husband's arm. He squeezes her shoulder to comfort her.

"I checked with Sammy yesterday." Phoebe says. "Our baby's doing fine."

"Yeah?" Jason asks, before remembering the vision he just had. "Say, uh... do you know if it'll be a boy or a girl?"

"There's no fun in spoiling the surprise." Phoebe chuckles. "I'll be happy for either..."

"Yeah." Jason mutters, while shooting a glance at Fiona. She smiles cutely, as if to ask whether or not he'll break the news.

"So..." Jason says. "Thought of any baby names?"

"Mhm." Phoebe replies. "For a girl... maybe Sarah?"

"I like that." Jason says.

"And for a boy..." Phoebe says, "...maybe Timothy?"

Jason's expression deflates. "Ugh. Fuck."

Phoebe frowns. She pulls away from her husband and shoots him a quizzical look. "Pardon?"

"No, no. It's not you..." Jason says, before realizing she might have misunderstood. "Remember those visions I mentioned? Well... one of them involved you. You were holding a baby in your arms. You spoke the baby's name, and you specifically said 'Timothy.'"

"Ah. I see." Phoebe says, relieved her husband isn't angry at her choice of name. "Maybe we should name the baby something else, then? That might change the future."

"Or it might not." Fiona counters. "Perhaps the future is fixed. But it might also be malleable. Maybe the baby's name will change, but nothing else. Remember what Jason previously told us about Archangel Camael?"

Phoebe nods slowly. "Camael foresaw the destruction of angelkind, but she was helpless to stop it. I bet she tried many times to change their future trajectory, but she always failed. In that case, the future is likely somewhat set."

"Gressil told me the future could be 'nudged'. Don't know whether or not we should believe him, though." Jason says.

"He could be lying..." Fiona mutters.

"I don't know about that." Phoebe says, a hard edge in her eyes. "I don't know Gressil well. Perhaps not at all. But... something about him seems... honest. In a way. He had Cassiel locked in his dungeon for god knows how long, and our rescuing her would surely

have pissed him off. Yet, when he had the chance to take her back, he didn't. If he wanted to kill you, he could have done it a thousand times over, Jason. Perhaps he's..."

The Wordsmith's wife lightly chews her lower lip.

"I think Gressil is treating all of this as a game. It's not about winning or losing. It's about the fun of playing."

Jason nods. "That... adds up. Some of the things he told me were about how much 'fun' he wanted to have. He's a sadistic psychopath."

Fiona glances around the Park. "He could be here, you know. Right here, right now. We wouldn't know."

"**Search.**" Jason abruptly says, sending a pulse of magical energy all around him. Hoping to find a pocket of 'empty' air his magic can't pierce, he instead finds nothing for three kilometers in any direction.

"Well, if he is here, he's doing a fan-fucking-tastic job at hiding himself." Jason grouches. "Christ. I can practically feel my skin crawling."

Phoebe's pupils flicker.

"That's his goal. Gressil wants us to be on edge. Fearful. Afraid of what he might do next. The scariest threat is an unknown one. We're playing right into his hands."

"Yeah?" Jason asks. "Then what would you have us do? We need a way to track this guy. As long as he can skulk in the-"

Right in the middle of Jason's sentence, a dull *thoomph* rings in the air. A moment later, all the lights and electricity inside the Golden Gardens turn off. Fiona vanishes from Jason's side and dematerializes, appearing inside Jason's head.

"Huh?" She asks, slightly bewildered. "What just happened?"

Jason and Phoebe quickly stand up. Jason casts more search magic, but fails to detect anything out of the ordinary in his vicinity.

What he does find, however, is that the entire power grid for all of Tarus II has shut off all at once.

Jason and Phoebe share a glance. They start to head west out of the gardens, only to stop when they see ten very confused children looking around.

"Are you kids alright?" Jason asks.

He notices a bunch of paintings and easels nearby, most of them drawn with childish designs, all except for one.

"Mister Lorent disappeared!" One of the boys says. "Him and Shana. Where'd they go?"

"I'm not sure." Jason says. "I think the transmitters for the Gardens turned off."

He glances at Phoebe.

"That would explain why Fiona disappeared too."

"The transmitters are magical in nature." Phoebe says. "But they also rely on plain old electricity to function."

Jason nods. He walks over to the center of the park where a statue of King Arthur stands. Around Arthur's neck, a simple brass locket hangs, along with a miniaturized butcher's axe, both attached to the same chain. Jason picks them up and sticks them in his pocket.

After communicating with the spirits inside, he turns to his wife. "Shana and Lorent are fine. But something's definitely happened. Let's go investigate the situation."

The two of them activate their T-REX's. They take off at a light jog, leaping atop nearby buildings to run across the rooftops while also obtaining a birds-eye view of the city below them.

Despite their expectations, nobody seems to be panicking. The humans, monsters, and demons merely pause their work to file out into the streets, looking more confused than anything. Jason half-expects a group of demon saboteurs to be the culprits and all of this to be the plot of one of the Emperors, but when he sees even Emperor Yardrat standing among his kin and scratching his head, Jason can only frown.

Before long, Jason and Phoebe arrive at the Warpgate complex. When they arrive, they find Magnus Chadwick, humanity's most influential general after Neil himself, standing and talking to several troopers. He turns to look at the two newcomers as soon as they arrive.

"Ah. There you are!" Chadwick says. "The T-REX communication system is down, Phoebe. Something took out our power systems. All of the reactors have failed, but we aren't sure why."

"You aren't?" Phoebe asks. "Did you find the source of the issue?"

"We did. All of those fusion power systems Jason made six years ago, plus the newer and more updated ones. They've all failed at once! But the strange thing is, it seems like they should be working perfectly."

Chadwick turns to one of the technicians, an 18-year-old geeky looking guy with big glasses.

"Hi, Miss Hiro." The young man says. "I ran some diagnostics. Here's my data."

Phoebe smiles. "Thank you, Douglas."

She takes a datapad from the teenager and quickly browses it. After a minute, she scrunches up her face.

"What in the world? This is bizarre. Look here, Jason. The reactors are functioning just fine. See? They're producing power with no issues. The problem comes from these transmission relays. They aren't transmitting the power to the grid. It's like someone severed the link."

Jason immediately spots another problem. "You've overlooked the magical elements. The power system seems to be functioning fine, but look at Reactors One to Seven. See how the dimensional shunts have started building up excess heat? This stinks of a rat. There's no way every single one of those shunts would disable all at once."

Jason and Phoebe walk with General Chadwick to the Warpgate, only to find it shut down.

"Sorry, sir." One of the soldiers guarding the post says. "We lost power here and at the Core too. The Warpgates all died simultaneously."

Jason nods. "Well, at least I'm here. That would be a major problem otherwise, to say the least. **Return.**"

Jason teleports himself, his wife, and Chadwick into the Core. There, they arrive in dense darkness, with only the scattered lights of various soldiers wearing T-REX's to shine flashlights and other implements into the darkness.

The three of them make their way toward the power stations, where Jason utters a Word of Power. "**Diagnose.**"

A wave of mana sweeps from his lips across the surprisingly small reactors, each one only three times as big as the average human, yet containing more than enough power to energize the Warpgates and all of humanity's other defenses.

A minute later, Jason frowns deeply.

"Son of a bitch. It's Gressil. He did this."

Phoebe nods. "Right as we were talking about him, too. Can you fix the reactors?"

Jason bites his lower lip. "Yes. *Easily*. But that's not the problem. Don't you see? He's sending us a message. Gressil didn't attack the grid or cause any permanent damage. He merely used his magic nullification to shut down the reactors. We couldn't sense him or detect him. He came through here and even had the kahunas to leave trace amounts of Chaos Energy behind."

As if to prove his point, Jason utters another Word of Power. "**Disperse.**"

The remnants of Chaos Energy lingering inside the reactors disperses. A moment later, all of the lights come back on in the Core, and thousands of people cheer or breathe sighs of relief.

But not Jason.

The Wordsmith frowns deeply. His wife also doesn't appear happy.

"We're too vulnerable." Phoebe mutters, tapping the side of her helmet. "Gressil's trying to get inside our heads."

"It's working." Jason responds, once again looking around himself, as if expecting to find the two-headed specter lurking over his shoulder. "Fuck. When I first left the Cryopod, Gressil hounded me. Now, six years later, he's at it again. I wish this piece of shit would just die already."

"He's not going to drop dead just because you want him to." Phoebe says.

Chadwick nods.

"We'll have to kill that son of a bitch ourselves."

Part 413: Lily's Lovely Life

"Mmm! Ahh!"

A young woman, appearing eighteen years of age, stretches after waking up early in the morning. Her room, while simple and small, appears quite colorful with lots of pretty red and pink decorations and a few palm-sized animals carved from wood sitting on wall-mounted shelves.

The young woman pops her back and moans softly, then climbs out of bed and gazes at her disheveled appearance in the mirror.

From an adjacent room, a deep masculine voice speaks. "Lily! Are you up?"

"Yes, daddy," Lily Brown says. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

"I made breakfast," Benjamin Brown replies. "You can take your bath after you've eaten."

"Alright!"

Lily Brown, daughter of Benjamin Brown, a former soldier during the Energy Wars, plops down at her desk and quickly begins brushing her long, pink hair. She hums quietly while straightening herself out, then trots across the apartment complex toward the kitchen-dining room hybrid.

This building, while small and compact, offers individuals and families a simple but surprisingly luxurious living space, complete with efficient stoves, bathrooms, and other amenities all packed into each apartment unit.

Lily Brown sits across from her father, a hulking muscle of man and machine, while he places a bowl of gravy on the table.

"Mashed potatoes and gravy for breakfast?" Lily asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't knock it til' you try it." Benjamin says, smiling warmly at his little girl. "These are apparently some rare potatoes grown on one of the Liberated worlds. I decided to give them a shot."

"They smell great." Lily says. "Pass me a slice of garlic bread?"

Her dad nods, then pushes a plate across the table toward her.

As they sit and eat, Lily babbles to her father about all the local gossip.

"-and my friend Becky, she says the central government is erecting an apartment three blocks from here. It's Class-A, so it's a bit more upscale than our place."

"We're fine where we are now." Benjamin says between bites. "There's no need to waste our Merit Tokens thoughtlessly. Didn't you say you wanted to try out the Beauty Booster soon? Even I don't find fifty tokens easy to collect."

"I earned an extra token yesterday for my hard work!" Lily says with pride, beaming a smile at her father. "That second round of body boosts really made me strong as heck, daddy! I can lift half a ton without breaking a sweat!"

"Hard work is good for the soul." Benjamin says. "But don't overwork yourself. We're not in a rush to integrate into this new society. We're just... visitors."

Lily's smile fades, ever so slightly. "I don't understand, daddy. Why not stay here? Rather than living in that cooped-up tower, we should stay with our fellow humans!"

"It's not that simple." Benjamin says. "What you see is a world of humans all living their best lives. What I see is a doomed society soon to crumble. The Wordsmith's planet is quietly being besieged by countless enemies, and only the delicate balance of 'benefits' in the present and future is holding them back. I'm merely staying here to collect intelligence before we can ultimately leave and head back to Hell Harbor."

Lily scrunches up her nose. "But, daddy. Hell Harbor is in ruins. The Archangels brought down the Hammer of God upon our homeworld. It's in ruins."

"That's exactly why we haven't gone back." Benjamin chuckles. "I'm waiting for Yadrat and the others to rebuild. The Slithering Spire all but collapsed under the remnants of a mountain-chunk. In the meantime, we live here because we're not in any immediate danger."

Lily sighs. "I never disliked living with the rest of our family, but being surrounded almost entirely by demons wasn't fun. I think you're being overly pessimistic, daddy."

Benjamin snorts. "As if you didn't take every opportunity to get 'close' to those demons. Don't think I didn't notice you playing lip-lock with the succubi."

"Daddy!"

Lily frowns in annoyance, while Benjamin simply chuckles.

"I'm leaving now." Benjamin says, standing up and walking to the sink to wash off his plate. "I'll see you after work."

"Don't get shot while you're training the maggots." Lily snarks.

"And *you* take care not to break any bones." Benjamin replies back.

After the man leaves, Lily finishes up her food, then cleans off her plate and puts away the leftovers in the fridge. She heads into the bathroom to clean herself up and get ready for her day at work.

* * *

Some time later, Lily leaves to go to work. She exits her apartment, only to bump into one of her many 'cousins', a child of Benjamin Brown's extended family, his previous wife's descendant.

"Hey, Latisha." Lily says, smiling at her cousin as they pass each other in the hallway. "I'm heading out."

"Have a good one Lily!" Latisha replies.

Lily passes by others from her extended family, all of them having also been transported away from the Slithering Spire thanks to Jason Hiro's magic. Simply as a matter of convenience, they mostly chose to live in the same neighborhood.

She exits the building and arrives in a well-trodden and cozy neighborhood street, one lacking any grass or plants due to the short time that has passed since Stormbringer, but with the beginnings of seedlings starting to spread thanks to Phoebe Hiro's many inventions. After anticipating the need to replant the local flora following Beelzebub's detonation, Phoebe created drones that fly around and re-seed whole tracts of land with basic plant-life from elsewhere on Tarus II.

Lily glances at one of those drones as it passes by overhead. It hums quietly, its anti-gravity motors allowing it to fly without the use of jet-based propulsion. Four long, spindly limbs hang out of its circular undercarriage, making it look like a four-legged UFO buzzing through the air.

Lily observes it for a moment as it drops to the ground across the street, sprinkles some seeds in the seemingly barren soil, then buzzes off to the next place in need of care.

"It's so lively here." Lily murmurs. "I hope daddy doesn't make me leave."

Lily heads down the street. Unlike the world of Earth during the Industrial Era, these streets are quite narrow and afford no room for anything but the smallest vehicle traffic. Several people ride on bicycles, zipping past Lily at a decent speed while she sticks to the sides of the road. With the streets being unpaved, she ends up walking mostly on compacted dirt and slightly uneven terrain, but this doesn't bother her at all.

Her outfit today is just as practical as always. As someone working in construction, Lily wears plain blue overalls and a white T-shirt. Of course, once she arrives at the job site, she'll probably have to put on a T-REX to protect herself from debris or other accidents, but she'd still rather not wear a cute dress to a job site.

Lily glances up at the plateau leading to the Fortress of Retribution's inner city. Despite her father possessing desirable qualifications and the right to live inside the inner city, he instead opts to live in the outer section to the west, between the main city itself and the Warpgate Complex.

Lily walks southwest, toward the newest housing developments that have only recently started construction. Before long, she arrives amidst a sea of humans, monsters, and demons, all working together under the eyes of various foremen and women. Huge minotaurs heft big rocks and steel girders while Demon Lords and even three or four Barons join in, using their more mystical abilities to construct, weld, and place structures together. Of course, the majority of the work is usually done by Phoebe Hiro's construction drones, which 'beam' the skeletons of structures and wiring into place, but the most delicate work is often finished by talented tradespeople.

Lily arrives to find two boys her age standing and watching as a Demon Lord sprays scorching hot flames onto a pair of beams, welding them together. Then, a pair of minotaurs work with an enhanced human woman to lift the beams into place.

"You two on break?" Lily asks in a sugary tone.

The first boy, a pale, freckled lad with reddish-orange hair, turns to look at her. His work-issued T-REX hangs in his hand, having taken it off a few minutes earlier for whatever reason.

"Hey Lily. Yeah, me and Connor just finished spraying a bunch of insulation. Boss told us to take a thirty."

Lily smiles. "Looks like a bigger apartment than usual."

The other teenager, Connor, a dark-skinned fellow with bright blue eyes, chuckles at Lily's question. "It's one of Miss Hiro's updated designs. It's gonna have a garden in the center for people to congregate."

"Wonder how long it'll take to grow all the plants." The redhead mutters.

Lily shrugs. "Knowing Miss Hiro, maybe a month at most. Becky says the Tech Division is working on some fancy new fast-grow plants. They might finally add some green to the scene."

Connor's face flushes, ever so slightly. He rubs the tip of his nose. "Becky said that, huh?"

"Oh my gosh, Connor." Lily laughs. "Ask her out already! Just do it!"

"Ahh, I don't know... I'm not good with girls. Not like Ves."

The other boy, Ves, scoffs. "If you think I'm good, you have holes for eyes."

"It's true!" Lily laughs. "Ves always trips over his words when he talks to girls. He's just so gosh-darn cute, they can't help but like him!"

The trio pokes and prods one another for a bit, but eventually, a foreman walks over, a short little goblin wearing slacks and a T-shirt.

"Hey hey!" The goblin exclaims. "Lil-lee! You here make big work today?"

"Yep!" Lily replies. "What do you have on the docket, Mongol?"

"Three choice." Mongol replies, while glancing at a datapad in his tiny little hands. At only three feet tall, he appears positively tiny compared to the humans before him. "We got underground poo-poo project needs work! Need build sewer for city."

Lily scrunches up her face. "...How many tokens?"

"Three tokens!" Mongol replies. "Pay very good for six hour work!"

"Yeah... maybe." Lily says. "What else?"

"Okay okay, pretty girl not want deal with icky sewer. Me understand!" Mongol chuckles. "Next we got heavy stuff-moving job. Easy work, but many lifting of things. You go to base of city and help construct new ramp to upper plateau. Your strength reach Class C, yes?"

Lily nods. "I can lift half a ton pretty easily. Maybe a bit more if I strain."

"Okay okay!" Mongol says, flashing a thumbs-up. "This work well-suited for you. Pay is one point five tokens!"

Lily glances at Connor and Ves, who shrug at her in response. Then she returns her attention to Mongol. "I might go for that. What's the last one?"

"It not hard, but not easy." Mongol says. "Only one token. You go and help dig tunnels. We need help pulling big rocks out and throwing them in open area. Lots of debris. Robots too big to fit."

"I'll take the second job." Lily says. "Send me the info, please."

She holds up her hand, revealing a metal wristband. Not only does she wear one, but so do the boys, and even Mongol. It projects a stream of information into the air, and Mongol activates his wristband as well. He flicks his fingers and transmits the details to Lily, allowing her to observe the job's specific requirements.

"Look good?" Mongol asks.

"Mhm. Thanks Mongol! I'll head over to the site in a bit."

"Okay okay, you have good time Lily! Make big bank yes! Fight-fight-fight!"

Mongol spins on his heel and trots away, leaving Lily alone with Connor and Ves.

"It's so neat how efficiently Miss Hiro's system works." Ves idly comments. "You can just take whatever job you want. If you do the work, you get paid. If not, you don't. Nobody cares what you look like, what your gender is, or even what your species is. We're all... equal."

Connor appears less impressed. "Yeah, this world's kind of nice. But I didn't ask to be brought here. None of us did. That Wordsmith guy just cast his magic without asking us."

"Oh?" Lily asks. "Where are you from, Connor?"

"I lived on Sharmur." Connor answers, his tone bitter. "Shit. The whole world... it's ruined now. That 'Plague' hit us. And from what I've heard? It came because of his magic. The Wordsmith actually attracted the monsters like a god-damned idiot. Now I'm stuck here. Me, my mom, and my dad."

"I'm from Jeddax." Ves says. "My world sucked. I like it here a lot more. The demons would form hunting parties to chase after us for sport. I'm turning eighteen next month."

I'd have been thrown into the 'chaser' party for the next hunt once I became an adult. Fucking demons."

"Really? Demons would hunt you down?" Lily asks, visibly shocked. "Why would they do that though? I've always gotten along just fine with demons."

"Ain't you some sort of princess?" Connor asks. "It's not the same for us commoners. I mean, I had it pretty good on Sharmur. The demons there were super chill. But I've heard horror stories about other demon-controlled worlds."

"Like Jeddax." Ves adds. "On Tarus II, humans have power. Demons don't fuck with us. The best they can do is make snarky comments, but they're terrified of getting cut off from those Belial Boosters. Those facilities are basically drugs to them."

"The Belial Booster..." Lily says quietly. "Mmm. I still need to say hi to her."

"Huh? Who? Belial?" Ves asks.

"Yeah. She and I go way back." Lily says, before noticing the odd looks the boys are giving her. "Oh! It's... well, it's complicated. You guys know I'm a lot older than you, right?"

"You are?" Connor asks. "What are you, like, twenty? Twenty-two?"

Lily fidgets with her feet. "Connor... I'm three thousand years old."

"What the *fuck*? How?" Connor asks incredulously. "Did you take a dip in the fountain of immortality or something?"

"Well, my daddy has access to these 'Energy War' technologies." Lily explains. "One of them is a nanite compound that can greatly extend a person's life. He's used it on all his family members in the past. We're basically immortal."

"Wow." Ves says, shaking his head in disbelief. "You think you know a gal. Why the heck is the Wordsmith making people visit the new age-extension facilities if he could just zap us with nanites?"

"My daddy intended to talk to him about them at some point." Lily says. "But the Wordsmith has been a bit busy. Daddy has, too."

"Guess it doesn't really matter." Ves says. "We do have those 'BoRDs'. The Rejuvenation Depots. They do the job just fine."

"I saw an old man step inside and he came out looking my dad's age." Connor says. "That's magic for ya."

"I'll bet you didn't have such a thing on Sharmur." Ves points out. "Just another reason I love living on Tarus II."

"We didn't. But I don't really care about that, anyway." Connor retorts. "I hate living here. On Sharmur, life was easy. We didn't have to work all the time building houses for other people. I used to sit around and write poetry for fun. Now I need to earn stupid Merit Tokens."

"But you don't have to do that." Lily counters. "Food and housing is provided for everyone for free."

"Sure, if you want to live and eat in the middle of bumfuck-nowhere." Connor says. "I want my little sister to have a good life. I'm saving up for a place in the Upper Plateau. Mom, dad, and I are going to pool our merits together."

"It's pretty pricey there." Lily points out. "Two hundred tokens a month. And that's just for a basic apartment. If you want something nicer..."

"As long as we can live up there, we'll have access to Miss Hiro's new school and university." Connor says. "I'll make sure my sister gets a good education."

"For someone who hates living here, you're sure making a lot of plans to integrate more deeply into the culture." Lily points out.

"Just doing the best I can with the hand I was dealt." Connor says. He pauses for a moment to glance at his wristband. "Oh. Break's over. I'm heading back."

"Me too." Ves says. "Nice talking with you, Lily."

"You too, guys!" Lily chirps. As the boys depart, she also turns on her heel to leave. "See you at the Tribunal tomorrow!"

"Yep. See you then."

Lily walks eastward, a bit closer to the Upper Plateau. She arrives near the bottom of the cliffside, where she finds a hundred people milling about. Some of them haul concrete in bags, while other drive forklifts and other vehicles plucked straight out of the Industrial Revolution, likely built or envisioned by the Wordsmith himself. They all work together to construct a new ramp up the cliffside, one which will allow many more people to travel to and from the lower and upper areas of Tarus II.

"Becky!" Lily says, as she approaches a blonde girl from behind. "You're working this job too?"

Becky turns around while easily hefting a huge 100-pound bag of concrete. "Hey, Lily. Yeah, this was all they had available. I didn't want to work down in a sewer, even if there's nothing gross down there yet."

"Right?! Me neither!" Lily laughs.

She joins in and starts helping Becky haul concrete to the designated landing zone, and the two of them chat while they walk.

"Guess who I saw on my way here." Lily says, smiling devilishly. "Connor!"

Becky flushes red. "Oh? Yeah... Connor."

"Hahaha! You're blushing! You L-I-K-E him!"

"Maybe a little." Becky says. "Come on, Lily! Stop teasing me!"

Both girls continue to talk while they work. After an hour, the topic drifts elsewhere.

"You're watching the Tribunal tomorrow, right?" Lily asks.

Becky's smile fades away. "Yeah."

Lily pauses for a split-second while throwing the bag of cement onto the pile of other ones. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Well... Lily..." Becky says hesitantly, "I... I lost my mother during Stormbringer. And she wasn't among the recovered souls. She's gone. For good."

Having only lived on Tarus II a scant few weeks, Lily hasn't yet had time to fully understand everyone's living situations, including that of her new friends. She freezes in place and gasps. "Oh my gosh! I'm sorry... I didn't mean... I didn't realize..."

Becky averts her eyes, gazing off into the distance with a vacant expression. She swallows heavily. "I don't like to talk about it. I can't bring my mom back. I was just... sitting on a Covenant ship while she fought to protect our home. When the ship came back... she was gone. I never even got to say goodbye."

Lily touches Becky's shoulder. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks." Becky mutters, before hardening her eyes. "I'm looking forward to the Stormbringer Tribunal. The demons have to pay for what they've done. We can't let them off easy."

Lily chews her lip. "Yeah. Hopefully, we caught all the bad ones from that day."

"All demons are evil." Becky says, keeping her voice low. She glances at the other workers nearby, with several Demon Grunts among them. Her gaze turns vicious. "Many just haven't revealed their true colors yet."

"No, no, no. Not all demons are bad." Lily whispers, pulling close to her friend. "I know what happened to your mom was terrible, but-"

"There's no 'but' about it." Becky says, giving Lily a strange look. "All the demons need to die. *All* of them. That's why after I've redeemed the level three Body Boost, I'm going to join the military. I want to serve under Neil Adams. He knows how to deal with *them*."

Lily frowns. "Becky. I have a lot of demon friends, and I don't think they're all that-"

Before she can finish her sentence, Becky abruptly pulls away from Lily's touch. She scowls at her, giving Lily a look of pure venom.

"You're a *collaborator*?! Wow. I'm glad you found out sooner rather than later. Forget what I just said. Don't ever talk to me again."

Stunned, Lily blinks twice while her 'friend' turns and walks away. The sudden reversal of their friendship leaves Lily tongue-tied.

"What... wait... Becky? What are... what do you..."

Lily finds herself unable to formulate a sentence. Becky storms off, not bothering to look back at Lily even once. After she disappears around a corner, Lily's legs shake and tremble. She leans against a pole stuck in the dirt and sags to her knees, shocked beyond belief. Despite only knowing Becky for a couple of weeks, never did Lily imagine she would turn on her so abruptly and without remorse.

"I don't understand..." Lily mumbles, fighting to hold back her tears. "What did I... do wrong?"

Part 414: Guerilla Warfare

Benjamin Brown leaves his house in the Eastern District. He strides away from it with purpose, his cybernetic eyes sweeping across the local infrastructure and citizenry with an almost passive indifference.

This seemingly simple man was once a legendary human warrior. A combatant who fought in the Energy Wars under the title of Vanguard. Over the millennia, the collective memories of humanity and demonkind slowly forgot his name and accomplishments.

Not all demons, however.

The Emperors, Dukes, and many of the older Barons still recalled those days. Those who were not put under mind-wipes, those who held positions of privilege, or those who were outright immune, they once knew the terror of facing a Vanguard in battle.

Cybernetically augmented with the best of humanity's technology. Upgraded with specific abilities to combat specific demons. Difficult to injure, and even harder to kill.

The Vanguards once terrorized demons in the same way the ancient demons once terrorized humanity. Their eyes could pierce solid barriers. Their fists could shatter steel, stone, and bone alike. Their accuracy with weapons was nearly perfect.

And now, 100,000 years after Earth's fall, Benjamin Brown finds himself as the last remnant of the Vanguards. A soldier without an enemy to fight. A man merely trying to live his life in peace.

He moves quickly but steadily, not breaking a sweat. He passes by humans, monsters, and demons alike, observing their interactions with clinical dispassion. To him, demons were once his greatest enemy. But nowadays, they are merely... obstacles.

As he makes his way toward the military-zoned area north of the Central Plateau, Benjamin Brown's thoughts drift between topics.

Humanity is progressing much faster than it did during the Energy Wars. But it still has a long way to go before it can reach a level comparable to what Marie achieved. Her leadership truly uplifted our species to the apex.

Sadly, it wasn't enough. Even she had limits. We were never a threat to the Volgrim, no matter how quickly we progressed.

He shakes his head while passing a pair of soldiers wearing nanite-based armor. Despite the impressiveness of their T-REX's, not one of these soldiers could hope to match Benjamin Brown in combat if he went all-out.

On the surface, these soldiers possess incredible power. But defeating demons and defeating the Volgrim... there's simply no comparison between the two. And that's to say nothing of the Plague.

Before long, Benjamin arrives at the edge of Tarus II's largest military base. Several conspicuous signs rest on its walls stating that demons are not allowed inside. None of them, not even Belial herself. Only humans and monsters, those who have fought on humanity's side for the past six years, are allowed to enter.

Benjamin Brown pauses at the gate, while a female trooper wearing a blue-tinted T-REX walks up to him.

"Mister Brown." She says, her voice transmitting through her faceless helmet. "Punctual, as always."

"Hello, Linda." Benjamin says, offering her a faint smile. "I have an internal chronometer installed in my skull. I am always painfully aware of any existing time constraints."

Corporal Linda Hurent nods at the man before her. "Neil says he wants to talk to you. He'd like it if you dropped by after you're done with your training session."

"He is the commanding officer here." Benjamin replies. "I'm at his disposal."

"We'll keep that in mind."

Linda leads Benjamin through the checkpoint toward the secret inner underground area. As they walk, the man and woman engage in idle conversation.

"We really appreciate your help." Linda says, as they enter the central dome, then descend down a spiral staircase into the facility's depths. "We need more veterans with your level of experience. Unsurprisingly, they're hard to come by."

"I've heard rumors going around that Blinker and her fairy friends are working on some sort of new... contraption?" Benjamin asks idly.

"I don't know any details." Linda says. She and Benjamin arrive at the bottom of the staircase and arrive inside a wide hallway, one which leads toward several portals to Camael's Cube.

However, neither of the two knows the truth about these training areas, believing them to be projections made by Fairy Magic, or perhaps some unknown utilization of Wordsmithing.

"None at all?" Benjamin asks. "Come now, Linda. You're pretty high up in the command structure."

"I'm telling the truth." Linda says, while leading Benjamin toward the 'aquatic' biome. "Neil might tell you the details, but he hasn't told me much of anything. All I know is it will be a much more robust training sim than what we have now. And don't get me wrong, these training biomes are crazy-realistic already, so I can only wonder what sorts of improvements the Wordsmith will make."

The two of them walk through the doorway and arrive on a large island amidst a seemingly infinite ocean stretching out into the distance. The portal behind them hums mysteriously atop a raised platform, and the two of them descend onto the island's sandy beach past several rows of troopers.

"Training Officer Brown is on the scene!" One man barks, causing the soldiers behind him to stand at attention. He walks over to Benjamin Brown and snaps a salute by lightly thumping his heart with his fist. "Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to visit us today, Officer Brown!"

Benjamin smiles perfunctorily. "We're all human, here. It's only natural I help whip my people into shape."

After once again thanking Benjamin for his help, Linda turns on her heel and strides back to the portal leading out of the Cube. Once she's gone, Benjamin begins pacing before the recruits, sizing them up. All of them wear T-REX modules on their chests, but they remain deactivated, allowing Benjamin to get a good look at today's candidates.

Surprisingly, barely over half of them are men. Their gender distribution appears roughly equal thanks to the effects of Jason Hiro's Body Boosters, which grant anyone with enough merit points access to a minimum of Class II enhanced physiques. Of course, if someone joins the military, they're guaranteed three rounds in the Booster to give themselves a Class III physique. And if they already have a Class III physique, they're granted two more rounds.

At the third level, even without armor, most soldiers possess noticeably faster tissue regeneration, rapid-clotting blood, and much denser skin and bone, allowing them to

punch apart boulders with their bare hands. Their strength also rises dramatically, granting them enough power to lift nearly a full ton of weight unassisted.

Benjamin nods as he sizes up the soldiers.

Not bad. They're no Vanguard's, but augmentations like mine weren't easy to install. Since the Wordsmith can mass-produce super-soldiers, even if they're a bit lower-level than the strongest soldiers of my era, it's not hard to make up the difference in quality with quantity. Plus, even outside of combat, these people can fulfill all sorts of general roles. Laborers, mechanics, construction workers... he's creating a more versatile and adaptable society than Old Earth.

Benjamin clears his throat. "Ahem. I'm sure I don't need to introduce myself. Does anyone here have a Class IV or higher enhanced body?"

Two men nod their heads.

"I do, sir."

"I as well."

Benjamin nods. "Perfect! You two will be taking the roles of warring commanders. I want half of the people here to go with you, and the other half to go with you. One side will play the role of assault, while the other will act as a defender. The defenders will have one hour to build fortifications, while the attackers will need to construct weapons and armor."

Benjamin gestures to the many trees on the island, the diameter of which stretches for about ten miles.

This is a tactical exercise. You are not to kill your opponents, though for obvious reasons, you can and should beat the shit out of each other. If anyone gets too injured to fight, we'll cart them off to the hospital for Belial to heal. Most importantly, I'm going to be training you in the art of guerilla warfare! This is a style of combat which allows seemingly small and weak militaries to hold back and sometimes defeat much stronger ones through clever uses of traps, sabotage, and other 'unsavory' methods."

Ben proceeds to spend the next ten minutes outlining all of the rules, among which includes leaving their T-REX's behind in order to endure the training with nothing but their bodies. Luckily, these soldiers not only possess enhanced physiques, but lightly enhanced brains as well, allowing them to more easily retain his words.

"Permission to speak?" One woman in the front row asks.

"Granted." Benjamin says, turning to face her.

"Sir," She says, "are you teaching us this in case we need to fight any specific adversary? Or is this training general-purpose?"

"It's both." Benjamin answers, while folding his hands behind his back. "Humanity is still weak. The Wordsmith's presence shields you, causing the demons to worry about taking any overt actions against your species. Additionally, they wish to form trade connections with you thanks to your valuable 'Belial Booster'."

He continues. "Nevertheless, if the Wordsmith is not here at all times, or if he leaves for any extended period, the demons may suddenly attack. You are still far weaker than them, collectively. Knowing how to use guerilla warfare against a superior enemy will not only benefit you if you ever have to fight the demons, but also the Volgrim. That being said, these tactics do have limits. They are... far from perfect, especially when facing such a huge difference in power."

Benjamin fields half a dozen other questions before initiating the training. Over the next hour, he spends most of his time with the defenders, helping them create a secluded base deep within the island's tree cover.

"Look here," Benjamin says to one pair of young men, both barely 20 years old. "Between these trees, you could place some barbed wire at ankle level and then hide it with leaves. Anyone trying to sneak past the perimeter will catch a nasty surprise."

"We don't have any barbed wire." One of the men replies. "Can we use fishing line instead? Maybe attach them to some bells as an early warning?"

"That's using your head." Benjamin says, giving them a thumbs-up before leaving them to their work.

The Vanguard proceeds to traipse around the base while the two hundred or so soldiers hastily erect their defenses. Afterward, he walks over to the other side, the attackers, and proceeds to give them personalized training.

The attackers wield mostly sharpened sticks, rocks attached to tree branches and fashioned into makeshift axes and clubs, as well as 'body armor' made from huge leaves or flat rocks. While rudimentary, these hastily-crafted weapons and armor give the attackers a superior equipment lead over the defenders.

"Your goal is to break through the defenses of your opponents, evade their traps, and beat them half-to death." Benjamin tells the attackers. "However, what you lack is information. You do not know where their defenses are located, or how they've been set up. If your leg gets stuck in a snare, you'll be a sitting duck for a counter-attack. And be warned, your opponents have positioned themselves all across the woodlands. They want nothing more than to pounce on you in an ambush and take you out without suffering a loss. Now, let's move out. I'll show you a few initial traps so you know what to look for, but after that, it will be up to your own survival and wits."

Benjamin strides into the forest with the other two hundred soldiers. He proceeds to point out a handful of tricks the defenders have laid out, including pit-traps, rope snares, and hammers designed to fall down and knock out an enemy before they can react.

What Benjamin also finds is that despite their youth, many of these humans are actually quite knowledgeable. Unlike the humans of his modern industrial era, those born into simple lives and 9-to-5 drudgery, these people were raised on hostile worlds where they had to work the farmlands or flee for their survival when the demons initiated hunting parties.

Several men and women take the lead, pointing out traps Benjamin didn't even mention. He falls back to the rear, then activates a certain upgrade inside his body, one installed just 20,000 years prior.

Benjamin levitates into the sky!

Thanks to an anti-gravity module installed by none other than Ose herself, Benjamin can take to the air in a slow but energy-efficient manner. Traveling at just under twenty kilometers an hour, he flies into the sky to look down upon the recruits as they initiate their mock battle.

In under three minutes, the first of the attackers accidentally steps on a trip-wire. A sharp *thwip* sound causes him to jerk his head to the left, where he sees a glob of dirt flying at his face, launched by some unseen mechanism. The soldier quickly raises his arm to block the incoming projectile, but this only causes it to crash against his skin and explode into a thick cloud of dust!

The man staggers back and sneezes, momentarily blinded by the dirt in his eyes. Before he can cry out for help, a woman hidden under a small pile of leaves jumps up from behind him and locks him in a chokehold. The man falls unconscious after she

throttles the life out of him, then drags him deeper into the jungle, where his teammates won't see him again.

"Good move." Benjamin idly mutters.

Across the jungle, several other such scenes take place. Some of the attackers, wiser than their peers, deliberately trip traps and act surprised, only to turn the tables on the defenders when they attack.

Over the next two hours, a series of victories and defeats plays out. Benjamin watches as the defenders start with initial victories, but ultimately lose more and more ground until eventually succumbing to the superior tactics of their opposing peers.

Afterward, he takes to the ground and proceeds to check up on the injured. Some of them bear serious wounds, but none that can't be healed with humanity's magic. He ships the injured back to the hospital area, then turns to face the remaining three hundred or so, those with painful injuries but who can still stand, as well as their peers who managed to survive the exercise without any major wounds.

"Well. That was a pathetic showing." Benjamin says, addressing the defending side. "The power of guerilla warfare lies in a smaller force outlasting an opposing side. Can any of you tell me what went wrong?"

The commander of the defenders, one of the two Class IV enhanced humans, steps forward and looks Benjamin in the eye. His pale skin appears quite bruised thanks to the beating he took, but thanks to his enhanced biology, he can heal from fairly severe injuries, given time.

"Sir. It was my errant leadership that caused us to fail."

Benjamin nods. "Your name?"

"Private Williams, sir."

"And what exactly did you do wrong?" Benjamin asks.

Private Williams grits his teeth. "I overlooked the true point of this exercise. I thought we should try to gang up on our enemies by isolating them and striking them two-versus-one. In this way, we could quickly take out half their members and easily deal with the others."

"At least you know where you erred." Benjamin says calmly. "Looking back, what do you think would have been the better solution?"

"Sir. We should have laid low and continued placing traps while falling back. The more traps our opponents crossed, the more likely they'd get injured or weakened at no cost to us. It's just..."

He pauses.

"...I feel as though we had to hold back due to this being a 'friendly' competition. You made it clear we weren't supposed to kill anyone. And frankly, none of us would want to do that anyway. Therefore, any traps capable of severely injuring the attackers might have accidentally killed them. The only way I felt we could be sure we were only incapacitating them was to get up close and personal."

Benjamin listens silently. He nods along to the soldier's words, and when the man finishes, Benjamin takes a moment to collect his thoughts.

"Guerilla warfare is a state of war most humans should innately prefer." Benjamin finally says. "Our ancestors were apes. We swung through the jungles and avoided predators stronger than us, because our bodies were inferior to theirs. When we learned toolmaking, we began to engage in combat only after outfitting ourselves appropriately."

He starts walking up and down the line of assembled recruits while continuing to speak.

"Traditional warfare is not something humans are innately good at. However, we are adaptable. We will master any skill if it lays within our limits. Shooting guns and standing on the frontlines of battle is how we currently engage in war, but it is inherently much more risky than sneaking around and defeating our foes through battles of attrition. You should take this loss to heart and focus on unlearning the traditional combat methods that have been drilled into you."

"Sir." Private Williams says. "Pardon my ignorance. I can understand why you would want us to learn guerilla warfare, but why ask us to also ignore all of our previous training?"

"You don't need to go that far." Benjamin says. "It's the mindset that counts. Bleeding your enemies to death is slow but efficient. It saves lives on your side. Your goal should not be to win quickly, but to win efficiently. Every loss you take gives your enemies, the demons, a big advantage. They already outnumber you ten thousand to one. Don't give them any additional benefits."

Benjamin continues speaking to the other soldiers for over an hour. Eventually, Corporal Hurent re-enters the training zone and walks up to him.

"Mister Brown. Commander Neil is ready to see you."

Benjamin nods. "I was just finishing up here. I'm curious as to what the Commander himself has to say to little old me."

The Vanguard turns away from his trainees and leaves alongside Linda. She guides him through the portal, into the outer base, and toward a building located at the rear in a secured area.

"Have you spoken to Neil before?" Linda asks.

"Once or twice. But only perfunctorily. I had the impression he was an extremely busy man." Benjamin says.

"He certainly is. There's a lot of work yet to be done." Linda says.

"Oh? What sorts of work?"

"Well. Simply put, Neil has... ambitions."

Benjamin nods along to her words. "He's not a fan of demonkind. He wants them gone. And he doesn't like the way Jason runs things."

Linda's helmeted head gives no indication of her emotions, but Benjamin easily picks up on the subtle nuances in her voice.

"Well... I used to think Neil's views were too extreme. But a few days ago, I found out Mara, a recently evolved Demon Duke, was the culprit behind the attack that killed over 50,000 men, women, and children. She also nearly killed Phoebe Hiro, yet kept quiet all this time."

"Mara, formerly the Baron of Games?" Benjamin asks.

"The very same one." Linda affirms. "Now she's the Duke of Collection. And her ascension was given to her by the same people she victimized. That *bitch*. She probably killed many of my friends, or friends of my friends, and I was all chummy with her."

Benjamin's expression remains impassive. "You can't trust demons. They are all liars at heart."

"Exactly right!" Linda exclaims, before quickly lowering her voice. "So, you don't like demons?"

"I neither like nor dislike them." Benjamin answers, his voice soft. "I've lived among demons for the past 100,000 years. I've had sex with them, gambled with them, fought with them, and killed more of them than you can imagine. I've seen demons at their best, and their worst."

He pauses.

"...I don't really care about the greater war effort anymore. It's all so pointless. So futile."

"What do you mean?" Linda asks.

"Everyone is so greedy and short-sighted." Benjamin sighs. "I just want to raise my children in peace. Live on a nice, quiet world. I don't want to bother anyone or have them bother me."

"Yet you're here, training our people." Linda points out. "Why bother?"

"Because I'm bored. And the merit allotment for these training missions is quite generous."

"I guess that's as good a reason as any other." Linda says. "You're in this for the money. I can respect that."

"Only because the Wordsmith's unique skills can offer me intangible benefits." Ben replies. "Lily has made some good gains thanks to the Body Boosters. I know she also has a soft spot for demons. She was raised in a nice, quiet, peaceful environment... unlike me. I grew up during a time of global war."

"So, what are your plans moving forward?" Linda asks. "Are you with us? Or against us?"

Inside her helmet, Linda narrows her eyes. She regards the Vanguard with a moderate level of suspicion while taking care to record his every facial twitch.

Benjamin chuckles. "You don't need to give me that look, Linda. I think what you people are doing here is... fine. But it's too little, too late. If you advance to a point that might threaten the Volgrim, they will bomb you back to the stone age. And if you don't, you will never break free of your shackles. Your whole struggle is simply... pointless."

Linda turns away from him. "Well. I think you're wrong. Maybe you ancient humans couldn't do anything, but we have the Wordsmiths now. I believe anything is possible."

"Maybe a Hero could have given us the leg up we needed, back then." Benjamin says. "But somehow, I doubt that. You haven't witnessed the terror of a high level Psion. I have. I fear even Wordsmithing has its limits."

"Let's agree to disagree." Linda says.

She directs Benjamin to the Commander Hall, a specially reinforced building designed specifically for Neil, as well as Hope Hiro, if or whenever he comes around. Outside, more than five hundred troops stand at attention, patrol the area, or maintain defensive positions atop the roof to ensure their commander's protection. The substantially-sized building sports hardened exosteel wall panels, a forest-green coloration on its walls, and a pair of statues depicting Hope Hiro and Neil Adams parked outside, on either side of the entrance.

Benjamin eyes the life-sized statues with disdain. "How egocentric."

With a shake of his head, he walks toward the entrance, while Linda stays behind.

"Have fun in there." Linda says.

"Oh, I always do." Ben replies.

Part 415: Pushing Benjamin's Button

After leaving Linda behind, Benjamin Brown walks with purpose past several dozen heavily armored T-REX Troopers. Unlike the basic exosuits worn by most recruits, these men and women wear much heavier variants similar to the Rhino-suits worn by Lieutenant Samuel. With heavier plating and a more robust power system, they can combine their strengths to defeat Demon Barons, and even a few of the weaker Dukes. Unfortunately, they still aren't much use against Emperors.

Ben pushes open the doors to Neil Adams' headquarters, a compact facility with many different computer terminals and video screens, all of them monitoring various areas of Tarus II. Their purpose is clearly to keep an eye on the humans, monsters, and especially demon residents.

It's not much of a walk before Ben skips past the few-dozen terminals and their monster and human operators. He arrives at the entrance to Neil's office, where he finds a pair of minotaurs standing outside. These monsters wear full-body T-REX suits, all except for their bull-like heads, which remain exposed.

The minotaur on the right observes Ben during his approach.

"Mister Brown. *Braaaaum!* Neil is ready to see you."

Benjamin nods at the minotaur, though he has no idea as to the half-bull's identity. "I'll be heading in, then."

The minotaur opens the door, allowing Benjamin to enter. He steps into a carpeted office with blue floors, simple electric lights above, and a grand mahogany desk in the center. On the opposite side of the desk, with several piles of papers placed before him, sits Neil Adams, humanity's military commander.

"Ah, Benjamin." Neil says, rising from his seat. "Thank you for joining us."

Ben's eyes flick to the near-side of Neil's desk, where he finds another man seated, a dark-skinned fellow of some notoriety in the military corps.

"Samuel Baker." Benjamin says, offering a nod to the Lieutenant. "It's good to see you."

Samuel stands up. He walks over and shakes Benjamin's hand while smiling cordially.

"I was just informing the Commander on the details regarding my trip to Volgarius."

The three men exchange pleasantries, then they all take their seats. Neil raises his eyebrows.

"Coffee?"

"No thanks." Ben says, casually waving his hand. "I don't require any neurological stimulants."

"That makes sense, what with you being more machine than man." Neil chuckles. His words, while slightly rude, don't contain any hostile intent. Benjamin doesn't mind their pointed nature.

"So." Ben says, glancing between Neil and Samuel. He lifts his palms, then plops them in his lap. "You called me here. How can I help you?"

Neil smiles. "I had some questions I wanted to run by you. How familiar are you with the Volgrim?"

Samuel blinks. "Familiar enough to know that there is currently a 7th-Level Psion within this planet's gravity well. Creator Demila is not a particularly famous Psion, but she does possess a certain level of reconnaissance capability. She can listen in on every word we speak. She may even be doing it right now."

Neil's eye twitches. He shoots a glance at Samuel, but otherwise maintains his smile.

"Is that so? Well, that's fine. I was only inquiring randomly. I don't plan to discuss any sensitive information."

"Good. I'd rather not paint a target on my back." Benjamin says. "Only men with a death wish would be stupid enough to poke their noses into the Founders' business."

Samuel frowns. "You're afraid of the Volgrim?"

"I am. And you should be too." Benjamin replies, without a hint of shame. "Unlike either of you, I've fought the sons of bitches. It didn't go well. Of course, I'd more describe myself as 'intelligently cautious,' but you can use whatever label you want. Just like if there was a tiger stalking you, you should exercise the same care and attention toward the Volgrim."

"That's fair. But... what the hell's a tiger?" Samuel asks.

"A creature from Earth." Neil says. "Four legged predator."

"Ah." Samuel grunts. "I see."

As a man who was never born on Earth, Samuel didn't have the chance to witness any of the motherworld's creatures in their original living space. Luckily, the Volgrim managed to transplant Earth's rich biodiversity onto habitable worlds across the Milky Way, but unfortunately, they would never be the same again.

"Let's move on." Neil says. "You've been working as a trainer for our troops for a while now, Benjamin. How would you like to join humanity's armed forces in a more official capacity?"

"I refuse." Benjamin says, his polite smile instantly disappearing. "I have no interest in your growth, your army, or your plans. As far as I'm concerned, you're living on borrowed time. Either the Volgrim will defeat the Plague, then come for you, or the Plague will defeat them, and then you're screwed anyway."

"What are you saying?" Neil asks, while adopting a frown of his own. "That there's no point in building up humanity? That we're destined to lose, no matter how we struggle?"

Benjamin leans back in his chair and sighs. "That's exactly right. Furthermore, let's not beat around the bush. You're pursuing a more... *aggressive* doctrine... than the First Wordsmith. You don't just want my help in training troops; you're hoping to have me there when the violence starts."

"Violence? No, no..." Neil says, dismissively waving his hand. He looks away as if disinterested in the idea. "You misunderstand me completely, Mister Brown. I would love nothing more than a peaceful resolution with the demons."

"That's some bullshit if I ever heard it." Benjamin gruffly retorts.

"I'm serious!" Neil protests. "Who wouldn't prefer peace to war? But from what I understand, you've spent the last 100,000 years living on Hell Harbor, yes? You enjoyed a time of relative peace. You do not wish to re-enter battle again."

"That's right." Benjamin answers slowly. "So you know how futile trying to convince me is."

"You have lived among the demons a long time." Neil says. "You must know their hierarchy and internal disputes quite well, yes? And above all else, you should know how treacherous and vile they are."

"I don't love the demons." Benjamin says, lowering his voice. "But I don't hate them like I did in my youth. I've... come to understand them."

"Understand them?" Samuel interrupts. "How in the goddamned hell can you think you understand them? My brother DIED because the demons murdered him. They didn't even have a good reason. They did it for sport!"

"Demons aren't evil." Benjamin says, ignoring the rage in Samuel's voice. "They have been taught to be evil from birth. They walk the path of bloodlust because it is all they know. Even so, many younger demon generations are more than willing to change if given the chance."

"You're making the same arguments as Jason." Neil says, his frown deepening. "I take it you intend to join his coalition?"

"Neither of you are listening." Benjamin says. "Your ears are filled with gunk. I won't join Jason because he's a naïve idealist. Just because I don't think all demons are bad doesn't mean I think they all deserve redemption. Some deserve fates worse than death!"

Samuel forces himself to calm down. "So... you mean..."

"I'm not joining Jason's side." Benjamin says. "But I'm not taking yours either, Neil. I will casually assist your troops in their training. I will earn some Merit Tokens, and that is all. Is my position truly so difficult to comprehend?"

"Why are you so hesitant to join us?" Neil asks. "Don't you see? The demons attacked us, unprovoked, during Stormbringer. They slaughtered our people-"

"Don't YOU lie to me!" Benjamin suddenly barks, raising his voice enough to make Neil flinch. "God-damn lying piece of shit. Unprovoked?! I'm not an ignoramus, Neil! You continuously made forays into the Labyrinth to 'rescue' human slaves. That would be excusable, but you just couldn't help mowing down any demons who also crossed your path!"

Benjamin gnashes his teeth. "You want to preach to me about how evil the demons are? You're no better! It's warmongers like you who always bring about misery to the masses!"

"I did what I had to do!" Neil shouts back, not allowing Benjamin's strong will to cow him into submission. "While you sat in an ivory tower, frolicking about with the demons, the rest of humanity suffered under their raping, torturous, barbaric ways!"

"That's right!" Samuel chimes in. "We may have killed a million bastards, but they deserved to die!"

Benjamin snorts derisively. "First you claimed their attack was unprovoked. Now you claim that even though it wasn't, they deserved to die. How far down this slippery slope shall you slide? At least the Wordsmith WANTS to peacefully resolve the problem, even though I doubt he'll succeed."

Neil settles back into his seat. "Peacefully. Are you even aware? The Wordsmith unleashed an attack that slaughtered more than five hundred thousand demons. I certainly won't lose any sleep over their deaths, but his hands are far from bloodless."

"I have heard of... that matter." Benjamin affirms. "And that is just one more reason why I won't join him. I might be a soldier, but I already fought my best years. I'm an old man now, and I'm not in the mood to join some new cause."

"Yet you assist our soldiers with training." Neil points out for the second time. "Stop fighting me, Benjamin. I am trying to give you exactly what you want! Don't you want your daughter to grow up among her own kind? Not a bunch of demons who would butcher her if they thought you weren't able to protect her!"

Benjamin falls silent. He stewes on Neil's words for several long moments before closing his eyes and shaking his head.

"You're not trying to help me. You're trying to use me. I know what that feels like. That helpless feeling when a commander above you issues an order that goes against your moral code. I hated it a hundred thousand years ago, and I hate it now."

He opens his eyes and looks squarely at Samuel.

"You lost your brother to the demons? I lost mine to the Volgrim. Darnell. He and I fought against the demons and the Volgrim alike. Ultimately, it wasn't even really the Volgrim who killed him. It was our own commander. Told him to take on a suicide mission. Said it would save lives."

Benjamin narrows his eyes.

"But it didn't save lives. Hundreds of civilians still ended up dying that day. And my brother was among them! Had I told him to disobey orders, he might still be with me now. But I didn't, and so he isn't."

Neil's posture softens.

"I see. You've been betrayed by people in authority. Now, you don't trust our types. I can see why you hold the position you do."

"The only person I care about now is myself. More specifically, my family." Benjamin says. "I don't want you lot going around, mucking shit up and stirring the pot. But I can't stop you, so I might as well earn a few tokens if it makes my little girl happy."

Neil sighs. "Alright. I'm sorry I spoke too forcefully. You can continue to assist our troops with their training if you wish. I won't ask you to pick a side again."

Benjamin nods. "I'm glad to hear that. If you don't mind, I think I'll be heading out, now."

"Sure, sure. Take care, Mister Brown." Neil says, while standing up. He and Benjamin both rise to their feet simultaneously, and they exchange a handshake before Benjamin turns and walks out of the room.

After the Vanguard departs, Neil sits back down. He and Samuel remain silent for a few moments.

"Too bad." Samuel eventually says. "You couldn't rope him in."

"Benjamin Brown is a formidable soldier. According to the scans we've taken, his body is comparable to a Demon Duke's, and his auxiliary abilities should make it possible for him to even take down some of the weaker Emperors. Our T-REX's are a long way off from matching that kind of combat strength."

"It'd be nice to have him." Samuel says. "But if I might say so, sir. I don't think he's necessary."

"Because of the Body Boosters." Neil posits.

"Yes. Say what you want about Jason, but his facilities are rapidly improving humanity's strength. Whether he came up with the idea or his wife, the difference isn't significant. His Wordsmithing is still key to overthrowing the galactic power structure."

Neil pauses for a moment as he recalls the existence of Creator Demila, who could easily be listening in on their conversation. At the same time, she could likely also pluck all the information out of their heads through her 7th-Level telepathy.

At this point, Neil has no way to stop her from wreaking havoc or obtaining all of their secrets.

"Fucking Wordsmith." Neil mutters. "I can't believe he just allowed a Psion to roam around freely. Doesn't he realize what her presence here means..."

After mulling that thought over for a moment, Neil shakes his head and reaches for a datapad on the table in front of him. He keys in several pieces of information, then glances at Samuel.

"Now that you're back, I'll expect you to resume your duties. Continue distributing the Power Gloves to our people. Also, make sure they get trained in using them."

"I ended up finally trying out mine." Samuel says. "I even, ah... I tried the 'Fairy' setting."

"You did?" Neil asks, while he crooks a smile. "And here I remember you protested so fiercely."

"It just ended up growing some fairy wings on my back. No big deal." Samuel retorts. "More importantly... I found out what it means to have an S-class resonance with another species' DNA. I'm telling you, Neil, it was incredible. I could use fairy magic effortlessly. It felt like I should have been born a fuckin' fairy. Never felt anything like it in all my life."

"Really?" Neil asks. "Can you show me?"

"Of course." Samuel replies. He glances at a table off to the side of the room, where his Power Glove rests. Due to its weight, wearing it for extended periods isn't exactly comfortable, unlike the chestpiece of the T-REX all humans permanently wear around their torsos.

Samuel stands up. He starts to approach the table.

As he reaches out his hand to grab the Power Glove, something unexpected happens.

It leaps off the table and flies into his grasp!

Startled, Samuel jerks backward slightly as the gauntlet claps into his palm, like a baseball landing snugly into a mitt.

"What the-?!"

Neil stands up. He stares intently at his subordinate.

"What did you just do?"

"I... I don't know!" Samuel exclaims. "I... I reached toward it, and the gauntlet just... came to me!"

Samuel turns to look at his commanding officer, but the expression on Neil's face turns ugly.

"Guards! Get in here!"

Before Samuel can react, the door flings open and both minotaurs rush into the room. At Neil's command, they pounce on Samuel and pin him to the floor, then kick the gauntlet out of his grasp, sending it rolling across the carpet.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?!" Samuel snaps.

"Who are you?!" Neil fires back, eying Samuel with visible suspicion. "Are you a shapeshifter? A demon? Or more likely... a Volgrim Changeling?"

"The fuck? I'm human!" Samuel protests, while the minotaurs keep him pinned to the floor. "What's wrong with YOU?"

Neil frowns deeply. He quickly touches a button on his desk.

"Debra. Get me a testing kit. I want DNA and any other sample types."

Samuel quickly realizes the mix-up. "Neil, I'm not a Changeling, okay? But go ahead and test me. You'll see."

"I'm not blind." Neil says, gazing coldly at the man pinned on his office floor. "I saw you use psionics just now. Explain how you did that."

"I don't know." Samuel mutters, his expression turning solemn. "I just... *did it*."

After a few minutes, Debra and half a dozen scientists enter the room, all of them people who have worked under Phoebe's tutelage over the past 6 years. One of them is even a member of the Respected, someone who perished during Stormbringer but came back in a superhuman body.

They proceed to draw Samuel's blood, swab his saliva, and perform other invasive scans. After half an hour, they hand the results to Debra.

"He's clean." Debra says to her boss, handing the slide to Neil. "At least as far as we can tell. You say he used psionic powers?"

"He did." Neil replies. "Samuel levitated that Power Glove off the table into his hand. You're sure he's human?"

"It's possible he's not. But if the Volgrim can deceive all of our tests, we won't have much of a way to tell..."

Neil frowns deeply. "Samuel traveled to Volgarius. It's possible his body could have been swapped with a Changeling while he was there. Hell, anyone who was on that mission could have been swapped. I want you to run tests on every single person who went."

"What about Demon Emperor Serena?" Debra asks.

"We can't test her. There's no point in trying. It will create a diplomatic incident." Neil answers. "Just worry about our people."

"Alright, Neil." Debra says, before turning and walking away.

After she and the scientists leave, the minotaurs stand up and release their grip on Samuel, allowing him to sit on the floor, but still keeping a close eye on him.

"Still no explanation?" Neil asks.

Samuel gazes at his commander. In his head, he understands why Neil acted so decisively. If he really was a Changeling, it could spell disaster for humankind. Rooting out the truth as fast as possible would be the correct choice.

But in Samuel's heart, the cold and callous way Neil had him pinned without warning... it didn't feel good to him. Now he isn't sure what to think of Neil's swift judgment call.

"Like I said." Samuel replies. "I don't know. I just... reached for the gauntlet... and it came to me."

He pauses.

"Although..."

"Although?" Neil asks.

"It's only a hunch." Samuel mutters, while standing up. He points to the Power Glove, resting on the floor a short distance away. "Mind if I use it like we planned?"

Neil glances at the minotaurs. They both nod and take out heavy guns, then keep the weapons trained on Samuel.

"Go ahead." Neil says quietly. "But don't make any sudden movements. I still don't know if you're truly 'Samuel Baker' or not."

"Motherfucker, I am." Samuel says, while shaking his head.

The man reaches toward the gauntlet on the floor, but instead of picking it up, he tries to repeat the trick he did earlier. He concentrates, squints, scrunches up his face, and even grunts a little.

However, no matter what he does, the gauntlet stubbornly continues to sit on the floor, as if taunting him.

Finally, he just bends down and picks it up. After staring at it in annoyance for a moment, he changes the dial to the Fairy setting, then activates the Power Glove's magic. Moments later, a pair of fairy wings sprout from his back, appearing like shiny and radiant butterfly wings.

"Theoretically," Neil says, "only the designated users should be able to use their Power Gloves. That must mean you're actually Samuel Baker."

"Right." Samuel says. "But maybe I'm actually a Volgrim who hacked the glove for my own purposes. All to get close and fool you."

"It's a possibility." Neil replies.

The Commander ultimately gestures to his two minotaur guards. The huge half-bulls snort at him, then turn and leave the room, closing the door behind them.

Neil takes a seat. He forces a smile, despite the awkward atmosphere.

"Well, sorry about all of that, Samuel. We do have to be careful, you know."

"Yeah. I know." Samuel grunts.

"What are you waiting for?" Neil asks, while gesturing to the Power Glove. "Show me what you can do with that thing."

"Yes sir."

Part 416: The Stormbringer Tribunal

(Part 1)

A hundred stories underground, deep beneath Tarus II's surface, a highly secure prison facility sits, its occupants considered the worst and most vile traitors and enemies of humankind.

If Hope were successful in capturing Mephisto or Yama, they would surely be imprisoned down in these depths. Unfortunately, only a few handfuls of truly evil demons and humans sit in the depths, all of them wearing specially-designed prisoner collars capable of preventing their suicides, and also sealing their magical powers.

In one of these cells, a former demon lays on his back. Beelzebub, the Duke of Inferno, now nothing more than an average human male.

His two crippled and useless arms rest on his stomach, their coloration becoming a depressing brown thanks to the lack of blood flow they received during his time in Rosalia's captivity.

On the other side of the cell, Private Henry also sits. As the person who betrayed Neil Adams by sealing the warpgate and setting the Core to self-destruct, he has been charged with treason against humanity. His face tells the story of a man haunted by his past mistakes.

"Today's the day." Henry mumbles. "The Stormbringer Tribunal."

The young man sits on the edge of the bed, rapidly gazing across the cell at a point on the wall above Beelzebub's bed. His eyes don't focus on anything in particular, while his mind randomly wanders.

"So it is." Beelzebub says, his hoarse and aged voice making him sound like a feeble old man. "Our day of judgment."

Henry lowers his eyes. "I'm... scared, Robert."

Not knowing Beelzebub's true identity, Henry only knows him by his human moniker. He simply views Beelzebub as an unknown old man, some fellow who must have committed a terrible crime to have been sent to the lowest block, yet not anybody Henry recognizes.

"You're young." Beelzebub says quietly. "You had your whole life in front of you. But you blew it because of some demon whore."

"I couldn't see through Emperor Ose's lies." Henry mumbles. "All I saw was the beautiful 'Oshina.' She was like a fairy to me. So easy to trust."

"That's how women get you." Beelzebub says. "They tell you what you want to hear. I had a woman do that to me as well. I fell for her snake-tongue, just like you."

"Oh?" Henry asks, raising his head. "And what did she say to you?"

"I wanted to become a revolutionary." Beelzebub answers. "To upend the stagnant order and bring prosperity to my people. She promised me that if I did as she commanded, I would achieve my goals."

He pauses.

"But that didn't happen. Instead, I simply added to the chaos with my own evils."

"Who *are* you, really?" Henry asks, more confused than ever by Beelzebub's cryptic words. "Should I know you from somewhere?"

The Duke of Inferno turns his head to look at his cellmate.

"It's better if you don't."

* * *

Later that day, many heavily-armored troopers march up the hallway to the cells. The sounds of their boots stomping against the stone floors echo throughout the prison, waking up anyone who actually managed to fall asleep on the day of their judgment. The troopers stride with purpose toward each of the cells, stopping in pairs for each individual prisoner while turning their heavily armored and faceless forms toward the cells' interiors.

Beelzebub sighs. He swings his legs over the bed's edge and shakily stands up, feeling a bit more capable of walking than a few weeks prior, thanks to some decent meals served to him by the prison guards.

Henry also stands up. His legs tremble as he turns to look at the old man beside him.

"Are you... nervous?"

Beelzebub's only response is a silent roll of his eyes.

The door to the cell opens. Four guards stride inside, with two holding powerful energy carbines, while the other two wield stun batons.

"Prisoners 1164a and 1164b. Follow us."

Beelzebub and Henry both nod. The guards handcuff their arms behind their backs, despite how useless doing so is to Beelzebub. After all, orders are orders. Then, they begin frog-marching them out of the cell and down the hall.

Hardly have they passed ten cells before Henry sees a familiar face also being led out of his cell. His heart jumps in shock.

"General Caddis?! You're down here too?"

Hardly have the words left his mouth before he wryly shakes his head.

"What am I saying? Of course you are."

As the man Neil Adams investigated and found responsible for disarming a large part of the Core's self-destruction devices, Caddis was placed in the prisons at the start of Stormbringer. His pale and gaunt face shows that the last month has not been kind to him.

"Tsk. It is me." Caddis snarls. "But I must say, little Henry. You were Neils' favorite sniper. I'm surprised to see you down here too. Guess you weren't acting suspicious during his investigation for no reason, hmm?"

Henry winces. "It's a long story."

"Pah! Save it for someone who cares!" Caddis spits, while the guards push him toward the exit.

Beelzebub and Henry travel into the elevator network and begin ascending to the top of the prison complex. After passing through more than a dozen security checkpoints, all manned by human and monster staff, they finally emerge into the open air, where they find several hundred prisoner transport buses lined up and waiting for them.

Outside, tens of thousands of demons and monsters, along with more than a few hundred humans, all stand idly with magic-suppressing collars wrapped around their necks. Their arms and ankles bound, these prisoners can only gaze up at the blinding midday sun, the first natural source of light some of them have seen in over a month.

Beelzebub winces when the sunlight hits his eyes. Back when he still possessed demonic powers, he could switch his vision between pitch-black darkness and blinding light with ease. But now, as a mere mortal man, he also suffers all the weaknesses of his human biology.

As Beelzebub and Henry wait their turns, they finally get a chance to look out and observe the distant housing developments under construction, as well as those recently completed. Despite his inferior human eyesight, Beelzebub can even make out the distant specks of human and monster figures milling about, heading to work or going about their days. The barren plains already seem to be sprouting traces of grass, showing their steady and gradual recovery from his detonation a month prior.

"Wow." Beelzebub murmurs. "The humans have developed incredibly fast since they captured me."

Henry turns to look at him. "What was that?"

"Nothing." Beelzebub says quietly. "I'm just admiring those buildings. It seems Tarus II has become quite prosperous."

"We went from complete annihilation to a massive city in under a month." Henry remarks. "Our people are resilient. We'll bounce back from anything. I never should have doubted our capabilities."

Beelzebub gives the young man a long, knowing look.

"Indeed."

* * *

The two men load up onto a bus. They begin driving south, toward a gigantic stadium built out in the middle of nowhere. This place will be the judgment and execution ground for the perpetrators of Stormbringer.

As they draw nearer, the evildoers who unleashed literal Hell upon humanity widen their eyes. Before them sits a veritable sea of humans, monsters, and demons all standing before gigantic, hundred-foot-tall viewscreens laid out in a circle around the exterior of the Tribunal Amphitheater. These screens display the arena itself, with its slowly filling seats for prisoners, as well as the central platform, where they will have to step up and plead their case.

Additionally, on the northern side of the stadium, thirty seats sit at the highest elevated position, each reserved for a high ranking member of the Wordsmith Alliance, including Jason Hiro himself, Phoebe Hiro, Monster Queen Blinker, Neil Adams, and dozens of others.

Beelzebub's expression remains neutral.

"...Truly, the Wordsmith has rolled out the red carpet for our day of judgment."

Henry's teeth chatter as the potential moment of his execution begins to loom over him.

"I... I never should have listened to her. Oh, god. Oh god... Piper, I miss you, boy..."

The buses come to a stop outside. Beelzebub and the other prisoners begin filing out onto a long walkway leading past a crowd of more than five million citizens, many of them holding signs, and all of them visibly enraged by the sight of the countless demonic bastards and traitorous snakes who killed their friends and family.

"Bloodskin scum!"

"Turncoat piece of shit!"

"I can't wait to see your heads fly! Every last one of you!"

"My children are dead, and it's all your fault!"

"Burn in HELL!!"

Horrible slurs, stinging insults, and vicious words metaphorically strike the faces of the demons and monsters and humans being led down the path into the stadium. Surprisingly, it's not even the demons who receive the most verbal abuse, but the human turncoats! Seeing only a few humans among the masses of red-skinned demons makes them stick out from the horde, drawing even more vicious criticism and hatred.

"Henry! Because of you, Neil Adams nearly died! I'd PAY to fire a round into your head myself!"

Henry winces when he sees another trooper, someone he once respected, standing on the sidelines screaming at him. He quickly lowers his head and tries to blend in, but his efforts don't bear much fruit.

Beelzebub wryly chuckles. "Cheer up. You'll be dead soon."

Henry glowers at him. "That's not helping, Robert."

They arrive inside the amphitheater, and their guards direct them to seats in the very front rows, on the southern side of the theater, directly opposite the Judge Seating Area. From this position, they have to crane their necks to look all the way up at the people who will soon cast their votes on the future, and their futures do not look pleasant.

"Fuck, man. Fuck. I'm so fucking scared..." Henry curses.

"I've accepted my fate." Beelzebub replies.

Jason Hiro and his wife arrive last to the Tribunal, nearly thirty full minutes after the other VIPs. Flying through the air via angelic wings, both of them pause their descent into the stadium to levitate over the crowds below, while millions of people cheer and cry out their names.

"Commander Jason!"

"Lady Phoebe!"

"Our genius and soldier duo!"

Phoebe faintly smiles. "You hear that? They called me a genius. They probably think you're a dummy, Jason."

She turns to look at her husband, only to see that Jason isn't smiling at all. Instead, his emotions appear rather muted.

"I'm not in the mood for jokes, Phoebe." Jason says. "Let's get this Tribunal over with. People are counting on us to conduct the event with fairness and decency."

Phoebe's smile fades away. "Yes. You're right. Sorry. We have to stay strong... and remember, it's not just about getting justice for the fallen, but for all their families left behind."

Jason nods. "We do this for Daisy's sake."

The Wordsmith and his wife fly into the theater toward the thirty seats of honor, seats reserved exclusively for those who will soon cast their votes for judgment against the killers and traitors who tore apart humanity during Stormbringer.

As they descend, Jason picks out all of the familiar faces in the seats.

Neil Adams, commander of humanity's military.

General Chadwick, who fought bravely until Stormbringer's conclusion.

Blinker, the Monster Queen who lost her husband.

Belial, who saved countless lives with her healing powers.

Archangel Uriel, who holds the souls of her three brothers in their rings.

Lady Brunhilda, whose Felorians used their power to contain the demons at the Warpgate Encampment for longer than anyone else.

But, in addition to these members of the Wordsmith Alliance, there are also several conspicuously placed Demon Emperors, none directly responsible for Stormbringer.

Serena, the Emperor of Soul Whispers.

Yardrat, Emperor of the Void.

Kristoff, the Emperor of Thirst.

Melody, the Emperor of Suppression.

Jahn, the Duke of Cuddles.

And finally, Silvia, the Duke of Whips.

These demons join the humans as judges, though Jason personally crinkles his nose at the thought.

"Why are we letting leaders of Hell interfere in our judgment?" Jason asks his wife, who set up the majority of these proceedings.

"Because." Phoebe responds. "If you want to maintain good relations with the demons, to show them there is a better path, we must try to at least appear impartial. I do not believe these Emperors will cause trouble for us, not when their interests intertwine with ours."

"And what if they do?" Jason asks. "What if they all vote in favor of releasing someone when we vote the opposite?"

Phoebe shrugs. "They only possess a minority of the vote. In the end, humanity's forces still get to choose who they let live and die. Any friction caused by opposing votes can be resolved with words."

"I hope you're right..." Jason mutters, before following up with "Speaking of which, Hope still isn't back. Where the hell is he? That motherfucker... he's up to no good, I can tell."

Phoebe's nose twitches. "Neil hasn't said anything to me."

Just as Jason and Phoebe touch down, an unexpected guest materializes before the two of them, startling both.

[Wordsmith.] Creator Demila says, gesturing to Hope's seat. [There appears to be a position vacant. Would you mind if I joined in on these proceedings?]

Jason stares at the 7th-Level Psion for a brief moment before grimacing.

"...Of course. Having a neutral third party... couldn't hurt. Just remember, you are on *my* planet."

Phoebe appears less miffed about Demila's appearance. "Why bother joining in on today's event? You don't have any skin in the game."

[I do not.] Demila affirms, her hawk-like gaze sweeping out across the field. [However. I am here to observe. Suppose Gressil were to attack? I might catch the Emperor of Chaos before he could flee.]

"You don't expect us to believe this has *anything* to do with Gressil, *do you?*" Jason asks snarkily.

[Believe what you wish. In truth, I suspect something... *interesting*... shall occur today. Perhaps it is nothing more than a feeling.]

Without waiting for Jason's response, Demila flickers backward and teleports into the empty seat, crossing her legs beneath her ornate black-and-red robes.

Sensing the conversation has ended, Jason suppresses the urge to roll his eyes. He takes a seat beside Neil, with the Commander on his left, while Phoebe sits on his right.

"You finally made it." Neil says, while looking out at the throng of prisoners. "I was beginning to think you might not show."

"Where's Hope?" Jason asks.

"I'm not his nanny. He's a Wordsmith. He goes wherever he pleases."

Demila, sitting on the opposite side of Neil, spreads her Psionic sense across the entire theater, but takes special care to pay close attention to the Wordsmith and his commander's conversation directly adjacent to her.

"You must know something." Jason hisses through his teeth. "Why hasn't he captured Mephisto yet? Or Yama?"

"Truly, Jason." Neil says, sounding surprisingly bored. "I've no idea what Hope is up to. Believe me if you want. Or don't."

Demila's expression remains impassive. However, with no effort at all, she plucks several thoughts out of Neil's primitive brain.

Strange. Demila thinks. The Military Commander truly doesn't know where the other Wordsmith has gone. Nobody does. I've searched the minds of hundreds of top personnel, yet he's nowhere to be found. Perhaps I should make a trip into the Labyrinth to seek him out, once this Tribunal concludes.

In the center of the arena, a massive minotaur strides onto the stage. Yamir, normally 'only' Jason's chef, wears a set of blood-red robes clearly designed with his species' aesthetics in mind. In his hands, he holds a familiar giant executioner axe, one which formerly belonged to Sir Lorent. Now expanded to its original size, the axe hums with divine energy belonging to the Hero whose soul is contained within.

"Braaaaum!" Yamir roars. "Everyone! Today marks the start of the Stormbringer Tribunal! This Tribunal is intended to bring justice to those victimized by the perpetrators of the Stormbringer attack!"

Outside the stadium, countless people whoop and cheer. Humans who lost their friends and family, monsters who fought valiantly during the war and also lost their closest companions, and even a surprising number of demons from the Seven Hells. Despite seeing their fellow demons threatened with executions en-masse, nobody bats an eye at these stupid losers who have no relation to them!

Considering the vastness of the Seven Hells, seeing a hodge-podge of low-ranking fools from the First Hell get executed only makes for an exciting show! The demons from the second, third, and other Hells merely laugh it up at the sad fates awaiting their fellow demons.

Jason Hiro stands up next. He walks to the edge of the platform and projects his voice out to the evildoers inside the stadium, as well as his citizens outside.

"In my era," Jason begins, "There was a concept known as 'innocent until proven guilty.' I believe in that theory of law. However! Every person inside this stadium has already been pre-judged as guilty by our investigators! We possess video evidence of each and every one of your crimes! The only thing awaiting you now is your sentencing!"

He pauses for a moment to gaze around at the despondent eyes of those-to-be-judged.

"Here is how today's proceedings will work. We will call up the name of an individual. That individual will step forward. We will present their crimes for everyone to see, and the perpetrator will have one chance to make an appeal. You can beg for pity, plead for mercy, or accept your sins. Say whatever you want! Just know this... death will await many of you, but an equal number will be sentenced to hundreds of years of slavery. You will toil in mines, producing resources for my people as penance for your crimes. None of you have any chance at walking free."

Jason gestures to the twenty-nine other people behind himself.

"These are your judges. Not only do they consist of humanity's leaders, but also esteemed representatives from the Seven Hells. So long as a majority of us agree, your sentence may be reduced, but it also may be increased! Pick your words carefully. Honesty and humility will get you far. Lies and excuses will receive only a swift and brutal death!"

Humanity's allies cheer raucously, practically frothing at the mouth as they excitedly wait for the proceedings to begin.

Jason sits back down and gestures to Yamir.

"You may begin."

"Yes, Wordsmith!" Yamir roars. "Today, the first to be accused! A Demon Grunt known as 'Paddock!'"

While Yamir calls out the name of the first prisoner, Jason glances at his wife.

Under his breath, he whispers, "Hey, honey? Not to be a bother but... there's kind of a *lot* of prisoners here. If we have to sentence these demons one at a time, aren't we going to be here for like... a million years?"

Phoebe rolls her eyes. "Don't you know I would have thought of that already? We'll start with certain individuals, yes. But we will also be judging large blocks of demons at the same time. It depends on their proximity to one another during the war. I've divided the demons into about three hundred individual 'sections'. At the end of the Tribunal, any who are to be executed will be killed at the same time."

She pauses to glower at her husband. "Didn't you read the memo I gave you?!"

Jason flushes red in embarrassment. "Sorry. I, uh... I was busy, and it was kind of long."

"You could have Wordsmithed the knowledge into your head or something." Phoebe chastises him.

"Oh. Yeah. I didn't think about that." Jason quietly laughs.

Phoebe sighs. She massages her forehead while wryly smiling at her husband.

"Sometimes, you are the *biggest* egghead."

Part 417: The Stormbringer Tribunal

(Part 2)

"I was just following orders! You can't blame me! It's all Ose's fault for ordering us to attack the humans! I didn't even wanna go!"

The first Demon Grunt positioned atop the massive platform in the center of the Tribunal Stadium shivers and trembles nervously as millions of other prisoners and citizens on Tarus II watch him with sad or judgmental eyes. He defends himself in the weakest way possible, casting all blame for his actions onto the leaders of demonkind while claiming he had nothing to do with the crimes levied against him.

Yamir stands a short distance before the shackled prisoner, looking down at the little fellow with an expression of pity and dismay.

"Fool. You say you are not at fault for your heinous actions, but the evidence speaks to the contrary! Look at these recordings!"

Yamir gestures to a giant viewscreen placed directly adjacent to the Jury of Thirty, the humans, monsters, and demons who will cast their votes for punishment on all the perpetrators of Stormbringer.

The viewscreen shows a loop of this 'Paddock' fellow ripping out the throat of a trooper, right before her T-REX's recording functionality shuts off. Then it cuts to a different view of the same moment, taken from another T-REX's point of view, where he screams in delight, then launches into attacking even more humans. Ultimately, he kills two people and badly wounds three more, all with the help of other screaming and delighted grunts beside him.

"I was already there!" Paddock protests. "I'm a demon! It's not my fault I love violence! I was just making the best of a bad situation! You can't blame me for wanting to enjoy that, uh, traumatic moment!"

Yamir snorts in displeasure. He lightly slaps the shaft of Sir Lorent's executioner axe in his palm.

"Your excuses are pathetic. Now that the jury has heard your plea, they will cast down their judgment."

He steps aside, then looks up at the Jury of Thirty.

Each member of the panel is given the opportunity to stand up and deliver their verdict, along with any thoughts that might contribute to the discussion.

The first to stand is none other than Yardrat, Emperor of the Void. The fair and handsome Demon Emperor rises to his feet and folds his hands behind his back, while also directing a sweeping glance across the stadium.

"The times have changed." Yardrat says. "Rules which once *were*, no longer *are*. Paddock speaks from a place of ignorance. He was raised to believe that humans are inferior. He believes that violence is simply a way of demon life. Perhaps he was once right. But the true issue lies in his inability to take responsibility for his own actions. While Ose did order the attack on Stormbringer, if Paddock were to simply stand back and move passively, without directly killing or hurting anyone, merely blending in with the crowd, he could have resisted her orders in a way nobody would notice. In that case, we would not blame him for being forced to act against his will."

Yardrat continues. "But the truth is, Paddock enjoyed killing his victims. He reveled in their pain and suffering. While I understand his actions, and have certainly acted out my own share of violence, his inability to accept blame for what he had control over makes him guilty in my eyes. I posit that he is fully at fault for all the deaths he caused during Stormbringer and judge him to be deserving of death."

Yardrat sits back down, and Emperor Serena next stands.

"I agree with all of Yardrat's statements." Serena says. "I understand why you must want to blame others, Paddock. But in the end, your actions are your own. I judge you as guilty of all crimes."

When Serena sits down, Paddock's teeth begin to chatter. "H-hey! This isn't fair! You Emperors have killed way more humans than me! Why am only I down here? Just because I'm weak, I have to die, while you get to live it up? Don't you stinkin' humans see how screwed up this is?!"

Several prisoners in the audience nod and begin to shout along to Paddock's words, proclaiming their agreement with his words. However, a wave of Wordsmithing fires from Jason's mouth, as he rises to his feet.

"Silence."

Immediately, all the demon's protests catch in their throats, rendering them unable to speak.

Jason waits for a moment before answering. "If you think I am unaware of the evils and atrocities committed by the Emperors on this jury panel, you are wrong. I have currently set aside their punishments, as well as the those for their Dukes, and their Barons, and all the others. Anyone who previously attacked or killed humans, be it during the Energy Wars, before those times, or at any point before my awakening from that Cryopod six years ago... I am temporarily suspending their sentence."

He continues. "The difference between their past crimes, and the crimes committed by those of you in the audience today is that I have no direct evidence of what they've done. Even if I did, I think one could justifiably say that prior to and including the Energy Wars, humanity and demonkind were perpetually at war and both sides committed atrocities against one another. Following the Energy Wars, that argument holds less water, but the previous point still stands. It is only moving forward, if any further aggression occurs, that I will not show a drop of lenience."

Jason slants his eyes and looks behind himself at the other Emperors on the panel.

"In the future, should the demons commit any further acts of aggression against humanity... I will not hold back against anyone. Not the leaders, nor their followers. I do hope we can all come to a... peaceful resolution."

To conclude his speech, Jason opts to give his judgment regarding Paddock.

"The demons who attacked during Stormbringer must be punished. There is no escaping your sins. Worry not about the Emperors up here, but how you will properly plead your cases to the members of this jury. Paddock, I pronounce you guilty not only of your crimes, but of a failure to accept responsibility for them. The next jury member may now speak."

Jason sits down. Next comes Neil Adams. As expected, he pronounces Paddock guilty.

Then comes Phoebe Hiro. She, too, pronounces Paddock guilty, though her reasoning comes more out of a specific distaste for the individuals he killed, as Phoebe knew them personally, albeit in some small capacity.

One by one, every member of the panel gives their verdict. All of them pronounce him guilty.

All of them... except for one.

Emperor Belial surprises everyone by being the lone voice of dissent.

"I do not believe Paddock is guilty." Belial says. "He did kill those people. He is a murderer. And he has utterly failed to take responsibility for his actions. But Paddock makes a point that I cannot disagree with. I have never gone out of my way to kill humans, angels, or anyone else. My rank of Emperor was not obtained through the consumption of human souls, but the empowerment of an ancient dragon. As such, I have been able to hold a lofty position of privilege, one which other demons have never possessed, because their powers could only be obtained through slaughter."

She continues. "Paddock has been brainwashed, along with all the other lower members of my species, to believe that violence is their primary lot in life. If Paddock must be executed, that I posit that every demon above his station must also be executed. Perhaps, had he been raised with love and care, he might never have taken those horrible actions. He might have grown up to be a source of positivity in this cold, violent, brutal universe. I don't want to see anyone die... and I also hold a great deal of shame regarding this Tribunal."

Jason gazes at Belial. "Shame? What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Belial asks, her voice projecting to everyone watching the proceedings. "I spent my whole life trying not to hurt others. Not to kill. Not to cause harm. But during Stormbringer, I lost myself in grief and hatred. I became a monster and killed... I don't even *know* how many of my fellow demons. I slaughtered them without restraint. I went berserk. Even if you claim that I was acting in self-defense, or on humanity's behalf... I still brutally ripped apart my lessers. I still committed terrible crimes."

Belial shakes her head.

"For that reason, I will give my judgment not only for Paddock, but for every other violent perpetrator and attacker of Stormbringer. I refuse to pronounce any of you as guilty... not even *one* person."

Belial's gaze seemingly flicks across the whole crowd. However, her hyper-enhanced Emperor-level vision pauses for the briefest of moments to fixate on a seemingly ordinary old man. One fellow, a 'human' sitting beside other humans.

Beelzebub.

She does not call him out, but does gaze at him with deep meaning, before concluding her speech.

"I only wish, after tens of thousand of years, that we might finally put an end to the cycle of violence. Nothing else matters to me."

She takes her seat, and the entire arena falls silent.

Outside, many humans, those who lost their friends and family, no longer cheer uproariously as they did only minutes before.

They think about Belial, her role as humanity's healer, and the number of lives she's saved.

They remember how she ran herself ragged during Stormbringer, healing tens of thousands of wounded soldiers, draining her mana until she was at the brink of death, only for the entire Hospital to end up destroyed by Yama's Shades, killing many of the people she saved.

They think about her rage and how she fought Ose, ultimately helping to murder humanity's greatest enemy, all at the cost of her own convictions.

And deep down... many people feel shame.

Plenty of Stormbringer's survivors want revenge. They wish to see the demons suffer just as badly as the people they tore apart.

But at the same time, an equal number of survivors can't help but wonder: *Will there never be peace in our future? Is violence the only language we must speak?*

Belial's proclamation doesn't change Paddock's judgment. He ultimately still ends up charged with the punishment of death and returned to his seat, where he now must await his execution at the Tribunal's conclusion. But what it does do is cause many to question the ultimate legitimacy of the Tribunal.

Even so, many people remain unmoved by Belial's speech. Neil Adams barely even looks at her, acting as if he didn't hear a word she said.

Succubus whore. Neil thinks. *As always, she is all too eager to leap to the defense of her fellow demons. Her schemes truly run deep.*

The next person up for trial is a tiny little Obsidian Goblin named Hungry. This fellow turns out to be a monster who was involved in the Stormbringer Attack from the very beginning, as he even participated in the attack on the Core, along with the subsequent invasion of Tarus II.

Hungry defends himself by making several similar claims to Paddock, but ultimately it is his lack of directly murdering any people which allows him to be sentenced to slavery in the Trifrancium mines for 300 years instead of death. As a tiny little goblin, he only assisted much larger creatures in pinning down their human enemies, rather than killing them himself.

It doesn't take long before whole groups of demon grunts, minotaurs, harpies, and other such creatures come on the stage platform to receive judgment all at once. Over the next eight hours, over fifty thousand demons and monsters join together with human traitors to receive their judgment. More than three quarters of them receive death sentences, while the rest all receive hundreds of years of slavery in the mines.

As the proceedings occur, Phoebe glances at her husband.

"I'm surprised you don't oppose enslaving these people, Jason. You've always said it was a barbaric act."

Jason shrugs. "I don't like it, no. But even the least guilty creatures here, those without direct blood on their hands, still assisted their brethren in killing our friends and families. 300 years of slavery might sound like a long time, but they will be allowed to go free once their sentences conclude, and most of them will live for thousands of years afterward. It amounts to a tiny fraction of their lives. Compared to those they killed, who can never again walk the mortal plane..."

Phoebe nods. "I'm just glad you're not feeling at odds with your morals. I already agree this is the best they deserve."

After concluding the judgment of slavery for a group of nearly 1200 demon grunts, the next person to take the stage is, surprisingly, a single demoness. A Duke, someone many people have only recently discovered was hiding a terrible secret.

"Mara, the Duke of Collection." Yamir says, as the demoness strides forward and stands before the Jury of Thirty, her expression solemn. "Today, you stand here guilty of killing over one hundred thousand civilians. These included men, women, and children. You attacked a Covenant Ship and destroyed it, reaping their lives. To date, we have only

managed to recover just twenty percent of those lost souls, with the rest presumed consumed by other demons."

"Additionally," Yamir continues, "you attacked the Wordsmith's wife and daughter, nearly succeeding in murdering both. During that attack, you killed their honor guards, ending the lives of more than a dozen brave soldiers."

The massive viewscreen plays out the events of Mara's attacks, showing the destruction of the Covenant ship, as well as the subsequent attack on Phoebe and Daisy.

Seeing their daughter on the giant viewscreen, Jason and Phoebe's hearts tense up. They gaze at her face, wishing with all their souls that they could simply 'will' her back into existence. Not just them, but Belial as well, who feels deep guilt at being unable to stop Daisy from ultimately dying to Beelzebub's blast.

Mara hollowly watches as her past crimes play on the giant viewscreen.

"What say you in your defense?" Yamir asks, eying her coldly.

As Daisy's chef, Yamir used to cook the little girl food while she grew, taking great care to cater to her childish tastes and finicky attitude. He, too, feels terrible pain due to her death.

"My defense..." Mara mutters, her words transmitting to the arena. "I have none. What I did was unforgivable."

"Why did you kill the people on that ship?" Yamir asks. "Did Ose command you to do so?"

"No." Mara says, her next words eliciting gasps of rage from the human audience outside. "I did so only because the 'opportunity' presented itself. It was entirely my own choice."

"It is good that you accept responsibility for your actions." Yamir says. "But that fact will not absolve you of your punishment. I have only one question left for you. Why did you accept Miss Hiro's offer to empower yourself in the Belial Booster? Did you believe you deserved such a gift from the people you had so violently brutalized? Did you feel *no* shame?"

Mara's expression becomes even more downcast. "I... I didn't know what to do at the time. I couldn't bring myself to turn down the opportunity. I did feel incredibly guilty over my past actions... but I was also afraid of getting caught."

"It's too bad." Yamir says. "Many people thought you were a decent person. If you had simply owned up to your actions at the time, you might have received a lighter penalty. Now they are unlikely to show you leniency."

He turns to face the Jury of Thirty. "Your judgments?"

In the audience of bystanders outside, Mara's sister Ying-Ying bites her lower lip. She fights to hold back tears, all while wrestling over whether she should try and use her Warping powers to save Mara's life. Unfortunately, even if she does, she has no chance of hiding Mara from Jason's Wordsmithing. He will surely be able to track an escaped prisoner down and find her with little effort.

The first of the judges stands up to deliver their verdict.

Uriel, the Archangel of Retribution, completely ignores the Demon Emperors within striking distance of her fists. Despite wearing three rings of power and possessing more than enough strength to lash out and perhaps murder at least one or two demons before they can react, she acts with remarkable restraint, though for what reason, her enemies can only guess.

"My judgment is as follows." Uriel says, her feminine voice biting at the air with an unmistakably malicious edge. "All demons are sinners. All are worthy of death. But the degree between their sins varies. In Mara's case, her evils have been aimed at the innocent; civilians who caused her no harm. In this regard, I believe that she deserves a fate worse than death, perhaps even eternal punishment."

The other Emperors stifle the urge to roll their eyes. While Belial has declared that she will judge no participant of Stormbringer as worthy of death, Uriel has acted in exactly the opposite manner. Not once has she made any exceptions for a single demon or monster put up for trial. She has declared a fatal judgment upon them all, the degree of their vicious acts notwithstanding.

Each Emperor stands up, followed by each human, and several monsters.

Blinker is the last to speak. Instead of remaining in her tiny fairy form, she maintains her inflated size of just over five-feet-tall, allowing her to stand at roughly the same height as all of the others, barring super-tall freaks like Jason.

"Mara. I judge you to be guilty." Blinker says quietly, her voice lacking any real enthusiasm. "The only punishment awaiting you is death."

Without going into any further detail, Blinker sits down. Her thoughts dwell not on any of the demons or humans she has judged so far, but just two individuals, two demons who were not successfully imprisoned. Mephisto and Zamiel still remain at large, and that fact causes her stomach to sink.

"You have been judged unanimously guilty, aside from Emperor Belial." Yamir says to Mara. "Your punishment will also be death. Go and take your seat."

Mara nods numbly, not expecting any other outcome. Her expression glum, she turns and walks away, sighing deep in her heart that her past has finally caught up to her.

After a few other groups of demons come and go, more than seventy-five percent of Stormbringer's participants finally receive their judgments, leaving them to cry or breathe quiet sighs of relief. However, those who remain are mostly the greatest offenders, the ones who caused the most damage, or the ones who previously held the greatest prestige.

Yamir turns to face the crowd of prisoners.

"Next is... a former General among humankind's forces. Bernard Caddis. Step forward."

A thin and wiry-looking man, gaunt from exhaustion and lack of proper nutrients, slowly stands up and hobbles toward the stage.

As he approaches, Neil Adams smirks coldly.

"Ah, finally. *This* bastard..."

He and the other humans direct hate-filled gazes toward the man whose betrayal nearly cost them everything, a man who could have given the demons a clean and easy victory had his plot succeeded.

Even Jason cannot help but glower at the man.

"*Fucking* Caddis." Jason remarks. "Let's hear what sorts of excuses he tries to make."

Part 418: The Stormbringer Tribunal

(Part 3)

Bernard Caddis, formerly a General among humanity's military, and the third-highest ranking service-member after Neil and Chadwick themselves, stands at attention on the podium. His wiry-thin frame and sagging facial skin give him the appearance of a depressed man mere weeks from dying to stress. Several greys stick amidst the rest of his black hair. Even so, his pointed jawline and eagle-eyes make him appear surprisingly formidable, even while wearing a simple grey prisoner uniform.

He stands with his hands folded behind his back and his head held high. No trace of humility rests in his eyes, but instead the arrogance of a man convinced he has not made a single mistake.

"Bernard Caddis." Yamir says, standing before the man with his chest puffed out. "You have been judged guilty of high treason. You conspired with Emperor Ose to betray your people, disable the self-destruction sequence inside the Core, and other similar crimes. Now, only your sentencing remains. What say you in your defense?"

Humanity's former General maintains his fearless expression.

"So what if I'm guilty? I did what any reasonably intelligent man would do! Do you people truly think humanity is going to win this war? And even if we do, what about the next one? Or the one after that? Do you all think Wordsmithing is so high and mighty that it cannot be beaten? It already has! Many times!"

Jason gazes down at Caddis with mild indifference. He listens as the man continues to rant.

"I don't believe in the Wordsmith's leadership. I don't believe in Neil Adams. I don't believe any of you have the power to protect humanity! In the end, Ose managed to kill millions of people, and the Wordsmith only came in after the fact to clean up her mess! Some incredible power, my foot! Demonkind outnumbered humanity ten million to one! Even if we manage to defeat the demons, what does it matter anymore? We still have to contend with the Volgrim, and then a goddamned galaxy-devouring Plague. Faced with this reality, I opted to work for the winning side."

Neil Adams stands up. He walks to the edge of the platform and sneers at Caddis far below him.

"At least you are willing to honestly admit to your evils, Caddis. Though, I *am* curious. How can you blame me or the Wordsmiths for humanity's losses when people like you helped give demons the keys to attack Tarus II? Perhaps if we had held the demons back just a few hours longer, the Wordsmith would have returned with his superweapon and eradicated them right then and there. People like you are directly and indirectly responsible for much of that death and destruction!"

Jason frowns slightly. Despite Neil's 'defense' of Jason, the Wordsmith quickly realizes he has an ulterior motive for asking that question. Before he can interject, Caddis immediately responds.

"Do you believe that would have made the slightest difference, Neil? The only reason the Wordsmith lashed out is because his *precious baby girl* died. Prior to that, he merely reinforced our soldiers with feeble 'boosts' of healing and vitality. Our people fought bravely while he stuck to the backlines! The Wordsmith is a pathetic little boy who acts out when his emotions get the better of him. With him in charge, our future can't possibly look any gloomier!"

Neil's expression remains impassive, but for the briefest instant, Jason could swear he sees a smile twitch on the corner of his mouth.

Bastard! Jason shouts in his mind. *Neil is... he's prodding Caddis to defame me!*

The Wordsmith quickly stands up and shoots a mutedly hostile glare at Neil before turning his attention to Caddis.

"You don't know anything, Caddis. I was bringing a weapon back to Tarus II which was capable of annihilating the demons! Because of people like you, I lost precious hours that would have allowed me to turn our world into an impenetrable fortress. Once I obtained it, I became capable of constructing weapons that could even kill Ose, who had possessed Bael's body! Do you know how impossible that would have been previously?! Now, humanity is finally safe because of me!"

"Safe?!" Caddis shouts back, taunting the Wordsmith with his eyes. "If you hadn't spent six years playing 'house' with your wife and daughter, we could have built up TEN times the fortifications on Tarus II! We could have made this world impregnable. Even now, what defenses have you erected? What if while you were gone for two weeks on your

little journey to suck the toes of the First Volgrim Founder, the demons had decided to lash out and attack us? They walk in our midst now! They have practically unfettered access to our systems!"

Caddis violently shakes his head. "I may have betrayed humanity to side with Ose, but you betrayed us six years ago when you failed to put up the necessary measures to protect our lives! If you didn't want people feeling so unsafe they would consider joining the demons, perhaps you should have done more to alleviate our fears! To you I say... piss off! All those who died during Stormbringer died because of YOU! Including your little *brat*."

Jason begins to seethe with rage under the surface. He forces himself to remain calm, even as his mind spins with several realizations.

Caddis isn't just making wild claims. How could he have learned all the details of the Volgrim and the Plague while he was in prison? Someone must have told him those facts! Hell, I only found out myself just a few days ago!

The Wordsmith's eyes flick to Neil, who continues to stare down at Caddis, as if unaware of the 'implications' behind Caddis's words.

Neil fed Caddis the information. He's turned the man into a mouthpiece for his ideology so he can broadcast unsubstantiated claims out to all the people! He's trying to undermine me!

The Wordsmith quickly pieces together the conspiracy. In less than a second, multiple realizations hit him at once, making him realize that Neil has no interest in 'punishing' Caddis when he could simply use the man to increase his own power and influence.

Furthermore, Caddis's repeated jabs at Jason's daughter only infuriate the Wordsmith further, making it difficult for him to retain his composure.

"Now, now." Neil says, in an annoyingly soothing voice. "The Wordsmith did the best he could with his *limited* war-time experience, Mister Caddis. Do not denigrate our *great* Hero by slandering him. The man loves his family; is that not a praiseworthy thing in this era of demonic degeneracy?"

Neil's slimy tongue worms out several half-praises to the Wordsmith, but these come off more as sounding preachy to Jason's ears.

"I may not have done a perfect job," Jason protests, barely containing his rapidly building anger, "but I still built many embattlements capable of shelling our enemies

from a distance! My wife also fought like hell on the frontlines to protect humanity. If the only thing I cared about was protecting my immediate family, don't you think I'd have gone to great lengths to ensure no harm could befall her? Mara nearly killed my wife!"

"That's only more proof of your incompetence!" Caddis shouts back. "If your magic can't protect your precious little girl, and if it can't even protect your wife, how is it going to protect ALL of humanity?! You're a useless leader, and an even more useless Hero!"

Phoebe jumps out of her seat. "Watch your mouth, Caddis! For a traitor like you to slander not only humanity's Hero, but its military commander and me as well, you truly have some guts! I'm sorry Jason isn't perfect. Truly, I am! But that just means he's human! Every human has their vices. Jason's flaw is a lack of planning, but yours is cowardice and enough bluster to inflate a hot air balloon!"

Neil flicks his eyes to Phoebe, then quickly reorients his gaze back to Caddis.

"Yes, yes. Exactly. There is no point in criticizing us when your crimes are so much worse. Now then, I think it's about time we all passed down your judgment, yes?"

Neil smiles politely, but in Jason's eyes, the expression appears dastardly, if not outright insidious.

"Here is my judgment. One thousand years of slavery in the mines. In light of your past work for humanity, and the fact that your betrayal ultimately did cost any lives directly, I think death is a bit too much for you. Perhaps after a millennia slaving in the mines, you will come out a much humbler and more world-weary individual."

He turns to Jason. "And what does our esteemed Wordsmith think Caddis's punishment should-"

At that moment, something unexpected occurs.

Bernard Caddis's head implodes.

As if crushed by an unseen machine, the former General's skull collapses in on his brain, reducing both to meat-paste. His body slumps slightly, then flops to the ground, without a drop of life left in it.

"What?!" Phoebe gasps. "Oh... oh my god!"

Jason quickly turns from Neil to look at the unexpected corpse left laying on the arena center. "Jesus fucking Christ! What the hell?!"

Neil's pupils shrink to pinpricks. He stares in shock at the corpse below, then whips his attention back to the Wordsmith. "Jason! What in the name of God are you DOING?!"

"Me? ME?!" Jason roars back, still shocked by the sudden and unexpected death of Bernard Caddis. "Why are you blaming me?! Someone get down there and search the area!"

"Don't play innocent!" Neil shouts. "You... you killed Caddis! With your Wordsmithing! How could you?! This is supposed to be a fair and upright Tribunal!"

"The fuck I did!" Jason exclaims, taking a menacing step toward Neil. "You're trying to set me up! What, after feeding information to the prisoner, did you put a fucking BOMB in his head too?!"

"I did nothing of the sort!" Neil protests. "Don't act as if a single whisper from your lips couldn't kill anyone in existence!"

The two men begin loudly berating one another, while Phoebe jumps in between them. Meanwhile, Belial leaps from the jury panel to the ground below, then rushes to Caddis's side. As she arrives, she momentarily detects a strange feeling in the air, but it quickly dissipates.

Hm? What was that?

Unsure what she just felt, Belial ignores it, then takes a knee beside the gruesome sight of Caddis's corpse. She quickly investigates his wounds, then frowns deeply.

This isn't just an implosion. His skull was physically crushed by something. Did Jason really kill Caddis from afar? Or was it...

Belial's frown deepens. She glances back at the jury panel from the corner of her eyes. She scrutinizes the other Emperors, but her gaze ultimately falls on the one unexpected visitor, the lone representative from Volgarius.

Creator Demila.

At that moment, words materialize inside Belial's head.

[Watch where you point your gaze, Emperor Belial.] Creator Demila says in secret. [Do not think that I am incapable of detecting the suspicion in your thoughts. I am not responsible for killing that mud-dweller.]

[You aren't?] Belial asks, knowing only Demila can easily read her mind. [Then do you know who did?]

[I do not.] Demila answers. [However, I can read the thoughts of everyone here except for a few special individuals. The Wordsmith is one of them.]

[Are you implying Jason killed Caddis with Wordsmithing?] Belial asks.

[I would have heard any words whispered under his breath.] Demila replies. [The Wordsmith cast no magic through his unique means. Most likely, the true culprit is...]

She pauses, allowing Belial to draw her own conclusions.

The Emperor of Passion stands up. Her heart turns to ice as she realizes a horrifying possibility.

While Jason and Neil publicly shout at one another and Phoebe tries to butt in and calm them down, the Emperors watch this display with a hint of amusement.

"This is why human empires always fall." Yadratt mutters, chuckling under his breath. "They're always plotting against one another, even with enemies at their door."

Serena sighs. "You act as if demons are not the same."

Belial leaps back atop the jury platform. She forcibly shoves Neil and Jason aside, sending them falling onto their butts.

"Both of you, knock it off."

She shoots a glare at Neil for starting the mud-slinging, then wryly shakes her head.

"Neither of you killed Caddis. The true culprit is... Gressil."

"Gressil?" Jason asks in bewilderment. He stands back up and looks at Belial in confusion. "How do you know?"

"Well. I don't know for sure..." Belial says, suddenly realizing she brought no proof. "But we know he's at large. It must have been him."

"Lies!" Neil protests, while also pulling himself back to a standing position. "Where's your proof? Did you detect any of Gressil's 'Chaos Energy'?"

Belial sets her jaw. "I did not. But... I examined Caddis's body. His head was physically crushed by someone's hands. It had to be Gressil."

"The hell it did." Neil says. "Do you expect us to believe Jason couldn't mimic such an action with his magic? The only thing you've proven is that I am most certainly NOT at

fault! If I had planted a bomb in Caddis's bloody skull, it would have exploded outward, not imploded inward! Jason must have quietly killed him for insulting his dead daughter!"

Phoebe frowns. "If we're throwing random accusations around, there are other potential culprits who would benefit from turning humanity against each other. For example, Creator Demila here..."

Creator Demila silently blinks all eight of her eyes. [It is true that I possess some small measure of motive to foment distrust among you mud-dwellers. However, I am not the one who killed that gnat. Such a cowardly act is beneath my dignity. I slay my enemies proudly, on the field of battle.]

"Another culprit could be Mephisto." Phoebe points out. "Jason's magic can't track the Emperor of Legions, and we know he can turn completely invisible after his ascension. He'd also benefit from killing Caddis..."

Belial glances back at Caddis's body.

There was that strange sensation of energy I felt. Was that leftover Wordsmithing magic? Demila's psionic remnants? Mephisto's ethereal form slipping away? Or perhaps Gressil's Chaos Energy? I... can't be entirely sure.

Jason manages to calm himself down. He takes several deep breaths, then utters a Word of Power. "**Analytical.** Let me look at this event from another perspective."

After clearing his mind, the Wordsmith's emotions completely reset to zero. He shifts his mindset artificially, allowing himself to view the situation from an outside observer's perspective.

"Replay. Visualize."

Jason aims his magic at the area around Caddis's body. To everyone's shock, Caddis seemingly leaps up from the ground and his head materializes back on his shoulders. However, they quickly realize this is merely a spiritual illusion. Jason manipulates the image to replay the moment of Caddis's death, showing his head being crushed as if by an invisible hand.

However, no matter what other words Jason utters, he fails to materialize any further details around that moment, making him and all the observers frown.

Neil assumes a more dignified posture and opts to fold his hands behind his back. "How do we know you're not altering these... spirit-recordings?"

"Because this whole event is being recorded and broadcast outside." Jason replies. "Also, my apologies to any parents if their children saw that. It happened unexpectedly."

While Jason tries to deduce what happened to Caddis, Archangel Uriel stands up and walks to a spot directly beside Creator Demila's chair.

"Thou hath observed certain important details, Volgrim." Uriel says. "Surely, if the culprit art Gressil, thou should'st be quite eager to hunt him down. Yet here thou dost sit, uncaring."

Demila glances at the Archangel. [If the culprit was truly Gressil, then I am unable to detect him. I have already scanned the vicinity with my abilities, yet I have found nothing of a magical origin lurking unseen.]

"Do not think me a fool." Uriel says, lowering her voice while pulling herself down to Demila's level. "Thou hath not come here to sight-see. Thy intentions art sinister at best."

Demila casually waves a hand. [Begone, undying creature. I've no words to spare for a primordial horror.]

Uriel continues to stare at her for a moment, then silently spins on her heel and returns to her seat.

Over the next twenty minutes, Jason continues trying to uncover the true culprit responsible for Caddis's death, but he ultimately gives up. He and Phoebe sit back down while a crew of service-members place Caddis's corpse on a stretcher and whisk him away. Jason cleans up the arena with a Word of Power, then 'Normalizes' himself back to his usual self.

Neil no longer sits beside the Wordsmith. Instead, as if 'fearing' Jason will murder him, he moves several seats to the right, opting to sit beside General Chadwick, all while continuing to cast suspicious glances at Jason from the corner of his eye.

After everything settles down, Phoebe chews her lip. She speaks in a quiet voice. "Jason. You didn't... you didn't *actually* kill Caddis, did you?"

"Of course not!" Jason softly exclaims. "Why would I even do that? Don't tell me you doubt me, too?"

"Not exactly." Phoebe says. "I just wanted to hear it from your mouth. I'm just not sure who did. There are several possibilities, and none of them are pleasant. We need to get that anti-Gressil device up and running as soon as possible."

"Could Neil have done the deed?" Jason inquires. "Like he said, if he had put a bomb in Caddis's head, it would have exploded outward..."

"Unless it was a singularity bomb." Phoebe mutters. "During the attack on the Core, our soldiers deployed grenades that could devour biological matter via nanites. It's something Hans worked on. A friend of a friend told me Hans might be working on something new... a micro-singularity could theoretically implode a person's head. But you'd need to surgically install it right in the center of his brain... who here is even capable of brain surgery?"

Jason watches as the people on the platform below finish cleaning up Caddis's remnants. With Caddis's soul now entering humanity's Lazarus Tower, they will certainly get a chance to question him later.

"Well. You could always just shove the bomb in there if it's small enough, because now we have a demon fellow who specializes in healing brains. Remember? Belial works with him."

"Right. Leeroy, the Duke of Restoration." Phoebe says. "Hmm... if it's him... but then again, Neil hates demons. Can you see him working with one of Belial's subordinates? This conspiracy is getting a little out of hand."

Jason nods. "Something's gotta give. Someone killed Caddis right in front of ten million people. It's like the fucking JFK shooting all over again."

Phoebe raises an eyebrow. "Who's JFK?"

"Uhh... a really famous politician-guy from my era..." Jason awkwardly explains, while remembering his wife doesn't know many nuances of the eras following her enslavement at Bahamut's claws. "He got shot through the head. He was in a car in like a parade, or something. I don't know the details, other than that there were a bunch of conspiracies saying the CIA and FBI conspired to kill him. Also something about a grassy knoll..."

"CIA? FBI?" Phoebe repeats. "I can't tell if these are acronyms for people, places, or things."

The Wordsmith smiles and squeezes his wife's hand. "Never mind. It's not important. All that's important is that we try and figure out who killed Caddis and why. Someone is trying to tear humanity apart, and we can't let them. Maybe we can interrogate Caddis after we bring him back. He might know who killed him."

"Yeah." Phoebe says, smiling back at Jason. "Maybe he will."

Before long, the Tribunal continues. This time, one of the last major offenders of Stormbringer steps out onto the stage, a young man visibly terrified that he might be facing slavery at best and execution at worst.

Phoebe's expression softens.

"Henry... look at him. He's so scared, Jason."

"He does look rather pitiful." Jason murmurs. "If he can offer a good justification... maybe we should consider pardoning him. After what happened to Caddis, we could use some levity."

"That's a good idea, honey." Phoebe smiles. "I've always gotten along well with little Henry."

"As have I." Jason replies.

Off to the side of the Jury Panel, Neil Adams and Magnus Chadwick observe the proceedings with heavy hearts.

"I can't believe you killed Caddis." Chadwick murmurs. "I didn't think you had it in you, Neil."

"I didn't kill the blasted fellow." Neil hisses softly. "He still had his uses. I already made a deal with him. In exchange for stirring up trouble with the Wordsmith, I'd get him sentenced to the mines, then quietly slip him out after a few months. Nobody would know what happened to him."

Chadwick frowns. "Then... did the Wordsmith kill him?"

"How should I know?" Neil retorts. "In that instant, I simply flung out an accusation to trip Jason up. He probably didn't, but as long as people think he's a threat, that still advances our 'Cause.'"

Chadwick shifts his body weight while casting an uneasy glance around. Knowing there are several sharp-eared Demon Emperors nearby, as well as a mind-reading Psion,

he can't help worrying whether or not someone will overhear their conversation.

"If you didn't kill Caddis, and if the Wordsmith didn't... then who in the blazes *did*?"

Part 419: The Stormbringer Tribunal

(Part 4)

Private Henry, a young man from one of humanity's liberated worlds, finds himself on a stage where only minutes earlier, one of his commanding officers died in a horrific, brutal, frightening manner. As the eyes of millions of people fall on him, Henry begins to shake and tremble. The strength in his knees fades, leaving him ready to buckle. At only twenty-two years old, Henry is only a few years younger than the Wordsmith himself, though he appears far younger due to Jason's artificial appearance-alterations.

Henry's short-cropped black hair sticks to his sweaty forehead. Drops of perspiration slide down his face, making him appear a sorry sight. His arms remain bound behind himself, preventing him the dignity of even wiping away his sweat with a sleeve. His teeth chatter. His vision wavers as he tries not to hyperventilate from anxiety.

Seeing the pitiful state of the young man before him, Yamir eases up on his usual routine. He does not broadly gesture with Lorent's butcher axe, nor does he speak in a loud and boisterous tone. Instead, he walks over and gently rests an arm on Henry's shoulder.

As long-time friends, the two have fought and trained together on many occasions. Henry was among the first of the people saved by Hope and Neil, a young recruit with a lot of potential who Yamir admired.

"Henry..." Yamir says. "Calm down. It will be okay. You have already been judged and proven guilty of abandoning Commander Neil to the Balrog. By closing the portal right before the Core's self-destruction, you all but guaranteed his death would be swift, and it was only a lucky break that saved his life. In the end, Neil did survive, and nobody else died as a result of your actions. Perhaps if you plead your case well, this jury may lighten your sentence."

Henry shivers in fright. He looks into Yamir's eyes with a pleading gaze. "They... they might?"

"Of course. The Wordsmith is a compassionate man, and so is Lady Phoebe, Lady Blinker, Lady Samantha, and many others present. Go on, then. Give the jury your honest

thoughts."

Perhaps due to Yamir's calm and soothing tone of voice, Henry manages to push down some of his abject terror and turn a weak gaze toward the thirty humans, demons, monsters, and even an Archangel and a Psion above him. This disparate group listens as the young man shakily starts to speak.

"E-everyone... I... I am so sorry..."

Tears well up in Henry's eyes as he struggles not to break down in front of millions of people.

"...I don't know what I was thinking. Ose came to me, but... but she took the appearance of a beautiful woman... a beautiful human woman... I thought she was like a spirit, or maybe a ghost... I don't know exactly..."

"When my friend Piper died six years ago to Beelzebub's attack, I was so sad, and so bitter... every day I felt depressed and suicidal, but Miss Oshina- sorry, Ose... Ose was always there for me, helping comfort me..."

"And then she started telling me these little things that bugged me at first, but I came to accept them as truth. She told me Jason was actually an enemy of humanity and a friend to the demons, and that he and Hope and Neil were working together, and that I should be ready to act if their efforts threatened humanity..."

Henry speaks at length for over ten full minutes without interruption. Several people in the audience, as well as the jury members, listen silently while he pours out his heart and explains the factors that led to his ultimate betrayal of Neil.

Even Neil himself doesn't seem to hate the kid. He smiles at times and chuckles wryly, though what thoughts run through his head, only he and the lone Psion can know.

"Commander Neil..." Henry says, his throat tight and his voice choked, "...I am so sorry for what I did. I fell for that evil demoness. I let her trick me, and I nearly killed you. I... I don't want to die... but I know what I did was wrong... I only ask for mercy! I know I don't deserve it... but *please*..."

If his hands weren't bound behind his back, Henry might fall to his knees and pray to Neil right on the spot. Sadly, he cannot, and so, he opts instead to bow his head in as reverential a manner as possible.

On the jury platform above, Neil sighs deeply. Seeing the promising young man below, Neil does feel more than a hint of bitterness toward Henry's betrayal, but he also recalls all the times in the past six years when Henry's gunmanship allowed him to snipe demons off the backs of his comrades, saving dozens of lives along the way.

Slowly, Neil stands up and walks to the edge of the platform. He pauses at the guard-rail and clears his throat.

"Henry. Perhaps, more than anyone else here, I should hold the most say over your punishment or lack thereof. It was me who you directly betrayed. I... resent you for what you did. But thinking back on that day, it was a confusing time for many of us."

Neil pauses for half a breath.

"I wish to ask you some questions. Would you be willing to answer truthfully?"

Henry raises his head. "Questions? Yes. Yes! I will answer anything you ask, Commander Neil!"

"Good. You're a good child." Neil says. "First. Do you remember when I interrogated you, Caddis, General Chadwick, Corporal Hurent, and Lieutenant Samuel?"

Henry quickly nods. "Of course! That was when Caddis had betrayed us to sabotage the Core's detonators."

"I knew you wouldn't forget." Neil says. "You appeared visibly nervous during that conversation. At the time, I chalked up your nerves to some unknown circumstances, but in hindsight, had you already taken to betraying me ahead of time?"

Henry's expression falls. "No, sir. Not... not exactly. It's just... when you were talking about various topics, I started to feel guilty in my heart, because..."

He pauses.

"...well, I'm not entirely sure why. I always believed I was on humanity's side, but perhaps Ose's words had already made me suspicious of my own motives."

Neil strokes the sides of his mouth, hiding a sly smile from everyone's gazes. He quickly returns his face to a neutral expression.

"Yes, I believe you when you say you were confused at the time. These demons... they can be quite sly in how they speak. No doubt, Ose preyed upon your vulnerabilities, your

thoughts, your motivations... it's just more proof you cannot trust demons and take them at their words. They can corrupt even the most innocent of minds."

Behind Neil, several Demon Emperors glance at each other. They easily see through his ploy, making some of them frown while others chuckle wryly.

"The balls on this human." Emperor Fae snorts. "I do like a man who speaks his mind!"

"He is using his words to influence the thoughts of those who hold doubts." Emperor Serena says quietly. "Neil Adams is not someone we should underestimate. There are many people who are ambivalent toward demons, neither trusting nor distrusting us. But his words... they have the power to sway minds."

Emperor Kristoff, having been silent up to this point, shakes his head wryly. "As an ancient philosopher once said, *the pen is mightier than the sword*. Neil's tongue is certainly sharper than most blades."

Neil continues to question Henry. He asks Henry about how long Ose manipulated him, whether or not Henry performed any other betrayals or sabotages, and finally, Neil turns to look at someone unexpected.

"Creator Demila. You are a Psion, someone of far greater standing than us lowly humans, yes? Are you able to read the thoughts of young Henry?"

Demila turns to look at Neil with a hint of bemusement.

[Indeed, I can.]

"Then would you be so kind as to tell the jury whether or not Henry has spoken any lies?" Neil asks.

Demila slowly blinks. [How do you know if you can trust my words? Whether I say he is lying or not, perhaps I will speak with an ulterior motive, intending to press a wedge between your distinct human factions.]

"Yes, perhaps you will." Neil nods. "But you are an emissary of the mighty Volgrim Empire. I do not believe you would stoop to such depths when you could easily crush the bodies of every person here through your unique powers."

Demila's mouthless face shifts, perhaps into an expression resembling a Volgrim's smile.

[I did not expect you of all people to be willing to place such trust in me. You are an interesting mud-dweller, Neil Adams. In a way, you remind me of my First Founder.]

She turns her head toward the young man in the center of the stage.

[The human known as Henry spoke no lies. He did not betray humanity in any other discernable way that I could tell. However, beyond surface-levels thoughts, I am unable to read any deeper. I am not as accomplished in the mental arts as some of my colleagues.]

"You aren't?" Neil asks.

[No. I am considered a Class II Telepath. There are five classes in total. The highest ranks can effortlessly rewrite the thoughts of weak-minded individuals and turn them into permanent slaves. As for myself, I focus mostly on reconnaissance. My abilities are tailored on broad observation, allowing me to survey entire star systems with ease.]

The Psion slowly blinks.

[As for your thoughts of potentially hiding information from me now that you know of my 'weakness,' do not bother, Neil Adams. I have already collected more information than you can possibly imagine.]

Neil's smile becomes a tad more forced. He stifles a grimace, then awkwardly nods.

"...Right. Well, I thank you for your assistance, Creator Demila. Forgive me for my primitive impulses."

[All beings wish to obtain greater benefits for themselves.] Demila says, her words projecting into the minds of every observer. [You are merely looking out for yourself, as would any other form of somewhat intelligent life. This is the natural order.]

A few moments pass as Neil digests Demila's words. He finally turns to look at Henry on the platform below.

"I have made my decision. Henry, you committed a great crime against me personally. However, I do not wish to see a young life snuffed out due to the deception of a demonic temptress. In the end, I survived, and you learned a valuable lesson. Therefore, my judgment is as such: I believe you should go free, but you may never again step foot in humanity's military ranks. You will forever be an ordinary civilian with a black mark on your record."

Henry's heart sinks at this judgment, but at the same time, it soars into the heavens!

"You're... you're forgiving me, Commander? Truly?"

Neil shakes his head. "I am not forgiving you. I am *understanding* you. You did try to kill me, but I no longer believe you were at fault. The Henry I met six years ago was a cute, innocent young man who would not do such a thing. While I am going to give you the right to re-enter human society, I will not allow you to rejoin my military. You have lost that privilege."

Henry nods. His expression dims somewhat, but he quietly accepts his lot.

"...Thank you, Commander Neil. I'm sorry I... disappointed you."

Neil turns to look at the humans and demons behind himself.

"I have issued my verdict. What about the rest of you?"

Jason looks at Phoebe. The two of them don't need to say a word, but they know well what Neil's true ploy is. He successfully turned Henry's judgment into a moment to proselytize about how evil the demons are, and his forgiveness of Henry only serves to show just how 'kind' and 'forgiving' he is.

The Wordsmith's stomach churns. *In matters of deception, Neil is far, far above me.*

"I agree with your judgment." Phoebe says. "If you are willing to show mercy to Henry, then so am I."

Jason nods. "And I as well."

"I always liked Henry." Belial chimes in. "He's not a perfect kid, but he has a good heart. He deserves a second chance."

"Henry was one of Kar's good friends." Blinker says quietly. "I agree with Neil's judgment."

One by one, all of the humans and monsters agree with Neil. When the Demon Emperors get their turn, they also perfunctorily agree, not that they really give a damn about the fate of one random nobody.

Eventually, the final vote falls to Uriel. Of all the people present, she has been the most consistent voter aside from Belial. She has always punished demons with death and spared humans, giving them the punishment of slavery.

This time, though, she does not act as she usually does.

"I believe the boy should be put to death." Uriel says, startling the others. "He collaborated with the enemy. An example must be made of him. Whether he is an ignorant youth or not, I care not. Those who collaborate must *die*. They will always return to their cowardly ways."

She glances at the shocked expressions of the humans around her.

"Dost my words offend thee? Take heed: This boy will return to his wicked ways. Whether in the near or far future, 'tis certain to occur. I have watched as many a bastard begged for forgiveness, only to turn around and plunge a dagger into the back of their benefactor."

She shakes her head.

"My vote will not change his fate. But take heed! This Henry is a snake in the grass. He must never again be trusted to perform any duty."

Jason sighs. "We know that, Uriel. As per Neil's decree, Henry will never again serve in our armed forces."

"Mmm. I pray that will be enough." Uriel says, before taking her seat once again. Her angelic beauty, a façade created to make her appear as she did tens of thousands of years ago, serves to hide the truth that she is merely a possessor of Barbatos's body. Her beauty also serves to give her words slightly more credence, making the rest of the jury look at Henry with thoughtful expressions.

After the voting concludes, Henry gives his profuse thanks, then steps off the podium to sit back in the crowd. He turns to the funny old man, 'Robert', and wryly smiles.

"Well. They let me off. Maybe you'll get lucky too, grandpa."

Robert, also known as Beelzebub, directs a look at the kid sitting beside him.

"Oh, I doubt that *very* much."

Up next comes another large group of people. These turn out to be the saboteurs who took over the Atlas Cannon during Stormbringer, as well as a couple of people who worked to assassinate Elder Skarde during Stormbringer. Sadly, his soul ended up devoured by Mephisto, and he was unable to revive inside the Lazarus Tower.

The looks of mercy and forgiveness people directed at Henry vanish in an instant. When they mentally compare his crime with that of the murderous saboteurs on the stage

now, they truly realize just how fair Henry's forgiveness was. At least, unlike these monsters, Henry didn't directly kill anyone!

Phoebe is the first to stand up and pass her judgment.

"You lot are bastards, through and through. Your actions shattered the barrier my husband put up. The shattering of Jason's Barrier opened up Hero City to attack, allowing Beelzebub to slip inside! It was because of you he was able to tear through the underground section of the barrier and arrive in the middle of our city! Millions died as a result of your actions... and I deem you among the worst of all the Stormbringer sinners!"

Phoebe pronounces a declaration of death upon these people. Jason stands up, and he too proclaims that they deserve to die.

Neil, Blinker, Uriel... all of these individuals join the Wordsmith and Phoebe to cast down terrible judgment upon Stormbringer's second-most-hated individuals after Beelzebub himself. Vicious words pour from their hearts as they call down figurative fire and brimstone upon those who seized control of the Atlas Cannon.

Not only did the saboteurs shatter Jason's shield, but they also launched an attack that directly killed five thousand human soldiers on the western front!

The group of ten or so survivors hang their heads in shame. The gamble they took, that Ose would save them when the demons seized Tarus II, ends up failing them completely, leaving them no room to defend themselves.

Finally, the last vote comes down to Belial. Despite the fact that her one vote cannot change these people's fates, everyone turns to her, waiting to hear what sort of a defense she will issue in regard for the sanctity of their lives.

However, Belial does not issue her usual declaration.

Instead, she looks down coldly at the small, pathetic-looking vermin on the stage. Her eyes narrow as she directs an icy glare their way.

"I... I truly hate all of you." Belial says, hissing her words through clenched teeth. "Coming to this Tribunal, I was ready to forgive anyone. I hate death. I hate violence. I want nothing more than for peace to spread throughout the whole galaxy."

She clenches her trembling fists at her side.

"But... but you took my niece from me. All of you, and Beelzebub, too. You killed that precious little girl. I hate you in a way I cannot put into words. Even more than I hate you,

I hate myself too! I hate that I was unable to protect Phoebe's daughter. The guilt eats me up every moment of every day!"

Belial's demonic vision flicks across the faces of these ten saboteurs, those who survived and weren't cut down by the Atlas Cannon's internal security. She easily perceives every wrinkle on their faces, every eye-twitch, every subtle motion of their irises.

"I just want to know..." Belial whispers, her words transmitting to the audience. "...do *you* feel guilt, too? Do you wake up every day sick to your stomach? Do you look in the mirror and wish that you had never been born?"

The expressions on the faces of the saboteurs are all the answers she needs.

"Because I do." Belial concludes. "And I now give my final judgment. I sentence you all to death. If you see my niece in the afterlife, I hope she spits in your face. Not that she would. She was better than all of you."

Belial turns and heads back to her seat, leaving everyone in the audience stunned!

Nobody expected that Belial would so hatefully rescind her prior statements of forgiveness for all the accused in such a manner. Her words serve to reinforce just how vile and hateful their crimes truly are.

At the same time, Phoebe looks back at her friend. "Sammy..."

"I meant what I said." Belial says quietly. "I feel... no regrets."

The condemned turn and leave the stage, a cloud of darkness hovering over their heads. None of them receives a drop of mercy, not even from Tarus II's kindest and most loving individual.

After they depart, Yamir clears his throat. He stands up a little straighter and turns to face the audience.

"Everyone. You have all received your judgments. Some of you have been penalized with death, others slavery, and only one has been set free."

He pauses to look at Henry, then continues.

"However. There is still one final person who has yet to be judged. We have kept his existence a secret until now. Even the guards at the prison did not know his true identity..."

Henry listens intently to Yamir's words. As the minotaur speaks, Henry's expression gradually shifts to one of confusion.

"That's odd. Grandpa Robert, you haven't even gone up there yet. Who the heck is Yamir talking about? Surely, it's not you, right?"

He laughs to himself at the absurd notion, but when he turns to look at the kind old man beside him, he finally notices the stone-cold expression frozen on Robert's face.

"...Grandpa? Wait, are you actually going up there last?"

Beelzebub directs a hollow glance at the young man beside him. He chuckles lifelessly.

"Enjoy your life, Henry."

Yamir finishes his pronouncement, then directs his attention to the old man sitting beside Henry.

"...that fellow is sitting right here. In the prison, his given name was 'Robert.' However, that is not his true identity. 'Robert,' please step forward."

Beelzebub sighs. He slowly rises to his feet, then begins walking down the aisle to his side, while several people direct curious gazes his way.

Hungry, the Obsidian Goblin who attacked the Core, nudges a different goblin beside him. "Hey, who the heck that guy? He look kinda familiar, yeah??"

The other goblin shrugs. "Dunno. All fleshies look same to me."

Beelzebub arrives at the bottom of the platform, then he steps up onto the podium, his seemingly simple appearance belying his true nature underneath.

"Would you like to introduce yourself? Or should I?" Yamir asks.

The Duke of Inferno sighs for the umpteenth time today.

"I'll do it."

He slowly sweeps his head across the Demon Emperors gathered above, those who look at him with curious gazes, as well as the grim and expectant faces of Neil Adams, Blinker, Uriel, Jason, and Phoebe.

"My name... is Beelzebub." He says, his voice projecting to the audience. "I am the one who attacked humanity. I am the one who killed... *millions*."

The crowd goes berserk.

Part 420: The Stormbringer Tribunal

(Part 5)

"What? Beelzebub?! He's ALIVE?!"

"How did he revive? WHEN did he revive? Has he been in prison since the end of Stormbringer?"

"Why does he look like a human? Why isn't his skin red?!"

The crowd of onlookers freaks out. Not just the audience directly behind Beelzebub, consisting of demons, traitorous humans, and assorted monsters, but also the vast throngs of ordinary citizens outside the arena's confines, and even the majority of those among the Jury of Thirty!

Henry's eyes become as wide as saucers. His jaw drops as he recalls the seemingly lighthearted conversations and various hints he's received from 'Old Man Robert' over these past few weeks. Never did he imagine the seemingly kind old man was actually one of the most, if not THE most hated demons among Tarus II's populace.

"Robert is... Beelzebub?! No wonder! It all makes sense now..."

Mara, the Duke of Collection, stares numbly at Beelzebub and smiles wryly.

"If my end is tragic and Caddis's was violent, then Beelzebub's will surely be the most deserved of everyone here. He won't receive a drop of mercy."

Outside the arena, ten million observers of all the different species shake their fists and scream obscenities at the ordinary-looking old man, recalling all the friends, family, and children they lost to his detonation, many of whom will never be revived.

"Fucking bastard! Lemme get a swing at him! Just one punch!"

"I'll put a bullet between his eyes!"

"He murdered my boys! I want to rip out his entrails and feed them to a Hellhound!"

Amidst the screaming, raging mob, one demoness remains remarkably quiet. Rosalia sighs in her heart as the demon she 'loves' stands on stage with a calm expression, feeling dejected that she was unable to protect him.

"If only I had more strength... Mister Beelzebub could have stayed by my side."

Inside the Jury of Thirty's platform, most of the Jury members wear differing degrees of shock and outright disbelief.

Emperor Yadrat howls with glee and stomps his foot. He laughs maniacally. "Hahahaha! Oh, that clever Wordsmith! He's been hiding the fire-bastard all this time! I'd never have guessed!"

Emperor Fae shrieks with glee. "Little bomber-boy is gonna go boom for the last time!"

"What a pity." Emperor Kristoff says, shaking his head. "Beelzebub was a powerful and influential Duke. His death will be a great loss for our people."

Only Emperor Serena appears wholly unsurprised. She listens to the proceedings, all without a single shift of her expression, as if perhaps having known all along. Though, how she may have learned of Beelzebub's survival is anyone's guess...

Belial, unlike her fellow Emperors, already knew about Beelzebub's capture, being the person responsible for apprehending him and investigating Rosalia. A wicked expression rests on her face as she fantasizes about several gruesome ends awaiting the man.

Blinker ends up blindsided by the development. With nobody having told her about Beelzebub, she stands up and gazes at him in shock. "Phoebe! You had Beelzebub all this time? Then, does that mean...?"

"Not Mephisto." Phoebe says with a shake of her head. "He's still at large."

"Oh. That's too bad..."

On the other side of the jury panel, Neil Adams and Magnus Chadwick only gaze impassively at the monster who slaughtered millions. With both of them having been debriefed on Beelzebub's recovery, they have already prepared themselves mentally for his appearance.

"Quite the level of excitement." Chadwick murmurs. "It seems the finale of this Tribunal is going to be... interesting."

Neil barely reacts. "Beelzebub doesn't interest me. He's an irredeemable bastard, like all the rest. I won't have to worry about Jason failing to punish him... but I do wonder how we can best advance The Cause..."

"Heh. As if you haven't already thought up ten possibilities." Chadwick chuckles.

Not only are humanity's top leaders and Emperor Serena unsurprised, but Creator Demila also watches the proceedings with little interest.

To these mud-dwellers, the demon known as Beelzebub is a frighteningly powerful entity capable of causing mass death. But to the Volgrim Empire, the weakest member of our Psion Reserves could crush him with ease.

She already knew about Beelzebub's survival thanks to the thoughts in Phoebe's mind, as well as the others. However, she also doesn't particularly care. In Demila's eyes, Beelzebub is a truly small and insignificant figure. Let alone a Demon Duke, she wouldn't bat an eye if the mightiest Emperor threatened her.

Creator Demila gazes off into the distance, not particularly giving a damn about Beelzebub's fate.

If only it had been me instead of Confessor Vulpanix fighting the Archangel. I have not faced a serious challenge since my ascension to the 7th Level, all those cycles ago...

She flicks her psionic attention to Uriel for a moment before pulling back once again.

Perhaps I may yet get my chance.

Uriel gazes wordlessly at Beelzebub on the platform below. She and her brothers silently communicate through telepathy, sharing their observations at the speed of thought.

Brother. Uriel says to Raphael. Dids't thou knoweth of Beelzebub's survival?

I did not. Raphael replies. But... I had my suspicions. A wielder of Nirvana cannot die so easily. T'was once the key to the Creator's power, after all.

Uriel's eyes flicker. She glances at Jason and frowns.

Nirvana...

On the stage below, after more than a full minute of the crowd screaming and all-but-rioting, humanity's defense forces manage to quell the mob and quiet them down, reducing their violent hatred to the silent boiling of a cooking pot. Despite their hatred for Beelzebub, Stormbringer's survivors tamp down their rage to instead pray he receives the most vicious, brutal, deserved punishment of all time. Forget killing him, the humans who fought in Stormbringer want to see him tortured and mutilated, left to suffer for decades and centuries, if at all possible. No other option enters their thoughts.

Beelzebub remains calm and composed. He stares up at the Jury of Thirty, noting with mild disinterest the various expressions of shock on their faces, as well as the lack of it for certain key figures.

The Duke of Inferno clears his throat.

"That's right. It really is me. I have lost my powers and my demonic body. I am now no stronger than any other ordinary human. Weaker, even, as my body has dried up and lost its vitality."

"Beelzebub." Yamir says, eying the Duke with a glare that could freeze lava in an instant. "You are perhaps the most hated demon in the entire galaxy, as of this moment. Nothing you say can save you from a terrible end. I *do* wonder, though... can you offer any sort of a defense for your actions? Any sort of explanation, or even an excuse? The people you have victimized have suffered terribly as a result of your actions. Your detonation killed millions of soldiers and civilians alike. It also seems to have cost you every last bit of pride you once held as a demon. So why, I must ask... did you do it?"

The minotaur falls silent. He squeezes the shaft of Lorent's butcher axe, as if itching for a reason to swing it at Beelzebub. Of course, as a principled minotaur, he would never let his base instincts get the better of him.

At the same time, Beelzebub barely even looks at the half-bull questioning him. He instead looks up at the Jury of Thirty, as before, with a casual indifference to the world and its feelings.

"I have no defense." Beelzebub murmurs. "What I did during Stormbringer and the actions I took... they were my choice."

Yamir snorts. "I'm surprised to hear you admit it so easily. Where is your laughter and bravado now, Duke of Inferno? Why do you appear so small and pitiful?"

Beelzebub turns his body slightly to face the minotaur.

I understand why you hate me. I understand why everyone does. Your anger is justified."

He pauses.

"I've spent the last month of my life at the lowest point of all my existence. Previously, I was a proud and renowned Demon Duke on the rise to someday become an Emperor.

Now, I am an ordinary human, weaker than the average by all accounts. I've lost everything that I once looked at in such high regard."

Yamir remains silent. So, too, does the crowd. Everyone listens intently as the worst criminal on Tarus II addresses the audience.

"I spent two weeks tied to a bed after my revival, with my arms raised above my head, ruined by a lack of blood flow. Then I was thrown into a prison and left to rot until this very moment, where I will now summarily be executed. But... that isn't what really has shattered my pride, my previous self-confidence that none of you could hope to dampen. No, it is a different sort of pain that now ails me..."

The former Duke of Inferno smacks his lips. He casts a long, slow gaze across the Jury of Thirty, followed by the audience of criminals behind himself.

"You know... I've always been something of an idealist. Sure, I've killed wantonly. I've burned and pillaged without regard for the lives of others, and I've certainly let my temper get the better of me. But... I always viewed myself as something of a *heroic* figure. I wanted to upend the stale and trite ways of my demonic superiors. I wanted to bring about a new era of revolution and justice for all my fellow oppressed Grunts and Lords."

He shakes his head.

"In the end, I fell for the whispered words of a bedeviled witch. Emperor Ose promised me that she would lead demonkind to greatness. If only I followed her direction, we would finally rebalance the scales of fate and bring about the deserved positive karma held from our people, all this time."

"You thought of yourself as a heroic figure?" Yamir asks, slightly bemused. "And yet you committed a genocide. You are merely a bloodthirsty villain."

"I am indeed a villain." Beelzebub murmurs. "But that was never what I wanted. My goal was to uplift demonkind to greatness."

Beelzebub turns his attention to a surprising figure on the Panel of Thirty, none other than Jason Hiro himself.

"Jason. You came to Ose before Stormbringer and made a proposal. At the time, I thought you were a stupid fool. You wanted to create a device that could uplift demons without requiring human souls. Ose told me not to believe you. But now I see that... *she* was the liar."

Jason tilts up his chin to peer down the bridge of his nose at the demon who killed his daughter.

"If you think flattery will get you sympathy, you've thought wrong, Beelzebub. Only death awaits you."

"You are angry. Vengeful." Beelzebub murmurs. "And deservedly so. I killed your daughter. In a moment of humiliation, I unleashed an attack which slaughtered millions of people."

Beelzebub purses his lips.

"I'm... sorry for that, Jason. An apology won't bring anyone back. It won't undo the damage I've caused. But it needs to be said. You have won, and I have lost."

"And not in a physical manner." Beelzebub adds. "Ideologically, we both have similar goals. I wanted to uplift my species, and you wanted to uplift yours. The difference is, you possessed the means and the will, while I did not. I allowed myself to be blinded by ignorance. I allowed Ose to deceive me. And in the end, you have brought about the era of revolution which I so desperately desired."

Beelzebub closes his eyes.

"I... *regret*. If only I had listened to you at that time. If only I had taken your extended hand. It's not that I regret the suffering which I have endured as a result of my actions, but that I have brought pain and suffering to you, the person who heralded the goal I wanted to achieve myself."

Beelzebub opens his eyes. He shakes his head, a look of deep sadness in his eyes.

"I am sorry for... killing your daughter. I am sorry for killing all those innocent people. I brought pain to the one man capable of realizing my vision, as well as his friends and family. I owe you a great debt, but I have inadvertently spat in your mouth. Whatever punishment you deem necessary, I will accept it without complaint."

Neil Adams frowns. Beelzebub's words are so wildly different from what he expected that, for a brief moment, he can't even believe his ears. Chadwick also appears visibly surprised, with both of them completely caught off-guard by the subtle psychological changes Beelzebub has undergone since his resurrection.

Jason, too, stares at Beelzebub in disbelief. In all the time he's known Beelzebub, not once has he imagined that the sick and sadistic sinner who caused Stormbringer's most

sorrowful moment would ever do anything but laugh in his face and revel in his pride, even during his final hours.

Jason blinks several times. He swallows heavily, unsure of what to say.

"You... are apologizing? Are you even *Beelzebub*?"

The Duke of Inferno nods slowly. "I am."

"That can't be right." Jason murmurs. "The Beelzebub I know revels in other people's misery. Is this some ploy of yours? Some plot to escape my wrath?! You will not evade your punishment through some fake and deceitful change of heart!"

"My words are authentic." Beelzebub says quietly. "But I understand why you don't believe me. I have been... a bastard. An irredeemable one. It's only because I lost everything that I gained the clarity of mind to re-evaluate my past actions."

"Six years ago," Beelzebub says, "I was there with my master, Agares, as the first demons to encounter you in the Labyrinth. At that time, you stood alongside the Black Witch, who would later become the Black Queen. My master put all of his attention on her, but I thought there was something odd about you."

"Later," Beelzebub continues, "I fought your people inside the Core. I reaped many lives, lives which I don't think you were even bothering with charging me for today. I even fought your now-wife, and she dealt me a grievous blow. I ascended to the rank of Baron through death and slaughter."

"After that, I killed my master during that climactic battle on Polaris. I ascended to the rank of Duke soon after, and began to finally think about how I could enact my ultimate plans for demonkind. Once I had finally obtained an amount of power which put me in the top echelons, I began to think about how I might uplift my people and do away with the old order."

Beelzebub wryly shakes his head. "But I was still a thoughtless imbecile. Even six years later, when you approached Ose, you gave me the opportunity to realize my ambitions, but I turned you down. Of all the regrets I hold, none are quite as painful as that one. Now, months later, I can truly look back on my life and understand the error of my ways. I sinned, and no amount of penance can ever redeem me."

While Jason struggles to find the right words, Phoebe does not. She stands up from her seat to take a position on Jason's left.

"It's good that you have accepted your failures, Beelzebub. You've admitted to your crimes, and now you must pay the price. No amount of reverse psychology will save you! You killed our daughter, and you killed our friends and family! The worst punishment in the galaxy still wouldn't be enough of a punishment for the likes of you!"

Blinker also rises to her feet. "If you had pushed back against Ose, perhaps Stormbringer might never have happened! Kar might still be alive today. So I also want you to die, Beelze-bastard!"

Uriel doesn't even move from her seat. "The bloodskin may have offered his weak and feeble apology, but it will sway no hearts. I also condemn him to death."

Yardrat shrugs, not caring one way or the other about the Duke from another Hell. "Your life or death is no skin off my nose. Goodbye, Beelzebub. Thank you for at least making your final appearance a little entertaining."

"Your fate matters not to me." Emperor Serena adds. "Perhaps your death will serve to heal the divide between humanity and our people. If you truly wish to advance demonkind's greater interests, you can rest in peace with this knowledge."

Kristoff and Fae both give identical judgments. The other members of the Jury of Thirty condemn Beelzebub to death, with none of them, not even Belial, showing him leniency.

"If the traitors aboard the Atlas Cannon deserved death," Belial says, "then your punishment must certainly be a million times worse. Goodbye, Beelzebub. If you truly wish to repent, then find my niece in the Great Beyond and apologize to her for what you've done."

Beelzebub gazes at Belial with a distant expression. He nods along to her words.

"I will do that, Belial. And... I am sorry to you as well."

The succubus sneers. "Save your apologies for someone who cares."

The final two votes, surprisingly, come down to Neil and Chadwick. Having remained silent all this time, Neil has not once said a word in regards to the verdict. Finally, he stands up, while Chadwick remains seated.

Neil directs a contemptuous look toward Jason.

"I'm disappointed in you, Wordsmith."

"What?" Jason asks. "And why would that be?"

Neil shakes his head, acting as if he were an ancient sage of a long-lost clan of ascetics. He gazes off into the distant horizon, an expression of melancholy playing upon his face.

"Here you are trying to act as if you want humanity and the demons to unite, but when this poor fellow offers you a heartfelt apology, you shut him down without mercy. Such *sincerity* you've shown to the demons. Beelzebub has clearly suffered and learned a lesson, but you will not even consider lightening his sentence. All because you refuse to forgive him his trespasses."

"Watch your fucking mouth!" Jason snaps, taking a step toward Neil. "Don't you dare try to act as if I'm the villain here! Your attempts to drive a wedge between humanity and the demons have not gone unnoticed! Beelzebub is a murderer, and no number of heartfelt apologies will redeem him! He's a monster! He deserves to die!"

Neil quickly bows his head. "Yes, of course. My apologies, Wordsmith. You have made your judgment. For a small figure like myself to stand in your way, I would not *dare* to be so presumptuous."

The Demon Emperors behind Neil roll their eyes, easily seeing through his wordplay. However, a few of them also can't help but feel, deep down inside of themselves, that Neil might have a point.

True, Beelzebub murdered millions. But so too have the Emperors sitting on the podium. What if the Wordsmith were to 'justifiably' come for them next? With his people gaining more sympathetic allied Emperors, it might only be a matter of time before he seeks to 'replace' them.

Yardrat's eyes flicker thoughtfully. *Neil Adams' ploys are quite transparent, but I cannot help feeling as if he isn't... correct. Even if only in a small way...*

Unlike Neil's previous wedge-driving attempts, he does not seek to divide the humans from the demons, but the demons from the humans. He makes his enemies question their place in Jason's future society, as well as the 'leniency' he will surely fail to show them when their days of judgment arrive.

Phoebe also notices this difference in direction. She links her arm around Jason's and pulls him back a step.

"Neil. Enough wordplay. Just issue your judgment already so we can end this."

However, humanity's military commander does not immediately pursue her request. Instead, he slyly smiles at Phoebe and shakes his head.

"Your husband is an impulsive man, Miss Hiro, but I expected better from humanity's genius. Certainly, Beelzebub is a vile murderer, but are you not one of our most compassionate leaders? Do you not feel the pain of loss in his voice, the deep regret emanating from his very being? He committed a terrible crime, but should we not consider sparing the life of this regretful sinner? Surely, ten thousand years of humiliating slavery in a mine will be a *far* worse punishment than a quick and easy execution..."

Phoebe scowls at him. "Since when were you the type to show mercy to even one demon, let alone the likes of Beelzebub?! This Tribunal is meant to seek justice for the victims of Stormbringer, not provide a platform for your political aspirations! And if you want mercy so badly, why follow up by saying Beelzebub should suffer for ten thousand years? Should we spare him, or should we torture him? Make up your mind!"

The corner of Neil's eye twitches. *Indeed, the Wordsmith's wife is quite a bit sharper than her husband. Phoebe is not an opponent who I can expect to ignore the holes in my arguments...*

He chuckles lightly. "Haha. Fair enough. We shall execute him, then. I suppose you think me a man who merely hates demonkind, but that could not be further from the truth! I merely believe that humans and demons should not live together, but should exist in our own separate spaces. Why deliberately breed tensions when we can exist apart in harmony? As for Beelzebub's crimes, I previously wished for him to suffer a most violent and gruesome death, but the Wordsmith's uncaring attitude toward Beelzebub's genuine apology... it simply tickled me the wrong way."

He nonchalantly waves his hand.

"No matter. We can kill him, if that is what you wish. I only fear that the supposed *forgiving* and *merciful* nature of the Wordsmith is not as boundless as he first claimed..."

Jason frowns. With Neil's final words, the Wordsmith finds himself in a bit of a bind. Should he continue with executing Beelzebub, he might look like an uncaring, vengeance-driven madman, which could end up pissing off the demons. But, at the same time, sparing Beelzebub would almost certainly drive the humans who look up to him into fits of rage.

Neil! Jason roars in his head, while his expression continues to flicker with uncertainty. You... you goddamned piece of garbage! Why are you acting like you don't want Beelzebub to die?! You hate him just as much as me! But you'll even let him walk freely if it means you can undermine my authority in any possible way! God, I hate lying shitheads like you!

Phoebe's expression also changes. She, too, feels somewhat uncertain of how to proceed, given the difficult position Neil has put her in.

I couldn't care less if Beelzebub dies. He deserves execution! And the Emperors are sure to see right through Neil's ruse... but he's putting Jason in a tough spot! But then again, why wouldn't Neil go this far? Beelzebub doesn't have his powers anymore! He's not a threat to humanity, so whether he's executed or not doesn't even matter, as far as Neil is concerned!

Beelzebub stands on the platform below, staring up at the squabbling humans with a look of absolute boredom.

"Oh... so it's like that. Humans are truly something. Even when they have me right in front of them, they only fight among themselves."

He rolls his eyes.

"Jason. Don't let Neil put doubt in your heart. I wasn't trying to trick you into forgiving me or into showing me pity. I still have a smidgen of pride left in my bones. Come down here and take my life. Just end my misery."

He pauses.

"Or send me to the mines if it makes you *feel* better. I don't care. I have lost, and you have won. Don't fall for the machinations of a small man thinking small thoughts."

Jason hears Beelzebub's words. His frown deepens, and he shakes his head to rid himself of those extraneous concerns.

"Shut up, Beelzebub. Don't you tell me what to do!"

"I would not dare." Beelzebub says, ever so blandly. "But for *devil's sake*. My weak little human-legs can't keep me standing for much longer. Make a decision already so these good people can cheer over my corpse and go home."

The Duke of Inferno's absolute nonchalance over his impending death drains some of the rage out of the souls of those watching the proceedings. In the arena's exterior, many

humans gaze at his face with gloomy expressions.

"This demon bastard... he doesn't even care if he lives or dies."

"I wanted to hear him beg for mercy! Can't believe he's taking all the fun out of this."

"Maybe Neil is right." Another person says. "Death is too quick an end for him. Jason should send him to the mines. Then we can visit him sometime and give him a good beating..."

As a full minute drags on, Jason wrestles with what to do or not do. Finally, he comes to a decision.

Neil's manipulating me. But... if I need to choose between pleasing my allies or my enemies, I'll always pick the former. Beelzebub deserves death.

He firms up his resolve, then shoots Neil a death-glare.

"I've made my decision. Beelzebub will die... and I will be the one to execute him."

Phoebe's eyes widen. "You will? Jason... you don't need to go that far."

"I do." Jason says, directing his words to not just Phoebe, but the entire audience as well. "Beelzebub's apology absolves him of nothing. It even feels like a slap in the face to those he killed. He's not even regretful of killing them, only that he was 'wrong' in how he pursued his goal."

The Wordsmith puffs out his chest.

"I'm glad you apologized, Beelzebub. I'm glad you've realized the error of your ways. But no apology will undo the damage you've done. For the sake of everyone's future... you have to die today. We have to put your past actions behind us so we can look to the future."

Beelzebub listens to Jason's words. He nods. "I understand. Do what you must."

Jason focuses his mind. He utters a Word of Power.

"Teleport."

The Wordsmith vanishes from the jury platform, then reappears a short distance from Beelzebub. He looks the murderer who killed his daughter in the eyes.

"You will be the first to die today, Beelzebub." Jason says. "Your punishment will set an example-"

Just as Jason is about to issue his final speech, a cry of excitement rings out in his Mind Realm.

"Ah! A friend!!!"

Jason chokes on his words, confused by the speaker. "Huh??"

At that moment, the Wordsmith's body begins to glow with a blood-red light. The spectators watch in surprise as a fiery domain bursts into existence around him, engulfing the entire confession platform along with Beelzebub and Yamir both!

"Aargh!" Yamir exclaims, as the scorching heat washes across his fur. "Jason-aaargh!"

He quickly leaps backward and hurtles off the platform, flopping into the grass to roll around and pat himself down. At the same time, the Wordsmith stands just a few feet apart from Beelzebub, his eyes widening in horror.

"Shit! Phoenix, what are you doing?!"

The cry of an ancient bird resonates within Jason's body!

"Friend! I smell a friend! He's my friend! Eeee!!!"

A bright red orb fires out of Jason's chest and rockets toward Beelzebub's heart. The Duke of Inferno doesn't even get an instant to react before that light explodes against his ribcage, sending him hurtling backward off the stage!

"Ahh!"

Beelzebub cries out more in surprise than pain as the Phoenix's aura floods his internal structure!

"No!" Jason shouts, his eyes widening in horror. "Dammit, dammit! He's not a friend, he's an enemy, Phoenix! STOP!"

But Jason's words don't slow down the primordial entity in the slightest. Beelzebub's aura soars into the heavens!

His skin shifts from a pale creamy color to a faint pink, then blood-red!

His ears begin to stretch outward, turning pointy... and two massive horns erupt from the sides of his skull!

The Duke of Inferno rebirths due to the power of Nirvana, reawakening his demonic power, even as his strength shoots into the stratosphere!

His withered arms fully regenerate, allowing him to snap the chains binding him as if they were made of tofu. He stands up, his power startling everyone present.

Yardrat jumps to his feet. He gasps at the sight before him.

"Beelzebub... he's regained his power!"

Kristoff's pupils shrink to pinpricks.

"No, it's more than that! He's attained the rank of Emperor!"

The audience watches in horror and excitement, depending on their affiliation, as they realize the truth that has appeared before their eyes.

The Emperor of Hellfire has arisen.

Part 421: EMPEROR OF HELLFIRE

Recommended Listening

Beelzebub, the Emperor of Hellfire, arises from the bottom of the platform. He levitates a few feet off the ground, an incredulous expression on his face as he gazes at his healed arms. A mixture of emotions washes across his face, all while his captors gaze at him with looks of abject horror.

"I've... evolved... to Emperor? I have powers again? But... why?"

In the brief instants after his empowerment, nobody moves a muscle. Nobody says a word, too shocked by the sudden situation they've found themselves watching.

Until Neil Adams jumps out of his seat. He claps his palm against his chest, initiating his armor's activation.

"All personnel!" He barks into his helmet. "This is a red-level emergency! Beelzebub has evolved to Emperor! ATTACK! Kill that murdering monster!"

His words break the spell placed on humanity's minds. Under Neil's verbal command, all of their T-REX's activate at the same time, enveloping humanity's soldiers and civilians inside protective membranes of nanite armor. The soldiers immediately take action, with any soldiers wearing flight-capable Hummer Exosuits taking to the skies, while the rest race into the arena, climb its walls, or jump onto transport ships to go over the walls.

Beelzebub quickly realizes what has just happened. He turns to the Wordsmith on the platform with a blank look. "What did you do to me? Why did you restore my-"

Before he can finish his sentence, Beelzebub detects a movement in the sky, an object racing toward him from above.

"Oh, shit."

Archangel Uriel crashes directly into Beelzebub, her body acting like a living wrecking ball as she envelops herself in projected holy armor. She strikes Beelzebub like a cannonball, hitting him with the full force of Heaven's might!

BOOOM!!

Beelzebub's body explodes under her terrific power! A cone of blood and bone sprays backward, splattering the audience behind him and making them scream in fright.

"Holy shit!"

"Satan the Devil! She fuckin' killed Beelzebub!!"

Henry, seated close to the front row, gets more than he bargained for as Beelzebub's entrails spray his face and body, with several fragmented pieces of bones even stabbing into his skin, though their small size prevents any serious injuries.

"Aargh!" Henry exclaims, more in terror than pain. "Wh-what the hell?!"

Humanity's soldiers arrive shortly behind Uriel as she jumps to her feet and gazes at the vibrating slushie of blood and bone beneath her feet.

"The demon is regenerating!"

Despite the horrific manner in which Uriel killed Beelzebub, it doesn't take even a single second before the newly minted Emperor of Hellfire begins rapidly pulling himself back together. Uriel's eyes widen as his blood 'magnetically' draws back together, sliding between her feet and coalescing rapidly into a pool of plasma.

By the gods! Raphael exclaims. This regeneration speed! 'Tis far faster than even Satan's was!

Satan required a full minute before his body would put itself back together. Michael observes. But Beelzebub...

The Archangel of Courage doesn't finish his thought, nor does he need to. His brothers and sister easily understand the implication hidden within his words.

Not even ten seconds later, Beelzebub's remains yank back together from all across the audience, and he rebuilds himself back to his former self, reappearing completely naked just a few feet before Uriel.

"Ah, shit! Shit..." Beelzebub curses. "That hurt! Why did you attack without waiting for me to explai-"

Uriel doesn't wait for Beelzebub to explain himself. She once again rushes toward him while humanity's Hummer Soldiers take aim with their sniper rifles from elevated positions.

Two hundred bullets fire at Beelzebub. With his newly enhanced Emperor abilities, he immediately detects their imminent arrival and frowns.

Foop!

Beelzebub vanishes!

He fireports to a new position a short distance away, atop a cluster of burning grass ignited by Jason's earlier fire domain. At the same time, Uriel strikes his previous position with a conjured spear of light, but only ends up swiping the air uselessly.

"Bloodskin!" Uriel roars, swiveling to face him. "Stand still and accept thy death!"

At the same time, Belial leaps from the platform above. She rushes toward Beelzebub, transforming her fingers into knives while also stretching out her arms.

"You won't leave here alive, Beelzebub!"

Jason follows the action with his eyes. He balls up his fists in rage.

"Phoenix! What the hell are you thinking?! You gave Beelzebub his powers back, you idiot!!"

He realizes, all too late, that Beelzebub's flame powers must have aligned with the Phoenix's element enough to agitate her. However, the ethereal fire-bird's response when she flies back to Jason baffles him.

"That person is my friend! Cheeurp!! He has a feather in his heart!"

Slightly taken aback, Jason frowns. "What? A feather? A Phoenix Feather?"

"That's right! Fire-friend is my friend! He has a good heart! He is not a bad guy!"

"That's not right." Jason answers. "He's a monster! He's killed millions!"

Simultaneously, on the Jury Platform above, Neil Adams watches as his troops organize and rush to Beelzebub's position. Some stop to evacuate the audience of criminals, though their lives are hardly any sort of priority since most of them were sentenced to die anyway. If a bunch of them do perish, humanity's military commander will barely care, let alone shed a tear over their sad fates.

"Creator Demila!" Neil says, turning to the Psion. "Can you assist us in taking down this rogue Emperor?"

However, what Neil finds leaves him slightly confused. Demila appears completely uninterested in the battle below. Instead, her eyes gaze upward in the general direction of

the sky.

[The affairs of mud-dwellers have nothing to do with me.] Demila states. [If humanity cannot handle a single errant Emperor, you will not be any use in the great war against the Plague. Handle this matter yourself.]

Neil's expression flickers with suspicion. Something about the position of Demila's head irks him, though he can't figure out exactly why.

"...Alright. Suit yourself. It's better if we don't rely on aliens to solve our problems, anyway."

He and Chadwick kick into full gear to coordinate their attack on the newly uplifted Emperor, all while Demila continues to gaze up into the sky.

Was it my imagination? I seemed to have sensed a certain disturbance in the Void...

Belial, Uriel, and humanity's soldiers lunge toward Beelzebub to kill him and fire bullets to try and pin him down. However, Beelzebub easily evades their movements by exploding his body into vaporous flames, then shimmying around their attacks to appear here and there.

"Blast it, won't you people stop for five seconds?! Let me speak!"

"Thou art speaking now!" Uriel roars. "We simply do not wish to hear thy words!"

She and Belial slash at Beelzebub, gradually growing more used to his tricky dodges, his fiery teleportation, and his regenerative abilities. After more than a minute of chasing his after-image, Belial succeeds in landing a blow. She slashes with her claws and tears off Beelzebub's left arm, making him scream in pain.

"Aaargh! Damn, that hurt, woman!"

For a brief moment, Beelzebub realizes that this is the first time he has felt pain since his ascension to Duke some six years earlier. He doesn't get time to think further about this topic though, as Belial and Uriel press their advantage!

Beelzebub's arm regenerates by bursting out of his shoulder in a fiery explosion. He ignites fire under his feet, then flies into the sky, rocketing upward to evade his enemies. Uriel flaps her wings and gives chase, while Belial needs to take a half-minute to transform into her Pure Succubus form.

Before Beelzebub can make a 'clean escape' he abruptly stops as he slams into an invisible wall.

Splat!

Beelzebub's hundred-mile-an-hour flight upward comes to an instant stop. He pancakes against the wall in a somewhat comical manner, with several of his bones shattering on impact!

"Guk!"

The Emperor of Hellfire's vision momentarily goes dark before he regenerates and finds himself face to face with a familiar enemy.

"Where do you think YOU'RE going?!" Blinker shouts, pulling back her fist and lunging it toward his face.

A telekinetic-empowered punch slams into Beelzebub's head, shatters his skull, and sprays his brains backward in a disgusting mess of gore.

Beelzebub awakens on the ground beneath Uriel's feet. She stands atop the Emperor of Hellfire's prone form with her spear of light raised overhead.

Beelzebub's heart skips a beat.

Shit.

She stabs her spear downward, impaling his head and killing him again.

When he regenerates, she impales him again!

And again!!

Each time Beelzebub recovers, he barely gets a second to react before a spear of light kills him. He doesn't get a chance to cast any magic or protect himself!

Uriel sneers.

"This bastard may regenerate endlessly, but I shall be happy to spend the rest of eternity killing him!"

Blinker hovers behind Uriel, her fairy body now human-sized. "This isn't working! He just keeps coming back! Beelze-buster's healing factor is even stronger than when he was a Duke!"

"That matters not!" Uriel roars. "Every bloodskin has a limit! Even Satan the Devil perished in the end! So too shalt this heretic!"

Just as Uriel starts to raise her spear again...

Foop!

She, Blinker, and Belial all teleport away from Beelzebub, reappearing a hundred feet in the opposite direction.

Disoriented, they blink in surprise, only to see the Wordsmith now standing over Beelzebub's prone figure.

"You're wasting your time." Jason says, the expression on his face telling a story of an unspoken secret. **"Suppress! Bind! Imprison!"**

When Beelzebub next regenerates, he finds himself temporarily powerless, his abilities completely sealed! Only his innate healing factor remains, but even that seems slightly more sluggish.

"Ugh! Ah, fuck! That hurts! That *really* hurts!" Beelzebub screams. "Stop killing me for just a minute, please! Let me speak!"

Jason stands over the newly minted demon elite laying on the ground. His cold expression gives no hints, but it also appears that he isn't quite ready to finish off the Emperor of Hellfire.

"Of all the dumb luck in the universe, the Creator had to pick me as the unwitting deliveryman for your ultimate power-up."

Beelzebub grits his teeth. The phantom pain from his recent executions continues to haunt him, but he manages to look up at Jason and force what he hopes is a 'pleasant smile.'

"Hey... Jason. Can you tell me what happened? Why did you... fix me?"

"I didn't." Jason says coldly. "Not intentionally. It just so happens I recently came into contact with... the Phoenix. And now I see that you also have a sliver of the Phoenix's power inside yourself."

"The Phoenix?" Beelzebub asks. "But that... that can't be right. Why would I have a primordial spirit inside my body?"

"I don't know." Jason mutters. "The last person to possess the Phoenix, that I know of, was an ancient Valkyrie named Catherine. But she died long, long before you were born. Maybe a fucking feather fell out of the sky and touched you or something. I have no idea."

Jason turns his attention to the audience, where humanity's soldiers continue rushing the accused and condemned out to safety. Then he looks at the hundreds of troopers hovering in the sky, all of their weapons trained on Beelzebub's position.

From the jury panel, Neil shouts down at Jason. "Did I just hear you correctly, Jason? You gave Beelzebub back his powers?!"

"Not... intentionally..." Jason repeats through gritted teeth. "It was an accident."

"Another accident!" Neil exclaims, his words transmitting to humanity's soldiers, allies, and enemies. "Always with the goddamned accidents! Well, don't just stand there! Kill him already!"

Jason's expression turns glum.

He stares at Beelzebub, now laying motionless at his feet, gazing up at him expectantly.

Fuck you, Neil. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck YOU. You think I don't want to kill this piece of shit?! It's all I want! But now that's basically impossible!

A deep sense of despair engulfs the Wordsmith's heart.

Idiot Phoenix. I can't believe you tied Beelzebub's power to the Cube! Now, every time he regenerates, he does so by drawing upon its primordial energy. Even if he regenerates a million times, it won't drain even a fraction of the Cube's power! As potent as Beelzebub's Emperor-level regeneration might have been under ordinary circumstances, the Cube has supercharged it!

Jason's fingers twitch.

Luckily, the blackheart hasn't figured out this fact yet. He has no way of knowing the Cube has given him access to the same wellspring of energy I now pull from. He could obliterate this entire fucking planet if he detonated his body a second time!

With a heavy heart, Jason turns to look at Uriel, Blinker, and Belial. He gazes into their eyes with a look of futility, making each of them frown. Then he turns his attention back to Neil.

"It's... not that simple."

"What do you mean?" Neil asks, unaware of Jason's inner thoughts. "Even if he regenerates a thousand times, we can just keep killing him."

"No." Jason murmurs. "We can only imprison Beelzebub moving forward. I don't have any other options. Nobody here, not even Creator Demila, is capable of killing Beelzebub. As for the reason why... I can't say."

Demila continues to sit in the same spot as always. However, she slowly frowns at the Wordsmith's words.

[You say I cannot kill that feeble little mud-dweller? I would watch your words if I were in your position, Wordsmith.]

"Don't misunderstand." Jason replies, raising his voice so the others can more clearly hear him. "You *can* kill Beelzebub. Anyone here can. But it won't matter. His regenerative factor has reached an unprecedented level. Even Satan the Devil would stand in awe of Beelzebub's healing abilities."

Demila's expression flickers.

[Because of the... Phoenix? And what might that be?]

Having heard Jason's words earlier, Demila possesses a small amount of understanding toward Beelzebub's changed situation, but she quickly recognizes the Wordsmith is hiding an important secret from her. With her lightning-fast thoughts, the high-ranking Volgrim delegate begins to realize that whatever secret Jason is hiding, it must be something her superiors would desperately want to know about.

Unable to read the Wordsmith's mind, she instead tries looking into Phoebe's thoughts, but Jason's wife exercises remarkable mental discipline by dwelling almost exclusively on her hatred for Beelzebub and the pain she felt at her daughter's loss.

In the time it takes Jason to formulate a quick response, Demila quickly combs over the minds of humanity's other top leaders. She discovers a few surprising hints.

Hmm? So those rumors of a 'super-weapon' weren't for nothing... but why do so many of these mud-dwellers share the same mental image of a 'Cube'?

"It's complicated." Jason says, taking care not to express too many details. "Through an unexpected coincidence, Beelzebub has regained his former abilities, but they have also been somewhat empowered. Now... I don't know what to do with him."

Beelzebub listens to the Wordsmith speak. As he does, a deep sense of shame washes across him.

"You... didn't give me my abilities back on purpose." Beelzebub mutters. "I thought that perhaps you had decided to show me mercy."

"When it comes to you," Jason replies, "that word isn't even in my vocabulary."

For a brief moment, the surroundings quiet down. With Beelzebub bound by magical chains, suppressed, and laying on the ground without even trying to resist, people begin to realize he may not have intended to start flinging fireballs the instant he got his powers back.

"You know..." Beelzebub says quietly, breaking the silence, "I meant what I said earlier, Jason. I'm sorry for what I've done. If I had known six years ago what I know now, I would have walked a different path in life."

"And how does that matter at all?" Jason asks. "What-ifs won't bring my daughter back. They won't bring anyone back!"

"No. They won't." Beelzebub admits. "But... all this time, haven't you been advocating for giving demonkind a second chance? Maybe I am truly irredeemable... but now that I have regained my powers... I don't want to die anymore."

"So you intend to fight." Jason says.

"Not fight, no." Beelzebub answers, shifting his body so he can get a better look at the Wordsmith. "Look, a few minutes ago, I was nothing. My existence no longer had any meaning. I was weak and useless! But now, I've become stronger than ever! I will promise to you personally that I won't fight you ever again! I will never again hurt a human! I will spend the rest of my life trying to make up my actions to the people I've hurt!"

Beelzebub grits his teeth.

"I just want to see everyone live well! I want my fellow demons to live good lives! I opposed you because Ose convinced me you were lying. Don't you want to prove your sincerity toward demonkind? Forgive me, and forgive all those who were deceived by Ose! Put slave collars on us if you must! Just give us a chance to prove that we can redeem ourselves!"

"Slave collars?" Jason grimaces. "That's abhorrent. I would never create such devices."

"I'm only giving an example." Beelzebub replies. "With my power, I... I could protect humanity! I could save people! Would you rather see me dead, or would you rather I

continue living and putting my abilities to good use? Give me a chance, Jason! Give everyone a chance!"

Jason stares at the demon who murdered his daughter. He gazes at Beelzebub's hateful face, his pleading expression, uncertain of what to do.

He doesn't want to forgive Beelzebub. But even as Beelzebub speaks, Jason begins to feel the effects of his suppressive spells weakening.

I can't kill him. Jason thinks. I can't even suppress him for long. My power comes from the Cube, but so does his. Eventually, he's going to break free. If I want to keep Beelzebub suppressed, I'll have to Wordsmith onto him every five or ten minutes for the rest of my life! I'd be better off destroying the Cube and killing him afterward!

He chews his lower lip and looks away, falling deep into thought.

If I forgive Beelzebub, what will happen next? Even just standing here and giving him a chance to speak is implying to everyone watching that I'm thinking of taking his side. But I'm not! How could I ever?!

From within Jason's Mind Realm, Fiona speaks.

"We don't have a choice anymore, Jason. You cannot hold Beelzebub down forever, nor can you keep killing him for the rest of eternity. You also can't simply destroy the Cube, either. We still need it for our own purposes."

So, that's it, then? Jason asks. *We just have to let him go and hope he keeps to his word?*

"Not necessarily." Fiona says. "We can still put some safety countermeasures in place..."

As she continues speaking, Jason's eyebrows raise intensely.

Oh. That's... quite interesting.

He looks down at the Emperor of Hellfire.

"I will not forgive you, Beelzebub. But... you do make a good point. I have always said people should be given second chances. So... I will follow my heart on this matter."

He turns to address the audience of prisoners, though few remain following their evacuation, the Jury of Thirty, and the citizens outside the arena, all of whom now wear exosuits.

"...I am going to set all of the prisoners free." Jason says, causing countless people to gasp and shriek in rage. "If I must free the worst monster from Stormbringer, then I cannot in good conscience punish those who committed lesser crimes."

He pauses.

"However. I will not let them dance off into the sunset. I am going to place down some harsh restrictions and conditions. Those who hurt our species during Stormbringer, no matter their identity or previous judgment, will lead difficult lives moving forward. I will not give them a free pass."

Neil slants his eyebrows as the Wordsmith begins to detail his plans for the demons and human traitors. The more Jason speaks, the more shocked Neil becomes.

"Jason! What are you doing?!" Neil shouts. "You're... you're undermining the entire Tribunal!"

The Wordsmith gazes up at the man on the platform above.

"I know, Neil. I wouldn't do it if I had any other choice."

He shakes his head.

"But in the end... it's my decision to make. I *am* the Wordsmith, after all."

Neil's eyes flicker as he digests the realization Jason just put his foot down in a public manner, showing a significant amount of backbone for the first time in ages...

"Maybe so... but you are not the *only* Wordsmith."

Phoebe, unaware of her husband's internal conversation with Fiona, can only try to objectively assess his thought process, all while wondering why he didn't even bother consulting her.

A realization strikes her.

Jason must have no other option. I know he'd never consider giving Beelzebub a chance at redemption. As for why he's made these other concessions, it can only mean he must worry about someone else finding out the truth behind Beelzebub's power.

Phoebe turns her head to the side. She looks for Creator Demila, hoping that perhaps she might glean a clue from Demila's expression.

Instead, she discovers that, at some unknown moment in the last few minutes...

Demila has disappeared.

Phoebe's heart drops into her stomach. She looks around the Jury of Thirty for Demila, but doesn't see the Psion anywhere.

"Shit. Where did she go?!"

Part 422: Demila's Disappearance

In front of the entire audience of onlookers, Jason Hiro proceeds to spend three full minutes elaborating on the conditions required for the release of Stormbringer's perpetrators. Under his logic, if Beelzebub cannot be executed, then Stormbringer's lesser criminals also must not be executed.

However, the Wordsmith will not allow these people to walk free and clear. He rattles off a list of stipulations, among which include:

All of them must voluntarily allow Words of Power to be placed upon their vessels. Jason's spell will cause them to suffer soul-wracking pain if they think even one thought that might cause harm to humanity or its allies.

The spell will also instantly kill them, and obliterate their souls, if they take any direct action to harm humanity. Those who might be capable of enduring the prior pain might be able to press on with their dastardly plans, so this is the final backup.

None may ever again hold a position of power in human, monster, or demon society.

Demons will not be allowed to mutate into higher levels of power.

Jason continues outlining more than a dozen rules. Each one suppresses the Stormbringer traitors on a deep level, making it harder and harder for them to gain a drop of leverage in their respective societies, moving forward.

Some of them complain. To those who do, the Wordsmith merely looks at them with a cold glare.

"I am the Wordsmith. I hold the final say. If you have a problem with these conditions, we can revise your sentencing back to slavery or death. Is that what you would prefer?"

All complaints from the accused vanish as they realize Beelzebub's evolution has given them another chance at life and freedom, even if through an incredibly tight and controlled method. Not only will they have to work to rebuild human society through their own efforts, but they will never again rise to obtain prestige and benefits from their species, or those of the other species.

Neil protests. He speaks up for the 'common man,' arguing that Jason is doing this due to secretly sympathizing with the demons. What he receives back from Jason is little more

than another icy stare.

"Always, it's the same with you, Neil." Jason says. "I would like unity with demonkind. I would like to forgive old wounds. I would also like to kill all those who harmed humanity during Stormbringer. But the fact remains that I cannot easily kill Beelzebub right now. The cost would be too high. And if I cannot kill him, why should those who have committed lesser crimes die? You and I are both men with a humane side. Perhaps, as Beelzebub has said, it would be better to give the demons one last shot at witnessing our benevolence?"

Jason sighs.

"Beelzebub might live on, but I assure you... this Word of Power will unleash excruciating, hellish pain the likes of which you can't imagine."

He looks at the demon bound at his feet.

"I'll give you a choice, Beelzebub. I can work with Blinker to create a formation capable of imprisoning you for all eternity, or I can let you go free under the stipulation you will suffer lava-like agony when your thoughts turn evil. Which would you prefer?"

"The latter." Beelzebub says without hesitation, looking up at the Wordsmith evenly. "I won't deny I have acted reprehensibly. But if you give me a second chance, I will *not* disappoint you."

Jason stares at Beelzebub for several long seconds. The pain of losing his daughter echoes in his chest. His ribs creak, and his stomach clenches.

In all his life, nothing has hurt Jason as much as the pain of letting his daughter's killer walk free. Every muscle in his body, every instinct screams at him to unleash a blast of holy magic and eradicate Beelzebub down to his cells.

But Jason knows that might not kill him.

And, as angry as the Wordsmith is, he can't help but feel that Beelzebub's offer does come from a place of genuine regret.

Perhaps, if Jason were to attack him, but Beelzebub were to regenerate, that regret might shift to a much more negative emotion. He might try fighting back.

And if he did?

The entire planet would be at risk.

No longer can Beelzebub's power be calculated in the ranks of Emperors. Perhaps he might even possess a strength not unlike the so-called Demon Deity, all because of accidentally tapping into the power of the Phoenix and Cube.

As Jason wrestles with his thoughts, Beelzebub frowns.

"If it would make you feel better... you can kill me a couple of times. It'll hurt like hell, but it might make things a little less... awkward between us."

"Don't fucking tempt me!" Jason hisses through his teeth, while averting his eyes. "Fuck. If you think this decision isn't the hardest choice I've ever made... **Release.**"

Jason simply lets Beelzebub go. He destroys the restraints holding Beelzebub prisoner, allowing the Emperor of Hellfire to sag to the ground and exhale a sigh of relief.

"Well. That feels better..." Beelzebub murmurs.

"Don't you make me regret this." Jason whispers to him. "If you ever harm a hair on anyone else's head... I don't care what it takes. I will kill you a billion times, imprison you inside a black hole... I'll go to any length to ensure you stay dead."

Beelzebub slowly climbs to his feet. He eyes the Wordsmith with caution, then slowly nods.

"I know, Jason. I know."

Jason quietly clenches his jaw. Mentioning a black hole makes him think of alternate ways he could kill Beelzebub, but without any guarantees, he doesn't want to take that risk.

Besides. Jason thinks. Putting Beelzebub in a black hole might kill him, but he might also keep reviving inside and draining the Cube's energy until it runs bone-dry. Then humanity will truly be screwed. We need that goddamned Cube if we want to survive the coming era of chaos.

The crowd outside the stadium yells and screams, with many people enraged by Jason's betrayal of the Tribunal and his taking matters into his own hands. Despite this fact, Neil assumes command of the soldiers and has them quell the crowd's rage. He swallows his own anger and calms himself down, turning to the projector to address the crowd.

"Everyone. I am no happier than you about the Wordsmith's declaration, but he does have a point. If we do not punish the worst offender of Stormbringer, it would not sit right

with me to punish the lesser criminals. Furthermore, he is the Wordsmith, and he holds ultimate power. We owe Jason Hiro our lives! We should be thanking him for the honor of serving at his behest!"

Neil's words of 'praise' ring hollow in Jason's ears. He frowns as he detects the hidden malice behind Neil's careful phrasing, and how he takes great care to heap all of the blame for this incident on Jason's shoulders.

At the same time, the Wordsmith recalls his conversation with Unarin.

When the time comes... will you kill Neil Adams? Or will you step aside and let him lead in your stead?

Jason clenches his jaw. *I want to kill him. I want to kill Beelzebub. All this shit is getting fucking tiresome! Killing these people would get them out of my hair, but it would also turn the situation into a complicated mess! It's so frustrating!!*

Jason calms his mind and heart. Realizing the situation is what it is, he turns to Beelzebub.

"Alright. Remember, you agreed to this."

"I will not forget." Beelzebub says, eying the Wordsmith with a nebulous expression. He remains quiet for a moment before averting his eyes. "You really are a better man than me, Jason Hiro."

"You're not a man at all." Jason snaps. "You're a demon."

"You know what I meant." Beelzebub replies.

After a moment of awkward silence, Jason begins to Wordsmith.

"Conjure. Limit. Compress. Seal. Punish. Pain. Agony. Trigger..."

Unsure how exactly his magic will fare, Jason has never actually performed this complex a series of Words of Power before. In total, he strings together thirty-two words into what he hopes will be an effective spell capable of inflicting agony upon Beelzebub should he turn against humanity.

The Wordsmith pauses after weaving his spells.

"...I just realized I don't know how I should test this."

Beelzebub shrugs. "It should be a simple matter, yes? All I have to do is think about burning a bunch of humans ali-AAAARRGH OH DEVILS!"

The Emperor of Hellfire crumples into his shadow and convulses on the platform, screaming and howling in agony as a torrent of lava scorches his cells, burns his pain receptors, and makes him feel as if an eldritch monster has assaulted his very soul.

It takes a full thirty seconds before the pain subsides, leaving Beelzebub twitching and spasming, all of his previous haughty and confident aura utterly gone.

"No... more... hurts..." Beelzebub whimpers like a beaten dog.

Jason smacks his lips, but says nothing out loud.

Actually? That felt pretty satisfying. I hope he does think about killing a few humans in the future. I wouldn't mind hearing his screams more often.

He stifles a chuckle, in spite of the atmosphere surrounding the arena, then turns his expression grave.

"Looks like that worked well, Beelzebub. On a scale of one to ten-"

"Forty-seven." Beelzebub hisses through his teeth. "It felt like a forty-seven on the pain scale."

"Damn. Maybe pain is actually more effective than I first expected..." Jason says, as several odd thoughts occur to him.

Pain, even if only imagined and not something that will leave a permanent injury on the body, can still prove beneficial to me in all sorts of circumstances. An Emperor in pain can't focus their mind to cast spells. A Psion might also be unable to use their abilities, too. Maybe I could cripple my worst enemies and leave them collapsed on the dirt in a heap?

Thinking of Psions, Jason turns his attention to the Jury of Thirty, only to finally notice a certain someone has disappeared.

Hm? Where did Demila go?

Jason flicks his eyes around, but he doesn't spot the Psion anywhere in plain sight. Momentarily stumped, Jason starts to cast a Word of Power, only for his wife to come jogging over to him.

"Jason! Jason!"

"What is it, Phoebe?" Jason asks.

His wife pauses to look past him at Beelzebub, who has barely managed to pull himself together and rise to a standing position.

"...Phoebe." Beelzebub coughs.

"Beelzebub." Phoebe replies.

The two wordlessly look at each other for a moment, until Phoebe shakes her head, grabs Jason's arm, and pulls him aside.

After taking Jason to a slightly less populated area, the woman looks at her husband.

"Privacy. Now."

Sensing the urgency in Phoebe's voice, Jason nods. **"Barrier. Silence. Warding. Camouflage..."**

He casts a dozen Words of Power, but even as the world seemingly completely vanishes from view, leaving him and his wife standing in a pitch-black void, Jason doubts Creator Demila doesn't have a way to see through his protections. Surely, with as accomplished an 'investigator' as she is...

Phoebe gnaws on her lower lip. "Demila's gone."

"I noticed. Is that a problem?" Jason asks.

"It's a goddamn big one, if my hunch is right. I think she might know about the Cube."

Jason's heart drops into his shoes. However, he quickly recovers.

"I thought she might. I didn't take enough precautions..."

Phoebe sighs. "It's not your fault."

"You're wrong." Jason retorts. "It's entirely my fault. We're dealing with Psions who can read minds. Before Demila showed up, I should have put Words of Power in place to protect all of humanity's leaders. I have Fiona and the Phoenix to protect me, but you don't, and you know *all* about the Cube. We have to expect Demila knows everything."

"Even if Demila couldn't pluck the information from my mind, there's also Neil, Chadwick, Blinker, and several others." Phoebe says. "The question is... what do we do now?"

Jason's shoulders sag. He glances around the small void encompassing himself and his wife with a look of despair.

"I don't know, Phoebe. I don't know. Unarin is right. I'm a useless leader. I can't protect anyone. I accidentally gave back Beelzebub his powers, while also binding his existence to the fucking Cube. So now he's not only as strong as an Emperor, but he's also been supercharged by the Cube."

Phoebe's eyes darken. "I thought something like that might be the case, though I wasn't sure of the details. Do... do you think Beelzebub is a threat?"

"Of *course* he's a threat!" Jason exclaims in exasperation. He throws his hands up in the air. "I have to trust he'll be a good boy, but now Beelzebub possesses enough mana to blow up this whole planet, and maybe even the entire star system! He's not something we can easily handle anymore."

To Phoebe's credit, she quickly pieces together all of the disparate happenings of the last hour. She realizes the possibilities, and that makes her even more frightened than Jason.

"Unarin wouldn't give you Excalibur. He feared your Wordsmithing would become too powerful if you possessed a magical object with immense amounts of mana you could pull from. But soon he'll probably learn you already *have* such an object in your grasp."

"And it's just floating up in fucking space!" Jason sighs. "What do we do? Neil's surely going to go on the warpath after this. Hope is still missing..."

"Can you locate Demila?" Phoebe asks.

Jason pauses.

"...Probably. But if I look for her, she might detect my soul approaching."

"We need to know if she's out there in space." Phoebe says. "If you discover her near the Cube, that will at least give us a definitive answer."

"Maybe..." Jason mutters.

He pauses for several seconds while his brain whirrs into action.

"Projection."

Jason beams Fiona into the material realm, allowing her to appear so she and Phoebe can work together.

"Hey, me." Fiona says.

"Hey, me." Phoebe says.

The two of them exchange an awkward smile at their 'joke' before getting down to business.

"I agree with Phoebe." Fiona says, surprising nobody. "Jason, I'll take over your body while you're gone. Try to 'Locate' Demila, and the moment you find her, come right back."

"That was my plan." Jason says. "But first, some heavy precautions..."

The Wordsmith begins casting several Words of Power, this time targeting his soul.

"Reinforce. Illusory. Transient. Stealth..."

He places all sorts of abilities on his soul, temporary measures that will fade after a day or so, but might make his presence more difficult to detect. Then, he nods at his wife.

"Wish me luck."

The two of them exchange a kiss, and Jason closes his eyes.

"Locate."

A tugging sensation pulls at his soul...

The Wordsmith's mind leaps from his body. It races into the sky at a speed unquantifiable by the limits of temporal physics. Even so, he remains perfectly aware of his surroundings and ends up racing well beyond the confines of Tarus II's local gravity well.

"What the hell?" Jason asks himself, as he travels across the Void into the depths of space. He not only begins quickly leaving his world's immediate vicinity, but the entire Star System itself!

"Demila isn't anywhere near Tarus II?" Jason asks himself rhetorically. "Where is she?"

The further Jason travels, the faster his speed becomes. In a period of just five short minutes, the Wordsmith rockets past a blinding array of stars. He enters a region of space he quickly recognizes.

"P-space? Does my soul travel through P-space when I use 'Locate'?"

Having only actually used the spell a handful of times in the past, and having only really traveled across the galaxy once or twice, Jason always found the previous

expeditions confusing. But now, as he enters a place where space itself has been compressed, he realizes the distant stars have become much larger and have pulled much closer together than they ever should in real-space.

Jason frowns.

What is P-space anyway? Why does it exist on a dimension adjacent to ours, yet it clearly operates on completely different gravitic principles?

Before long, Jason arrives near one of the many stars populating P-space. He exits P-space and arrives inside a star system as boring and ordinary as any other. In real-space, the distance between planets, stars, and entire star systems is actually so vast it would boggle any human's mind. Even in the Sol system, travel between Earth and Mars would require months of time at velocities lower than the speed of light.

So, when Jason doesn't immediately notice any planets nearby, he doesn't pay much attention to this fact. Most planets appear little more than specks to human vision, no different from the vast array of stars in the nearby galaxy arm. Even with his improved soul-vision, Jason can't make any out.

But that doesn't affect the trajectory of Jason's soul-form. Due to the power of his Locate spell, he continues homing in on an unknown location amidst the void.

"I don't get it..." Jason says to nobody in particular. "Demila came all the way here? But... why? And how? I must have traveled a few thousand light-years. Is she a master of spatial transference, like Dosena and Nufaris? She hasn't been gone ten minutes!"

The Wordsmith's soul continues flying toward an unknown place. He frowns.

"Then again... she could have jumped to the Warpgates, stepped into the Core, and traveled to a different location by hijacking one of the Gates. I'll have to check and see if she made a 'request' to the personnel there."

Finally, Jason's flight speed slows down. He watches as a speck in the distance rapidly begins to enlarge, revealing a completely-brown planet, utterly barren and devoid of any natural life.

"Volgarius?" Jason guesses.

As he draws closer, the Wordsmith shakes his head.

"No. Not Volgarius. It's a mud-ball. There aren't any structures on the surface. I don't think I'm in the Volgarius system at all..."

He observes the distant star and mentally shrugs.

"Christ. All stars look the same to me. I need a reliable way of telling where the fuck I am in the galaxy. This is ridiculous!"

In the middle of ranting to himself, Jason suddenly stops mid-sentence. His soul turns cold as he senses a familiar emanation of energy up ahead.

"A Psion!" Jason softly exclaims, only to widen his eyes. "No, multiple Psions. A bunch of them! Holy shit... that's... that is a *lot* of Psions."

Jason's Word of Power finally deactivates, leaving him hovering just a few million miles away from the spherical mud-ball. A deep sense of danger rings in the Wordsmith's soul, making him feel incredibly wary about flying any further forward.

"This planet... it isn't ordinary..." Jason mumbles to himself. "There's something scary about it. Why would all these Psions be living here? Why not somewhere more prestigious, somewhere that has actual infrastructure on its surface? And why don't they seem to sense me yet? Even if my Wordsmithing is ten times more potent than I anticipated, at least one of them feels like an 8th-Level Psion... an Executor..."

Jason's discomfort grows by the second as he comes to a startling realization.

"This... this world might be a secret base of some sort. Something the Volgrim Empire doesn't want its enemies to see. Not me, not *anyone*. It's just my good luck Demila happened to head back here."

He pauses.

"...Or my bad luck. If they catch me, the Psions will probably rip me to shreds to hide whatever is down there."

For once, Jason hesitates.

Unsure of whether to move forward or pull back, his curiosity continues to increase as he flies around the sphere at speeds far beyond what a non-soul-entity could achieve. He examines it from all possible angles, his superior soul-vision allowing him to pick out plenty of details on its surface.

"Must be an underground complex. I don't see any obvious entrances, but my soul can pass through physical matter. I should take my time approaching and be ready to yank back to my body if someone detects me."

Jason nervously recalls the moment when Confessor Vulpanix detected his soul inside Marie Becker's laboratory and how easy it was for her to reach out and subdue him. His soul shudders at the thought of her or another horrifyingly powerful Psion latching their claws onto him.

"Yeah. Caution is the key word here." Jason mutters, steeling his resolve. "I *have* to know what's going on here."

And so, the Wordsmith begins making his way toward the planet's surface...

Part 423: Planet Mudball

Jason slowly begins to make his way toward the unknown world below. As he descends toward the ugly mud-ball, he calms his nerves by thinking about his tactical options.

I can't communicate with Fiona remotely. We don't have any way to talk to each other, not even if she tries to Wordsmith a connection. For some reason, my soul isn't receptive to my own Wordsmithing. But... if any of these Psions sense me, I can transmit a pulse of mana back to my body and alert her to recall me.

After his run-in with Mephisto during Stormbringer, where the necromancer nearly sucked Jason's soul into Valac's lantern, the Wordsmith decided he could never again skip having a contingency measure to save himself.

It's not much... but it's something.

The further Jason descends, the greater the details he can make out on Mudball's surface. Without an official name for the planet before him, he quickly takes to calling the ugly, amorphous blob of a world that without hesitation.

Interestingly, no matter where Jason directs his attention, all he sees is a massive, unending flatland of dirt and mud. Not a single mountain hangs on the horizon. Nothing taller than a fifty-meter hill, to be sure. No trees, no rocks, nothing of any interest, not even a basic landmark.

In fact, the more Jason observes the planet during his descent, the more he begins to think its complete lack of features may be its greatest asset.

"Hmm. This world isn't bland and lacking by accident. It's intentional. If one does not notice the massive amount of psionic energy signatures in the region, they won't think of this planet as anything but an ugly, featureless husk. I wonder if this planet even exists on any star maps..."

Finally, he breaches Mudball's upper atmosphere. A scorching hot breeze of nearly 500C (932F) washes across his soul. The heat doesn't hurt him or cause him any discomfort, but he certainly notices the irregularity. He also can't help but detect a surprising amount of humidity in the air, though it does not appear to be caused by any

sort of liquid water. Perhaps some other form of liquid, such as molten iron or something else.

Unfortunately, the Wordsmith's chemistry knowledge comes up sorely lacking. He hasn't a clue the temperatures needed to turn various alloys into free-floating liquids lingering in the sky. What he does know is that if he were not in his soul-form, he would be suffering immensely.

"Quite the hostile world." Jason remarks blandly. "Buuut... perhaps for a *Psion*, this is easily bearable. Or maybe they never need to step foot aboveground."

After patiently taking more than ten minutes to descend, Jason finally reaches Mudball's surface. He stops a few feet above the ground, noting the 'mud' is absolutely not just dirt and water, but something much more viscous that would happily cling to his fleshy leg and eat through his skin in half a second, something resembling molten brown lava.

"Delightful. Don't think I'll be taking Phoebe here for a vacation any time soon..."

Already, the distant sensations of psionic energy have become much more omnipresent, making him feel distinctly uncomfortable. Jason waits for several seconds, but not even one of those sensations pauses to linger on him, making him wonder why the usually-observant Psions haven't detected his presence.

Is it because I'm moving slowly? Not causing a fuss? But Vulpanix easily detected my soul-form... and there's at least one Executor's presence mixed among the others. I can't even count the number of 7th-Level Psions down there.

As uneasy as he felt before, Jason really begins debating returning back to Tarus II. However, the thought that Demila crossed several thousand lightyears in under ten minutes to arrive here makes him worry about her reason why.

"I have to know. I *have* to know what's down there..." Jason finally says, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Without any further hesitation, he levitates downward, passing through the planet's surface without resistance. A field of blackness instantly engulfs his vision, causing him to become completely blind. However, at the same time, with his eyes no longer distracted by the material realm, he becomes more able to detect the 'soul realm' in a manner not

dissimilar to how he located Ose on Tarus II during their confrontation more than two months earlier.

When his vision properly adjusts, Jason's heart turns to ice. Beneath him, a sea of white light glows in varying degrees of luminosity. This light, Jason quickly realizes, is not an actual sea, but a colossal, unthinkable number of souls, all pressed together tightly, each not even a meter apart from the other. While gaps do appear in their distribution, and thus the 'sea' itself, Jason finds these gaps to be eerily uniform, as if divided every so often by walls.

How many souls are there?! A million? A billion? God, there must be tens of billions down here! Why are there so many Psions living under Mudball's surface?!

Jason continues levitating downward, unsure of where to go. He takes his time, paying extra attention to the 'brightness' of the souls arrayed before him. He quickly realizes that the sea is not perfectly uniform, and some parts of it appear significantly duller than the rest. When he focuses on the dimmer souls, he comes up with a potential explanation.

The brighter the soul, the more powerful the Psion. Perhaps the dimmest ones are only 1st and 2nd Level Psions? The brightest ones might be 7th or 8th.

The closer Jason travels to the soul sea, the more skittish he becomes, like a frail rabbit descending into a pit of vipers. Any of the stronger Psions might be able to easily sense him, and considering how easily Vulpanix nearly ripped him apart...

All of a sudden, Jason's vision returns!

The omnipresent blackness of a seemingly infinite underground world of rock and dirt vanishes, temporarily startling him. He finds himself inside a steel-lined hallway deep within the planet's depths. The flat floor gives way to a three-meter-high ceiling, with angled walls sloped hexagonally to reinforce the underground structure, likely to prevent a collapse. In turn, this gives the hallway the feeling of being a 'tube' with annoyingly bright lights reflecting off the spit-polished surfaces.

Jason blinks his eyes several times, despite them only being soul-based. He looks around himself, uncertain where to go or what to do.

While he could descend underground and continue floating toward the souls beneath himself, that method never feels good, and he hates traveling through the planetary crust unless absolutely necessary.

I'll stick to the hallways, at least for now. Jason thinks. God, I hope I don't run into any Psions...

Tentatively, he begins floating to the left, deciding to go in that direction instead of the other, for no particular reason.

As Jason begins traveling the underground complex, he passes by various sealed doors, none of which open up for him, likely due to their inability to detect his soul. The Wordsmith hesitantly sticks his head through the doors, where he often finds storage rooms, supply closets, and other such things. Inside, various techy gadgets hang to the walls, their functions utterly foreign to him. Unable to reach out and touch them, Jason can only hazard random guesses as to their functions.

Maybe this is a janitor's closet? The Wordsmith thinks. Those might be cleaning tools or something...

The Wordsmith leaves the third random room, and the moment he flits outside, his heart leaps into his throat!

A Volgrim approaches him from down the hallway, but he quickly realizes they are not a Psion. Instead, they're very clearly a Technopath, someone levitating through the air, their torso severed and replaced with a floatation module. The Wordsmith stares, wide-eyed, as the Technopath hovers toward him.

Shit, shit, shit! What do I do? Can he see me?!

The Technopath flies directly toward Jason. Then... passes right through him.

Without so much as glancing in Jason's general direction, the Technopath levitates further down the hallway, eventually rounding a corner and disappearing.

Jason's metaphorical heart thumbs in his chest, though that sensation comes more from his human expectations than his soul's 'bodily capabilities'.

Jesus goddamned Christ. I nearly shit myself!

It takes him a good few minutes before he manages to calm down, but eventually, he does.

The Wordsmith continues levitating down the hall. Before long, he spots a pair of robots approaching him. The robot on the right sports eight tentacle-like appendages, the long limbs ending in a three-pronged 'hand' for gripping objects. The octo-bot's head features a single red iris, which looks past Jason, unable to detect his soul.

As for the robot on the left, it rolls around on treads and features a 'torso' about the size of a skinny flagpole, with two long and delicate-looking arms, likely intended for surgical precision or reaching into nooks and crannies.

These two odd-looking bots walk and roll past Jason, paying him no mind. It doesn't take long before Jason's advance starts to put him within the visual range of other robots and other Technopaths. Several dozen pass him over the next thirty minutes, making him frown.

So many Technopaths and robots... but not a single Psion?

Jason's confusion deepens. He arrives inside some sort of robotics laboratory where machinists weld robots together, wire their internals, program their code, and do all sorts of other tasks. Their projects lay scattered about hundreds of giant tables, with no cubicle walls or other barriers to divide all the workers from each other. The gigantic underground space gives Jason the chance to levitate to the ceiling some several hundred feet above, where he assumes a bird's-eye view.

Beneath Jason, thousands of Technopaths go about their day, oblivious to the soul watching them from above. Male and female Technopaths work together, often talking to each other about their work. Some conversations drift to the subject of the Volgrim Empire itself, but mostly these Technopaths seem content to not even bother talking about their motherworld.

Unfortunately, Jason's ability to understand the Technopaths is weak at best. Without his Wordsmithing, he can only understand a few words he's heard during his time on Volgarius, as well as the period he spent living among Kordonis's crew. Words like 'Volgarius' or 'ship' or 'electronic' tickle his ear, but all the rest might as well be gibberish.

"Hang na shas hxlutlanna'. I naag su agns'aths shut *module*."

Unable to understand more than one word out of every other sentence, the Wordsmith gives up his hopeless quest. He spots all sorts of alien text on the many displays scattered around the open-floor facility, but they appear as little more than squiggly hieroglyphs to his uneducated eyes.

Fuck. I really need to learn some Volgarian after this. Jason thinks.

His number one desire is to figure out just where, exactly, he's found himself. The world's name, the facility's purpose, anything that will clue him in as to why Demila chose

to come here.

A thought occurs to the Wordsmith. He stares down at the Technopaths and shivers.

This seems like a top-secret research facility. Demila might have come here to report on her findings to the Volgrim brass, or maybe her direct superiors. I bet they're all having a huge gathering to discuss how to deal with me!

In his head, Jason imagines a huge wall of Psions standing at attention while Demila issues proclamations regarding 'humanity's superweapon,' riling them up and preparing them for a massive invasion. Even though the idea seems credible on its surface, it also seems a bit like overkill.

Demila alone could probably murder me with a twist of her wrist. What the hell would all the other Psions do? Stand around and jerk each other off?

He pauses.

...Do Psions jerk off? That's a weird question. I don't ever want it answered. Alien junk is none of my business!

He returns to observing the research facility beneath him. After some time, he realizes the goings-on in the chamber are not actually as sensitive as he first thought. As it turns out, these Technopaths aren't even particularly high-ranking, not are they very skilled. Many of them seem quite amateurish, and their work almost entirely consists of repairing and building maintenance robots like the ones Jason has passed several times now.

Jason watches as several Technopaths fumble with their tools, turning to older and seemingly wiser Technopaths beside them. After receiving advice and guidance, they return to their duties.

After several more minutes, Jason begins to notice other peculiarities. While all Technopaths eschew wearing clothing in favor of modding their bodies with as much metal and circuitry as possible, the quality of the parts used varies drastically. Shinier, fancier-looking parts correlate strongly with older and more advanced Technopaths. He quickly becomes capable of distinguishing many of the senior mechanics from their junior counterparts.

Maybe this is a training facility? Jason ponders.

With a shrug of his shoulders, the Wordsmith drops to the ground level, then heads toward a random doorway, mixing among the stream of Technopaths pouring in and out

of that particular entryway.

While Jason has no ability to read the floorplans, translate the Volgrim language, or even understand the greater purpose of this strange facility, he does intuit that following the greatest flow of Technopaths should lead him somewhere interesting.

Not much time later, Jason passes by several resting areas, but not exactly 'bedrooms.' He peeps out their insides, finding various 'bays' where Technopaths can stand inside and 'dock' their bodies to receive power from some unknown location, recharging themselves for their next round of duties.

He also passes Nutritional Stations, where the Technopath worker drones can consume basic nutrients to keep their mortal bodies healthy. Surprisingly, no matter how high or low-ranked a Technopath, they all eat the same tasteless nutrients, completely forgoing the joy of eating good food.

Jason's stomach churns. *I'd kill myself if I had to live a life like this.*

Eventually, Jason finds that the ambient psionic energy in the air is growing stronger. He focuses his soul-vision and discovers that he has started approaching the outer perimeter of a huge lake of souls, all of them contained within a disturbingly compact area through a large pair of closed doors.

Jason approaches the double-doors. Before he can reach them, they open up to reveal half a dozen maintenance bots, as well as a handful of Technopaths. The assorted group exits the room, while another enters, phasing through Jason's body without ever noticing his presence.

When the doors open, Jason finally gets a look inside the room. Upon finally obtaining visual confirmation of the 'gathering of Psions,' Jason finds himself... *confused*.

He sees tens of thousands of souls, but upon entering the room, Jason blinks several times in disbelief. He arrives inside what he can only mentally describe as a 'warehouse of containers.'

Tens of thousands of dodecahedral orbs, tightly interlocked, rest inside rows and columns of reinforced steel girders holding them in place. They stack on top of, in front of, and behind one another, with no end in sight.

Jason flies into the air, a mere hundred feet off the ground, yet the jam-packed assembly of spheres rises all the way to the tippy-top of the room, spreading out through

many different 'shelves' all tightly lined with only narrow gaps for individuals to walk between them.

Jason blinks repeatedly, as if trying to clear a cloud of film obscuring his eyes.

What the fuck? What even is this place?

He hovers over to one of the dodecahedral orbs at random. When he peers inside of it without getting too close, he senses a faint but powerful aura of psionic energy contained within. At the same time, he also easily makes out the shapeless 'soul' contained within.

Slowly, Jason's face screws up into an unfamiliar expression.

This... this is a Psion's soul? And it's inside a random orb-thing? What is it, a storage container of some sort?

In slight disbelief, Jason checks out several other orbs, and all of them confirm the same thing. Each orb contains a Psion's soul, though what their identities might be, he isn't certain. There appears to be Volgrim writing etched into one of the face-up sides of each orb, but he sure as hell can't read it.

Somewhere down the line, at the other end of the huge shelving unit, a Technopath on a hover-module levitates upward and stops before one of the tens of thousands of metal containers. With its compact size being about that of a basketball, the Technopath easily picks up one and examines it. He mutters something under his breath, then presses a series of command codes into his wrist-computer.

Jason levitates closer to get a better look at what the Technopath is doing. Before long, a robotic spider daintily climbs up the shelving units without disturbing the soul-orbs, then stops before the Technopath.

"Beep beep boop beep boop."

It speaks a series of unintelligible beeping noises, to which the Technopath simply nods. He hands the orb to the robot, which then skitters away. As it leaves, the Technopath levitates upward and to the left, where it plucks out another orb, then calls another drone to its position. Like before, that drone takes the orb, and the Technopath continues to another orb.

Fascinated, Jason begins following the spider-drones. He passes out of the 'soul container warehouse,' as he's taken to calling it, and pursues the drones as they carry their bounty toward a location elsewhere in the facility.

Not too much time later, Jason's heart skips a beat. He follows the drone into a facility truly alien in nature, one which holds all manner of strange and exotic floating crystals, eerie deep-blue lighting, and some sort of electrical storm pulsing along the edges of the room. Thunderous *booms* detonate in the air, and Jason's eyes flick to the center of the room, where a procession of drones forms a line leading up to what Jason can only describe as a series of one hundred altars.

Each 'altar' features a blackened table-like surface with a hole in the center clearly designed to fit something of the exact size and shape as the soul-orbs. Jason hangs back at the entrance, feeling as if entering this room too deeply would be a terrible idea on his part.

He watches as a robot nearest one of the altars walks over, places the orb it is carrying inside the 'slot' on that altar, then draws a few steps back. The spider-machine faces the altar without any emotion, following its programming as commanded.

After that robot and ninety-nine others have placed their orbs into the relevant slots, they all draw back, seemingly waiting for something to happen.

Before long, a terrific and violent *bang* of thunder crashes down upon the first altar, scaring the goddamn shit out of Jason. The Wordsmith visibly flinches as, every second, another thunderbolt smites the next altar, and then the next one, and the next one after that!

Each second, for 100 seconds, bolts of thunder fall down and strike the altars, agitating the souls inside of the soul-containers. When the thunder finally stops, along with the ringing in Jason's soul-ears, the room becomes quiet.

And then...

Crack. Crack. Crack.

Each of the soul-containers splits in half.

One by one, they crack open and fall apart, allowing the normally-invisible souls inside to shine brightly and flash with light!

The spider-bots at the bottom of the stairs remain motionless as a strange event takes place. The psionic souls burst into reality and take physical form, levitating into the air and morphing into one hundred Psion bodies. Their ages and physical features differ, but

the one trait they all share is their complete lack of clothing, a sight that makes Jason wince.

Guess that answers that. No alien junk down there...

After two full minutes of growing a flesh-body out of seemingly nothing, the Psions levitate down from the sky, fall to the floor, and collapse in a heap, unmoving.

Jason widens his eyes. *What? Are they dead?*

The robots walk up to the collapsed Psions. They extend various sensor modules out of their frames to inspect the newly-created bodies, then wrap their spindly limbs around the unconscious Volgrim. They lift them up and begin carrying them out of the chamber, each Psion still unconscious and unable to move.

Jason observes the whole experience with stupidly wide eyes.

This... is this some kind of birthing facility? Maybe the Psions here are being created for the first time? But... it doesn't quite match up with what Kordonis told me about how Psions are created... and that last batch felt like they were 3rd or 4th Level... not exactly brand new initiates...

Jason watches as another two rituals take place, each one identical to the first batch he watched. One hundred Psions grow new bodies, fall to the floor, and get carted off, an additional hundred following them.

With robotic efficiency, whatever the ritual does, it does so with unerring efficiency, making Jason deeply narrow his eyes.

What exactly have I stumbled into?

Part 424: Using Protection

The Wordsmith's expression becomes more and more grim. It doesn't take long before he realizes this facility is far, far more top-secret than he first imagined. Jason follows a batch of 100 Psions after their 'birthing' through lightning, trailing the robots that carry them with a wary gaze. Luckily, the newly-created Psions appear too weak and frail to move. Their bodies lay unmoving in the grasps of their robotic caretakers, completely at the mercy and whim of whatever these metal automatons would do to them. Not only do they appear unable to move their bodies, they also lack much activity in their mind and soul, laying utterly catatonic in their caregivers' grasp.

Jason keeps a healthy distance from them, pursuing the robots down several corridors and past the rooms with the 'soul orbs' into what he can only imagine is a gigantic underground 'hospital' with thousands of levels reaching deep, deep into the planet's crust.

Jason finds himself inside one of hundreds of recuperation wings, areas where Psions brought from other such 'lightning revival points' (as Jason has taken to calling them) are brought and placed inside of rejuvenation pods.

These pods immediately remind Jason of the cryopod he once entered which froze his body and ultimately led to his awakening 100,000 years in the future. However, the Psion's pods sit in rows placed against the walls, filled with a nutrient-rich, crystal-clear liquid of some sort. The Wordsmith glances around this new facility, unsure of its exact size and dimensions.

At first glance, it appears to be a hexagonal structure with a 'hollow' core in the middle leading up and down to other levels, where a flight-capable Psion or other entity can ascend and descend at will. However, Jason quickly finds that the 'core' of this facility stretches for hundreds of stories above and below the area where he currently stands, and the ambient levels of psionic energy are far above anything he's ever experienced, except perhaps those found on Volgarius itself.

After a bit of investigation, Jason also finds that each level inside this 'nutrient pod facility' sits directly adjacent to multiple other such hexagonal pods, each one with its own vertical shaft leading up and down to other levels.

Jason quickly performs some mental math.

If each hexagonal room has about enough space for one hundred Psions in their special nutrient pods, and there are a few thousand levels above and below me, that would be... what, room for maybe 500,000 Psions in each vertical chamber? But there could be dozens or even hundreds of these vertical chambers... so there could be tens of millions of Psions within just a few miles of my immediate vicinity?

Recalling the size of the entire planet, Jason's expression scrunches together into one of concern.

If I'm not wrong... this isn't a facility for birthing new Psions.

It's the black-level area for bringing back 'dead' Psions.

The Wordsmith's soul shivers.

Any one of these Psions could rip me to atoms if they detect my soul. I absolutely should not be here. I should return to Tarus II as quickly as possible. Every second I stay here, I put myself in soul-rending danger!

Jason hesitates. He realizes that even if the Psions didn't kill him, he would surely be endangering humanity if the Volgrim found out he knew about this world.

Psions don't have souls. That is what I've been told many times. But it's not the truth. I can clearly sense their souls here, and they are terrifyingly powerful...

Jason levitates to one of the 'cores' in the center of the vertical chambers, looking up and down at the thousands of levels above and below himself, where machines travel here and there, monitoring the vital signs of the revived Psions contained within their nutrient pods.

I can't just leave. Jason realizes. This is a rare and precious opportunity. Does Marie Becker even know about this planet? Is it the only one of its kind? How does it function? I have to find more answers!

Jason hovers toward one of the nutrient pods recently filled with a Psion's body. He warily examines its occupant with his soul-sense, finding with a lack of surprise that unlike the Psions he's met on Volgarius and in other places, this individual does in fact possess a soul. It glows within the Psion's body, as nakedly visible to Jason's soul-vision as if it were a shining gem on their forehead.

Jason has no idea of this specific Psion's identity. All he can tell is that they appear to be a male, though the differences between the two sexes are barely distinct, and perhaps not even all that important. In fact, Jason realizes the only distinguishing factor he's ever noticed between male and female Psions are their mental voices and the size of their bodies. Perhaps, like Changelings, Psions don't even truly have any need to make such distinctions...

The primary purpose of having two sexes is for the sake of copulation and reproduction. Jason thinks. But if my talks with Kordonis told me anything, they told me Psions don't 'mate' in the same way humans, animals, or mud-dwellers in general do. They hold some sort of fancy... ritual. Then they create a spawn. Or something.

Frustratingly, Jason's knowledge on this issue proves far from complete, making it difficult for him to draw any conclusions. He theorizes many possibilities, but without having witnessed the Psion creation process himself, he cannot fathom the exact mechanics.

What he does know, or at least comes to believe, is that this is very much the rumored 'revival facility' he's heard about in whispers. Thanks to the conversations he shared with Kordonis, Unarin, and others, Jason begins to examine the facility with a much more critical eye.

He returns to the soul-storage depot and scrutinizes the dodecahedral orbs containing Psion souls with greater care than before. Under his cautious gaze, he realizes he missed several clues the first time he entered this storage facility.

These orbs aren't just storing Psion souls. They seem to be connected to some sort of greater 'soul network.' Jason thinks. There are 'power lines' connected to the bottom of the soul-containers that seem to lead somewhere else. Maybe if I follow them...

Jason observes several thin conduits of soul energy lining the underside of the soul-orb racks. He traces their energy flow with his eyes, and begins levitating along the edge of the containers. As he does, he also begins to notice differences in the level of energy contained within all of the various souls.

This soul appears much weaker than all the others. And this one, too. Maybe they belong to 1st Level Psions?

He pauses before a pair of orbs placed directly adjacent to one another. As he scrutinizes them, a strange flicker of soul-energy catches his attention. Jason turns his

head to the side, where he detects one of the more robust and powerful souls nearby suddenly flicker and die down, as if suddenly losing ninety percent of its power. At the same time, a tiny red light activates on that particular row of soul-containers, making Jason frown.

What happened? Why did this one suddenly weaken so dramatically? Wait... did it just...?

Jason glances around the area below him. He spots a Technopath levitating nearby who tilts his head toward that same orb Jason just detected. The Technopath floats upward, and Jason hovers to the side, watching with rapt attention. The warehouse worker gives the orb a cursory scan, then calls over a spider-bot to come and collect the orb.

At once, something clicks in Jason's head.

Unless I'm wrong... that Psion's soul... it just drastically weakened, as if having suffered a terrible blow. Did it... die? And now it needs to be processed and revived?

The spider-bot picks up the dodecahedral orb and leaves, while Jason merely watches it depart.

That must be it. Perhaps... perhaps these souls are linked directly to the Psions roaming the Milky Way. Maybe the souls hidden here aren't just being stored for safekeeping, but are actually 'remote controlling' their host-bodies elsewhere? I'll know if I follow the trail of soul energy out of this facility!

And so he does.

Jason begins pursuing the 'power lines' containing Psionic energy out of the warehouse, underground, and across an unthinkable distance. He travels through the blackness of the underground realm, where he finds himself moving in parallel to more than ten thousand tiny, faint conduits of soul energy, all converging from various other soul-warehouses toward some unknown distant point.

However, Jason eventually slows to a stop before reaching their final destination.

Up ahead, the levels of Psionic energy sharply increase. But what's more, he detects significantly 'denser' amounts of psionic power, a density level far beyond what he's noticed anywhere else on this world.

All the psionic energy I've detected until now felt 'inert.' Jason thinks. But the energy up ahead... it's active. Alert. Those aren't unconscious Psions. They're alive and well. They must be fully revived. If I go any closer, they'll almost surely sense me.

Jason becomes anxious. Every bone in his ethereal body screams at him to retreat back to Tarus II, but these instincts collide with his curiosity and need to know what lies ahead.

I still don't know where this planet is. I don't know the mechanics behind Psion revival. Should I really go back with the knowledge I have now? Should I risk my life for a little more information? Just one rogue Vulpanix could kill me effortlessly!

He wrings his hands together. He levitates forward, then stops and pulls back.

For the next five minutes, Jason wrestles against his common sense and better judgment, unsure of what action to take.

Ultimately, however, he calms down.

He falls silent and remains unmoving, staring up ahead while sensing the active psionic power capable of crushing his soul into cosmic dust.

I can't risk it. Not now. The fact that I now know this facility exists is enough. I can always come here again, but more prepared.

He wants to know more. But at the same time, he isn't the same impulsive youth he was only six years before.

I came here by trying to 'locate' Demila. That means this world must be where her soul is currently being held. I can't know for absolute certainty... but if I don't see a soul inside her body when we meet next, I can be pretty confident that's the case.

Jason takes a deep breath, useless though the gesture is for his soul.

If I'm right about my assumptions, I may have just discovered a significant secret about the Psions. The bodies we see and interact with aren't their true forms. They're more like remotely controlled 'drones' projected from this planet. That would explain why Psions can 'die' and revive later. They must be able to regenerate and reattach to new bodies so long as their souls are intact.

With a nod, Jason closes his eyes.

*I've seen enough. **Return.***

Abruptly, a pulling sensation latches onto his soul and yanks him away, tearing him out of that facility and taking him up into the Void...

Minutes later, Jason jerks his eyes open and coughs, the combining of his soul and body being about as jarring as ever.

"I'm back!"

Jason blinks his eyes. He looks up to find himself in the same 'privacy void' as ever, with only Phoebe standing before him.

"Thank god, Jason. You were gone so long I was starting to get really worried!" Phoebe complains. "If Fiona hadn't assured me your soul wasn't in any distress, I might have freaked out!"

"Sorry." Jason says, awkwardly scratching the back of his head. "How long was I gone?"

"Forty-two minutes." Phoebe replies. "Neil has already cleared out the prisoners and taken them back to the prisons for processing. You only put those Words of Power on Beelzebub, so he's just... hanging around. But Neil's not going to let anyone walk free until you put your magical shackles on all of them."

Phoebe pauses. She runs her hands through Jason's hair while looking at him in concern.

"...So. What did you see? Learn anything useful?"

Jason nods. "I sure did. In fact-"

He pauses abruptly, then frowns.

The Wordsmith stops short of telling his wife what he saw.

"Yes?" Phoebe asks.

"Uhh..."

Jason hesitates. He chews his lower lip, then shakes his head.

"I can't tell you. Not yet. Humanity's leaders are... compromised. Demila can read your thoughts too easily. I need to protect your mind, Neil's, and all the others."

Phoebe blinks in surprise. "Oh. That's smart of you. Yes, don't tell me anything I don't need to know... but how can you go about protecting my mind? Are you even sure Demila can't read yours?"

"I'm ninety percent certain she can't." Jason says. "But there might be more adept telepaths who can, to say nothing of the Executors or Dosena herself..."

"Ninety percent is better than zero percent." Phoebe replies. "Do you think you can protect my mind?"

The Wordsmith throws his hands up. "I don't know! Maybe. I can certainly try, but my mental defenses consist of Fiona and the Phoenix. Yours... well..."

Phoebe lights up a delightful smile. "I know! You should give me my own brain-husband! How about a Jason of my own, hmm?"

"Oh, no, no no no!" Jason laughs. "We already have *two-too* many of me running around. Two Jasons and two Phobes is quite enough!"

"Well that's not fair." Phoebe retorts, crossing her arms. "So you get a second wife to confide anything you want, but my head has to be all lonely and quiet? If I didn't know any better, I'd think this was just a male double standard."

"Err, well..." Jason winces. "I... I guess that's a good point. Do you *really* want another of me in your head?"

Phoebe shrugs. "Frankly, I think putting a copy of me in *your* head was a bad decision. You know, Jason, an unfair wife might be able to make the claim that you were cheating on her with your mind-wife."

Fiona, nestled inside Jason's Mind Realm, snorts. "She's got you there."

"I didn't really think things over at the time." Jason murmurs. "But... if anyone's going to be in your head, I'd rather it be me."

Jason contemplates what to do next. Ultimately, he relents and opens his mouth to speak a Word of Power.

"Wait." Fiona interrupts. "Project me."

Slightly surprised, Jason nods. "**Projection.**"

He summons Fiona to the material realm. She stands beside Phoebe, both of them looking as beautiful and radiant as Jason has ever envisioned his wife.

"I don't think this is a good idea." Fiona says. "Making a copy of anyone inside Phoebe's Mind Realm, I mean. It's just... not."

"What do you mean?" Jason asks, visibly confused.

Fiona wrings her hands together. "Well, you see... I don't exactly *like* being stuck in your Mind Realm, Jason. No offense? I love you just as much as Phoebe, but I also feel... trapped. I have no control over whether I can stay or leave. I have no autonomy and basically have to sit tight until you beam me back into the material world."

Taken aback, Jason frowns. "Is it really that bad for you?"

"Sometimes." Fiona admits. "I wouldn't want another copy of me, or you, to end up stuck inside Phoebe's head. As bad as it is for me, at least I do get to pop out and stretch my legs. I also have the Phoenix to keep me company, along with Shana and Lorent on occasion. But whoever you put in Phoebe's Mind Realm... well, they'll be *completely* on their own."

Realizing the seriousness of the problem, Jason slowly nods. "And if I made several people, it would only exacerbate the problem."

"Right." Fiona says. "I have accepted my existence. What I do is essential. But... I wouldn't wish my life upon anyone else. It would be best if you could come up with a Psionic countermeasure that didn't involve duplicating other people's minds."

Phoebe lightly squeezes her soul-self's shoulder, barely able to interact with Fiona's transparent body thanks to Jason's magic. "I didn't even realize it was that bad for you, Fiona. Even if we were still willing to copy Jason or myself inside my head, what about Neil and all the rest? Who would we create inside their heads? It's a disaster waiting to happen."

"Yeah. I agree..." Jason murmurs, his heart suddenly feeling heavy. "Let me think for a moment."

In the past, Jason has spoken to Fiona and noticed her discomfort at being stuck inside his Mind Realm. However, never did he realize just how much pain she was silently enduring for his sake. But in retrospect, he realizes it makes perfect sense.

Phoebe is an outgoing person. An extrovert. Jason thinks. But now her other self is stuck inside my head, unable to leave of her own accord. Even when she does, she's not a 'real' person made of flesh and blood, but a half-formed soul. That has to feel...

dehumanizing. I was thinking about a solution to this problem, but I never took it all that seriously. I've been hurting her without meaning to. And Fiona doesn't deserve that...

The Wordsmith suddenly feels extraordinarily guilty. All those times he asked his mind-wife to do a bunch of work for him, treating her as little more than a robot to help him fulfill spiritual engineering tasks, now they feel more like unintended slaps across her face.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Fiona." Jason murmurs. "I'll find a solution for your problem, and quick. I don't care what it takes."

"Thank you, Jason." Fiona says. "But... we do have more pressing matters to deal with. We need to blockade Phoebe's brain as soon as possible."

"And the other leaders." Phoebe adds. "Yes... even Neil."

"*Epecially* Neil." Jason murmurs. "Fuck. I should have done this sooner! Why am I always so slow to react?!"

"It's not easy to anticipate the movements of an intergalactic alien empire." Phoebe says. "Plus we didn't expect a 7th Level Psion to spring up in our midst out of nowhere."

"Well, she's here now." Jason retorts. "So... let me see. Maybe if I try this..."

The Wordsmith takes a minute to collect his thoughts, then focuses his attention on his wife's face.

"Blackout. Disruption. Field. Impair. Noise..."

He utters a dozen Words of Power, none of them necessarily working together, but all of them doing their own thing to try and protect Phoebe's mental activity.

Phoebe blinks. "Did that work?"

"I don't know." Jason admits. **"Telepathy."**

He focuses his mind to try and read Phoebe's surface-level thoughts. However, what Jason instead receives is a violent burst of static noise, like what an old television from the 1980's might make. He flinches in surprise, then nods.

"I think it worked. But I don't know if Psion telepathy functions the same way my Wordsmithed telepathy does. I can't be entirely certain..."

"It will have to do." Phoebe says. "Let's hurry up and blanket Neil, Chadwick, Blinker, Samantha, and all the others with this protection field. Ideally we will want to protect the minds of all our allies... but that could take forever."

"There's another problem." Fiona says. "We don't know how long Jason's Words of Power will protect you and the rest. What if they wear off after a day? What if the Psions can break down the 'door' and get into your head with a little persistence? If they tried to do that to Jason I would notice, but I'm pretty sure this protection field won't warn you if the Psions attempt such a thing on you."

Phoebe winces. "Well... maybe we should just cross that bridge when we reach it. Some protection is surely better than none."

"Right." Jason says. "And I'll tell you about the Volgrim facility I found later, after I've protected the others' minds."

"I'm not in a rush." Phoebe says. "Though I'm *certainly* curious."

Jason nods. He recalls Fiona into his mind, takes a breath, and utters a word of power.

"Normalize."

The privacy field engulfing his body and Phoebe's vanishes.

The moment it disappears, Jason nearly jumps out of his skin!

Not five feet away, a familiar Psion stands with her arms crossed, looking at the Wordsmith with that same judgmental, expressionless face she always does.

[Ah, Jason. Phoebe.] Creator Demila says, her voice sickeningly pleasant. [Such an interesting magical field. Don't mind me, I was merely studying it for my own research purposes. I could not see through its perimeter, no matter how I tried.]

For a brief moment, Jason's heart lingers in the sole of his foot, like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

He quickly recollects himself.

"C-Creator Demila. You're... back already?"

The female Psion cocks her head.

[Back already? Of course. Where else would I be?]

"...You left a little bit ago." Jason says. "Where did you go?"

Demila cocks her head from side to side a few times, hemming and hawing.

[Hmm... where did I go... oh! Yes, of course. I thought I sensed Gressil's 'chaos energy,' so I momentarily stepped away to take a look. It turned out to be nothing.]

She leans forward, her six eyes intently scrutinizing the Wordsmith and his wife.

[And what about the two of you?] Demila asks, her voice sounding ever so slightly sinister to Jason's ears. [Did you have an interesting... *discussion*... while I was gone?]

The corner of Jason's mouth twitches as he tries to force a smile.

Oh, this bitch.

Part 425: Tribunal's Conclusion

Unsure of how to react to Demila's sudden reappearance, Jason finds himself in a bit of a bind. On the one hand, he would love to quickly check and see if he can detect her soul inside her body. If he can't, then that means it must be inside the underground facility on Planet Mudball. However, her reappearance makes it impossible for him to stealthily utter a Word of Detection toward her soul.

Demila's six eyes scrutinize the Wordsmith with unerring fervor, making him feel distinctly uncomfortable.

You have to watch out, Jason. Fiona says from Jason's Mind Realm. Demila probably can't read your thoughts, but she is a powerful entity with an enhanced physique. Who knows what clues she can glean from your body language? Maybe she can hear your heartbeat or see veins bulging on your forehead. Even if she's not trained in dealing with human body language, she's not likely to be an idiot.

Jason swallows heavily, despite knowing this simple act could reveal information to his Volgrim interrogator.

"Isn't it obvious?" Jason asks, regaining a bit of confidence. He answers Demila's previous question while trying to puff out his chest. "I decided it would be strategically smart to... level the playing field."

Demila gazes at the Wordsmith unblinkingly. [A human turn of phrase. What disadvantage were you trying to erase?]

"Well. We can't read *your* thoughts." Jason points out. "Now *you* can't read Phoebe's, nor mine. I'd have done it sooner, but I was busy."

[Oh? Do you have something you're trying to hide from me?] Demila asks, a predatory gaze in her eyes.

"Maybe the Volgrim don't value privacy, but we humans do." Jason retorts, standing his ground. "Those who would forcibly intrude upon other's privacy are nothing more than authoritarians."

Phoebe nods. "We would never try to read your mind. We ask only that you don't read ours."

[Hahaha.] Demila laughs, slightly surprising the Wordsmith and his wife. [You say you would not do so, but I find that *difficult* to believe. If you could read my mind without my knowledge, I have no doubt you would do so in an instant. Of course, you cannot, for I am a Psion. I am superior to you.]

"That's beside the point." Jason counters. "This is my planet. We have the right to privacy. If you don't like it, you can leave."

[Any rights you possess are nothing more than privileges which can be revoked at the whim of the Founders.] Demila counters, leaning toward the Wordsmith with a smug look on her face. [But you may do as you please. I'm still curious what it was you were discussing inside this impenetrable force field. It is not often I encounter a barrier none of my senses can pierce.]

"My Wordsmithing can be quite potent." Jason snaps. "That's why the First Founder needs my help so *badly*."

[Your assistance is less necessary than you believe.] Demila says, a hint of warning in her voice. [The Volgrim do not wish to lose the Milky Way. But if we must flee the Plague, we will do so without hesitation. We will uproot our civilization and survive. Completely eradicating us is not within the realm of possibility for the Kolvaxians. Your powers will save us a lot of trouble, and that is all.]

"Hmph. That's putting it lightly." Jason mutters, trailing off afterward.

For a brief moment, the Wordsmith thinks about what he just said and what he didn't just say, and vice-versa for the 7th Level Psion before him. Neither of them told the other what exactly they were up to, leaving an uncomfortable ambiguity in the air.

"You can't just ask Demila if she knows about the Cube." Fiona says inside Jason's head. "If she doesn't know, you'll immediately clue her in to its existence. But at the same time, it's unlikely she doesn't..."

Demila might not know everything about the Cube. Jason thinks. She probably has several gaps in her knowledge. And do you really think she was off looking for Gressil? That was such a blatant lie!

"But she knows you can't call her out on the lie." Fiona retorts. "It's actually possible for you to prove where she went through your Wordsmithing. But if you know that she knows about the Cube, then you can't play stupid anymore. She would like nothing more

than to feign obliviousness. But if you call her out, you might accidentally reveal the Cube's existence to her if she actually *doesn't* know about it right now."

Jason's right eye twitches. *This is giving me such a fucking headache. I hate tip-toeing on eggshells!*

Demila remains quite for a few moments while flicking her eyes and psionic senses between Jason and Phoebe both.

[Such a lovely day outside.] Demila suddenly says. [I feel like flying around to enjoy the scenery. I'll leave you two mud-dwellers to deal with your Tribunal. I wouldn't want to impose on you, after all.]

Jason presses his teeth together in a vacuous smile. "...Of course. Thanks for sparing us *lowly* mud-dwellers a few minutes of your time, Demila."

Demila doesn't answer him. Her eyes merely curve for a moment, then she flickers away, vanishing as if stepping into the wind.

Jason's expression remains unmoving. *It seems Demila possesses some form of dimensional manipulation.*

"I wouldn't immediately assume she's left, Jason. From now on, you should assume she's watching you at all times. Even if you create a privacy field for yourself and Phoebe, Demila might be standing *right* next to you and you'd never know it."

The Wordsmith shudders. *Fuck's sake. Just like Gressil.*

"Yes. Just like Gressil." Fiona affirms. "Bunch of invisible bastards lurking all around us."

Jason turns to his wife. He and Phoebe exchange a long look, but they don't speak of their encounter with Demila just now, instead opting to rely entirely on eye contact for communication.

"We'll talk later." Phoebe says.

"We will." Jason replies.

Phoebe leaves to deal with something, and Jason turns to the side, where he finds Beelzebub in the same place as before, a look of sheer boredom on his face.

"Oh, so you didn't forget about me." Beelzebub says. "Yes. I'm still here."

"You're lucky to be alive." Jason says, biting his words off with a hint of malice. "Fuck's sake. If it wasn't for the Phoenix..."

"I recall hearing about the Phoenix in the past." Beelzebub says. "Master Agares mentioned it once or twice in passing. I don't know any details, though. Care to enlighten me?"

"No. I don't." Jason mutters. "Though I did learn something interesting. The Phoenix says you already seemed to have a 'feather' attached to your body. That's why you have such a high fire affinity and the ability to revive from death. *Know anything* about that?"

Beelzebub sighs. "I literally *just* asked you about the Phoenix, Jason. Why would I know about a... a feather? Why would I know about that? I know you don't like me, and deservedly so, but it should be obvious I'm clueless about what's going on here."

Jason nods slowly. Doubt flickers across his face.

"...The last person who possessed the Phoenix's power was an ancient angel named Catherine. She was the Valkyrie of Fire, and she was also the one who killed Demon Emperor Valac. Heard anything about her?"

"I never gave a damn about the angels, not until six years ago." Beelzebub answers. "I never asked my master about them, either. I think I've heard Valac's name once or twice, but I couldn't describe the fellow to you."

"Yeah..." Jason mutters. "It's likely a coincidence anyway. More importantly..."

He carefully runs his eyes up and down Beelzebub's naked body.

"**Clothes.** Are you really 'Beelzebub?' You're too polite. Too willing to accept blame. You're trying too hard to redeem yourself."

Jason conjures a suit to cover up Beelzebub's unmentionables, then hits the newly minted Emperor with a barrage of questions. Beelzebub merely listens as the Wordsmith's interrogation crashes against him, then he nods.

"I've had a change of heart. Is that so difficult to believe, Jason?"

"IT IS!" Jason suddenly snaps. "Do you really expect me to believe you've suddenly become a kind, caring, compassionate demon who only wants forgiveness for his misdeeds?! You literally burned thousands of good men and woman to ash, then you LAUGHED at their corpses! There's no way I'm buying what you're selling!"

Beelzebub examines the snazzy black suit Jason Wordsmithed for him, then he crosses his arms.

"Of course I haven't changed that much. Don't be ludicrous, Wordsmith. I'm not seeking redemption for killing a few weaklings. I'm seeking redemption for standing in the way of the one man capable of empowering demonkind. There's a difference."

"So you admit it." Jason mutters. "You don't give a shit about any of the people you've killed."

"Sure I do. A *little*." Beelzebub answers. "In an... abstract sort of way."

Jason coldly glares at the Emperor of Hellfire. Then, he turns and walks away.

"*Fuck*. I should have just killed you."

If Beelzebub has anything else to say, Jason doesn't hear it. The Wordsmith warps away, arriving several hundred meters distant to land beside Emperor Belial. The succubus sits in the spectator stands, along with the other jurors, not quite certain what to do now that the Stormbringer Tribunal has ended so abruptly. She stares down at Beelzebub intently, while Uriel sits back in her chair like before, seemingly having forgotten about the battle which she took part in less than an hour before.

"I don't get it." Belial says gloomily. "You really just forgave Beelzebub? Just like that?"

"I didn't have much of a choice. And I *didn't* forgive him." Jason growls. "I'm simply giving him an undeserved second chance. After I place Words of Restriction on the other Stormbringer participants, I'll have to pray everything works out for the better."

Uriel folds her hands in her lap, looking unamused and more than a bit disinterested.

"'Twas a mistake to spare that demon's life." Uriel says. "But... my brothers hath made some educated guesses based upon some clues they've gleaned. I doubt thou wouldst have given Beelzebub a second chance without a good reason."

"To say the least." Jason mumbles bitterly.

Jason utters several Words of Power, projecting privacy fields around Belial and Uriel's minds identical to the one he gave Phoebe. Then he grimaces as he spots Neil walking toward him.

"It's about time you returned." Neil says, his tone icy. Humanity's military commander sizes Jason up with his eyes, as if trying to determine where Jason's allegiances have

shifted. "All this fucking buildup for the Tribunal only to throw it all away in the end. And what exactly happened with our most hated enemy down there? Why is he now an Emperor? I find it difficult to understand why you would suddenly gift him with all of his former powers, plus a helping hand to achieve the rank of Emperor. Even for you this is..."

Jason glances around the Jury of Thirty. With the exception of Demila, who has taken her leave, and Phoebe, who has disappeared to deal with something better left unspoken, all the Hidden Emperors and humanity's allies remain seated, waiting for an explanation from Jason.

"Before I explain," Jason says, "let me first give all of you a privacy shield. It will protect your minds from psionic infiltration."

He turns to Neil. "**Blackout. Disruption. Field. Impair. Noise...**"

After uttering a long string of words, he repeats this slow and painstaking action an additional twenty-five times, eventually covering every human, monster, and demon's mind with a privacy shield.

"Don't ask me how well the shield will work." Jason says. "It might fall apart after a few days. It might collapse under repeated telepathic intrusion attempts. Don't assume your minds are now impervious to telepathy. All I know is... none of you should have your privacy invaded too easily."

Yardrat snorts contemptuously. "And I suppose *you've* never forcibly read anyone else's thoughts?"

"Not intentionally, no." Jason replies. "Not even those belonging to my enemies."

"I seem to recall a time you listened in on a conversation between myself and Hope." Neil retorts. "But enough about that. Are you going to explain to us what happened with Beelzebub? Why did you suddenly hit him with a fire-blast that turned him into an Emperor? It was an utterly baffling choice."

"There is an entity living in my Mind Realm." Jason explains. "It's called the Phoenix. She recognized a certain power inside of Beelzebub, a familiar sensation, and decided Beelzebub was her... 'friend.' So she flew out without asking me and gave him back all of his powers plus change. That's all I know."

"That's all?" Emperor Serena asks. "And you expect us to simply take your word for this after you've just granted all of us a special telepathy-inhibiting shield? It sounds like you are holding back important details and giving us only half of the story."

"That's right, I am." Jason replies, making her raise an eyebrow. "The extra details don't matter to you. I've said enough. If you think I would willingly empower Beelzebub to the rank of Emperor, you don't know me at all. I want nothing more than for the demon who murdered my daughter to suffer a horrific death. However, with this new revelation, I have no choice but to give him a second chance."

Jason flashes a nasty glance in Neil's direction.

"And don't *you* give me any lip, Neil. I am humanity's leader, *not* you. You will carry out my decisions, even if you disagree with them. The Tribunal's ultimate conclusion may have been unfortunate, but it still presents a useful opportunity. I would still rather try and reconcile with demonkind than slaughter my way into an uncomfortable peace."

"Well, isn't that noble of you." Yadrat asks, his tone utterly rhetorical. "Now, if we're done with this farce of a meeting, I'd like to go home."

He stands up. So does Emperor Serena, Kristoff, and the rest.

The last Emperor to rise turns out to be Emperor Fae. Unlike the others, she appears quite amused.

"Don't listen to all these squares, Wordsmith!" Fae loudly proclaims, while flashing him a huge thumbs-up. "I had a ton of fun at this stupid Tribunal! What a series of twists and turns! I was TOTALLY gonna conk out and fall asleep at one point, but you just kept doing all sorts of batshit insane things!"

She points a finger at Belial. "And you, lady! You kicked ass! You really punched the fuck out of Beelzebub's shadow! You and that Archangel had me screaming with laughter! That was awesome!"

Belial grimaces. "Shut up, Fae."

"Bahaha!" Fae shrilly laughs, making every other juror wince at her nasally voice. "If you ever learn to pull that thong out of your ass, you'll become a real riot! Okay Yard-Rat, let's get the heck out of here! I could go for some meat right about now!"

Fae deliberately and obnoxiously places extra emphasis on separating Yadrat's name, making him scowl.

"Yes. Of course. Devils, one of these days I'll pay the Wordsmith to shut you up for good." Yadrat mutters.

The Emperor of the Void opens several portals to other demon-controlled worlds. He and his fellow Emperors take their leave, and once they've all departed, Yadrat steps through his own portal along with Fae, returning to their home-world of 'Numaria.'

After they leave, Jason glances around at the people who remain. Among them are Blinker, several Dukes from the Hell of Lust, Yamir, Brunhilda, and others too.

"I'm sorry things didn't end properly." Jason says. "But... it is what it is. I'll take responsibility for the fallout."

"And what exactly will you do about Beelzebub?" Brunhilda asks. The Felorian flippantly gestures to the Emperor of Hellfire, who has plopped down in the spectator stands and leaned back to stare up at the sky. "There is no chance any human will ever trust him."

"You don't have to trust Beelzebub." Jason replies. "Just make use of him. He's an Emperor-level powerhouse now. Put his talents to work. I'm sure there's some way the bastard can earn his keep."

Surprisingly, Blinker of all people is the first to say anything positive. "I know one way we can make Beelzebub useful."

"Yeah?" Jason asks. "And what would that be?"

Blinker's expression turns frosty. "I want him to help me hunt down Mephisto. Yama too."

"Oh." Jason grunts. "That's... a really good idea. Maybe you should take someone else with you too. Wait, speaking of which, where is Hope? He was supposed to capture or kill Mephisto and Yama, but he's not back yet."

Jason turns to Neil. "Do you know?"

"I don't." Neil immediately answers. "I've not a clue where Hope went. If you don't believe me, you can feel free to root around in my mind."

"I'd rather not." Jason replies. "For the record, I'd never do that to *anyone*, Neil."

Neil appears unconvinced. "So you claim."

While Jason would love to give Neil an earful, he refrains from doing so in front of all their allies. He smooths his shirt down, then glances in the direction of the Tarus II prisons.

"I'll deal with the other stuff later. **Teleport.**"

The Wordsmith warps away to place 'pain shackles' on all of the Stormbringer participants. After he leaves, Neil stares off into the distance, a thoughtful look in his eyes.

The Psion might know about the Cube. That would mean Jason's evasiveness has something to do with not knowing whether or not Demila knows. Jason isn't sure whether or not he should say anything. The Phoenix must be directly related to the Cube, too, which could mean Beelzebub has connected directly to the Cube's power source.

He frowns deeply.

Things are getting out of hand. Jason might not be my intellectual match, but it would be foolish to think Solomon's training had no effect on him. The situation is getting to be a bit dire now.

Where in God's name has Hope gone?

After departing Tarus II's confines, Emperor Yardrat and Fae arrive on their homeworld of Numaria, a planet belonging solely to the Hell of Punishment under Emperor Auger's reign. As a world covered in lush forests and thick tree cover, it holds an unbelievable number of secrets no observer can see from the skies. Only by descending into the darkness of the canopy underbrush can they find all the hidden and isolated demonic settlements.

Yardrat and Fae step out of his portal onto a granite platform in the middle of a small clearing beneath the trees. Yardrat seals his portal and looks around. Rays of light fall through the canopy to touch the dirt and fallen leaves here and there. Insects make chittering noises. Strange and exotic flying creatures cry out from the branches above, their screams sounding eerily like the wails of dying human women.

After a few moments, a female demoness approaches Yardrat and Fae, strolling out from behind a tree with a bored look on her face.

"Oh. You're back early."

The demoness wears a dress made of leaves and bark, but it's her pitch-black skin that really makes her stand out from other demons, marking her as a distinct sub-species known as an Animus. Her demonic horns poke out and bend slightly backward from the sides of her head, mimicking the angle of her ears. If a human were to observe them, they might think her horns resemble the spoiler on a race-car.

This demoness is none other than Nymph, the Emperor of the Forest, a newly awakened powerhouse whose uplifting came about as a result of Jason Hiro's premier innovation, the Belial Booster. For tens of thousands of years, she lived as only a Duke, but thanks to recent advancements, she now finally possesses the qualifications to stand among the ranks of demonkind's leaders.

"You missed out on a good show!" Fae exclaims. "Beelzebub lives! Not only that, but the little cunt ended up getting turned into an Emperor! I couldn't stop laughing my ass off!"

"Yes." Yardrat says, his 'excitement' far more muted. "It was a fun show. Simply *delightful*. Gather the Dukes. We need to meet with Auger."

"You do?" Nymph asks, her soft and willowy voice whispering through the air to make the forest cover *hum*. "What for?"

"Setting aside the Beelzebub situation, I noticed there's a big rift growing in human society." Yardrat says. "I want Auger's opinion on what to do next."

"Mmm. Understandable." Nymph says. She sashays over to Yardrat, then loops her arm around his. "I don't feel like walking."

"Damn, girl! You're sure bold today!" Fae cackles. "Let's make this a threesome!"

Yardrat rolls his eyes. He waves his hand and summons a portal deeper into Numaria's largest forest.

"Let's save the fun for later. This matter is quite urgent." Yardrat says. "Send out your little *creatures*, Nymph. Get the other Dukes here on the double."

Nymph nods. "Of course."

She turns her head to the side, then lightly blows at the air, sending nearly-microscopic 'spores' into the air, which drift toward the nearest tree and grant it a limited degree of sentience.

The tree then transfers its sentience to another tree, and that one transfers to another tree...

As the three Emperors step through one of Yadrat's portals to arrive at Auger's Sanctuary, Nymph's influence spreads throughout the forest, traveling hundreds of kilometers within minutes. The trees whisper to the hidden Dukes lurking within their treehouses and secluded forts, rousing them from their private business.

"Auger demands my presence."

"Well, if it's Auger asking, I'll go."

"It's been a long time since Auger assembled his acolytes. Something big must have happened."

These Dukes all rise to the task, entering portals hidden in their bases to arrive at the Solemn Sanctuary hidden somewhere within Numaria's vast and unending forests.

What command will Auger issue?

Part 426: Auger's Ambition

The world of Numaria. A lush paradise-class planet completely covered in trees with little to no open space anywhere. Gifted to the Hell of Punishment by the Volgrim following the conclusion of the Energy Wars, it has long become Emperor Auger's home, his sanctuary he never sees fit to leave. Even when the other Emperors assemble to deal with some important business, Auger remains in place, secluded in an unknown location amidst the jungle, his soul imperceptible and his whereabouts unknown.

Emperors Fae and Nymph travel through Yardrat's portal behind the demon in question. They find themselves stepping into a surprisingly dark area of the forest where the treetops are packed so densely that scarcely a single beam of light can thread its way through the leaves above. At the same time, a faint magical aura swallows them, part of a secret formation laid down not by the fairies, but by one of Auger's 'special helper' demons.

This formation is quite special. It shields all new arrivals from soul-searching magic, and even possesses a terrifying ability to hide those inside its radius from high technology and life-form scanners. While it has never been tested against Psions, it should also camouflage its interior from the mightiest Volgrim subspecies in the Milky Way.

Yardrat and the other Emperors arrive inside a treehouse more than five hundred feet tall and several thousands of feet wide, though it does not consist of a single platform, but dozens of smaller ones all stitched together and linked through wooden stairwells and rope bridges. These platforms sit attached to the trunks of trees, some bigger than others, all of them made to be as easy to traverse as possible.

A solemn aura lingers around the central tree, the largest one of them all. Countless beautiful flowers thread around its branches, with the majority of them being colored white, but plenty of red and black ones intermingle to break up the solid patterns.

Yardrat glances around his designated entry platform. He immediately spots a slender but muscular Demon Emperor a short distance away, a fellow with a crooked back and several rotted teeth. The black-haired demon smiles good-naturedly at Yardrat, chuckling in an unpleasant and hissy voice as he hobbles toward him.

"Ahh, there you are, Yardrat. And you've brought the other two."

Nymph smiles at the rather ugly-looking fellow. "Emperor Dagon."

"Nymph. You're looking as fine as ever." Dagon, the Emperor of Pathogens says. "Any idea what our great leader has brought us here for?"

As a newly ascended Emperor in the same vein as Nymph, Dagon's ascension came as a result of the Wordsmith's facility on Tarus II, the Belial Booster. However, despite living as a Duke for tens of thousands of years and even fighting in the Energy Wars, he's never been one to meddle with the upper political struggles of his people, instead leaving such bothersome interests to those who pursue them with passion.

"There was an anomaly at the Tribunal." Yardrat says. "The Wordsmith surprised everyone-"

"Beelzebub freaking revived and came back as an Emperor!" Fae roars, screaming with laughter as she holds her sides. "You should have seen the looks on everyone's faces! Funniest shit I ever saw!"

Dagon doesn't laugh along with Fae. Instead, he frowns. "Beelzebub is an Emperor now? He was already a damn-near unkillable cockroach. How formidable has he become after his ascension?"

"Frighteningly so." Yardrat says blandly. "But I don't like to repeat myself. Let us wait until the others have arrived before we continue this conversation. Emperor Auger already knows the details."

"Sure, sure." Dagon says.

An hour passes. Demons continue to arrive inside the central tree-city of Numaria through portals located elsewhere on the planet, made through the usage of not only Yardrat's powers, but some clever manipulation of other demon's powers. While the fairy queens have not crafted any Formations for the Hell of Punishment, they also are not strictly necessary either. Auger's unique abilities allow him to perform feats with magic that other Emperors can only drool over in envy.

A group of Dukes eventually strides toward Yardrat and the other Emperors. The Duke at the front radiates an enormous aura of power, one supremely close to the boundary of Emperor, yet frustratingly short of actually crossing the threshold. With brown hair held back in a ponytail and demonstone armor covering his thick frame, the fellow appears

quite imposing, especially when one takes into account his shark-like teeth and vicious animalistic grin.

"So you guys are already here?" The lead Duke says. "Auger's summons caught me off-guard. Me and the boys were having a good fuck-session with some minotaurs in the Eastern Woods."

"That's nice." Yardrat says in a tone of voice implying he thinks exactly the opposite. "What a shame though, Hamir. You ended up failing to become an Emperor. Maybe next time."

Hamir, the Duke of Hailstorms, winces at Yardrat's barb. "No worries. Heh! I'll break through for sure on my next attempt. We can't all get lucky like Dagon..."

He shoots an ugly glower at Dagon, who merely rolls his eyes in return. "There was no luck involved. My foundation was superior to yours. All that bluster and you couldn't even advance before me, hehehe!"

"Just you wait 'til I do!" Hamir retorts. "My powers will skyrocket! I'll beat your ass!"

"An individual's strength barely even matters in our Hell." Hamir mutters with more than a hint of bitterness. "All our boons belong to Auger and Auger alone."

"It's not about how much power you possess." Yardrat retorts. "It's about how well you use them. Count your blessings. Auger has never let us down. Perhaps you haven't noticed yet, but we've recently advanced to become the most powerful of all the Hells."

Hamir glances at the four Emperors arrayed before him. Yardrat, Fae, Nymph, and Dagon. After adding in Auger and himself in the near-future, he can't help but feel moderately surprised.

"If we add in Glinch, our Hell has six powerhouses, soon to be seven. It's a little nuts how the humans have empowered us to such heights."

"Don't get cocky." Emperor Dagon warns through his rotting teeth. "The Wordsmith cut down Ose with that frightening Arthur clone of his. If he can destroy Bael's body, he can kill us with ease. We're still not a match for Jason or Hope."

Emperor Nymph purses her lips. "Perhaps."

"You disagree?" Dagon asks.

"I don't pay much attention to the Wordsmith." Nymph says in a frank manner. "But I am unconvinced he is as frightening as he makes himself out to be. He is a human, and a male at that. I believe it is possible for us to manipulate him."

"I agree." Yardrat adds. "As human lives go, Jason Hiro is still surprisingly young. Despite his rage at demonkind for his daughter's death, he continually tries to swallow his anger and seek reconciliation. I'd find the effort admirable if it weren't so sickeningly *human* of him."

"Yeah. It's pretty pathetic." Fae adds. "What kind of little goony-ass guy doesn't lash out and beat up the people who killed his family? Man, I miss REAL men like King Arthur. Remember when he went berserk and killed a MILLION people? That guy was scary as hell! Compared to him, the Wordsmith is just a little pussycat."

"A pussycat with a nuclear bomb." Yardrat quietly says. "No matter how benign he might seem, Jason Hiro is not someone we can afford to take lightly."

The Emperors continue discussing their enemy in a somewhat lighthearted manner, even as more and more demons show up. Eventually, the forest platforms reach a critical mass with more than five million demons, all limited to the range of Lords and above, standing in the treetops and awaiting the meeting's start.

Finally, they sense a change in the atmosphere. Everyone turns to look at the most centralized platform, one that seemingly hovers in midair, suspended atop a deliberately sawed-off tree trunk so that nothing sticks out of the platform's center. A faint, invisible field of energy hovers at the platform's center, and it begins to stir.

Whoomph.

A quiet displacement of air puffs out of that magical area. An incredibly old and ancient-looking Demon Emperor suddenly hobbles into view, a skinny fellow seemingly suffering from malnutrition. He leans heavily on a gnarled walking stick. His long white hair and pointed eyebrows give the impression of a mountain hermit who rarely comes into contact with civilization.

At the same time, however, this Emperor also possesses deep and cunning eyes with a gleam of extreme intelligence. Despite his frail-looking body, every demon in the area knows that if they were to try and engage him in a fight, they wouldn't just lose or lose badly... they would *perish* in a manner most brutal.

Emperor Auger slowly shuffles to the center of the huge platform, standing alone while a sea of eyes falls upon him, fixated on his every movement, his every word...

"Everyone's here, then?" Auger asks. "Good, good. I don't intend to yap at you lot all day. Let's make this quick."

He turns his attention to the 'elite' platform nearby, where Yardrat, the other Emperors and their Dukes all stand and observe him with rapt attention.

"Yardrat here has passed me along quite the interesting information." Auger says, his creaky old voice as loud and audible as if he were standing just a few feet in front of every individual spectator. "It seems several... *interesting events* happened on Tarus II today. Beelzebub revived, and he even ascended to the rank of Emperor in an inexplicable manner. Most interesting, most interesting..."

Auger waves his hand flippantly.

"But the emergence of one additional Emperor changes nothing. Our society now stands at a crossroads, one which may spell our doom *or* our salvation. To that end, I have decided to bring a guest along with me today."

Everyone perks up, even Yardrat, considered by most to be Auger's most trusted subordinate.

A guest? Yardrat thinks. *I haven't heard anything about a guest...*

The invisible magic field behind Auger hums for a moment. An instant later, a tall Demon Emperor suddenly appears as if stepping out of midair in much the same manner as Auger himself did. At the sight of this demon, the entire crowd gasps in surprise.

"It seems the youth still have eyes." Auger says cheekily, smiling like a kindly old grandfather. "This handsome fellow should be familiar to you all, but for the more slow-witted, allow me to introduce him."

Auger lifts up his hand and rests it on the shoulder of the demon standing beside him.

"This individual is known as Kristoff, the Emperor of Blood. He is the only current living powerhouse in the Hell of Blood. Heh heh heh..."

Emperor Kristoff, a handsome but dainty-looking demon, sighs quietly under his breath.

"Everyone. Emperor Auger and I have recently... discussed our situation. In light of recent events, we thought it prudent to consider our strategic options."

Yardrat frowns. "Emperor Auger? Does this mean...?"

"Heh heh heh." Auger laughs cutely, like a doddering old man. "Oh, little Kris-Kris has had it hard, recently. Three of his fellow Emperors died to the Cherubim's attack, including his beloved wife. So sad! Such a tragedy. And now he must find it difficult to rebuild his Hell's forces all alone..."

"Let's not mince words." Kristoff interjects, shooting a cold glare Auger's way. "Once, the Hell of Blood possessed more Emperors than any of the other Hells. Now, we rank at the bottom. Even the Hell of Lust will soon add multiple Emperors to their ranks after allying with the humans."

Kristoff swallows a lump in his throat. "I... do not enjoy political squabbles. Historically, I always left such maneuvering to my wife and the werewolves. But those days are over. My wife's soul was destroyed. Emperor Wolfram perished in his entirety to the Cherubim. And as for Lupus, she has become an undead servant to Mephisto, possessing my wife's body following her soul-death. I am... simply not competent at overseeing the lives of others. If I take the reins, I will only lead my followers to destruction."

"You may not be much of a political thinker," Auger says 'consolingly,' "but a wise man knows when to submit to circumstance."

"Yes." Kristoff replies, his tone heavy. "To that end... I have decided to unite the Hell of Blood with the Hell of Punishment. From now on, I will concede all control of my Hell to Emperor Auger."

"What?!" The crowd shouts, everyone shocked out of their wits.

"We've taken control of the Hell of Blood?! Holy shit!"

"Vampire babes and werewolf girls for everyone!"

"The Hell of Punishment will rise!"

Auger listens to the roaring crowd with an expression of quiet pleasure while Kristoff looks as if he could crap his pants from anger.

After a minute or two of raucous disbelief, Auger suddenly raises his hand.

"Quiet."

At once, the volume drops to nothing. All of the demons suddenly become utterly silent, no longer making a peep. Kristoff doesn't fail to notice that this effect is entirely artificial, brought about by Auger's absolute control over his subordinates.

Emperor Auger smiles again. "Now, then. This deal is quite complex. I have made several concessions to my good friend Kris-Kris. The Hell of Blood's members will allow me access to their souls. I will 'imprint' upon them as I have all of you. In this way, we can bring them into our... *Collective*. But, I cannot force them to join us, and will have to provide them with incentives. If anyone refuses, they will be free to leave the Hell of Blood and go to another Hell to live out the rest of their lives. Who knows? Perhaps they will decide to join the Wordsmith and the humans."

Auger chuckles deep in his throat, as if the very idea is the most foolish, imbecilic thought that has ever crossed his mind.

"If I may," Yardrat says, "I'd like to ask... what do you stand to gain from this, Kristoff?"

The Emperor of Blood snorts dismissively. "I will receive several tangible benefits from Emperor Auger. He has agreed to grant me the equivalent of 4000 Merit Tokens belonging to the Hell of Punishment. I will use these Tokens to enhance my own abilities."

"A wise choice." Auger praises. "In this universe, the only strength one can trust is that which belongs to themselves."

"Right..." Kristoff says, visibly disinterested in any of Auger's honeyed words. "I don't particularly care what happens to the Hell of Blood. All I ask is that if someone does not wish to become part of Auger's cult-"

"Collective." Auger says, correcting Kristoff. "Part of our *Collective*."

"Right." Kristoff replies disdainfully. "If they don't want to become part of your 'Collective,' let them leave unmolested."

"Of course, of course." Auger says, still all smiles. "I will treat your subordinates well. They will receive fantastic benefits when serving under me."

Kristoff turns to look at Auger for several seconds. His expression gives away no hints, but to Yardrat and the keen-eyed other observers, they can't help but notice a hint of

disgust in his eyes.

"...I take my leave." Kristoff mutters.

The Emperor of Blood turns and walks toward the center of the platform. A moment later, he vanishes, disappearing into whatever sort of strange spatial turbulence happens to have embedded itself atop the platform's center.

Auger remains silent for a moment. Then, he returns to addressing the crowd.

"The coming era will not be a simple one. As I said before, a crossroads awaits us. Uniting with the Hell of Blood will not guarantee our survival, but it will benefit us greatly. As we speak, the Volgrim continue to do battle with a deadly enemy from another galaxy. The Hell of Isolation fell in a day to the 'Plague,' and ours will fare no better, should it make landfall upon our world."

"Yeah?" Fae says. "So what are we gonna do then, Boss Auger? Kill the Wordsmith?"

Auger chuckles. "Kill him? No. Don't be shortsighted, Fae. The Wordsmith is the galaxy's only prayer for defeating the Plague. None of you, nor me, are capable of combating this Threat. Indeed, I do not wish to make an enemy of the Wordsmith. I wish to ally with him!"

Auger's words startle everyone for the second time, but Yardrat appears unmoved. Having already previously communicated with Auger through telepathy, he knows about Auger's decision ahead of the rest.

Yardrat flicks his fingers. He steps across space and arrives at Auger's side with practiced ease, then turns to face the other members of the Hell of Punishment.

"The Wordsmith is currently under siege, whether he knows it or not." Yardrat explains. "Not only are the Volgrim pressuring him through the presence of a 7th Level Psion stationed on Tarus II, but he faces increasing resistance to his pro-demon policies from his current military commander, Neil Adams. Neil is not a fan of demonkind and has made his stance abundantly clear. But currently, his faction lacks real teeth. Even though he is ostensibly backed by a Wordsmith, Hope Hiro simply lacks the credibility and doesn't possess the same authority as his other half. He's not a threat to the current order."

Yardrat continues. "The other Hells are dragging their feet. They are more than happy to make use of the Wordsmith's abilities, his 'Belial Booster,' but they won't commit to his

cause. We stand to gain a lot if we directly approach him to become allies."

Emperor Nymph appears unconvinced. "His goals align with ours, to be sure. But I do not see the point. We don't stand to gain much more if we directly align with the Wordsmith's faction."

"You're right." Auger says. "If it were just about reaping benefits there would be no point. The Hell of Lust does not receive any additional benefits from the Wordsmith compared to us. Their Merit Tokens are earned all the same as ours."

He pauses.

"But... we can begin to make overt moves against the humans by allying with them. And that is the ticket to our future success!"

This time, Nymph looks completely confused. She glances at Dagon and Hamir, but neither of them seem to know what the heck Auger is talking about.

"You... want us to ally with the humans... so we can betray the humans?" Nymph asks.

"Not exactly 'betray.'" Auger says. "We must ensure they cannot progress too rapidly. Make no mistake... the humans are advancing much faster than us. They are rapidly strengthening their bodies through our demonic mana. They are sucking us dry, and what we have received back are merely a portion of their gains. In order to ensure we do not fall too far behind, we must overtly act in humanity's interest as their ally so that we can subvert their power structure and turn them against one another."

The old demon chuckles to himself.

"We will not hurt a single human, Nymph. No, instead, we will make them fight one another. When the dust settles and they have crippled themselves, we will be the ultimate victors."

"But what about the Plague?" Nymph asks. "Won't we need the Wordsmith to defeat this Threat from another galaxy?"

"Naturally." Auger answers. "That is why this is a long-term plan. We will assist the Wordsmith for now and prop up the pro-demon faction, all to ensure Jason Hiro can defeat the Plague."

Auger's smile turns cruel.

"And then... when we have succeeded in eliminating that intergalactic Threat... we will turn humanity's two factions loose on one another."

Yardrat smirks. "Just like we did to ancient Rome."

"Yes... just like we did with Rome." Auger affirms.

By the time the meeting finishes, the Entire Hell of Punishment has already realized that their leader is far more devious and far-sighted than any of them ever could have imagined. His plans seem set to put the Hell of Punishment on the map, as well as in first place for the running of all Seven Hells. The First Hell's demise seems more likely than ever, as when it fails to resist the Fourth Hell's power, Auger will swoop in to swallow up its remnants.

Auger steps through the dimensional rift leading from the outer Sanctuary to his inner chambers. He grins evilly.

"It's all coming together now..."

Part 427: Hope's Quest

Volgarius. Some time before the Stormbringer Tribunal.

Hope Hiro continues his mission on the Volgrim homeworld. He forcibly rejuvenates his mind through Wordsmithing, never taking the risk of going to sleep in the middle of enemy territory. Over the course of a full week, he scouts out more than a dozen Psion strongholds, but he never finds the information he needs the most.

I can't risk getting too close to a 7th or 8th Level Psion. Hope thinks. But none of these 6th Level Psions hold real political power. They don't know where Excalibur or the Dominion Rod is being held. I need to change my strategy.

Despite failing to find the location of his desired Heroic Artifacts, Hope hasn't wasted his time. Over the past week, he has successfully infiltrated many Psion training facilities, secret bunkers, and other such areas, and he has learned a lot about their abilities, how they fight, and how they evolve.

Psions are way too scary. Hope thinks. Most of the high-level ones have altered their minds and bodies. They have inhuman reaction times. They can think faster than me and have tens or even hundreds of thousands of years of combat experience, if not millions! They know how to combat Heroes, Angels, Demons, and even Titans. If they ever detect me, they'll rip me apart before I can react. Trying to seek out the information I need from them is certainly going to fuck me over in the long run.

Hope slowly nods.

But there is another way.

The Wordsmith slowly flies through the sky, weaving between stratoscrapers and dodging the innumerable craft flying around while steadily progressing past all the seemingly-identical towers built in grids across Volgarius's surface.

While Volgarius seems to be a planet covered in boring, bland, identical infrastructure, Hope has come to find out that the towers do in fact have minute differences. He's become capable of identifying which stratoscrapers are older than others, which were rebuilt in the past few thousand years, and even which ones have been around since the conclusion of the Seven Great Wars of Volgrim myth.

Psions don't work alone. Hope muses. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that the Volgrim sub-species are always in constant conflict for benefits, but they also have to cooperate to improve their lot in life. Especially with the Kolvaxians gaining ground every year. Where there are Psions, there are Changelings and Technopaths as well. They form a symbiotic trio.

He frowns.

But as for The Ascended, I still have yet to encounter a single one. As best I can tell, there must be trillions of them hidden in secret military installations on other worlds, all hooked up to their virtual playgrounds or whatever, but they never bother mingling with their 'lessers.' And as for the Dolgrimites? Heh. Those recluses basically consider the other four subspecies to be 'sinners against Dolgris.' What a bunch of weirdos.

Unlike Jason, Hope has not extensively interacted with Founder Unarin, nor has he observed the realm of Valhalla. He hasn't a clue about the discoveries his other half has made, but neither has he slacked off in his own efforts. Hope knows plenty of secrets Jason would froth at the mouth to learn.

I have to target the Technopaths. Hope concludes. Their weapons, their automated mecha, and their robots are scary as hell, but they can't detect me like high-level Psions can. They must have secret bases without any high-level Psions lingering around, places I can sneak into and find the information I need. There must be something...

The Second Wordsmith descends toward one of many identical-looking stratoscrapers on Volgarius's surface. What he discovers during his approach is that this one contains hardly any Psionic auras inside its interior. Coupled with a few telltale nuances on the structure's exterior, this allows him to identify it as a Technopath stronghold.

The three 'core' subspecies often heavily interact with one another and assist each other in the aspects where they're weakest. Psions are great at frontline combat, but they would be overwhelmed quickly without Technopath technology backing them up and providing support from the rear. At the same time though, the five species don't especially trust each other. They're always competing with one another and trying to stash secrets away...

Hope's eyes flicker with a greedy gleam. He cautiously slides into the stratoscraper's interior, passing through its walls with his ghost-like body. He rubs his eyes as he realizes he's beginning to feel tired.

"Rejuvenate. Damn. It's not having as much effect as before. I barely got six hours out of the last spell."

He keeps his voice quiet, despite the barrier surrounding his body, preventing his voice or any sound from leaking. It even neutralizes the odors leaking off his body, just in case any bloodhound-nosed Volgrim happen to glance in his general direction.

Within seconds, Hope arrives inside a brightly-lit interior room somewhere inside the stratoscraper. He takes a moment to orient himself, ultimately discovering he's entered a tech-research facility. Maintenance and construction tools clump together in pairs, connected to power conduits and hanging down from cables designed to maximize their scanning capabilities while minimizing their weight. They hover over workbenches and tables covered in countless pieces of unknown technology.

Hope finds nearly a hundred Technopath researchers crawling around the room. After a quick visual inspection, he nods to himself.

These Volgrim have ugly but functional implants. They seem somewhat crude, but they're optimized to work as efficiently as possible while consuming very little bioelectric power. If I had to guess, this stratoscraper must be owned by Clan... Oblong?

Hope hovers at the corner of the room, just below the ceiling. His eyes flick around as he assess the structure's inhabitants.

No... even for Technopaths, these implants are only mid-tier. This must be a sub-clan working under Oblong. Maybe Clan Hadron? They follow a philosophy similar to Oblong, but they're not as well-funded, nor as prominent.

Hope levitates downward. Unlike his forays into Psion spaces, he can fly extremely close to the Technopaths without them spotting him or sensing anything amiss. However, Hope always worries they might have some unknown technology capable of detecting him once he draws within a certain proximity, so he still chooses to keep at least two arm-lengths from any Technopath, just in case.

At this distance, Hope can finally get a good look at the Technopaths and what they're doing. He chooses to observe a pair of mid-ranking personnel, a male and a female. The male stands atop two surprisingly slender legs, each barely the width of a sword-blade, but curved into a sideways-facing 'v' shape to retain flexibility. The male's legs taper off into two dainty metal 'feet,' though they look more to Hope like circular pads that

maintain minimal contact with the ground. How the male manages to balance himself or hold his body upright is anyone's best guess.

The female Technopath, on the other hand, has two half-legs attached to her lower torso, and at the spot where a human's knees might be, there are instead anti-gravity pads, allowing her to 'walk' on air, though her movements appear as smooth as if she were simply flying around in a pod like Sangin Lidra would. Her body doesn't even bob up and down when she 'walks' across the air.

The two Technopaths work together to build what Hope guesses is some sort of energy rifle, but its alien design and incomplete form leaves him uncertain of its parameters. He easily translates the Volgrim's speech through Wordsmithing, allowing him to listen in on their conversation.

"The PTR is insufficient." Says the female Technopath. "What use is projectile velocity if it comes at the cost of heat management? Even a Symmetran could do better than this."

"There's no need to slander my work." Her male counterpart replies. "I still haven't adjusted the LL Index. I'm thinking of replacing these Victor-Tubes with a set from Clan Corona. They'll be smaller and more energy efficient."

"That will lower the maximum energy capacity." His coworker retorts. "The entire point is to create an anti-material rifle superior to the Hyperion V in all respects. If it comes up short in any category, the Analysts will classify it as a variant."

"I am aware." The male says, trying not to sound too irritated. "We can raise the energy capacity by increasing the conduit width by twelve percent. After that, we will switch these micro-fibers to nano-fibers, and that should bridge the gap."

"What model of nano-fibers are you planning to use?" The female asks, before turning to a computer terminal at the side. She quickly types in some commands to pull up the rifle's specs, then scowls. "Useless! These are from Clan Kokorat! The Viltrix Filaments use nucleonic particles to maintain their stability, and have a seven percent failure rate! That means nearly a tenth of the rifles we produce are liable to explode once deployed to the frontlines!"

"They are more volatile than I would prefer, yes," The male says, "and the Founders *know* I would never willingly choose to employ faulty Kokorat filaments unless absolutely necessary. But I think if we include an external nanite repair system, we can minimize the damages caused if the rifles malfunction."

"If you can ensure the Viltrix Filaments only fizzle out instead of exploding, then that might make sense." The other Technopath says. "But this is Kokorat technology we're talking about. If you include even a single component made by Kokorat, you'll instantly plummet our confidence index by at least fourteen percent. We will lose more research grants than we'll gain! Name even one military outfit willing to put untested weapons on the frontlines if they have even a single Kokorat component!"

"I'm doing the best I can, here!" The male Technopath exclaims. "Trying to improve the parameters of the Hyperion V is easier said than done! And the deadline is only two cycles from now. I have to take a risk!"

The female Technopath, clearly the male's direct superior, shakes her head disapprovingly. Her mouth-tentacles quiver as she tries to suppress her frustration.

"Tsk! If the choice is a bit of heat dispersion loss or using one of Kokorat's scrap components... just use the former. We'll have to- WAIT! Why not use Clan Aratrax's nano-wires? The Madir Mk. III's have been battle tested to endure the rigors of combat. They should mostly solve the heat and energy transfer issues!"

"We *will* lose a few points of efficiency..." The male replies hesitantly. "But the overall power output will certainly increase by at least twelve percent. I think this is feasible!"

"Excellent. Get to work on your revisions. We only have two cycles to complete this round of designs. And you're far from the only Constructor trying to make an upgraded Hyperion V. I will *not* lose our War Provision allotments to those damned Symmetrans!"

The two Technopaths drift apart, with the female heading off to deal with some other matters, while the male remains in the same spot, modifying his schematics to add new information, update his notes, and follow through on his superior's commands.

All the while, Hope quietly observes their dialogue, gleaning plenty of information about these two from their conversations.

So this is a military research facility. That's perfect. I'm sure now that it belongs to Clan Hadron. They must need the War Provisions to increase their budget so they can research even mightier weapons of war.

The Wordsmith hovers around, observing other Technopaths while shaking his head.

It's too bad. The Volgrim have long since reached a near-plateau in terms of technological innovation. They can barely make gains of a few percentage points with

their technology, so they're struggling to find novel new solutions. And on a planet of trillions, there's no room for losers or drifters. You either innovate or you fall out of memory.

Doesn't help that their futures are looking more and more grim by the day thanks to the Kolvaxians.

Hope narrows his eyes. His heart hardens as he once again dwells on the thought that humanity's future will soon come under dire threat if it lacks the means to protect itself.

I need to find Excalibur!

He drifts throughout the building, phasing through floors and walls while looking for much higher-ranked Technopaths. Within a few short hours, Hope eventually travels underground into the building's subterranean layers. He finally discovers the people he's been looking for when he arrives inside a highly secure facility.

An underground chamber reinforced with ten-foot-thick exosteel walls and countless layers of security sits with a small meeting table in its center, ten seats surrounding its edges. Multiple datapads lay strewn about its surface. Five lights line the ceiling, their harsh blue color shining down to form distinct 'spots' on the table's surface. Otherwise, the room appears utterly bare, without even a hint of decorations.

A female Technopath missing the lower half of her body rests atop a circular pod levitating at the head of the table. Her keen eyes and aged skin reveal her to be someone of somewhat advanced age. She levitates before a pair of contrite-looking Technopaths who Hope quickly identifies as Clan Leaders according to the quality of their implants. However, they certainly appear to be of lower status than the female before them.

"-disappointed in you." The female Technopath says. "Clan Oblong does not intend to continue financing Clans Hadron and Victor if you cannot produce results! We have already lost two manufacturing worlds in the last five cycles! Our weapons must cut through the Plagueborn faster if we are to reverse their momentum!"

"Clan Leader Lidra," One of the lesser Clan Leaders says, her tone hesitant. "We are doing the best we can. Even our brightest minds cannot brute-force innovations."

The second female Technopath appears quite different from her counterpart, Sangin Lidra, the one leading the conversation. Very little skin remains on her body, and she

appears more like a machine than a biological entity. Only her head appears to remain mostly flesh-based, but her arms and legs glisten with the shine of exosteel.

"Clan Hadron's excuses continue to pile up." Sangin Lidra retorts. "I would rather have one superior weapon capable of scything the Kolvaxian hordes than fifty inferior tools. Tell your clan to put all its efforts toward one design rather than spreading your workforce thin, if that is what it takes. No excuse, Peri Belmore!"

The male clan leader, silent until this point, flails his arm-tentacles about in exasperation. "The law of diminishing returns! If we put fifty thousand talents to work on a project, it won't get completed fifty thousand times faster, nor will it become fifty thousand times more efficient. Progress may even slow to a stop due to a needlessly complex chain of command!"

Sangin Lidra waves her tentacles dismissively. "You know what I meant. Come up with solutions. Our juniors are so focused on the War Provisions and their place in society they are entirely overlooking the Threat. This is no longer about earning credits or accruing glory. Our society will soon face an unfathomable crisis. We will have to abandon our worlds and flee to the stars. Ninety-nine percent of all Volgrim will be left behind to perish."

Peri Belmore, leader of Clan Hadron, flinches in surprise. "The Founders... they are truly considering such a contingency? I thought that was the worst case scenario?"

The leader of Clan Victor, a male named Rynor Grey, lowers his head and sighs. "The worst-case scenario is already here. I can only assume that the number of cycles remaining before our front-lines collapse are fewer than we last estimated."

"They are." Sangin Lidra says, her tone melancholic. "We might have a thousand cycles left at most. Perhaps only several hundred. The Plague's ability to evade our defenses and reach the heart of our worlds is too frightening. We simply cannot stop its spread. It even struck a world controlled by demonkind recently."

"Better the mud-dwellers than our people." Rynor Grey says. "But... I must ask. Have you heard the news from the Founder's Council? It seems the human Wordsmith recently had a meeting with Founder Unarin. We learned all sorts of new information which is currently being disseminated among the upper ranks."

"I have heard of this meeting." Lidra says, nodding sagely. "Though I have not had time to review the details."

"It turns out there is a massive folded space enveloping the entire Milky Way!" Rynor proclaims. "What we know is that it is called the Cosmic Realm. It was created by the angels in the time before Volgrimkind's ascension, during the Primordial Wars."

"Hmph. The angels." Peri Belmore says in a dismissive tone. "Undead relics. An ancient but fallen order. But now we are facing a Threat due to their incompetence?"

"All life in the Milky Way descends from the angels." Rynor Grey says. "But perhaps the angels could not fathom the existence of horrors from outside our galaxy. Either way, it appears the Kolvaxians have managed to infiltrate the Cosmic Realm and are using it to materialize on worlds inside our defensive perimeter!"

Hope's eyes flicker as he listens to the three Technopath clan leaders talk. He quickly learns about some of the antics Jason has been up to, as well as information specifically relating to the Cosmic Realm.

For a brief moment, Lidra becomes quiet. She gazes at the two lesser clan leaders with trepidation.

"This changes everything. Will we send an Executor to investigate the Cosmic Realm?"

"We are not currently certain how to enter its periphery." Rynor says. Clan Victor's leader touches his arm-tentacles together daintily, as if collecting his thoughts. "I believe Executor Nufaris may begin making attempts to locate an entry point soon, though. However, from what I have heard, few are confident we will be able to gain entry without the Wordsmith's help. The Cosmic Realm should be accessible from anywhere, but nobody is able to sense it, not even Founder Dosena. How is it possible that after all these eons, we never once detected its presence?"

The other two clan leaders nod grimly.

"I would not expect any immediate gains." Peri Belmore says. "We will have to work closely with the Wordsmith if we expect to locate an entrance to the Cosmic Realm. Perhaps this will finally allow us to eradicate the Kolvaxians at their source! I have long theorized that they are a hivemind with a controller hiding in an unknown location. The Cosmic Realm seems to be the most optimal hiding place for such an entity..."

"Actually... when it comes to the Wordsmith," Sangin Lidra says, suddenly lowering her voice to a whisper. "I have learned some interesting news. The Founders recently sent Creator Demila to investigate his world."

"Creator Demila." Rynor repeats. "She might not be an Executor, but her stealth and observation skills are top notch. What do you think her spying will uncover?"

"These are mud-dwellers we're talking about." Peri chortles, causing her mouth-tendrils to tremble. "They will not be able to hide any secrets from Demila. Rumor has it she can extend her psionic sense across the entirety of a star system. Her telepathy is not terribly advanced, but since her opponents are mere primitives, it will prove sufficient."

"Her body enhancements have reached a profound level." Lidra nods knowingly. "Her eyesight can view all visible light spectrums, the microscopic realm, and can zoom onto objects thousands of kilometers in the distance. She can even peer through walls! To say nothing of her hearing. The mud-dwellers won't have any secrets left to hide by the week's end!"

"If we can obtain the right leverage, we should be able to twist the Wordsmith's arm until he gives us what we want for free." Rynor says. "There is no reason we should divert so many precious War Provisions to an inferior species like the humans."

"Indeed."

The three Technopaths continue discussing various topics for several hours longer. Eventually, they split apart and go their separate ways.

Hope locks his eyes onto Sangin Lidra's back.

This Technopath is not one I can afford to let slip away. She WILL lead me to Excalibur!

Part 428: Secret Experiments

Sangin Lidra finishes her meeting with the leaders of Clans Victor and Hadron. After they depart, she remains in the office for a moment, deep in thought. Her eyes idly glide around the empty room while she thinks.

The Plague continues its advance. I have my tentacles full juggling fifteen different red-level tasks, but these worthless sub-clans can't even innovate more than a single-digit percent. Ridiculous. The standards for clans have dropped substantially in the last few million cycles.

She hovers two feet off the ground, lost in thought, while her expression flickers between annoyance and discomfort.

How many cycles can we truly last? All of our predictions hang optimistically on the idea that the Plague will not evolve further. But we know it will! These Kolvaxians have already begun to inefficiently harness Psionic abilities. What happens when they discover how to unleash the full power of Executors Huron and Sartran's power? All those predictions will shorten even further!

In truth... we might only have a few orbital cycles left. And that's assuming the Threat is not deliberately toying with us to lengthen our despair? I cannot shake the feeling that this invasion of our galaxy has a deeper intent behind it.

Lidra suddenly stiffens in her seat. A cold chill washes down her back as she whips her head around the room. Reflexively, she presses a button on her chair-module to call for guards.

"Who is there?! Show yourself!"

She looks around, feeling a sensation tickle the back of her neck, one which quickly vanishes. Unsure what just happened, Lidra spins around, scanning every inch of the room. Her iris modules switch to scanning all the known spectrums of light, and she even activates a Psionic Detection Node, but doesn't notice anything strange.

The door to the room swivels open, and eight heavily armed Technopaths outfitted for melee and ranged combat charge into the room.

"Clan leader! Where is the intruder?"

Lidra frowns deeply. "I am not certain. Perhaps it was nothing but... just to be sure, conduct a thorough sweep of the whole facility. We might have a rogue Psion peeping on us."

"At once!" The commanding guard says. He transmits a series of orders to his subordinates in the facility, commanding them to sweep the premises.

An hour later, the results come up negative. Slightly disappointed, but also a little unnerved, Lidra commands the guards to follow her, just in case.

Was it only my imagination? She wonders. *Maybe I'm too jumpy.*

She makes her way up through the underground facility's lower levels, passing through various black-box sites and inspecting the work of her direct subordinates while also glancing at information related to less important projects further down the pipeline.

As the leader of Clan Oblong, her faction's motto is quite simple.

Beauty is useless. Maximum value is what we must pursue.

Oblong focuses heavily on making weapons and technology as efficient as possible. They seek a 'perfect balance,' neither trying to miniaturize their devices to an absurd level, nor trying to cut costs beyond what is reasonable. While subjective, their internal barometers for 'efficiency' have been fine-tuned over eons, allowing them to assign all sorts of relevant metrics to their technology, and those of their competitors.

There is only one universal constant that Oblong knows to be true: It does not matter how attractive a device looks, nor how sleek a spaceship might be. The only thing that matters is its raw capabilities. This once caused many upper-class Volgrim to sneer at them, but everything changed when the Kolvaxians attacked.

Long ago, before the Energy Wars, Clan Oblong was not considered a powerhouse in Volgrim society. With no natural enemies aside from their relatively mild inter-faction wars, the other Technopaths mainly constructed technology for vanity purposes, only iterating in big ways if they happened to stumble upon a particularly novel solution to a long-standing problem.

But after the Threat emerged, their society began to experience tremendous upheavals.

Now, Clan Oblong finds itself rising to the top, approaching the prestigious heights Clan Dyna has always held.

This causes its leader, Sangin Lidra, to feel a swelling of pride in her chest.

Vanity is for the foolish. Gaudiness is a waste of resources. It is only when hard times come that other realize how essential my work is! But alas. The other clans are still far behind compared to mine. All those eons I spent suffering under their laughter and wicked gazes... if we someday cull the Threat, I will have them face an accounting for their snobbery.

This tower, the headquarters of Clan Oblong, hides countless secrets within its underground black-box chambers. Lidra pauses when she enters one such area, where she finds a group of upper-level members of Oblong's researchers testing an improved weapons system.

"Clan Leader." A male Technopath says, his eight-legged body skittering toward her. "You are just in time. That junior I told you about three cycles ago, he just completed the prototype for his Bio-electric Dispersion Gun."

Lidra nods. "Excellent. Commence the test when you are ready. I am in no particular rush at the moment."

"Of course, Leader Lidra. Just a few moments..."

The male skitters away, his long and delicate legs tip-tapping across the floor as he rushes over to his subordinates.

Inside this room, a long table sits covered in electronic equipment, mainly used for monitoring the happenings inside the test chamber. Above the table, a huge plexiglass window, made with state of the art Reinforced Chryselum, shields the observers from any harmful radiation or other things that might spill out and travel through the light spectrum.

Lidra walks up to the window and crosses her arms. She watches as a human child and two adults are led into the room.

"Oh?" Lidra idly murmurs. "You managed to procure additional subjects?"

The technician nods. "The external research divisions have been cloning them as quickly as possible, Clan Leader. But the queues for new subjects are long, and even procuring vat-grown clones is a bit troublesome. After all of our test subjects vanished, we had to scramble to keep our design rounds concluding on time. These Terrans are much too valuable to replace with less developed specimens."

After a brief pause, the technician glances at some charts. "The Development Council is working on procuring a large batch of free-range Terrans. I believe our Changeling operatives have already identified several desirable test subjects. Once she has some free time, Creator Demila will snatch a few as well."

"Psions are so short-sighted." Lidra says disapprovingly. "During the Energy Wars, they actually wanted to exterminate the human populace. Wouldn't that have been such a waste? It's much better to keep a few million around. But now that that 'Hero' has risen up... tsk. It's going to be troublesome acquiring additional subjects. Cloned subjects are far less useful for our needs."

Inside the chamber, a little boy and his parents stand naked, shivering with fear. They find themselves inside a painfully bright white room, the walls reinforced so not a single sound can escape the perimeter.

Despite being vat-cloned humans, they possess the same memories as their original 'template models' once did. They remember their lives on Earth, and their quiet suburban existences. All those memories turn to blackness at some unknown point, where they woke up inside prison-like storage facilities designed to keep them immobilized and ready for whatever horrific experiments their alien captors wished to unleash upon them.

"Dad... dad... I'm so scared..." The little boy whispers, his voice cracking.

His father kneels down to hug him. "I'll- I'll protect you, Jacob. Don't be afraid..."

His wife joins him in embracing their son. Together, neither of them even feels particularly afraid, strangely enough. They've been subjected to so much pain over the last few weeks, so many torturous experiments, that now they can only wish for a quick death.

Naturally, after being led into the testing chamber, with its cold floors and uncomfortable ambient temperature, they immediately notice the transparent glass across from them, along with the Technopaths milling about, wholly unconcerned with their captives' states of mind.

"Oh god, oh fuck..." The woman whispers, closing her eyes. "Can't it just end? Why do they keep doing this to us?"

"I don't know, Diane. I don't know..." The man mutters hollowly.

A quiet swishing of air alerts the trio to their task for the day. Their blood turns cold as the floor opens up, revealing a Technopath soldier outfitted with full combat attire. With heavy armor lining every inch of his body, he looks like he could tear through a wall of humanity's finest without breaking a sweat.

The soldier easily hefts a heavy rifle weighing more than 100 pounds (45 kilos) with practiced ease. Thanks to his augmented body, he's more than capable of lifting weapons and armor five times the gun's weight.

Seeing this horrifying weapon of war being aimed at them, the little boy screams in fright, but his parents remain calm.

Finally. We can die.

Behind the glass, Lidra watches as her technician subordinate speaks into the microphone.

"You may begin."

The soldier nods. He takes aim with the gun, then fires.

KZZAAT!

An energized tachyon burst instantly races toward the trio. Before they can react, it explodes in their face, blasting them with electrical energy and making their bodies seize up!

Like a taser overloaded to an absurd level, the Bio-electric Dispersion Gun fries the electrical receptors in their bodies, causing the whole family to gnash their teeth together, fracturing or outright shattering their molars.

A moment later, they all flop to the ground lifelessly.

At once, a dozen drones drop out of the ceiling and begin hovering over the fallen humans, scanning them and collecting data regarding their fallen figures. They lift up and wrench their bodies around without regard for the humans' wellbeing, treating them as casually as the ancient humans might have treated lab rats.

"Interesting." The male Technopath says. "These are promising results. We were able to successfully destroy their neural pathways, which resulted in instant incapacitation. Of course, we won't know how the weapons will perform until we test them in the field..."

"This is a good start." Lidra says, nodding approvingly. "But our enemies are Kolvaxians. They might possess enhanced resistance against electrical-based attacks."

"They will almost certainly adapt over time to the Bio-electric Dispersion Gun." The male replies. "But that doesn't matter. If we can succeed in capturing just one live specimen, we should be able to crack the Kolvaxian infection genome and develop a counter-measure. But we need to disable whatever signal they receive that causes them to self-destruct."

Lidra nods absent-mindedly. "Yes, yes. Keep up the good work. In the meantime, I'll see about getting you more free-range humans."

"We really do need to be bumped up the queue." The technician affirms. "It's too much of a waste to give spiritually-viable Terrans to the lesser clans."

"The supply is almost nonexistent, and the demands for fresh bodies are infinite." Lidra says blandly. "As for competing with Dyna? We'll have to settle for second place."

While the two Technopaths talk, the inspection bots inside the test chamber quickly obliterate the bodies of the fallen test subjects. They erase all traces of their DNA to ensure there won't be any contamination in future experiments, then retreat into the ceiling.

A minute later, the door to the chamber opens, and three humans are pushed inside. These three consist of a little boy, a man, and his wife.

The man shivers. He looks around the room and immediately spots the heavily armed Technopath soldier standing at attention, waiting for his next order.

The man glances at his wife.

"This... this might be it, Diane."

She nods. "I love you, David."

"Dad... dad, I'm scared..." The little boy whispers.

But Lidra and the other Technopaths pay these vat-cloned humans no mind. No matter whether they cry or beg, they will never receive any mercy.

After a few more horrifying rounds of testing, Lidra turns and leaves.

"Keep me updated."

"Yes, Clan Leader!"

She exits the room with her honor guard in tow, but pauses outside for a moment and frowns.

There it is again. That feeling I'm being watched. Is it merely my imagination?

She swivels her head in a wide arc, causing the leader of her guards to take notice.

"Clan Leader?"

"Did you scan the whole facility?" Lidra asks.

"Of course. We even called in a request to Clan Hadron. Their specialized detection matrix has not detected any anomalies."

"It's probably nothing, then." Lidra says out loud, but internally, she can't help but feel conflicted. "Let's return to my upper office. I have a meeting scheduled with Exolis of Clan Dyna later. You will accompany me for the foreseeable future."

"Yes, Clan Leader." Her honor guards reply.

Hope Hiro, having spent the past several hours observing Sangin Lidra, feels nothing but a deep-seated disgust within his bones.

He observed every moment with nothing but the utmost horror. Between his snooping on her conversations with the other Clan Leaders and the revelation of human experimentation in these secret Technopath labs, Hope managed to connect several awful dots.

It all makes sense now. I assumed the Volgrim kept humanity around for the reasons they outright stated, but of course they lied! They've been using humans for experimentation for years. I bet they don't just use us, but demons and monsters as well. And why wouldn't they?! They're a supremely powerful Type III civilization. We must make for awesome lab rats!

Hope's hatred grows exponentially every hour that passes. He watches in horror as the same family of people is brought in, blasted with the Volgrim's special neutralization gun, then promptly 'disposed' of. Despite his barely contained rage, the Wordsmith doesn't rescue these families, as saving them would only reveal his position, and they can simply be cloned again, over and over.

What truly enrages the Wordsmith is the revelation of Creator Demila's secondary purpose on Tarus II.

That Psionic bitch. I haven't even met her yet and I'm already prepared to atomize her into cosmic dust! She's stealing humans for the Technopath's sick experiments! Not just her, but the Changelings too! I have to let Neil know about this after I return.

He contemplates a great many things, all while silently pursuing Lidra like a fly on a turd. No matter where she goes or how she scans the area, she never manages to detect his presence.

The Volgrim claim that they kept humans around because exterminating us would be a terrible sin. They spoke as if this were an act of benevolence, but that couldn't be further from the truth! We're nothing but test subjects to them. Even now, they only negotiate with us to lower our guard. And Jason's such a fucking moron there's no way he's uncovered this secret yet! He's even been chumming it up with Unarin, selling out our secrets and giving the First Founder details on our troop movements or whatever other bullshit he feels like blabbing!

Unaware of the specific details of what Jason and Unarin may have discussed, Hope manufactures all sorts of outrageous thoughts, building up his rage further.

Goddammit. How am I going to fix this? The Volgrim definitely don't want us to know they're using humans for experiments. The veil of secrecy benefits them. But if we do find out, they might drop all pretenses of politeness to focus on a rapid suppression and extermination effort. Frankly, I don't think Jason is up to the challenge of fighting a Volgrim armada. Humanity's strength is insignificant compared to what the Volgrim can unleash!

Hope slowly calms down. He follows after Lidra while she rides a gravlift upward to the top levels of her headquarters.

We still have a big advantage. There are TWO Wordsmiths, not one. If Jason and I are ever in the same area, the Volgrim might try to attack and kill us both to neutralize us. Of course, they probably also want to use our Wordsmithing to benefit themselves, so... there might be a cost/benefit analysis involved. If our threat level rises too high, they will attack, but otherwise, they will work with us. And revealing I know about their human experimentation could throw a wrench into their parameters. The might benefit humanity, but it might be to our detriment too...

Hope licks his lips.

There is another way. What if I could clone myself? I could make a third, fourth, or even a fifth Wordsmith. Maybe even more. Then no matter how the Volgrim try, they'll never be able to eliminate us both.

His expression falls.

Too bad I can't clone myself or anyone else... not without Solomon's Crown. Even Centurion's calculations can't make up the difference. Jason was only able to clone me through Solomon. That means I not only need to acquire Excalibur, but the Crown as well.

I can't scan to find the Crown's location. Even with Solomon's soul inside of it, the Crown itself reads as an inanimate object to my Wordsmithing. But if I think logically, the Crown won't just be left in any random location. It will have to be locked up tightly somewhere secret. Somewhere impossible for me to locate under normal circumstances. Maybe Unarin's tower? Maybe a black-level site? Hell, it might even be at the same place as Excalibur. That would be awfully convenient.

The gravlift slows to a stop near the top of the tower, in the executive suite. Sangin Lidra exits along with her honor guard, and they stroll through brightly-lit, white-walled corridors past all sorts of upper-crust Technopath elites. Some of them nod at their faction's leader, but most continue with their business, paying her arrival no mind.

Lidra doesn't head to her personal office. Instead, she travels to a hangar nestled on the south side of the headquarters, where a personal VIP shuttle awaits. She and her eight guards climb aboard and take their seats.

"Dyna Tower." Lidra says to the pilot, a Technopath bred and trained specifically to always remain inside the shuttle, ready to ferry her anywhere she might need to go. "I have a meeting with Exolis Whitspur."

"Yes, Clan Leader." The pilot says. "Our estimated travel time is forty-seven time units."

"Is traffic heavy today?" Lidra asks.

"Not especially. Though I have heard that the Psionic Council is holding a minor exhibition match for several recently uplifted Level 6 soldiers."

"Yes, yes." Lidra replies, not particularly caring. She frowns slightly, then looks around the cabin.

"Before we leave, run a scan of the interior."

"Yes, Clan Leader."

The pilot runs a detection matrix inside the craft, but he fails to detect Hope's presence. Even so, this doesn't make Lidra feel reassured.

Hope smiles wickedly at the anxious-looking Technopath.

She can't see me, nor can she detect me, but she feels uncomfortable. It must be an intuitive feeling, like when a prey animal feels the eyes of a predator lingering on its back. Good. Very good... I intend to kill you once you've exhausted your usefulness to me, Lidra. Your atrocities are far too numerous to count.

The shuttle takes off, and Hope follows along after it, chuckling sinisterly to himself all the while.

Jason might want to someday reconcile with the Volgrim. But as for me?

I'll kill every last one of these alien cocksuckers.

Part 429: The Excalibur Initiative

Exolis Whitspur. One of the five Clan Leaders of Clan Dyna. Due to his youthful age, he might not be the highest ranking member, but he quickly rose to power due to his innovative solutions to longstanding technological blockades that plagued Volgrim society for more than a quarter of a million cycles. As such, he has come to possess much prestige among his peers, and has earned himself great accolades from his superiors, as well as his equals.

Even so, he is still only one of five Clan Leaders running Dyna. Considered the most powerful, longest standing, and most prestigious of all Technopath Clans, the influence he wields is significantly higher than that of his guest today, Clan Oblong's leader, Sangin Lidra.

The black-skinned leader of Dyna sports a red uniform with gold-stripes. Unlike other Technopaths, no visible augments appear on his body. He commands attention through his muscular bipedal build, his five-fingered hands, and his elongated skull. Despite resembling a brutish battlefield commander, the fifth Clan Leader of Dyna is neither a foolish brute nor a reclusive researcher, but a balanced fusion of the two.

He sits inside his luxurious office, an area he has designated as his inner sanctum. His walls are adorned with beautiful works of art, many of them focusing on ancient battles the Volgrim fought on hostile worlds, while others show off his rise over time to his current prestigious heights. In some images, he stands beside other noteworthy Technopath and Psion elites, showing off his extensive and solid social network. At the same time, many shelves filled with high technology line the walls, including older models of top-of-the-line black level hardware that lesser Technopath clans would kill to glimpse.

His piercing yellow eyes sweep across the contents of a datapad in his hands.

The Sentient Weapon Observation and Research Division's newest reports appear promising due to the recent acquirement of the Heroic Artifact known as Solomon's Crown. Early studies show an unexpected resonance event between the Crown and other artifacts. More information to come soon.

Exolis flicks through several other entries, some of which note the downturn of recent developments after the loss of all their viable Terran research subjects.

Unfortunate. Exolis thinks to himself. But understandable. Losing all of our Terran-biologicals at the same time has drastically slowed down our R&D divisions. However, S.W.O.R.D. has still managed to make some important gains in spite of the crisis. I'll have to reward them by diverting an additional supply of vat-clones to their head researchers.

He lightly strums his fingers on the table while falling deep into thought. Interestingly, Exolis is one of a very small percentage of Technopaths who opt to surgically replace their arm-tentacles with bone-based digits, though for what reasons, only he can fully understand. For a leader of a top Technopath clan to do so is considered especially odd, but few would ever second-guess him due to all his past accomplishments.

Strange. Reports indicate that all of the Terrans in the Milky Way were teleported to the world of Tarus II through the Wordsmith's magic. Despite this, the Terrans seem not to have noticed. If they did notice, they've remained oddly quiet. Perhaps their leaders have opted to cover the matter up? Considering the fates which would have befallen the vat-clones, I can understand why they might... but it is still an unexpected response from such a hot-blooded species.

While Exolis contemplates this divergence in humanity's behavior, a light pings on a computer console beside him. He doesn't move a muscle, but instead transmits a wireless command to receive the incoming communication request.

"Leader Exolis." A mid-level executive says. "Clan Leader of Oblong, Sangin Lidra, has arrived."

"I am presently unoccupied." Exolis says. "Bring her in."

"Yes, sir."

The line cuts off. After a few minutes, the opaque reinforced glass doors to Exolis's office hiss open, and a female Technopath hovers in, her circular pod levitating a foot or two off the floor. Exolis rises from his seat, then walks around his desk across his office to meet the newcomer.

"Ah, Lidra. You look as lovely as ever." Exolis says, taking great care to conceal his disgust at the stereotypical array of technology bolted onto her body and that useless hovering bucket which has replaced her lower torso.

So low-class. Exolis thinks, while maintaining his polite façade. *Always, my fellow Technopaths want to outfit themselves with technology in such a crude, ugly manner. Subtlety is lost on them.*

Lidra spreads her arms out in a welcoming gesture. "Leader Exolis, it is a pleasure to see you again. I've brought you some promising results regarding five black-level technologies, as well as seventeen red-level technologies."

Exolis nods. As expected, Lidra has brought him the information he requested. However, before he can open his mouth to respond, Lidra continues.

"Would you like me to neurally transfer my results?"

For the briefest of instants, Exolis pauses, slightly startled by this request. However, he schools his expression and nods. "Yes, yes, of course. Come and have a seat. We'll discuss your recent findings in great detail."

At the same time as Exolis speaks, he activates a subdermal implant inside his skull. This bit of technology is something quite ubiquitous among all Technopaths, as it allows them to connect to all sorts of devices wirelessly and transmit large amounts of information to and from their cerebral synapses. Naturally, Exolis's is far superior to the low and mid-grade implants his lessers possess, including advanced security and anti-hacking countermeasures to protect his existence, but those details don't matter for ninety-nine percent of usage cases.

Except for this one.

He activates a transmission link while he and Lidra turn to walk toward his desk. In the instant between instants, the two of them begin communicating at an unthinkable speed, transmitting hundreds of words every nanosecond, far faster than any lesser-biological mind can comprehend, except for perhaps a Brain Enhancer Psion...

[Clan Leader Lidra.] Exolis transmits, as his body slowly begins to turn toward his desk. [State the nature of the emergency.]

[I suspect there is someone pursuing me.] Lidra says, her body also slowly beginning to follow after Exolis. [I first hypothesized it was a rogue Psion. However, I have not been able to detect any remnant psionic patterns in the local airspace. There were also no unexpected discoveries in my headquarters, and every other scan came up clean.]

[Then why do you believe you are being followed?] Exolis asks.

[I cannot give you a concrete answer. It is merely my 'intuition.' I feel as if something is watching me, and I do not know what. I will transmit the last ten standard time units of my observations to you.]

In the single second it takes them to turn around and head toward Exolis's desk, Lidra transmits a series of emotional, mental, and psychological sensations to her fellow Clan Leader. Despite the lack of any hard data, she believes that these feelings dogging her do not come from nowhere. Exolis experiences the last ten hours of her life as identically as if he were living in her shoes. He also experiences those same strange feelings, including the sensation of something brushing the back of her neck.

[There is no hard evidence to suggest you are being followed.] Exolis states after reviewing the data. [However, you were right to contact me. I have recently received a Top Secret file passed down directly from Founder Cuanali. You are aware Founder Unarin recently spent a significant amount of time with the Terran designated Jason Hiro?]

[I am.] Lidra says, only for her heart-rate to spike. [Are you implying...?]

[Jason Hiro is presently on Tarus II.] Exolis says. [As of less than half a standard time-unit ago, we have confirmed his exact position and have been monitoring his whereabouts. This does not exclude the possibility of his powers taking an esoteric form to infiltrate our Empire. However, there is a much more likely reason for the feelings you are experiencing.]

Exolis pauses to let his next words sink in.

[The entity pursuing you may be the Second Wordsmith, Hope Hiro. We have been unable to deduce his whereabouts for several rotational cycles. Founder Unarin confirmed that Jason Hiro possesses exceptional stealth capabilities, as well as anti-stealth capabilities, which likely means his clone does too. We have already begun to search several top secret facilities for traces of the second Wordsmith, and now it is entirely possible we have unwittingly stumbled onto him due to your observational skills.]

Lidra doesn't feel any sense of pride at the thought she may have helped the Founders, but instead dread due to not one counter-measure being capable of sensing the Wordsmith's presence.

[By the Founders!] Lidra exclaims. [Then we should contact the Executors! We must capture the Wordsmith at once!]

Exolis expresses amusement through his emotional sub-connection. [That is not the decision the Founders have made. We need to maintain an alliance with the First Wordsmith. While we have observed that he has no strong attachments to the Second Wordsmith, we mustn't discount the possibility that we have overlooked extenuating circumstances. If we capture the Second Wordsmith, he may use his magic to alert the First Wordsmith to his predicament, and this could cause a serious diplomatic breakdown between our species.]

Lidra remains quiet for a fraction of a moment.

[Then what action should we take?]

Exolis's emotions spike for a brief instant, sending a sensation of *condescension* Lidra's way.

[The Second Wordsmith is here to *investigate* our Empire. The fact that no High Psions have noticed his presence means he has already learned to evade their detection. No doubt, he intends to secretly locate the Heroic Artifacts. We have already anticipated this eventuality. We will give him what he wants.]

[I do not understand.] Lidra says. [Founder Unarin passed down a directive to delete all records relating to the Heroic Artifacts and their whereabouts after we discovered the Wordsmith's emergence. Why would he wish to undo that decree now?]

[You are not as wise as the First Founder.] Exolis states. [How can you comprehend his genius? We now know that the Second Wordsmith is mostly likely pursuing you. Giving him the location of the Artifacts on *our* terms can benefit us greatly. *Especially* if we know he is coming.]

Lidra transmits a sensation of comprehension. [Of course. The First Founder is wise. He is always thinking ten steps ahead of these inferior mud-dwellers. I should not question his wisdom.]

The two of them maintain their communication link, but lower the transfer rate after communicating some more information in secret. Within a few real-time seconds, they reach Exolis Whitspur's desk. He takes a seat at the commanding side, while Lidra hovers at the receiving side.

"I have reviewed your findings, and they are quite promising." Exolis says out loud, seemingly picking up the conversation from a 'few seconds' before. "I was actually

wondering if you could review the notes on the S.W.O.R.D. operation. We've run into some issues with the Excalibur Initiative."

He deliberately turns the datapad to face Lidra, though she could easily receive the information through her cerebral link if she so-desired. She in turn leans forward to look at the datapad, which displays a wireframe image of a familiar medieval blade.

"The Excalibur Initiative?" Lidra asks with a curious tone. "I am afraid that information is above my clearance level. The Founders would never entrust anyone outside of Clan Dyna with the Heroic Artifacts."

"You are an exception." Exolis says, his expression blank. "The Founders have heard about your recent successes with the Nanite Deconstruction Nodes. While they were not effective versus the Kolvaxians, they did show a lot of promise in other areas. We're willing to let you in on this specific program's details."

He pauses for a moment before continuing.

"The Excalibur Initiative recently encountered a significant setback when our experimental subjects all vanished. As such, we've run into multiple hindrances related to controlling its Divine Energy. However, that changed when we acquired Solomon's Crown. It seems we might be able to weaponize Excalibur if we can unite the two artifacts. Do you think you could provide us with any insights?"

Lidra scrunches up her face. "You evaluate me too highly, Leader Exolis. My skills are inferior to yours when it comes to the study of spiritual energy."

Exolis leans back in his chair and smiles. "What if you were to go there in person?"

"Well..." Lidra says, her tone hesitant. "My duties are significant. I do not know if I could spare that much time out of my day. Where is the S.W.O.R.D. facility located?"

As if expecting her question ahead of time, Exolis casually waves his hand above the datapad, changing the screen to show an image of a barren-looking world covered in grey dust, not unlike Earth's moon, Luna. A small but deep-looking hole on the surface easily draws one's attention, resembling a mineshaft leading into the planet's core.

"This is Serris. Some call it *The Vault*. It's a moon orbiting a gas giant in the Gedo system, just seventy light-cycles from here. Even if you travel at Warp Six, it won't take you more than a single cycle to arrive. But we'll provide you a Class III shuttle, so you can be there within the next few standard time-units."

He continues. "The Founders hollowed out Serris's core over a million cycles ago to keep all black-level research under lock and key. The only way in and out of the planet's core is through the tunnel bored into the moon's surface. It's a geologically stable world ideal for sensitive experiments. Not too far from Volgarius, but distant enough that snooping spies won't be able to stumble upon it by accident. The Founders keep space traffic there to an absolute minimum."

"So close to the homeworld..." Lidra idly remarks, leaning in to peer at the screen. "I truly am surprised. To think something of such importance would be within an arm's reach. Figuratively speaking, of course."

Exolis nods. "So, are you interested in my proposal? If not, I will have to request that you submit to a memory wipe of this conversation. We cannot allow knowledge of Serris to percolate among the greater population, not even for a Clan Leader like yourself."

"I am interested." Lidra quickly says. "Who would not be? A chance to engage in another clan's black-level research does not come often. And this is a specific path I have not been able to dabble in much, of late."

"You have earned this privilege." Exolis says kindly. "Your goal of capturing a Kolvaxian alive has not succeeded to date, but Oblong's innovations have reaped many Plagueborne lives. I believe that Oblong will be key to our species' future in the upcoming future."

"I thank you for your praise." Lidra says. "I will try to continue my clan's current rate of innovation."

The two of them continue to exchange pleasantries and information. After half an hour, their talks wind down, Lidra bows her head, and she hovers out of the room.

Once she departs, Exolis remains seated, trying to 'sense' the surrounding area.

I wonder if the Second Wordsmith will take the bait? If it is not him, there will not be any harm. But if it is? I do not believe he will be able to resist.

Silently, Exolis transmits a command through his cranial module.

[Special message to Founder Unarin. I believe I have located the *Lost Terran*.]

Hope Hiro follows after Sangin Lidra. He listens in on her conversation with Exolis Whitspur and even gets the shock of his life when they 'luckily' begin to discuss the Excalibur Initiative.

However, after the meeting concludes and Lidra leaves, Hope begins to think carefully on the discussion he just observed.

That was awfully convenient. Here I am looking for Heroic Artifacts and I stumble upon not just Excalibur, but Solomon's Crown too? And now I know the exact location for the world of Serris. I thought I'd have to do mind extractions to find what I'm looking for, yet it just ended up vomited onto my lap.

Too easy. Waaay too easy. It seems the Volgrim don't KNOW I'm here, but they must suspect it. Their scans didn't reveal my presence, but Lidra may have made a stab in the dark at my identity. I didn't notice anything odd in their conversation, but Lidra and Exolis seemed to be explaining things in an overly simple manner, as if they were speaking to an 'audience.' Me.

He silently scratches his chin while levitating through the air. With practiced ease, Hope avoids bumping into anyone and continues following Lidra as she travels toward a hangar bay containing a special shuttle that will take her off-world.

My intuition tells me there's a sixty percent chance this is a trap. Hope thinks. That probably is the actual facility containing Excalibur, but they might have a bunch of High Psions waiting for me when I arrive.

Hope pauses. His eyebrows shift several times.

Should I try and read Lidra's mind?

Having held back from reading even a single Volgrim mind since his arrival on Volgarius, Hope feels a great deal of apprehension about doing so. For all he knows, trying to intrude on an alien's thoughts might instantly reveal his presence. High-level Volgrim might have all sorts of mental defenses he can't anticipate, ranging from the technological to the Psionic.

Maybe there's a better way. Hope thinks.

He opens his mouth.

"Prediction."

At once, a sudden blackness swallows his awareness.

* * *

Hope watches as several images flicker past his eyes.

A group of three Psions gaze at him, their expressions cruel.

[You were foolish to come here alone. We anticipated your arrival.]

An instant later, a blinding white light irradiates Hope's vision. He watches as the world of Tarus II is engulfed by cosmic energy, blasting him with its power. Hope opens his mouth to scream, but instead, he finds himself standing across from his other half, Jason.

Jason presses his palms against his eyes.

"Dead... god, they're all dead. Phoebe... Daisy... I couldn't save them! Aaaah!!"

An instant later, Jason disappears, and Unarin appears. The First Founder appears disappointed. He swirls a glass of liquid absentmindedly in his fingers.

"So much for the Wordsmiths. I guess we no longer have any choice. We'll have to enact the final measure."

A female Psion appears next to him.

[We may have lost the war, but we will never give up the fight.]

* * *

Hope's vision returns, and he finds himself sprawled on the floor. Alarmed, he quickly levitates back to his feet, only to breathe a sigh of relief when he sees Lidra some ways up ahead.

Holy crap! I conked myself out for a good ten seconds or so! I'm lucky nobody stumbled across my unconscious body!

He quickly scans the corridor but finds nobody around his position.

What the hell were those images? I was only trying to find out if the Volgrim were planning to ambush me. Maybe those three Psions were the ambushers? But what was all that about Tarus II? Why was Phoebe dead? And what 'final measure' was Unarin talking about?!

More confused than alarmed, Hope can't quite make heads or tails of those random visions. Bewildered, he quickly catches up to Lidra, then shakes his head.

Forget it! Useless visions. If I can't read minds and I can't predict the future, then I won't bother. I'll just prepare for the worst.

Now... what can I do to make sure I come out on top if half a dozen Executors pounce on me?

He boards the shuttle behind Lidra, and it takes off, leaving the world of Volgarius behind.

All the while, he evaluates his options with great care...

Part 430: Moonbase Serris

Sangin Lidra's shuttle races across the Milky Way at Warp 8, a speed most civilian vessels can't typically achieve. Even the Volgrim, once the complete conquerors of the entire Milky Way, could only afford to keep a few scattered grams of Trifrancium aboard their military vessels, at the upper limit. As for civilians, travelers seeking to immigrate from one world to another, or prospectors in search of riches for the sake of impressing their Founders, their access to Trifrancium was restricted and they had to make do with Dilithium, its weaker cousin.

Trifrancium, by its very nature, is a rare commodity valued for how it allows spaceships to break past the barrier of Warp 6. However, it is a finite resource, and one not easily located or excavated. Even the world of Tarus II, a known mine for Trifrancium, only managed to dig up a mere ten kilograms of the material over an extraordinarily long time, though as to the exact whereabouts of those deposits, not many can know...

Fortunately, the shuttle Sangin Lidra finds herself on is a rare high-class civilian vessel capable of traversing the stars while consuming a gram or two of Trifrancium. It features all sorts of amenities designed to soothe her body and free up her mind, ideally allowing her to drift off and doze for a few hours during the transit to her destination.

But too bad. Lidra doesn't dare to sleep.

During the whole trip to the moon of Serris, she can barely steady her beating heart. That irritating feeling of being *watched* tickles her mind, making her unable to fully focus on anything. She perfunctorily browses a datapad while trying not to look around or appear too suspicious.

The Second Wordsmith. He's here. I can feel it! This is so unnerving. I'm all alone, this ship doesn't even have a pilot. If he attacks me, nobody will be able to protect me. Oh, why did I agree to this?! I'm like a Dyklon on the chopping block!

She screams inside her head, venting her frustration silently while praying the unseen Terran isn't reading her thoughts. The entire trip, all she can think about is how she can't wait to mingle among other Technopaths and blend into a crowd.

After five hours pass, Lidra frowns, ever so slightly.

If the Terran were going to kill me, he'd have done so already. Therefore, he must not intend to do so. More likely, he wants to obtain information from me. What should I do in such a situation?

She ponders that thought, more to pass the time than to come up with a satisfying answer, until the shuttle's AI beeps a warning tone.

"Attention, VIP Passenger: **SANGIN LIDRA**. We have arrived inside the Gedo System and will soon reach the gravity well of Serris. Please remain seated until this vessel reaches its destination."

Lidra tenses up, wondering if this will be the moment where the Terran finally attacks her, but half an hour later, as the shuttle descends toward the grey-colored moon, she continues to remain among the living.

Her shuttle passes through a large glass vacuum-sealed dome surrounding the massive mineshaft leading into the moon's depths. Lidra looks up into the sky, where she sees the huge gas giant swallowing up a fifth of the horizon, its blood-red coloration making her feel like a tiny, insignificant speck against the backdrop of the galaxy. At this exact moment, the planet happens to be smack in the middle of its night cycle, but the gas giant's reflected light brightly illuminates its moon with an eerie red glow.

Her ship touches down in a small landing area alongside a dozen other vessels, demonstrating to her just how little traffic visits this moon. The landing ramp descends, and Lidra hovers outside into the air-filled glass dome.

A pair of bipedal Technopaths wearing brilliant red and blue robes approach Lidra. Despite their youthful ages, they don't act subserviently toward her, but instead they nod politely, approaching her as if they were equals.

"Sangin Lidra of the *young* clan Oblong. We have been looking forward to meeting you." Says one of the two, a beautiful female Technopath wearing a blood-red robe that glitters in the starlight. Her words carry a dismissive tone, as if the incredible advances Oblong has made during the Kolvaxian Crisis haven't particularly impressed her. "Please follow us. We will take you on a tour through our facility."

Lidra nods. "Of course. And your names...?"

The female raises her right tentacle-hand. "I am Melkia Redshift. And this male beside me is Melkia Blueshift."

"We are Children of Melkia." The male Technopath says, wearing an equally brilliant blue robe to mirror his sister's. "It is your honor to learn of our continued existence."

Lidra's heart nearly stops.

"M-Melkia? As in, the ancient installation...?"

"You know your history." Redshift says. "Yes, our predecessors once worked on the ancient weapons of war known as the Sentinels. It is a matter of pride for us, as well as one of shame. Please come along, and we will be happy to answer your queries."

Lidra shivers with excitement. "All my life, I've heard rumors of the fabled Children of Melkia! I thought your whole family lineage had gone extinct!"

Blueshift chuckles amusedly. "We do prefer when people forget we exist. It allows us to conduct our work in the utmost secrecy..."

The three Technopaths climb aboard a vehicle designed to ride down into the mineshaft. As they do, Lidra frowns.

Odd. It doesn't feel like I'm being watched anymore. Has the Wordsmith left? Or was he ever even here...?

Hope Hiro, still as invisible as ever, levitates in the void above Serris. He cracks his neck, then flexes his arms, appearing uncomfortable for some odd reason.

I'm not as limber as I hoped I'd be. Hope thinks. My arms don't feel quite right. But it will have to do. I need to protect myself, especially if the Volgrim intend to ambush me.

Hope doesn't travel down to the moon along with Lidra. Instead, he exits her shuttle some distance from the upper atmosphere, then opens up a secret dimension through his Wordsmithing. He sits inside it for a few minutes making important preparations for his journey to the underground complex, then exits and descends to Serris's grey-colored surface.

"Wow." Hope mutters to himself, as he flies through the planet's ultra-thin, barely-present atmosphere. "It really does look like Earth's moon."

The ultra-hardened glass dome surrounding the planet's singular mineshaft poses no obstacle to Hope. He passes through it as if it doesn't exist, his ghostly body slipping

through the gaps in reality with ease. As he descends, Hope utters several Words of Power.

"Atlas. Inspect. Analyze. Centurion, check out this information for me and create a local memory backup."

Centurion speaks inside Hope's mind. **[COMMAND ACCEPTED, PILOT HOPE HIRO. RECEIVING PLANETARY SCAN INFORMATION NOW.]**

He scans the local area, and the entirety of the planet's innards, obtaining a far-too-detailed map of its interior. However, the sheer size of the world makes it nearly impossible for Hope to 'focus' on anything specific, not without requiring a great deal of time and attention. One thing Hope does notice makes him frown.

"Hmm. There are Psions on Serris, but they're all somewhat low-level. Maybe ten or twenty at the 6th Level, and none at the 7th or above. Surely, they must have predicted my coming? What else could that vision have been but an ambush?"

He pauses for several minutes, merely perusing the data his Wordsmithing has fed him. Already, he's obtained a frightening amount of knowledge regarding Serris's interior.

"It's enormous. The center of this moon is entirely hollow, with no active magma core. Somehow, through clever usage of structural supports and technology I can't even fathom, its occupants have made tons of gravity-manipulation zones suitable for all types of experiments. Much of the interior is Zero G, but they can dial up the levels as desired. Volgrim technology is kind of nuts, isn't it?"

He directs the question at nobody in particular. Even Centurion doesn't deign to respond.

During the trip to Serris, Hope didn't just sit around. Knowing he might end up facing off against high-level Psions, he took the time to reinforce his body and prepare all sorts of nasty tricks. He reaches into a small bag at his side, where he finds thirty heavily reinforced 'marbles,' each one weighing a full kilo. The bag hangs heavily on his waist, but he doesn't notice its weight due to the strength enhancements he's placed on his body.

Additionally, Hope has made himself 'invincible' through Wordsmithing. While he can't know exactly how much damage his body is capable of taking, he inherently feels he should be at about the same power level as Bael.

"But even 'Invincible' doesn't *actually* make me invincible." Hope mutters to himself. "Gressil completely neutralized my magic. That means others might be able to as well. Even if they can't, I've never actually fought someone 'mano a mano' with Invincibility active. For all I know, it might have some upper limit a high-level Psion could easily break."

He licks his lips, which feel eerily dry. "Whatever. I've made my assurances. Hopefully I can break in, steal Excalibur and the Crown, and escape. I don't have a clue if the Dominion Rod is here, but I might luck out. God, I hope these Volgrim aren't just screwing with me."

Hope cautiously approaches the giant hole in the ground. At over a mile in diameter, its size is far greater than any volcanic opening on Earth, or any crater caused by a meteor that Hope may have seen in images from Earth. The sheer scale boggles his mind.

"How long did it take the Volgrim to drill this? To widen it? Imagine if it wasn't even a hundred years. **Analyze.**"

Hope idly scans the shaft as he levitates downward. While he could simply fly through the ground and keep out of sight, he's become reasonably confident the Volgrim cannot see him. If they can, then they will already know he's coming, and if they can't, he will only slow himself down by fumbling about in the blackness of the planet's crust.

As he descends, Hope casts many Words of Power to enhance his vision. He makes out the distant sides of the mineshaft, where thousands of 'carts' rise and fall to and from the moon's core. These carts carry not only Technopaths, but a surprising number of Changelings as well. The Volgrim inside stand idly and chatter with one another, or they remain silent, ignoring the ones around them. The differences in how they treat one another seem to have something to do with their social classes.

The shiny steel walls of the mineshaft glimmer under the reflection of Serris's gas giant motherworld. Given the shaft's current rotational position opposite of the system's star, the darkness of night allows the brilliant and shiny gas giant to act as a somewhat less-luminous version of the Gedo star.

The further Hope descends, the less visible the gas giant's light becomes, and the more lights he finds dotted along the edges of the mineshaft. Pretty soon, it becomes even brighter inside the shaft than it is outside, due to an abundance of levitating lights hovering in the center of the shaft and casting their brilliance in all directions.

Hope consults his internal map of the moon. He discovers numerous 'holes' in the shaft that, while appearing tiny at a distance, are actually large enough to fit automobiles from Earth's 21st century with ease. Some Technopaths and Changelings exit the mineshaft-carts to enter these tunnels, while others emerge from within and ride the carts up and down to other destinations.

It doesn't take much observation before Hope comes to a surprising conclusion.

There are a lot of Volgrim living here! Perhaps a billion or more.

Indeed, despite the moon's seemingly small size compared to a 'real planet' like Earth, the fact that it has been hollowed out means it actually possesses far more living space than the mere upper-surface of Earth, especially when factoring in the space 'wasted' on Earth's oceans. The true volume of Serris's living space may even rise to five or six times greater than Earth's landmasses.

Of course, if one were to factor in Earth's underground-buildable areas, along with its scalability upward like on Volgarius, the true amount of space might not prove inferior to Serris, but those details don't matter much to Hope.

"This world is a natural fortress." Hope observes. "You could drop a nuke on the surface and it wouldn't affect anyone down here. I bet there's even a way to seal the one entrance leading deep into Serris's core. Security seems tight as well, there's all sorts of checkpoints leading in and out... I wonder how often Volgrim come and go from here to the homeworld?"

Eventually, Hope reaches some sort of demarcation point, where the shaft rapidly expands outward and opens up, revealing the vast, inner world of Serris. Tens of thousands of catwalks and elevators stretch from one wall to another. Volgrim levitate through the Zero G environment, flying around with special movement modules and navigating to one levitating building or another. These orb-like modules contain various types of specialized equipment that Hope idly checks out, sometimes finding living quarters, and other times finding food consumption areas.

Some of the orb-buildings levitating in place offer gymnasiums for the Technopath and Changeling occupants to keep their bodies fit. Others surprise Hope even more due to their recreational output. Various game-like systems sit inside, with Changelings and Technopaths using them, appearing to be having the times of their lives.

"Video games?" Hope mutters, after peeking inside one of these random Entertainment Pods. "The Volgrim are actually capable of having fun? That seems... different from the aliens I've come to know."

Slightly confused, Hope pays careful attention to the Volgrim inside these pods, but ultimately he comes to the conclusion that they really are just playing games and having a good time.

"Maybe... the Volgrim here live different lives from the ones on Volgarius? Maybe they have earned the right to have fun due to their unique status?"

Hope cracks his neck, wincing due to its stiffness.

"I don't get it. But, whatever. None of this matters. I just need to figure out where in the hell Excalibur and the Crown have been hidden."

He flies from one place to another. After carefully combing through the Atlas he formed inside his Mind Realm, he manages to use Centurion to pick out half a dozen places of interest, locations where the Crown might be located.

"This moon core is freaking gigantic." Hope remarks to himself, as he passes by a pair of Technopaths flying through the air. "I can't believe how many Volgrim there are. And yet this place isn't even one percent of Volgarius's population. It's staggering to think about how many Volgrim there are scattered across the Milky Way. Even this one random moon has as many Volgrim as an eighth of Earth's population at its peak."

A faint gloominess descends upon Hope's heart.

"Wordsmithing is powerful, but even a giant can be felled if enough ants attack it. If the Volgrim ever get truly serious, will humanity stand a chance against them? We don't even have a fraction of the population of this one random moon. What do we have, like thirty million humans? That's nothing at all. And I bet Jason's so stupid he hasn't noticed the threat hanging over our heads. Luckily, Phoebe and Neil have."

Hope flickers around, traveling from place to place. As he moves, he places down spiritual Waypoints in case he ever wants to return here.

The further he travels, the greater the population density becomes. He eventually arrives at a city built on the side of a wall, its inhabitants living 'sideways' in zero gravity. He peeks in on them and even feels a bit sick to his stomach at the warped perspective, as

they blissfully fly around and walk on the 'walls' without seeming to care about the change in orientation.

It takes Hope several minutes to adjust to the change in perspective. He even tries Wordsmithing to make himself adjust faster, but it turns out only time can solve the innate problem.

This city on the wall turns out to be the first of many. When he leaves, he finds others here and there, most of them with several million Technopaths and Changelings going about their days, uncaring of how they find themselves walking on the ceilings and walls.

One of these cities turns out to be a Mechanoid Research Center. This grabs Hope's attention as he finally stumbles onto one of the main 'features' of Serris, its secretive laboratories made for creating the weapons of war that will eventually go on to fight the Plague... among other enemies.

Inside the MRC, drones fly around, assembling giant bipedal, tripedal, and even quadrupedal robots. Hope recognizes some of these as highly advanced descendants of the Dragoons, the tripod-like war machines that fell upon Earth during the Energy Wars, reducing humanity's cities to rubble.

However, as it turns out, the comparatively stupid Dragoons are nothing compared to the agile, menacing-looking mechanoids being built inside Serris's facilities. Hope watches as one quadruped mech races through a training course, dodging fire from two bipedal mechs, jerking its body to the left and right, and firing back with pinpoint precision. It hefts a menacing-looking positron rifle with a hundred-foot barrel toward its enemies. Its spider-like legs allow it to delicately tap around and touch down in places a wide-footed mech couldn't.

Blat! Blat!

The mech unloads powerful energized rounds into the bodies of its opponents, shredding their armor systems and leaving them to crash to the ground.

Hope only peruses the situation with an uneasy look before pulling away and continuing his quest to search for Excalibur.

"If the Volgrim have weapons like this at their disposal, how in the goddamn *hell* are they losing to the Plague? Clearly I'm missing some crucial context."

Tired of looking around this world-sized planet core aimlessly, Hope fires off a Word of Power.

"Mana."

He scours the area around him, trying to detect Excalibur's energy signature, or any mana-based signature at all, hoping to stumble across their location simply due to Excalibur's sheer volume of magical power. Instead he finds... almost nothing.

Only a faint, distant blip catches his attention.

Hope frowns. "What? That's it? If that's Excalibur, it sure isn't putting out much power..."

He stares past the Technopaths floating through the air, the Changelings walking along catwalks, the structures levitating in fixed positions, toward the distant blip of magical energy...

"Maybe the Volgrim really do know I'm coming. They may have removed all of the artifacts and hid them elsewhere. My whole trip could be in vain, or even worse, it could just be an ambush."

The Wordsmith grits his teeth.

"But I have to check. I need the capital to challenge Jason. I need divine authority to take control of humanity! Otherwise, he'll always have the advantage over me."

Hope levitates toward that distant dot of mana, praying it will lead to his salvation.

But even he knows that the possibilities are slim to none...

Part 431: Nether Gate

Hope Hiro slowly navigates toward the distant, lone speck of magical energy he can sense. During his travels, he places down Waypoints with his Wordsmithing, just in case he needs to make a tactical retreat, or in the event he needs to return to the Moonbase later, among other reasons.

As a Wordsmith, his ability to teleport to different places in the galaxy is somewhat limited. Traveling any distance requires magical energy, and the further he has to go, the greater the magical cost. Even teleporting from one side of a planet to another will run out his mana in the blink of an eye, let alone jumping across interstellar distances. Zipping between worlds is essentially impossible.

But, as both Wordsmiths have found out over the years, there is one loophole: The Word of Power known as 'Waypoint.'

Waypoints somehow cheat the system, allowing Wordsmiths to transport themselves anywhere else in the galaxy they have already visited at practically no energy cost. Even better, seemingly no matter the distance or how many dimensions they have to pass through, the mana cost never increases. The single issue with this system is that it only allows them to return to places they have already set foot on, so they can't use it to travel to unvisited locations. Despite this minor limitation, it has become their habit over the years to erect Waypoints all the time, since they don't seem to have a limit on how many they can put down.

Hope takes his caution to the extreme. He moves slowly and with purpose, flicking his eyes around and observing the various facilities he passes. He stumbles across more than a few areas where experimentation on non-Volgrim takes place, making him pause to widen his eyes in shock.

Inside one such facility, a bunch of captured demons are outfitted with mind-controlling helmets, forcing them to fight one another and battle to the death. Hope slides into the control room and watches with interest as several Technopath and Changeling researchers jot down notes, chatting with one another about their results.

"The internal M.L. seems to spike when subject group A3 is exposed to great danger. However, nothing happens in group B3. This one suspects this is due to an inherent

biochemical anomaly present in the brains of the B3 subjects."

"I disagree! This has to do with their souls. Don't you see how their Magical Affinity Index is rated 0.0071% higher than the subjects in A3? The reason their M.L. is lower is because of discrepancies in their soul parameters!"

"Your postulation has no evidence to back it up. We are unable to properly measure the quality or type of soul a Sentient Individual possesses. Therefore, any statements along this line of thinking must be presented purely as an opinion."

"You're too insistent on following 'hard evidence'! Just because we can't observe the differences in a group of sentient souls doesn't mean those differences don't exist! We already know souls are the key to altering the types of magical abilities mud-dwellers can unleash. If we can just find a way to measure them..."

"Better Technopaths than you have tried. This one has watched for more than three hundred thousand cycles while our best and brightest failed to make a single device capable of accurately measuring Soul Resonance. The only method left is to use a magical device to search for information regarding a soul, but this one lacks confidence the Volgrim can create one capable of suiting our needs."

"Just because others have failed, that doesn't mean this will be the case forever! Furthermore-"

Hope tunes out of the conversation, despite finding it to be a little interesting. He notes that the Volgrim seem unable to properly assess souls on a scientific level, a thought which gives him pause.

What are souls, anyway?

One of the demon groups fighting eventually gets overpowered by another group. They scream in pain as their opponents rip them apart and feast on their flesh, commanded by the mind controlling helmets to follow their basest desires.

Shaking his head, Hope levitates away. *Even in an observation facility, the demons are still mindless killing machines. I won't let them fool me like they've fooled Jason!*

He passes by several other similar areas. With the human 'livestock' no longer ready and available, Hope finds that the Volgrim here have had to supplement their stores with demons and monsters. More than a few times, Hope encounters gruesome experimental facilities where vat-cloned humans are subjected to horrific torture, all for the sake of

advancing these Volgrim scientist's sick and twisted scientific hypotheses. Fortunately, their numbers are few and far-between.

Hope begins to grow numb to the horrors on display. His cold, rational mind dulls some of his anger, reducing his seething hatred to more of a passive existential timer placed upon the Volgrim.

"It doesn't matter how this war concludes." Hope mutters to himself. "Whether the Plague overruns you, or you eventually eradicate it, there will be no salvation. If you somehow come out on top, I will stomp what remains of your civilization into ground meat. I will flay the skin off your Founders' bones. I will condemn you for the horrors you have wrought."

* * *

After more than ten hours, Hope finally draws near enough to the mana signature he detected earlier than he can get more of a detailed idea what it even is. He finds himself at the absolute center of the planet, where all of the power being produced elsewhere accumulates into a technological device he can barely even comprehend. Through some unknown physics, a pair of giant pylons aim at one another and fire a ceaseless, unending blue laser together that coalesces into a hundred-meter-in-diameter spiraling blue portal not unlike the Warpgates found in the Labyrinth and on Tarus II.

However, unlike those portals, which require a Warpgate, this one appears to use some sort of unknown exotic material to empower the dimensional resonance. Hope faintly senses that the mana fluctuations emanating from the portal might actually belong to Excalibur and the other artifacts, but he cannot tell for sure.

What really makes the giant portal stand out is in fact its sheer size. By comparison, the portals on Tarus II are just barely big enough to allow small armored vehicles to drive through them, with anything of an especially large size proving impossible to fit except by piecemeal breakdown-methods of transference. On the contrary, the gigantic Serris portal towers more than ten times larger in diameter than the Warpgates Hope is familiar with, making him raise his eyebrows.

The amount of energy required to keep this portal open must be astronomical. Truly, you cannot underestimate the Volgrim under any circumstance.

Hope glances around the area. As he does, he notices something... strange.

Despite the high-tech nature of the Gate Facility, and the number of powerful-looking mechanoids and turrets in place to defend it... not a single Volgrim stirs in the area.

The hairs stand up on the back of Hope's neck at this realization. He quickly looks around, but fails to find a single Volgrim anywhere, not even inside the cockpits of the war machines.

"Detect." Hope says, sending a Word of Power outward. He waits with bated breath, but his spell tells him that the nearest Volgrim scientists are more than five kilometers behind himself. Somehow, he entered what should be the most highly-secured area on Serris, yet he failed to notice the complete lack of life nearby!

At that moment, a deep but feminine voice drifts into the cracks of his mind.

[Enjoying the *view*, Wordsmith?]

Hope's body tenses up. He quickly whips his head around and spins in the air, taking up a defensive stance while looking for the Psion who spoke.

Not seeing anything, he fires off more Words of Power. **"Detect! Locate! Reveal!"**

However, his spells fail to uncover the Psion's hiding location. His heart grows cold at the realization someone could not only sneak up on him, but also detect him without him noticing.

[You appear alarmed. But do not worry,] The Psion says. [I am not your enemy. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Confessor Vulpanix... and I have been waiting for your arrival for quite some time.]

Sensing the eerie mental link attached to his thoughts, Hope narrows his eyes. **"Trace!"**

This time, he strikes gold. He latches onto that faint psionic energy link and causes a bright blue trail of energy to light up in midair, the stringy trail leading to a seemingly empty patch of space just a hundred meters in front of him. A moment later...

"Reveal!"

This time, Hope targets that specific point in space, causing the air to 'wobble' and vibrate. A dimensional shrouding effect breaks apart, revealing a powerful Psion wearing golden robes and a luxurious-looking helmet with seemingly no noteworthy combat utility.

The Psion, Confessor Vulpanix, blinks in surprise.

[Oh? You uncovered my hiding location quite easily. It seems you were able to trace my psionic link back to my position.]

Hope glowers hatefully at her. "How are you able to see me?"

[You think that I am an Executor.] Vulpanix states. [I am not. I am merely a Confessor. A 7th Level Psion. It just so happens that I possess a set of skills that make me uniquely adept at sniffing you out.]

Hope double-checks himself and finds that he is indeed still completely invisible, shrouded by his Wordsmithed protections. None of them have faded, and even the sound that leaves his mouth shouldn't be perceptible to the Psion before him, yet she is still able to do so. This realization alarms him.

[Calm yourself, Second Wordsmith.] Vulpanix says with a sneer. [If I wanted to kill you, I could have done so when you were unaware of my presence. I expected to find you through the fluctuations of your soul, but in fact that clever field shrouding you has made me unable to sense it. However, your pitiful attempts to hide in the Ethereal Dimension were your ultimate undoing. I have long specialized in sniffing out the more obtuse and esoteric threats to my glorious Empire.]

"Oh?" Hope says. "You can't sense my soul, but you can sense the... fluctuations around me?"

The Confessor floats a little closer to Hope, clearly not fearing his powers in the slightest.

[So rudimentary. I can tell that you are only able to hide yourself due to that special power of yours, not because of any particularly novel understanding of Folded Space. You may still be happy to know that I was only able to detect your approach when you reached 2,500 meters from your current position. Before that, you actually managed to evade my senses.]

Hope nods slowly. "Assuming you're not lying, yes. Yes, that does warm my little mud-dwelling heart."

For a brief moment, the human and Psion both remain quiet.

[You appear to be quite hostile toward me.] Vulpanix says. [Not that I can blame you. While I awaited your arrival, I took the liberty to read up on all of the intelligence we have

procured regarding your creation, development, and ambitions. You are quite the interesting clone...]

Hope licks his lips. "Is this the part where we beat the shit out of each other? I'm not interested in swapping barbs with an alien."

[I think you will be.] Vulpanix says, smiling at him with her eyes. [According to the intelligence, you and Jason Hiro do not possess the most... amiable relationship. He created you, and then cast you aside to do all the hard and dirty work while he lounged about on Tarus II, living a fun life with his spouse and child. Is this description accurate?]

"Don't try to play word games with me." Hope fires back. "Any reason you and I have to chum it up is purely for your own benefit. And based on what I've seen, your haughty Empire will treat humans like test subjects and throw us away the moment we lose our usefulness!"

Vulpanix cocks her head slightly. She scrutinizes the human's face with a long look of boredom.

[It seems the intelligence was indeed right on the mark. You value the lives of your fellow humans dearly. I assume you have seen some of our more... extreme experiments?]

"You're goddamn right I have." Hope growls. "I watched a vat-cloned family, a man, his wife, and their little boy get killed over and over again. It was barbaric! You treat other Sentients like garbage!"

[Your assessment is accurate.] Vulpanix affirms. [Non-Volgrim life is beneath Volgrim life. But is our mindset really that incomprehensible to you? Did humans not test their own scientific advancements on less-developed sentient creatures?]

Vulpanix motions with her hands, conjuring up a psionic projection of a human, followed by several other animals from Earth.

[Monkeys, baboons, apes, chimpanzees... for decades, even centuries, humans tested all sorts of awful and vile experiments on these lesser creatures, these sentient 'animals' capable of feeling pain and loss. Yet your species treated their cries of pain, their begging for forgiveness, as useless nonsense. We Volgrim might be experimenting on humans, but we are not experimenting on ourselves, nor are we experimenting on our biological ancestors. Surely, this experimentation performed by your species is *far* more unforgiveable than what we have done to lesser aliens.]

Hope frowns. He opens his mouth to retort, but Vulpanix raises her palm.

[I don't want to hear about how you, specifically, would never do these things. By that same account, neither would I. I have not engaged in these experiments. I have not subjected lesser creatures to torture for the sake of research. I neither endorse nor condone it, I merely observe and point out the hypocrisies inherent in your argument.]

Hope clamps his mouth shut. He scowls at her.

"Experimenting on monkeys and apes was... it wasn't good. It was terrible. But we outlawed those practices by the time I was born. And there's still a difference between animals incapable of speech and sentient humans, demons, and monsters capable of vocalizing their pain."

[We could argue this matter all day.] Vulpanix states firmly. [But I have no further interest in quibbling over philosophical degrees of morality. If you wish to hate my species for the way it has treated yours, I cannot stop you from doing so, and neither do I have any interest in trying.]

The Confessor tilts her head up to dismissively look down the bridge of her nose at the Wordsmith.

[I have come here to speak to you about a potential... collaboration.]

"A collaboration?" Hope asks, suspicion in his voice. "Explain."

[Let us not play out the conversation in a manner that would make us both look foolish.] Vulpanix says. [You want something. I want something. A transaction is therefore possible. A weak-minded, idiotic, useless mud-dweller might try to acquire something through promises, or pacts, or contracts. But those are terms set between the weak and strong. You are strong, and so am I. The best basis for cooperation is and always will be one which relies on a system of benefits.]

Hope slowly nods. "That makes sense. So... what sort of benefits are you proposing?"

[You came here to obtain Excalibur. And Solomon's Crown. And the Dominion Rod.] Vulpanix says, making Hope's heart drop into his shoes. [I can give them to you.]

"What?!" Hope exclaims. "You would GIVE ME the artifacts? Do you think I'm stupid?! There's no way I'd believe that!"

[Not long ago, the thought would never have entered Founder Unarin's mind.] Vulpanix says, her tone carrying a hint of ominous warning. [But that recently changed

when we made a certain... discovery. We would never have considered giving such a powerful artifact to a Wordsmith, knowing how it could supercharge your abilities.]

"Because using the mana I have now versus the mana Excalibur could give me would mean a vast difference in outcome." Hope observes. "...So what changed?"

Vulpanix crosses her arms.

She taps her fingers on her elbows, looking at the Wordsmith with a hint of wry amusement.

[What do you *think* happened?]

Once again, Hope's heart drops, making him feel a cold sweat.

The Volgrim... they must have found out about Jason's Cube! If they know he already possesses a massive mana battery, then Excalibur won't supercharge him all that much! And that means he's become a threat to their Empire!

Hope reels from this realization. He levitates backward, ever so slightly, while several emotions flash across his face.

That means Vulpanix- no, Unarin... Unarin must want to use me as some sort of... of counter-balance to Jason! He wants to turn me into an unstoppable object capable of breaking Jason's immovable defense.

Seeing the looks of surprise and shock on Hope's face, Vulpanix nods in tempo to his thoughts.

[I am unable to read your mind.] Vulpanix says. [You have shielded your thoughts well. Even so, you humans are so emotional, so easy to read, I don't need telepathy to know what you're thinking. Yes, we know about the First Wordsmith's Cube. And that presents you with a unique... opportunity.]

Hope returns his attention to the Confessor.

"You misunderstand something, Vulpanix. I am not fond of Jason. I don't like the way he rules, or the way he treated me, or his naivete... but I will NOT be your puppet. I will not turn myself into a cudgel to weaken humanity."

[Of *course* not.] Vulpanix says patiently. [The High Volgrim understand that the galactic situation is changing, Hope Hiro. Perhaps the Milky Way will not have any room for our grand and glorious Empire in the future. Perhaps humanity will rise up to

overthrow us. But our survival is not in doubt. Even if you and Jason were to unite and eradicate Volgarius along with ten thousand of our other worlds... we have made countless contingencies to ensure our survival. Our best and brightest will flee to the farthest reaches of the Void. We will travel to other galaxies and take up residence there. And who knows? Perhaps in ten million cycles, we will return once again, unstoppable and inexorable. We are nothing if not patient.]

"Your lifespans are certainly long, that much is true. And I can only imagine Unarin thinks in terms of the cosmic scale." Hope says, nodding along to Vulpanix's words. "A long-lived ruler like him has surely made plans for tens of thousands of years from now."

[If the Kolvaxians assimilate the Core Worlds, the Milky Way will fall.] Vulpanix states factually. [It is more important to us that a rational species remains in control of our home 'seed.' The consequences of the Milky Way falling to a foreign invader are... incalculable.]

"So what is your proposal?" Hope asks. "You want to give me three godlike artifacts. I can only imagine the price you intend for me to pay won't be low."

[A correction.] Vulpanix states. [We do not 'want' you give you the artifacts. However, the changing situation has required us to evolve our mindsets. Our Empire is not as rigid and conformist as you may have led yourself to believe. Founder Unarin is wise beyond your comprehension. He is neither benevolent nor merciless.]

"Fair enough." Hope mutters, feeling slightly annoyed by Vulpanix's dancing around the issue of what she wants from him. "But stop bullshitting me. What do you want in exchange for my help?"

Vulpanix pauses. Her eyes curve slightly, giving the impression of a sinister smile, despite the lack of a mouth on her face.

[The first thing I want is for you to learn some important Truths, Hope Hiro. You will need to expand your horizons if you are to become a willing partner with the Volgrim Empire.]

"So you *do* want me to work for you." Hope says, feeling even more suspicious than ever regarding this all-too-kind 'offer.'

[*With* us. Not *for* us. There is an important distinction.] Vulpanix replies. She gestures toward the hundred-meter portal. [If you wish to know more, you will have to follow me

into the Nether Gate.]

She shrugs in a decidedly human-like manner.

[Or we could simply fight. But I think your curiosity will override your hatred. You want to see what we have to offer before committing to any acts of aggression. *Especially* knowing what attacking me would mean for humanity as a whole.]

"And now you're resorting to threats." Hope retorts. "What will you do to humanity? Attack us? Piss Jason off? Don't make a threat you can't back up."

Vulpanix doesn't respond to his prodding. She merely gestures to the Nether Gate once more.

[Make your choice, Second Wordsmith.]

Hope spends a few minutes quietly contemplating Vulpanix's offer. He weighs the pros and cons of following her into an unknown location, through a portal that might shred his body at the molecular level and instantly kill him.

But, compared to simply attacking him when he was unaware of Vulpanix's presence, this idea simply seems ludicrous.

If Vulpanix wanted to kill me, she'd have done so already. And obviously my Wordsmithing has real value to the Volgrim. It's only natural they would want to secure me as an ally. I don't know what 'favors' they'll ask of me, but the price shouldn't be something I'm unwilling to pay...

After hemming and hawing, the Wordsmith reluctantly admits defeat. He gives in to his curiosity and silently nods at Vulpanix.

The two of them come to an unspoken understanding. She levitates toward the Nether Gate and passes through. Hope grits his teeth and follows her into the opaque portal, never once being able to guess what could be on the other side.

What he does ultimately see shocks him to his core.

"Is this... Heaven?!"

Part 432: Fragmented Past

A blinding white radiance batters the Second Wordsmith's eyes as he steps through the Nether Gate. That same radiance, an all-encompassing light that chases away shadows in all directions, is one he has seen through visions granted to him by Solomon, some months earlier. He immediately winces, recognizing that this radiance is not something that can be casually replicated, mostly due to its holy properties. The thick spiritual energy in the air immediately tells Hope everything he needs to know.

"Is this... Heaven?!"

[It is.] Vulpanix says, sagely blinking her eyes. [Or rather, it is what *remains* of Heaven. It is The Vault we use to store and maintain Heroic Artifacts.]

Hope glances around his immediate vicinity. He doesn't find any Volgrim in the area, but he does spot hundreds of beautiful white trees, all of their trunks glowing with light. Plump, round fruits hang down from the branches, each one radiating spiritual energy.

Some distance from the bright blue Nether Gate itself, Hope notices structures sticking slightly out of the ground, but they are not made of steel, concrete, or any other inorganic matter. Instead, they appear to be constructed out of wood and clay, seemingly primitive, yet also surprisingly intricately designed.

Finally, not even a kilometer away, Hope frowns when he sees a huge wall of light. He spins in place and looks all around himself, finding that this wall surrounds the Nether Gate in all directions.

[That is Heaven's Boundary.] Vulpanix says. [Not too large, is it? Quite small, even. There's not much left of the Angel's Realm. After the final battle in Heaven at the end of the Energy Wars, ninety-five percent of it was destroyed. Now all that remains is a fragment of its former greatness.]

Hope levitates around the immediate vicinity. He frowns as he looks at the mana-rich trees. He heads to the edge of the Boundary, but when he tries to pass through it, his hand presses against an inexorable force that resists him no matter how hard he tries to breach its limits.

Finally, he returns to the Nether Gate and shoots Vulpanix a complicated look.

"So. We're in Heaven. Does that mean the Nether Gate has brought us all the way to Earth?"

[You don't know?] Vulpanix asks, before her eyes flicker. [Ah. That's right. It was not you who spoke to the First Founder, but your original self, Jason Hiro. You are unaware of Heaven's fate. The Angel's Dimension shattered during the final battle with demonkind. Now, it no longer resides in the space around Earth. We have moved it to a more suitable location rich with life.]

"Serris?" Hope asks.

[No. Serris is not suitable for sustaining Heaven's need for rich life energy. Instead, we wrapped what remained of Heaven around a certain paradise-class planet rich with fauna and flora. The Nether Gate allows us to step across the galaxy and arrive inside this secret location. But that does bring me to the reason I brought you here. You see, the Volgrim have a... dilemma.]

Vulpanix lifts off the ground and begins to levitate toward the forest of bioluminescent trees. As she approaches, she speaks to Hope.

[My people are more than capable of creating 'folded spaces.' After all, the Psions are masters of altering and manipulating the void itself. But sustaining those spaces in perpetuity is, as of this moment, beyond our capabilities. Heaven is different. It is a folded space which requires no regular maintenance.]

She turns to look at Hope with deep meaning.

[I'm sure you are able to follow this line of discussion.]

"You want me to help you make folded spaces?" Hope asks.

[In a roundabout manner, yes.] Vulpanix replies. [We already possess the means to create sustainable folded spaces. We are simply unable to do so at present.]

"If you *possess* the means, how are you unable to make *use* of the means?" Hope asks, now visibly confused. "And how would you even know you possess the means if you CAN'T use them? You're talking in circles."

Vulpanix doesn't immediately answer him. Instead, she reaches up to one of the nearest Divine Trees and plucks a fruit from its branches. She casually tosses it to Hope, who catches it with ease.

[Eat that.] Vulpanix says. [It provides little benefit to a Volgrim, but for a mud-dweller like yourself, it should prove quite invaluable.]

Hope raises an eyebrow. He examines the large fruit in his hands, looking at its perfectly spherical surface. It vaguely resembles a small cantaloupe, albeit with an orangey, peachy skin, edible by humans. A sweet aroma drifts off the fruit's surface, and what shocks Hope the most is the surprising amount of mana contained within its center. Even a spiritually-dull person like himself can easily sense its energy.

[It isn't poison.] Vulpanix says with a hint of contempt. [If you think a High Psion like me needs to stoop to such a lowly level to deal with a mud-dweller, I'll fight you right here and now.]

"Oh, I know it's not poisonous." Hope murmurs. "But... what is this fruit? Why is it so rich in spiritual energy?"

[Surely, you have heard of the 'Garden of Eden'?] Vulpanix asks, her tone mostly rhetorical. [It is a figurative place alluded to in several holy books from your homeworld. It is said that the fruit of the 'Tree of Life and Death' could grant humans peerless knowledge, making them as wise and all-knowing as their Creator.]

"...So this fruit will make me smarter?"

[Some things are beyond the power of even a Creator.] Vulpanix says smugly. [It will not enhance your intelligence, not in the slightest. But... well, take a bite and see for yourself. The tests we have performed with various mud-dwellers were quite... enlightening.]

Hope resists the urge to immediately bite down. Instead, he utters a few Words of Power.

"Inspect. Analyze. Origin."

Hope scours the spirit-fruit with his Wordsmithing. He discovers through his magic that its interior is even more densely packed with mana than he first expected, but most shockingly...

"What the hell? You call this a Soul Fruit?" Hope asks, looking at Vulpanix with shocked eyes. "It enhances a person's soul?"

[Tsk. You humans always go on about how the Volgrim aren't any fun, but then you immediately ruin the surprise.] Vulpanix complains. [I did not know your magic could

even uncover the names of objects. That is a fact I will have to note in my report.]

Hope's heart skips a beat when he realizes he accidentally gave the Volgrim intelligence about his abilities. Internally, he curses at himself.

[But yes.] Vulpanix continues. [These are Soul Fruits. They are capable of *slightly* enhancing a human's soul, though the effect on a demon will prove quite gruesome, due to their mortal weakness to divine energy. These fruits can only grow inside of Heaven. It took several millennia of research to produce their trees. We are even confident we could grow different types of plants, all capable of enhancing other 'metaphysical' aspects of living beings. Ah, but then the Plague attacked, and we had to divert valuable research assets elsewhere...]

Hope nods along to her words. After a moment of contemplation, he bites down onto the fruit and begins to chew.

Having expected the fruit to taste orgasmically good, or to melt in his mouth like an apple fritter, Hope raises an eyebrow when he realizes the Soul Fruit actually tastes quite bitter, even a little sour. While the taste is a bit unpleasant, it's still far from unbearable. And so, he continues to hesitantly munch on it, eventually consuming the whole thing within a minute or two.

After making sure to clean up its inner core and slurp up all the juices, Hope casually drops the inedible remains of the fruit to the grass at his feet and smacks his lips.

"Well. I have to say. Taste-wise, I'd rather eat an apple. Or pretty much any other fruit, if I'm being honest. And it doesn't seem like anything obvious has changed inside of me."

Hope does notice that his slightly fatigued mind, having remained awake for days already, feels a bit more rested than before. Additionally, while the mana expenditure for keeping his invisibility and stealth active hasn't been all too high, it has drained some of his mana. But now, his mana refills back to full, likely due to the fruit supplementing his reserves.

As for his soul... Hope doesn't notice any major changes in its composition, but he does feel a slight bit more 'aware' of the mana in the air. Unfortunately, he isn't entirely certain if that's because his soul has slightly improved, or because of a placebo effect.

[Yes. Most mud-dwellers did complain about the taste. But such a trifle is unimportant.] Vulpanix says, her tone haughty. She folds her hands behind her back and

assumes a domineering posture. [How many methods do you have at your disposal to improve your soul? Not many, I'd wager. This is but one benefit you could obtain by... cooperating with my people.]

"Another benefit for me." Hope says dryly. "This deal just keeps getting better all the time. Curious, then, that you haven't told me what you want from me."

[That comes now.] Vulpanix says. She gestures to the structures 'growing' out of the ground in the distance, half a kilometer away. [We found that inorganic matter, when built en-masse, could affect Heaven's delicate balance adversely. Therefore, we grew life-friendly eco-structures instead. Why don't we take a look at what's inside?]

Hope follows after her without complaint. He throws a casual glance back at the Soul Fruits and frowns.

I do have ways to greatly strengthen my soul, though. I could devour the souls of others to empower myself. Demons would be best. Though I do wonder if there would be serious adverse effects if I did that. These fruits seem like a much safer, albeit slower method of soul enhancement...

Despite the relatively short distance to the eco-structures up ahead, Vulpanix flies at a weirdly casual pace, barely covering any ground at all. Hope considers asking her what the holdup is, until she turns her head to look at him.

[Second Wordsmith. Do you know what makes me unique among my fellow Psions?]

"I'm sure you're about to tell me." Hope replies.

[There are many 'Confessors' in our great Empire.] Vulpanix says, her tone slow and ponderous. [The title a High Psion earns can tell you a lot about who they are and what their specializations are. How much do you happen to know about Psions?]

"Not much at all." Hope casually lies, unwilling to tell her about the last two weeks he's spent scouring the Psionic Enclaves of Volgarius. "But do feel free to enlighten me."

[Mmm. Not much at all, he says.] Vulpanix chuckles, making Hope frown. [I am a Confessor. Confessors use their psionic specializations to cause others to 'confess' information. Broadly speaking, that is how we choose to employ our abilities. What makes *me* unique is that I am the only Soul Confessor in the whole of the Volgrim Empire.]

"Soul Confessor?" Hope repeats. "And that means...?"

[I am not the only Psion, nor the only Volgrim able to sniff out and detect souls. I am not the only one able to manipulate them. No doubt, some of the Executors, and even Founder Dosenia herself are far superior to me in many regards. But I *am* uniquely qualified to distinguish important nuances in souls that others cannot. Perhaps not even the ancient Archangels...]

"You think you're better at handling souls than the Archangels?" Hope asks, smirking in amusement. "I think Raphael would have some choice words if he heard you bragging so openly."

[The First Archangel has his strengths. I have mine.] Vulpanix says.

She pauses a stone's throw away from the bio-structures up ahead, the white tree-like buildings barely popping out of the ground. Then, she turns to Hope.

[What color is your soul, Hope Hiro?]

The Wordsmith blinks. "Color?"

[That's right. What color is your soul? Is it white? Black? Red? Blue? Have you ever thought about that question before?]

"Can't say I have." Hope answers. "I assume you're going to tell me it matters a lot?"

[Oh, most certainly.] Vulpanix nods. [More than you can possibly imagine. You see, I was born a thousand cycles after your so-called Energy Wars had concluded. By that point in time, many great Psions had already looked into Soulcrafting, and many considered themselves to be masters. But I was different. I was hungry to leave my mark on the Volgrim Empire.]

Vulpanix spreads out her palms.

[I began to research the metaphysical aspects of mud-dwellers, and in doing so, my Psionic Seed became more powerful far more quickly than did my peers. In just eighty-thousand short cycles, I advanced to the rank of Confessor, and I owe that speedy advancement to the unique aspects of you Terrans!]

"And what does that have to do with soul colors?" Hope asks. "Not to be rude, but it sort of seems like you're rambling a bit."

[Haven't you ever wondered why demons seem to evolve unique abilities as they advance in demonic power, but at the lowest ranks, they often stray into only a dozen or so major archetypes?] Vulpanix asks. [Why is it that the Archangels and the Valkyries

possessed such a variety of metaphysical powers, but the lower ranks all had only the most homogenous and boring abilities? Why can Psions gain metaphysical powers, but the other Volgrim subspecies cannot?]

[And,] Vulpanix asks, [why is it that humans possess no magical capabilities whatsoever, yet Heroes can emerge from the most ordinary of your kind?]

"Well, that last one is easy to answer." Hope replies. "The Heroic Aura empowers humans, giving them the strength of angels and Titans."

[Ah, so you are unaware...] Vulpanix replies, smiling with her eyes. She waggles a finger in Hope's face like a disapproving parent. [No. The Heroic Aura does not 'empower' humans. It merely... 'heals' a certain defect already contained within their bodies. It was my investigations which uncovered this fact. Indeed, all humans should possess the power to magically enhance themselves on a metaphysical level, but the angels placed a defect inside their vessels, preventing them from doing so.]

"Bullshit." Hope says. "That's not how magic works. Are you lying to me?"

[Your other half already knows the truth of the matter.] Vulpanix answers. [He and Unarin shared many secrets with one another. In the interests of furthering our relationship... I have been permitted to inform you of these revelations.]

"So you're telling me the angels intentionally made humanity flawed?" Hope pushes further. "Why would they do that?"

[Why ask a question to which you already know the answer?] Vulpanix retorts. [The angels suffered due to their creation of the Dragons, Titans, and Demons. Does it not make perfect sense they would spiritually cripple their newest creation to prevent your rise?]

For several long seconds, Hope becomes quiet. He ponders on what Vulpanix has told him and compares it to his existing knowledge-base.

Did Solomon know about humanity's crippled nature? And if he did, why didn't he tell me? Hope wonders.

"So what color is my soul?" Hope asks, after regaining his bearings.

[I am unable to sense yours.] Vulpanix says. [That barrier around you is quite difficult to see past. If you drop it, I'd be happy to tell you.]

"Ah." Hope grunts. "No, I don't think I will."

[It will be difficult to build a mutual cooperation between us when you harbor such distrust toward me.] Vulpanix says 'sweetly,' her syrupy words sounding oh-so-grating to Hope's ears. [I've shown you my sincerity. Where is yours?]

"You've shown me a carefully crafted narrative to butter me up." Hope responds. "And yet you still haven't told me what it is you want from me. Don't act like you're doing me some huge favor by tossing me a few fruits which you already said were useless to you and some information you already told Jason. I'm not an idiot."

[The color of one's soul affects many different metaphysical aspects of their potential.] Vulpanix explains. [By looking at one's soul color, I can also tell what sorts of attributes they might later come to possess. This makes me excellent at uncovering the future potential of a mud-dweller, or even a Psion. For example, I once had the chance to peer at your other half's Soul Color. Jason Hiro's soul was quite interesting. It was actually a rainbow of different colors, mixing together five major affinities into one blend. I have to wonder if your colors will differ from his...]

"So, what, the color of a person's soul determines the powers they can wield?" Hope asks. "And a rainbow means they get a versatile power like Wordsmithing?"

[You have heard of Specialists and Generalists when it comes to magi, yes?] Vulpanix asks rhetorically. [The color of one's soul determines not only the types of metaphysical abilities they will be most adept in, but *how* adept they will be in wielding their gifts. This applies to mud-dwellers and Psions alike, a fact that earned me great accolades among my peers. Unfortunately, the ability to detect a soul's color lies outside the scope of what Volgrim technology can currently achieve... and that is where you will be able to assist us.]

Vulpanix gestures to the bio-structures sticking out of the ground. Their cream-colored wood intermingles with the beautiful green grass, creating a fantastical atmosphere Hope might even describe as 'somewhat Elvish.'

A door to one of these small structures opens under Vulpanix's psionic control. Hope walks inside, and Vulpanix follows after him.

Shielded from Heaven's Light, the sudden relative darkness makes Hope wince. He utters a Word of Power to forcibly alter his eyesight, only to find himself inside an underground terrarium, one filled with countless exotic flora from all manner of distant Milky Way worlds.

Plants hang from the ceiling. They grow on the walls. They slither up out of cracks in the floor, with some of them appearing vine-like, and others resembling Bonsai Trees. Some plants have fruits or vegetables hanging off their branches that Hope has never seen. Others smell quite foul, making him crinkle his nose.

A faint green light pervades the room, quite different from Heaven's omnipresent bright white light that not even closing one's eyelids will obstruct. Its soft, earthly glow makes Hope feel at ease, as if he's entered an underground wonderland reminiscent of a paradise.

But when his eyes stray to the far wall of the terrarium, his heart jumps into his throat.

A fifteen-foot-tall statue stands erected, a figure of a woman holding one hand up to grasp hold of a palm-sized planet. Two wings protrude from her back. Her dark brown skin contrasts with the greenery around her, making her look like a tree that has taken root inside the Terrarium. Her five splayed-out fingers hang but a few inches from the planet, as if tantalizingly close to taking hold of it, yet failing to close the final gap. A look of longing hangs on her face...

And on that outstretched hand, a single golden band rests on her fourth finger.

The ring of an Archangel.

"Is that Uzziel?!" Hope gasps. "The Archangel of Creation?! Why is her ring here? What's going on?"

Vulpanix nods sagely. [Archangel Uzziel. During the Final Battle in Heaven, she became wracked with grief and rage. She unleashed an attack that annihilated multiple Demon Emperors and countless Dukes. She expended all of her vitality and self-detonated, tearing apart Heaven until only a fragment remained. In the end, her ring fell to the ground, and the demons parlayed with us to obtain their benefits.]

Vulpanix leads Hope closer to Uzziel's statue. He marvels at its lifelike appearance, and how it almost seems as if it could reach out and touch him. If the statue came to life and started talking, he wouldn't even be surprised.

"You have Uzziel's ring." Hope says. "Is that why you brought me here? To convince her to do your dirty work? You think she might listen to a Hero instead of you?"

Vulpanix's eyes lower, ever so slightly.

[Unfortunately, I don't think your words will have much effect, Hope. You will not be able to convince Uzziel to do anything.] Vulpanix says.

She pauses.

[After all. The Archangel of Creation is... *dead*.]

Part 433: S.W.O.R.D.

Both shocked and curious, Hope slowly approaches the statue of Uzziel. It perfectly mimics her original appearance in every way, while at the same time being made entirely out of specially-grown wood. Like a tree grown over time to somehow perfectly form the shape of a living person, Uzziel stands in place, her sightless eyes gazing vacantly past Hope to a world beyond his comprehension.

"She's dead?" Hope asks. "What do you mean? Why can I feel a trace of her energy still here?"

[There is far more than a 'trace' of the Earthmother's aura here.] Vulpanix says contemptuously. [You are simply too spiritually dull to sense it. Indeed, her affinity to life has enhanced the growth of all living things in Heaven. Even this underground arboretum.]

"But you said she was dead." Hope points out. "So... how can that be?"

Vulpanix draws nearer to Uzziel's statue. She looks at the Archangel's ring, but does not touch it.

[That is a somewhat complicated question to answer. You see, the Archangel of Creation experienced a violent fit of rage during the final moments of the Final Battle in Heaven. In an unexpected, uncharacteristic manner unbecoming the personality we had all grown accustomed to, she erupted with a bloody wrath, tearing apart several Demon Emperors, many Dukes, and countless other lower demons. She obliterated Heaven by drawing upon its internal mana reserves, then detonated her soul to unleash one last ultimate attack.]

Vulpanix slowly shakes her head.

[The Volgrim were not privy to that final battle. No, we arrived after its conclusion, only to witness the mountains of corpses that lay piled atop one another. We saw the aftermath of her outburst. Not myself, as I was not yet formed, but I have read the reports and seen the holo-images. It was a... gruesome sight. Quite horrifying, if I'm being quite honest.]

She continues. [The Earthmother died, along with all her brothers and sisters. The Archangels ended up inside their rings. Since the demons had fought that final battle, they held dominion over the rings and refused to give them up without... concessions. Unarin paid quite a price to obtain Uzziel's ring, but left the others to the demons.]

"You paid a hefty price for a dead Archangel." Hope repeats. "Yet the implication seems to be that she is not truly dead."

[Her soul was shattered to dust.] Vulpanix explains. [The other Archangels also died, and for the first few millennia, they did not awaken inside their rings either. But eventually, they did. Uzziel did not. Her broken, shattered soul remains inside this ring. And that is one of the reasons why I've brought you here today.]

She turns to look at Hope.

[The Earthmother is technically dead. But she is not *truly* dead. We have sustained and nourished her soul over the eons. We placed her ring inside Heaven and anchored this realm to a world rich in life energy, all in the hopes of someday bringing her back.]

"You... want to use her powers?" Hope asks. "And you want me to use my Wordsmithing to try and revive her."

[The Archangel of Creation is not like the other Archangels.] Vulpanix explains. [She possesses the Creator's Seed. While we once sought to obtain the Codex, the key of life, from Emperor Lucifer, her creation abilities are but a pale shadow of Uzziel's. Lucifer cannot create new life. She can only corrupt existing life into forms which already exist. But Uzziel... she can create *something* from *nothing*. And that is a power we must obtain if we are to defeat the Plague.]

Hope crosses his arms. He smirks at Vulpanix.

"Look at you, twisting the truth. You want me to believe you need Uzziel to fight the Plague, but that isn't the case. She might prove useful there, but that's hardly why you first picked up her ring. Considering the Plague didn't start popping up until a *few thousand years* after the Energy Wars, and considering you paid for her ring *right* after the Energy Wars, you must have wanted her abilities for another reason."

Hope begins to walk back and forth, pacing in front of Vulpanix while hemming and hawing.

"Hmm. Now, if I were a galactic empire in full control of the Milky Way, what would be my number one goal moving forward after defeating humanity? *Ah, I know.* I would want to augment my empire's strength further. Uzziel's powers would certainly come in handy for something like that. I could genetically strengthen the Psions, making them even more unstoppable. The Technopaths could become not just intelligent, but physically mighty as well. The Ascended, the Dolgrimites, the Changelings... there would be so many ways I could use her power, it's no wonder I'd want her ring for myself."

Vulpanix narrows her eyes. [And what of it?]

Hope stops to face her again.

"The answer is obvious. You don't need Uzziel to revive so you can defeat the Plague. You need her to revive so you can escape the Milky Way if things go south. Then you can put her to 'good use' empowering your species by force. She won't even be able to resist. She's not a short-term gain for you, but a long-term one. And that changes the equation for what value I provide, doesn't it?"

He continues. "If she were only useful in the short-term, I wouldn't be able to extract many benefits for myself. But since she will provide you with powerful upgrades over the coming eternity, I think I'm entitled to far more benefits than you were going to sucker me into accepting."

[You are surprisingly agile-minded when it comes to your greed.] Vulpanix replies blandly.

Hope doesn't reply. Instead he walks over to the statue and hovers up to its splayed-out hand. The statue's fourth finger holds Uzziel's ring, and he observes it for a moment.

"Will anything happen to her if I remove the ring?"

[The statue stabilizes her condition.] Vulpanix answers. [But you may remove the ring for a short while. It will not affect the Earthmother negatively.]

Hope nods. He starts to reach for the ring, but pauses.

"...You're really okay with me taking the ring? What if I teleport away? I could screw you over pretty badly."

[You might not be the most intelligent entity in the Milky Way,] Vulpanix says, [but you have much to gain by working with us and much to lose by making us your enemy. I trust you would not do something so imbecilic.]

"Mmm. Fair enough. I am pretty good at... gauging the odds of my actions." Hope says, his words slightly cryptic.

He plucks the ring off the statue's hand, then slides it onto his finger.

After a few moments, Hope immerses his consciousness inside the ring's interior. What he finds is a broken and shattered world. While all of the Archangels tend to live within pure quite voids inside their rings, Uzziel's ring appears more like a shattered pane of glass, with giant cracks and fissures inside the ring's interior.

Hope easily finds Uzziel's soul. He appears before her in an instant, frowning as he looks at her horrifically deformed and mutilated 'body'. Arms and legs grow out of places they definitely shouldn't. Her 'body,' which is actually just a representation of her soul remains, twitches every so often. Two heads sprout from her shoulders, with each of them sporting shuffled facial features. One of the heads has seven eyes. The other has nine. And neither of them have their noses or mouths in the correct places.

Slightly disgusted by the sight, Hope sighs to himself.

Every vision Solomon showed me demonstrated that Uzziel was a kind and loving person. For her to end up like this... it's just not fair.

He retracts his consciousness and reappears in the material realm where Vulpanix gazes at him in disinterest.

[Quite a pitiful sight, isn't it?] Vulpanix asks. [I am unable to connect to Archangel Uzziel's soul. No Volgrim can. We have had to experiment on humans to create temporary beings who were capable of interfacing with her soul. Unfortunately, their bodies destabilized, so we could only obtain verbal and telepathic reports of what they saw before they ultimately died.]

Hope licks his lips. "I... I don't know if I can bring her back to life. She's still... alive. Sort of. But even if I can heal her soul, she won't be the same. She's been suffering like that since the end of the Energy Wars. I'd rather just... end her life. Give her peace."

Vulpanix's expression sours. [Do that and you will receive nothing from us. You may find the Earthmother's predicament painful to look at, but compared to the fate of the galaxy, it is nothing at all.]

"Even if I bring her back," Hope points out, "that doesn't mean she'll be capable of doing anything but crying or wallowing in depression. She'll be a broken shell of her

former self."

Vulpanix shakes her head. [You are laboring under a misconception. We do not need Uzziel to act consciously in order for the Volgrim to make use of her abilities.]

Hope frowns.

He thinks about the implication behind Vulpanix's words for several seconds before curling his upper lip in disgust.

"You... you want me to give you a way to use Uzziel's power freely? Without her consent?"

[Exactly.] Vulpanix says, caring little for his evident disgust. [You could make a device of a magical or mundane nature. It would allow our people to interface with the Earthmother's powers. We could use them as we pleased. The better the device you create, the more concessions we are willing to give.]

She pauses, noticing the look on Hope's face.

[Get over yourself, mud-dweller.] Vulpanix snaps. [Your aversion to this minor action is revolting. The Plague captures living sentients and turns them into mindless drones, making them fight to capture and kill their enemies. Consider how many lives you could save with the Earthmother's powers, then get to thinking about how to satisfy our request. Considering how many lives you have taken since your cloning event, I do not imagine you are as averse to this task as you pretend.]

Hope's frown lessens somewhat, but he still feels relatively mixed on the issue.

"I... I might be able to heal her soul. Maybe I could make a device capable of wielding her creation powers. But... alright, let's talk business. What's in it for me?"

[You know, I respect a greedy person.] Vulpanix muses. [You're always certain of where you stand with them. Follow me. I'll take you to the next location of interest.]

She pauses to gesture at the statue. Hope nods and place Uzziel's ring back on its finger. Then, Vulpanix leads him a little deeper into the Arboretum. They round a pillar to find a door leading to a spiral staircase descending into the wall, and the depths of Heaven.

Hope follows Vulpanix. They quickly move through the stairwell, its interior illuminated by glowing mana-stones charged via Heaven's energy. Before long, they arrive

inside a small room with another glowing portal, though this one is colored an ominous blood-red instead of purple or blue.

The Wordsmith watches as Vulpanix steps through the portal.

For a brief moment, he hangs back, thinking about shutting the portal off, stealing Uzziel's ring, and leaving.

Her ring could benefit humanity tremendously. Plus... she doesn't deserve to be used and abused by these goddamn aliens. She should be with her brothers and sister.

But he doesn't do that. Instead, he flies toward the portal.

If there's an ambush waiting for me on the other side, I'll make Vulpanix regret crossing me. She has no idea the surprises I can unleash if she sours on our 'cooperation.'

He travels through the portal and arrives inside a steel-laden factory, a bunker of some sort with conduits of blue light and energy running along the walls. Hope glances around, sensing a tremendous amount of magical energy in the area.

"We're... back on Serris?" Hope asks. "That's odd. I... I sense countless Heroic Artifacts! But I couldn't before."

[We are indeed back on Serris. In a manner of speaking.] Vulpanix says, gesturing to a group of Technopaths standing at attention just a hundred feet away. The Technopaths look at Vulpanix, but don't notice Hope at all, given his currently invisible body. [We are inside a... Special Containment Zone. This is the Sentient Weapon Observation and Research Division. S.W.O.R.D. for short.]

A pulse of magical energy collides with Hope's barrier, momentarily making him visible to the Technopaths. They notice the disturbance in the air and look in his direction, but he turns invisible again a half-breath later.

"The hell?"

Hope glares at Vulpanix, but she doesn't pay his annoyance any heed. [I can already see you. What does it matter if these Technopaths can too? They are senior researchers, the cream of the crop. The best and brightest in the Volgrim Empire. You should let me introduce you to them.]

"Not interested." Hope gruffly says. "Let's get on with actual business."

[Fine. But I do insist you learn the name of at least one person here.] Vulpanix says. She directs her eyes to a certain Technopath, someone with powerful-looking steel legs, a burned body, and a deformed face that makes her barely even identifiable as a female. [Do you know this one?]

Hope frowns. She does indeed look a little familiar, if only due to her highly distinctive appearance.

"I... think I've seen her somewhere before."

[She is Psymin Miralax. One of the last living Celestial Designers. The Celestials were a group of Technopaths who created the Sentinels. Not many of them remain. Only a handful, as you humans would say.]

"I think I saw her during Unarin's broadcast..." Hope murmurs, before uttering a Word of Power. "**Memory**. Ah, yeah. He mentioned her name. She must be pretty important."

[Important. Yes. That is one way to put it.] Vulpanix says quietly. [I am a mighty 7th-Level Psion. Yet if the Plague were to strike Volgarius, Founders Unarin and Dosena would toss me aside, along with all the others of my rank and below, so long as it ensured the survival of the Celestial Designers. Their importance may even be greater than the Executors themselves. And for your information, Founder Cuanali is also a Celestial Designer. That means Psymin Miralax is regarded nearly as highly as our Fourth Founder herself.]

Hope raises his eyebrows. Hearing such reverence in Vulpanix's tone, he realizes that not only would the Volgrim gladly throw Vulpanix aside like garbage if it meant protecting Psymin's life, Vulpanix herself would not even complain! She would probably consider it an honor to die in the service of such a superior specimen like Psymin.

Perhaps Vulpanix herself regards Psymin Miralax as humanity would a 'God,' Hope muses to himself.

The Technopaths standing at attention tilt their heads slightly. Then they turn and walk away, dismissed via a private telepathic message from Vulpanix.

[We will enter now.] Vulpanix says.

They walk through the only doorway leading out of the gate transfer room. As they pass through the exit, Hope feels a shift in the air, as if he has passed through a bubble, or

the membrane of a biological organism.

A torrent of holy energy suddenly buffets his position, making Hope visibly wince. As if he has stepped into the periphery of a storm, Hope can practically feel the winds of mana crashing against his barrier. He hastily strengthens it with his Wordsmithing while looking around the room.

What he finds leaves him in awe.

Hope now stands on a small outcropping of a giant wall, one that drops a hundred stories above and below his current position. Every ten meters, Hope will see a different hole in the wall, and this goes on in a spherical shape all around the interior of a truly unfathomably gigantic facility.

Now standing inside a space seemingly blasted apart via a nuke into a perfectly spherical shape, Hope finds that he has truly entered the Vault itself. Each hole on the wall is covered by energy-imbued glass, containing most but not all of the mana of countless Heroic Artifacts. Truly, even if he were to try and count them with his eyes, Hope might not even be able to guess their total number.

"What..." Hope whispers. "What am I looking at? Are ALL of those holes filled with Heroic Artifacts? There must be thousands of them!"

[Not quite.] Vulpanix says. [The maximum capacity of the Vault is seventy-three thousand artifacts. At present, only two percent of the alcoves possess an artifact. Given how many Heroes have walked Earth's surface, we will never be able to fill it up.]

Hope's eyes sweep across the opposite walls and the walls around him, but ultimately it's a single beam of light in the exact center of the facility that draws his attention.

A torrent of magical energy travels from the ceiling of the spherical interior to the floor. And smack in the middle of this torrent of power, a powerful artifact levitates.

Excalibur.

Hope's heart quickens. He gazes at the artifact greedily, but quickly sobers himself up.

"That's Excalibur? But the beam of magical energy... it's almost like..."

[As if Excalibur is powering the Vault?] Vulpanix challenges. [That's right. It is. Excalibur provides power for not only the Vault, but the whole of Serris as well. Its reserves are truly beyond comprehension.]

Excalibur dumps ambient energy into the local environment. At the same time, high-technology-based energy-siphons greedily slurp up Excalibur's excesses in order to transmit that power elsewhere.

[Excalibur is perhaps the most remarkable of all Camael's creations.] Vulpanix remarks solemnly. [It absorbs residual ambient mana into itself, and when its reserves are full, it simply releases that power for us to use. And the best part? Even though the Volgrim cannot properly utilize mana for our own purposes, we all still possess mana in our bio-vessels. The greater the number of Volgrim who live on this planet, the more ambient mana we release, allowing Excalibur to further augment its energy reserves.]

She pauses.

[In short, it practically bypasses the laws of thermodynamics!]

Hope becomes more excited at this explanation, but that feeling quickly vanishes, replaced instead with a sinking realization.

There's no way I can obtain Excalibur easily. He thinks. *It has too many applications for the Volgrim to just hand it over. They're going to want me to pay an exorbitant cost!*

This realization causes him to experience several mixed feelings. He eyes Vulpanix from the side, but makes no particular moves, waiting to hear what the Confessor has to say next.

[Excalibur's energy production is truly impressive.] Vulpanix says, turning to face the Wordsmith. [But... it can be replaced. Taking energy from a local star is not too difficult for us Volgrim. Creating a Dyson Node is something we do all the time to transmit energy to our populated worlds. In that respect, Excalibur is far from irreplaceable...]

"But?" Hope asks, prodding her along that train of thought.

[But that does not mean we have the resources to throw around casually creating Dyson Nodes.] Vulpanix retorts. [If you want the artifacts you seek, you will have to not only assist us with Uzziel, as I previously requested, but a few other matters as well. For instance, building the infrastructure to replace Excalibur's functionality. If you can use its magical reserves to augment your Wordsmithing, this should be but a *trifle* of a favor.]

Hope's lips begin to feel dry again. He cautiously licks them, then presses them together.

"Is that all? Repair Uzziel's ring, build the energy infrastructure necessary for you to replace Excalibur, and perhaps some other... miscellaneous tasks?"

[Yes...] Vulpanix says slowly. [Other miscellaneous tasks.]

"How many? And to what extent?" Hope asks cautiously.

Vulpanix does not immediately answer. She fans out her fingernails and idly examines them, looking away from Hope as if he suddenly isn't all that important in her eyes.

[You seek a short term venture, it would seem. What we want is much longer-term. It would be a shame for you to waste your Wordsmithing on mere idle pursuits, don't you think? This war between humanity and demonkind, is it not rather petty? The basis for cooperation exists, but why do you hesitate to go any further?]

Hope narrows his eyes.

"Why? Because your species has dominated the Milky Way for the past several eons. Any gains I might make from this transaction will surely pale compared to those you will earn. On top of that, the Volgrim have not only tested their inventions on humans in the past, you still do so even now! And you really expect me to trust you when the terms are so beneficial for you but so limited for me?"

Vulpanix snorts. She and Hope fully put their attention on one another, having finally reached the bargaining part of their meeting.

[You want to speak of benefits? Let us not bring up how heavily Excalibur will inflate your strength. What of the Dominion Rod? It is largely useless for us, yet its ability to control and influence human minds will surely prove potent in your hands. And Solomon's Crown! Need I say any more about putting the greatest library of knowledge atop your head? These three artifacts alone should never be possessed by a single individual, lest they go power-mad and try to conquer the galaxy. Yet you act as if you are being slighted!]

"You're trading away three artifacts that either have no use to you or can be replaced for an Archangel's power that will *vastly* enhance the Volgrim Empire's strength over time." Hope argues back, standing his ground. "You lose practically nothing but you gain a great deal in return!"

The two of them begin pushing and pulling, each one trying to gain leverage for their own side.

"You want to use Uzziel's power to create more folded spaces like Heaven!" Hope exclaims. "Who knows what dastardly secrets you'll be able to hide all across the Milky Way?!"

[And you can already do such a thing with your own power!] Vulpanix retorts. [The fact you haven't already shows that we Volgrim are superior! We know how to properly use the strength we possess!]

"Long-term cooperation benefits you far more than it does me!"

[If you think this is the only card we hold that you might want, you are sorely mistaken! Helping us without complaint will give you access to our other stores in the future!]

"You want a subservient Wordsmith slave you can hand some crumbs and get back gold from." Hope says. "Your sincerity isn't nearly enough. Show me more."

Vulpanix becomes quiet.

She eyes the Wordsmith with an ambivalent gaze, her eyes betraying no particular emotion.

[I do like a greedy person.] Vulpanix says quietly. [You always know where you stand with them. But sometimes, one can take their greed a little... *too* far.]

"You think I'm asking for too much?" Hope replies. "I'm sure an intergalactic empire can pull a few more goodies out of its ass. Let's not play stupid."

Vulpanix doesn't budge. She merely stands firm, waiting for the Wordsmith to relent.

[Our terms are generous. What we ask of you is far from excessive. Do not press your luck, Second Wordsmith.]

The corner of Hope's eye twitches.

That term she keeps using.

It didn't particularly bother him at first, but in this moment, it truly grates on his nerves.

Second Wordsmith.

Second Wordsmith.

Always the follow-up choice. Always reminded of his inferiority.

He knows that the only reason the Volgrim approached him is because their first pick, Jason, would never have agreed to their terms.

Always, Jason gets the good parts of life, while Hope gets the leftovers.

A moment of silence passes between the Wordsmith and Confessor. Perhaps sensing the change in atmosphere, she cocks her head.

[Do you... disagree?]

Hope's eyes flicker. His pupils dilate, ever so slightly, a fact that Vulpanix does not miss.

"You know..." Hope murmurs. "I've treated you with respect this entire time. I've never implied that you were below me, or less than me, or inferior to me. But always, you look down on me. You look down on humanity."

[You are mud-dwellers. This is the natural way of things.] Vulpanix says, her tone frosting over. [Do not ruin this opportunity for yourself. It will not end well for y-]

Hope accelerates.

From a standstill, his body suddenly and violently races forward at the speed of sound.

Like a cannonball fired when nobody expected it, he blasts away from his position, his hand aimed at Vulpanix's chest.

THOOM!!

The Wordsmith crashes into the Confessor's body, exploding her like a bomb and spraying her entrails all across the area. He flies forward and slams into the opposite wall, his 'invincible' body taking no damage from the collision while causing alarms to ring out inside the facility.

His heart racing, Hope turns around to see what little is left of the Confessor sliding down the nearby walls.

"I reject your terms." Hope hisses, smiling evilly.

However.

The air shivers. It vibrates, like churning water seen through an aquarium's glass.

Vulpanix steps out of a tear in the fabric of space and idly glances at the remains of her 'other self' sliding down the walls.

[As I said, Wordsmith. You have made a *foolish* choice.] She says, smiling with her eyes.

Part 434: Cleansed Mud

Recommended Listening

Vulpanix and Hope Hiro remain in the same spot for the briefest of instants. They size one another up, and both of them sneer at the same time.

Then they attack.

Hope lunges toward Vulpanix at the same time as she rushes toward him.

They collide!

The 'invincible' Wordsmith and his enemy slam into each other with violent force. Vulpanix's 'clone' doesn't get caught off-guard like before, and manages to summon a barrier to envelop her body. She smashes Hope's face with her fist, knocking him backward. However, the collision doesn't even rattle Hope, as he hardly feels the impact.

The Psion's eyes shift in concentration. *The Wordsmith's body is far more durable than I expected. It is as if I'm punching a solid slab of Living Moldanium! Capturing him alive will be tricky...*

She flickers around, leaving afterimages and a trail of psionic energy as she pursues the Wordsmith like a ravenous shark in the ocean. She batters him with psionic-imbued punches, only for Hope to bark out a Word of Power.

"Teleport!"

Hope jumps behind Vulpanix, then swings his hand back. In his grasp rests a sword identical to the one hovering in the center of the room. Vulpanix barely has time to react as a lethally sharp blade cuts across her midsection and lowered arm.

But she vanishes!

The Confessor phases out of reality and steps through a gap in space, barely evading Hope's strike.

[Excalibur!] Vulpanix exclaims. [You've created a replica?! Wordsmithing is truly formidable.]

"It's not as good as the real thing." Hope says with a confident smirk. "But it doesn't have to be. **Arthur!**"

Completely startling Vulpanix, a human figure suddenly appears behind her, someone vastly different from Hope in appearance. A man of mature age, with thick golden hair and shining white eyes.

King Arthur, the black hole construct!

In the instant between instants, Vulpanix's enhanced brain allows her to sense and investigate the newly appeared person, and she fails to detect a soul inside it. She immediately and correctly concludes 'Arthur' must not be a real human, but her scans fail to penetrate deeper than the surface of his skin.

Even more frighteningly, the psionic energy she directs toward the Construct ends up partially sucked inside it, slightly empowering its abilities!

Arthur rears his arm back. The Excalibur replica appears in his grasp, teleported there by Hope, and Arthur slashes in a wide arc toward Vulpanix's midsection.

He misses!

The crafty Confessor once again steps across reality, appearing a short distance away, just out of reach. She blasts the Construct with telekinetic power and shoves Arthur backward, but he recovers in an instant and relentlessly surges toward her again.

[Fighting me is a terrible mistake!] Vulpanix warns Hope. [Pull back now and I will treat this as a mere diplomatic blunder!]

"I'm not going under anyone's thumb again!" Hope roars, while Arthur tries and fails to cut Vulpanix down a second time. "You can eat my ass, you lying alien bitch! Everything here is mine. Especially Excalibur!"

Hope suddenly turns to the center of the room. He holds his hand toward the divine blade and grins. "**PULL!**"

Hope surges his Wordsmithing out to try and grab Excalibur, but...

The divine blade remains unmoved!

Startled, Hope quickly realizes why he failed. The magical power enveloping the blade from ceiling to floor actually nullified the strength of his Wordsmithing, turning Arthur's artifact into an immovable mountain.

"Shit! Guess I'll have to take it myself!" Hope says out loud.

With Vulpanix occupied by Arthur, Hope quickly flies forward, rushing toward the divine blade.

But, alas.

A second iteration of Vulpanix steps out of a gap in space right before Hope and aims her palm at him.

Before Hope can react, he disappears from the spot and reappears on the opposite side of Excalibur and its divine beam of holy light, hurtling toward the opposite wall. Momentarily confused, Hope accidentally flies inside of the wall, traveling into it without stopping in time.

Realizing he's been had, the Wordsmith directs a glance backward while turning around and racing back into the Artifact Vault.

"Sneaky! But that won't work twice! **Immovable!**"

He turns himself immune to the effects of teleportation, despite knowing this will hamper his own efforts at zipping around. He does this while once again racing toward the divine blade.

"Excalibur is mine!"

At once, a gap in space opens up before Hope. Three copies of Vulpanix fly out and race toward him, turning his heart cold.

"So many?!"

One of the Vulpanix's fires out a hundred thin 'threads' of Psionic energy, entangling Hope like a spiderweb. The other suddenly increases the force of gravity on Hope's body tenfold, making him unable to properly control his flight. The third races before him and raises her fists overhead.

WHAM!

Vulpanix smashes Hope downward, toward the floor, causing him to phase through it and disappear into the planet's depths.

At the same time, one of Vulpanix's other copies struggles to battle Arthur, but what she finds is that this strange non-human entity cannot easily be damaged! And his sword, while not at all like the actual Excalibur, has its own frightening properties.

The damned weapon can cut through anything!

She tries to summon a psionic barrier to shield her body in expectation of releasing a counter-attack after deflecting Pseudo-Excalibur, but the blade swipes past her barrier effortlessly and severs her arm, making her quickly jump back and yank the limb to herself. She reattaches it while dodging Arthur's follow-up attacks, all while her mind realizes more and more just how prepared the Wordsmith actually came.

What a surprising fellow. A lauded Confessor put on the back-foot by a mud-dweller. But this Wordsmith is no ordinary human! I may have to initiate the Cleansed Mud protocol...

Vulpanix carefully weighs her options while also best thinking of how to capture the Wordsmith alive if possible.

After all, killing him might eliminate a major threat, but at the same time, that worry always lingers in the back of her mind, as well as Unarin's and many other top Volgrim...

What if killing one of the Wordsmiths triggers a secret alarm? What if Hope and Jason's strife isn't as severe as it seems? What if they have been carefully concealing other clones? What if they haven't, but they possess the option to make more at a whim?

The Volgrim lack one crucial piece of information, something that would surely tip the balance of power if they ever found out.

They do not know that Solomon's Crown is a requirement to create more Wordsmith clones.

If they knew, a series of major actions would certainly be undertaken with great haste, but lacking this knowledge hampers their hands in a dire manner.

*Killing Hope could cause a massive secondary war that would overwhelm our already strained combat capabilities. Vulpanix thinks at high-speeds. Better to capture him alive. Then we might even be able to make **full** use of his abilities...*

Indeed. In much the same manner Ose came to that conclusion, so too have the Volgrim. Killing the Wordsmith would only prevent him from becoming a threat. But capturing him and turning him into a mind-controlled slave would benefit them far more!

It is for this reason that Vulpanix regretfully holds back her strength time and time again. She does not complain, as she knows her success here will make her a hero of the Volgrim Empire, a figure to be lauded for tens of eons to come.

If the Volgrim can capture the Wordsmith, every single terrible thing that has befallen them will reverse course in an instant!

With the Wordsmith's power at their disposal, the Volgrim Empire will turn the tables and obliterate the Plague ruthlessly!

Even if they fail, so what?

They will still have the backup plan to flee to another galaxy, but this time with a magical slave capable of vastly empowering their social order. They will someday return and completely conquer their home galaxy once more!

Vulpanix ruminates on this information silently, never leaking to her opponent the truth of the matter.

As Hope leaps out of the floor to fly toward her, Vulpanix conjures a ball of psionic energy in her palm. This corrosive, destructive force will surely pierce through Hope's defenses, ensuring that not even his incredibly durable body and fully withstand its effects. After all, it doesn't just target the body, but the soul as well!

Right before Vulpanix can spring her trap, Hope abruptly speeds up. His body becomes an afterimage as he rushes behind her and swings his fist down.

SPLAT!

Hope crushes the head of one of Vulpanix's three copies, making the condensed energy ball explode and engulf that figure, destroying it entirely. Before her other two selves can react, Hope falls upon them as well!

"FIRE!!

Hope sends three ultra-dense marbles rocketing at one of Vulpanix's two remaining selves. Despite trying to summon a hasty barrier, the Wordsmithed projectiles tear through her defenses and break apart her head, hip and spine, killing one of the other two mercilessly.

The remaining copy gasps in shock.

So fast! I thought he was at the limits of his speed! How did he...

She struggles to pull away from Hope as he races toward the third Confessor copy, but to her shock, she finds that her body and mind are working much more slowly than she's used to.

He didn't speed up. The little mud-dweller slowed me down!

Too late, Vulpanix's final copy realizes the truth of this matter. She transmits her realization to the 'main body' right before Hope rips her apart, killing her on the spot.

Hope grins like a werewolf hungering for blood. "Keep sending copies, Volgrim! I know you can't keep this up forever! You must be wasting a boatload of Psionic energy summoning more of your other-selves!"

Hope fires off a Word of Power. "**Trace!**"

Just like before, he follows the line of energy from the three Confessor clones he just killed to a hidden, secluded place of origin, a folded space on the edge of the arena. His eyes turn blood-red as he rushes toward that spot.

"Expose!"

Hope tears Vulpanix's true body out of that fold in space. As he charges toward her, the Wordsmith minutely slows his speed. He gazes in horror at her body, which now appears... absolutely unnerving. Very different from what he expected.

"What the fuck?! Are you wearing a meat-suit?!"

Hope stops a short distance away. He grimaces in horror at the strange 'thing' clinging to Vulpanix's body. The faces of various 'people' sit attached to her figure, appearing vaguely human, though he can't be entirely certain. Even Vulpanix's head isn't visible, as this horrifying 'meat-suit' engulfs her entire figure.

[Hideous, isn't it?] Vulpanix asks, satisfied by the look on Hope's face. [Project Cleansed Mud... it wasn't supposed to be revealed like this. But what's done is done. I must defeat you here.]

Abruptly, Vulpanix steps toward Hope, then vanishes. The Wordsmith barely manages to trace a trail of energy zipping past his position, lunging toward the center of the Vault.

The Wordsmith turns his head. He follows Vulpanix's movements with his eyes as she grabs for Excalibur's hilt.

The hell is she doing? Excalibur won't allow a non-human to- WHAT?!

To Hope's utter shock, Vulpanix grabs onto the holy blade's hilt. A massive amount of divine energy flows into the meat-suit wrapped around Vulpanix's figure, but does not

reach her actual body. It causes her no harm, and instead massively empowers her, causing her strength to skyrocket.

Hope levitates backward a short distance, unwittingly putting distance between himself and his opponent.

"You... you can wield... Excalibur?"

[Oh, I can do a lot more than that, Wordsmith.] Vulpanix says, gleefully goading him. [You mud-dwellers are all so arrogant, but you always underestimate the true power of your superiors! Project Cleansed Mud isn't even finished yet, but it already allows my people to weaponize the artifacts you humans laud with such reverence. In your hands, they are wasted. In ours, they become superweapons!]

Vulpanix waves Excalibur in a wide arc. With this motion, she casually summons four more copies of herself, and all of them rush toward Hope, conjuring various Psionic powers to grab and bind him, force his mouth shut, and yank him toward their Excalibur-wielding original self.

Hope struggles mightily. Hundreds of psionic webs entangle his arms and legs, making it impossible for him to pull away, while others wrap from the top to the bottom of his head, forcibly clamping his mouth shut.

At a mental command from his master, Arthur suddenly breaks away from Vulpanix's clone and races toward Hope. The Construct skips across space, jumping tens of feet forward multiple times and arriving within a close enough distance to swing his blade down and sever the cords yanking Hope toward certain death.

The moment Hope's mouth comes free, he fires off a burst of words. **"Disperse! Cleanse! Barrier! PUSH!"**

Hope fires his own burst of telekinetic power at Vulpanix, but it crashes against the mana emanating off Excalibur and disperses uselessly, causing her no trouble.

[What a quick escape!] Vulpanix compliments. [But you only delay the inevitable! My reserves are now INFINITE! Yours are anything but.]

"Never count a Wordsmith out." Hope says quietly. "That sword is mine. Arthur! Let's kill this Psion once and for all!"

Hope's eyes suddenly glow with power, making Vulpanix frown.

"Resonate!"

Hope's spiritual aura abruptly shifts. He and Arthur confusingly become 'one' in a way that slightly confuses Vulpanix. Even though their bodies remain separate, their 'existence' intertwines in a way she can't quite explain, which ever so slightly worries her.

"Slow! Slow! Slow! Slow!"

Hope suddenly shouts, firing off Words of power at each of Vulpanix's clones. All of them momentarily freeze in place, giving the Wordsmith a single second to rush forward in unison with Arthur, the two of them diving toward Vulpanix like a pair of birds of prey.

"Duplicate!" Hope shouts, summoning an exact replica of Arthur's Pseudo-Excalibur into his grasp. Vulpanix realizes an instant before they attack that both swords possess all the same attributes, including their stunning ability to slice through anything in their path.

Still, the Confessor does not show any fear. With her meat suit empowering her and True Excalibur held firmly in her grasp, she meets Hope's blade with equal force.

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

In a blur of motion, the Confessor and Wordsmith smash their weapons together, his slightly clumsy use being enhanced somewhat by the fact that he and Arthur can fight together, while Vulpanix's superior speed, control, and energy reserves allow her to hold back two extremely dangerous opponents with just one sword.

As a nearly 100,000 year old monster who has fought countless opponents during the Kolvaxian Invasion, Vulpanix's combat experience vastly eclipses Hope's. Even two versus one, she calmly pirouettes on the spot, dances around, and flickers across space to evade and deflect Hope's attacks.

At the same time, Vulpanix pincer-attacks the Wordsmith with her other selves. Her special ability, the power to create Temporal Anomalies and call forth other versions of herself from timelines which do not technically exist, allows her to further widen the gap between herself and her Wordsmith opponent.

Vulpanix breathes the quickest sigh of relief in her entire life. To her great fortune, the genuine Excalibur does not end up slashed apart by Hope's two fake renditions of the holy blade, and so, her biggest fear does not come to pass. Even if the false weapons truly could split Excalibur in half, she suspects Hope would hold back, as his true goal has little to do with killing her, and everything to do with stealing the Volgrim's 'liberated goods'.

If Hope were to destroy Excalibur, his entire motivation for coming here would be rendered null. And this revelation regarding his greed allows Vulpanix to glean several clues regarding his psyche.

I may not be able to peer into his mind or sense his soul, but this Wordsmith is as easy to read as any primitive book! Before this Confessor's eyes, no secrets can escape!

She suddenly presses her advantage, slamming Excalibur against Hope's fake blade, then cleverly twisting her wrist to wrench the weapon out of Hope's grasp. The Wordsmith's eyes flicker with shock as Vulpanix lunges toward him.

SHIK!

Even his 'invincible' body cannot stop the penetration of the mightiest divine artifact in the Milky Way!

Excalibur impales Hope's stomach, knocking the breath out of him. Before he can try to gasp out a Word of Power, Vulpanix compresses her fist in size and shoves her free hand into his mouth, forcing it open and preventing him from speaking.

[You're MINE, Wordsmith!]

Arthur tries to rush to the imperiled Wordsmith's aid, but two of Vulpanix's clones prove more than enough to slow him down. The other three join together with their main body to tangle up all of the Wordsmith's limbs, cocooning him like a caterpillar entering the larval stage. Hope's eyes widen as he struggles to break free, but Vulpanix pinches down on his tongue and squeezes his neck, making it impossible for him to breathe, let alone gasp out even a single sound. For all she knows, his Wordsmithing might work even without direct vocalization, and she can't take that chance!

With Hope completely subdued, the Confessor's other selves turn to face Arthur. The Construct, while mighty as ever, simply cannot put up nearly as much of a fight with Hope immobilized. The panicked Wordsmith can only watch as four Confessor copies surround Arthur and begin whaling on him from all sides.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!!

Fists and psionic blasts rain upon the construct's body, knocking it out of the sky to the ground below. The Confessors pounce upon Arthur and pin him to the ground, ready to deliver the final blow.

At the last instant...

Fwip!

Arthur disappears!

Vulpanix's four selves scrabble at the floor for a brief moment, confused. They shoot glances at the clearly captured Wordsmith, wondering what sort of trick he's just pulled.

Then, before their very eyes...

Hope's body turns to dust.

Like a sand sculpture suddenly struck by a vehicle, Hope collapses around Vulpanix's fist, his entire body sagging and turning into particles in the air as he rapidly dissolves in a manner which, Vulpanix must privately admit, appears quite horrifying and gruesome.

The Confessor gapes at the Wordsmith's ashen remnants, suddenly realizing a horrible truth.

She's been tricked.

A gap in space opens up.

Hope Hiro casually strolls out of the air, still holding onto a Pseudo Excalibur, while Arthur stands beside him. The difference is, this time, he doesn't appear invisible or immaterial. He appears fully visible, not bothering to hide himself.

Vulpanix's stomach rocks as she realizes that despite this fact, she still cannot sense the Wordsmith's soul, nor read his thoughts.

His mind isn't being protected.

Neither is his soul.

They simply don't exist.

Hope smirks at the look of confusion on her face, as well as the slowly dawning realization in her eyes.

"Figured it out yet?" Hope asks casually. "I thought, since you decided to show up with your fake body, so would I. For a High Psion... you're pretty fucking gullible, you know that?"

[That wasn't your true form.] Vulpanix says out loud, partially due to her own astonishment. [The whole time... the person I was talking to... it wasn't even actually Hope Hiro?]

Hope taps the side of his head. "Heyyy, now you're starting to get it. So, you ready for Round Two? I think I've gotten a pretty decent grasp on your abilities."

[You know NOTHING of my strength!] Vulpanix roars, while recalling her other five copies back to her side. [Nobody toys with me. NOBODY! Certainly not some lowly, wretched little mud-dweller! I was told to take it easy on you, but no more!]

"I figured that was the case." Hope replies, glancing at his fingernails. "No doubt, you wanted to capture me and turn me into your Wordsmithing slave. *So cliché*, and late too. Ose already beat you to the punch on that idea. Jason might fall for such a basic ploy, but not me. I'm already three parallel realities ahead of you."

[We will *see* about that.] Vulpanix concludes, before all six of her selves rush toward the Wordsmith.

Part 435: Serris's Fate

No longer does Vulpanix hold back. While before she tried to preserve her strength so that she might capture the Wordsmith alive, even if badly injured, now she knows the body before her is nothing more than a false image. What also becomes abundantly clear as she initiates the second phase of their fight is the utter pointlessness of the battle!

All I'm doing is wasting time here! Vulpanix silently screams in her head. *Even if I kill this false body, the Wordsmith will only make another! Where is he hiding?!*

Vulpanix rushes toward the fake Hope, but he disappears and reappears five hundred feet in the distance, making her attack *whiff* harmlessly. At the same time, an invisible force of energy smashes into Vulpanix's stomach, throwing her into the air and momentarily disorienting her. Her five other selves try to surround Hope, but he keeps teleporting around, and what Vulpanix finds even more distressing is...

He isn't even Wordsmithing!

Indeed, Hope begins 'casting' magic without using his mouth, making her realize just how much he played her for a fool in the first phase of the fight.

When the Wordsmith first attacked, he suddenly accelerated toward me with such force he blew apart my Temporal Copy. I didn't realize it at the time, but the little mud-bastard didn't even utter a Word of Power! There were several other times he used magic without Wordsmithing too. This isn't just a clone... it's a remote drone! He must have made some sort of fake body and now he's manipulating it from afar to distract me! And if that is the case, what is his goal?

Hope suddenly 'splits apart,' transforming into twelve copies of himself. This abrupt shift catches Vulpanix completely off-guard as all of them split up and race in different directions, rushing toward each of her own Temporal Copies in pairs to defeat her with numerical superiority!

[Wretch!] Vulpanix roars. [I fought the Cherubiim! I do not fear you, Wordsmith!]

Her other-selves lash out at the different Hopes nearby, with some of them relying on Primal Psionics, while two actually fire off lightning bolts through their Energy

Manipulation. To Vulpanix's shock, these attacks pass through Hope's clones harmlessly, making her widen her eyes.

They're not clones! They're only illusions! WAIT! Where did Arthur go? AHH!

Vulpanix internally curses as the two Hopes rushing her alone turn out to be his genuine clone-body and his Arthur construct, but hidden within an illusion of the Second Wordsmith's figure. She tries to pull back, but they catch her in a pincer attack, forcing her to go on the defensive and parry with the genuine Excalibur while they strike at her from two tricky angles.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Vulpanix defends herself sloppily, but she still prevents Hope from landing a killing blow. He manages to hold her up for a split second while Arthur rushes in and impales her heart, but the Confessor teleports away and lands in the middle of her other selves, who assume a defensive formation.

Despite the 'grievous' blow dealt to her vital organ, Vulpanix barely shows any signs of injuries. As a 7th Level Psion, she has certainly put some effort into her Body Enhancement Psionics, and it shows. She quickly takes control of her individual cells and repairs them, healing her heart back to a point where it was practically never injured.

Still, she does feel a slight sting when she moves her arm around. [Very sneaky, Wordsmith. Hiding Arthur amidst those illusions. You nearly beat me.]

"It's only a matter of time." Hope retorts. "Now tell me the truth. That... that skin-suit you're wearing! Is that made from humans? They look like they're still alive!"

[They were humans once, yes.] Vulpanix says, chuckling quietly. [Now they have been... *stitched-together*... to make a tool useful for the Volgrim Empire. Of course, we couldn't use vat-clones for Cleansed Mud. No, we needed humans who were spiritually active.]

"Spiritually active..." Hope repeats, his eyes turning vicious. "You mean..."

[Did you know?] Vulpanix asks rhetorically. [Humans become less spiritually flexible as they age. The less mature a mud-dweller is, the more easily we can mold their spirits to fit our needs. Yes, the younger, the better, indeed...]

Hope's heart skips a beat. A look of horror spreads across his face.

"Those are CHILDREN?! You absolute MONSTER! How could you... how could you turn little kids into something so horrifying?!"

Vulpanix shrugs. [What difference does it make? Five cycles or one hundred, you mud-dwellers all die before my people even complete our maturation phases. You are like *dogs* to us. Yes, stupid, worthless mutts from planet Earth. If we can at least turn you into useful tools, it will be the greatest honor of your lives!]

Hope squeezes his fingers around fake-Excalibur's hilt. He tightens his grip so much it feels like he might break his bones.

He doesn't notice the pain.

"They... were just... CHILDRENNN!"

The Wordsmith and Arthur once again rush toward Vulpanix's real body, but with his emotions running high, he merely ends up madly swinging and lashing out at every nearby Vulpanix copy like a rabid wolf.

"I'LL RIP YOU APART, VULPANIX! YOU AND YOUR VOLGRIM EMPIRE BOTH!!"

He chops at Vulpanix rapidly, trying to close the gap and cut her down, but with his emotions thrown off-balance, Vulpanix quickly regains her cool, along with her control of the battle's tempo.

Before long, Hope makes a fatal error. He chops at one of Vulpanix's clones, only for that fifth-self to suddenly rush toward him and allow the weapon to cut into her body. Momentarily caught off-guard by his opponent's suicidal action, Hope doesn't get a chance to resist when the main-body Vulpanix materializes behind him and impales the genuine Excalibur into his heart.

"Aaargh!"

Hope releases one quick scream of pain before Excalibur floods his body with divine energy, swelling him up and bursting him like a bloody balloon!

A few moments pass, and another Hope steps out of a gap in space. This one appears much calmer than the previous one. He grimaces as the remains of his previous body.

"I let myself get worked up again. You're good at getting under my skin."

Vulpanix doesn't revel in her victory. She even appears annoyed.

[Manipulating a mud-dweller is child's play. Now where is your real body? Show yourself!]

Hope snorts. "There's no point. I already know about your backup plan. While we fought, I've been... taking a look around. You don't think I'd really battle you here for no good reason, do you?"

Vulpanix stiffens. She stares at the Wordsmith as if suddenly realizing something.

[Where is your real body? WHERE IS IT?!]

"Here. And there." Hope answers cryptically. "All over the place. But the fact is, since I'm telling you this... it's already too late."

Vulpanix's mind works quickly. Thanks to her high level Brain Enhancements, she can dissect Hope's words at high speeds, allowing her to draw several conclusions.

[You couldn't have taken any artifacts. The alarms in the Vault haven't-]

"The alarms?" Hope says coolly. "Your faith in technology over magic is your undoing, Volgrim. You've truly underestimated my Wordsmithing this time."

Slowly, casually, Hope holds out his hand. His palm turns face-up.

Shoop!

An object materializes in midair, levitating above his grasp.

Vulpanix's heart turns cold.

[The Mind-Thief!]

"That's right," Hope says, as Solomon's Crown vanishes from his grasp. He lowers his arm. "While we fought, I casually raided all of the artifact stores here. I don't even know what artifacts I've recovered yet, since there are so *many* of them. But I'll figure them out eventually."

He pauses.

"Of course, I didn't only take artifacts. I'm sorry to say this, but your plan for Gaia will have to be... *indefinitely postponed*."

Hope makes an 'OK' sign with his hand, but leaves a small gap between his pointer-finger and thumb. In that area, a faint golden band materializes, making Vulpanix's heart sink even further into despair.

[The Archangel's ring...]

"The Archangel's ring." Hope affirms, smiling at her. He sends the ring back to his main body, then cracks his neck. "But I'm not done yet. I'm about to make you an offer that you can't refuse."

Vulpanix's entire body trembles. She recalls that she sent for two Executors to come here, but at this rate, they will arrive mere minutes too late. Hope has already plundered the whole of their treasury! Their prized Heroic Artifacts are all in his hands now!

The shame she feels makes her wish she could crawl into a hole and die.

[What... offer...] Vulpanix asks, barely able to contain her rage.

"Before I say, why don't you do us both a favor?" Hope asks casually. "Hand me Excalibur. If you do, I'll treat this whole incident like a... what did you call it earlier? A minor diplomatic blunder. I won't hold any hard feelings for your species, and may even seek to work with you on a more *equal* level. Doesn't that sound nice?"

[Don't toy with me.] Vulpanix hisses. [You may have obtained all the other artifacts, but I will never give you Excalibur. NEVER!]

"Now, now," Hope says slowly, wagging his finger. "Let's not be too hasty. Are you sure you don't want to humor me? It could save you a LOT of embarrassment..."

Vulpanix slowly begins to levitate toward him, carefully drawing closer, as if itching to strike his clone down and spend the rest of her days hunting his shadow.

[You will... PAY... for this treachery...]

Hope doesn't miss the building-up of her hostility. He merely frowns disdainfully at her and drops the pleasantries.

"Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you. I'm about to humiliate your Empire in a way it's never experienced before."

Hope raises his hand. He snaps his fingers, and an illusion of another Volgrim appears beside him. When Vulpanix sees this newcomer, she stops advancing and widens her eyes.

[No... what have you done?!]

"This is Psymin Miralax." Hope says, gesturing to the female Technopath beside him. Her arms are bound tightly behind her back, along with countless magical chains wrapping her body, wholly sealing her movements. "Of course, you're a smart woman,

and you have eyes. What may not be as obvious is that Psymin here is not the only Volgrim I've taken prisoner..."

He snaps his fingers again, and many other illusions materialize beside him. Among them are not only Sangin Lidra, Redshift, and Blueshift, but dozens of other senior researchers and important VIPs as well. And even more frighteningly, the Technopaths here are some of the most hard-working and important technical personnel in the whole of the Volgrim Empire.

"Don't think I don't know who is coming." Hope says to Vulpanix curtly, ignoring the shifting expression of fear and hatred on her face. "You sent out a transmission to call two Executors here. When they arrive, I'll surely have a hard time fighting back. But if they do arrive... I'll kill all of these important VIPs. That would be quite a stain on your legacy, wouldn't it? You would be forever known as the Confessor who allowed a mud-dweller to kill off one of the last living Celestial Designers. I suspect you'd suffer a True Death out of sheer self-loathing right on the spot."

His words jolt her heart once again. [You know of our True Death?]

"I know a lot of things." Hope says. "Now, quit stalling. Here is my offer. You give me Excalibur, and I'll release these prisoners. If you refuse, I'll kill them."

[Unacceptable!] Vulpanix exclaims. [You imbecile! You're making an enemy out of the Volgrim Empire! When this is all said and done, do you think you'll have anywhere you can hide?! We can overwhelm the rest of humanity in the blink of an eye! You will condemn them all to oblivion!]

"Those are interesting questions." Hope replies, appearing unconcerned. "Do I think I can hide? Indeed I do. I've learned a lot about the Volgrim. Especially the Psions. For instance, even your lauded Executors can't cross the entire galaxy instantly, or even all that quickly. But me? I can step tens of thousands of lightyears in a single instant. This gives me a huge logistical advantage you can surely understand, once you put a little thought into it."

He continues. "And can you find me? Well, you yourself cannot. Perhaps your Executors can, but I doubt that. I'm more than capable of hiding myself inside a pocket of space in some remote corner of the galaxy. Good luck finding me when I become a needle in a haystack 100,000 lightyears in diameter."

"As for attacking Tarus II..." Hope says, narrowing his eyes. "Indeed. You could show up and kill everyone there. But do you think *I'll* be there? That's quite the gamble to take, you know. If you screw up, I'll still be alive and ready to ensure your people never know a day of peace. You will all die as the Plague overruns you and I hamper your escape efforts. And furthermore, if I can hide myself in some remote pocket of the galaxy, then doesn't it stand to reason I can do the same for other humans? You really aren't using your head..."

The more Hope talks, the more Vulpanix's rage begins to deflate. Instead of anger, she truly feels outplayed. Outmaneuvered. She secretly regrets showing off the Volgrim Empire's vast wealth, its Celestial Designer, and all the artifacts before securing a pledge to obtain the Wordsmith's assistance.

The Second Wordsmith is taking everything from us. She thinks. The Founders sent me here to secure a valuable ally. Instead, I have completely failed the Empire, and right when our situation is approaching the point of no return! I have to turn this situation around!

Vulpanix forces herself to calm down. She straightens her posture and lowers Excalibur to her side.

[Very good, Wordsmith. I underestimated you. You hold all the advantages, and I have already suffered a great loss. I truly cannot even retaliate.]

"It's good that you know your situation." Hope says. "So, what do you say? A simple trade. That's my offer. I'll give you back the hostages, and you will give me Excalibur. I'll leave, and that will be the end of our relationship."

Vulpanix's eyes flicker with insight.

[Excalibur is crucial to your plans.] She observes. [The First Wordsmith already possesses an artifact capable of augmenting his mana reserves by a tremendous amount. Excalibur will allow you to equalize that playing field. The other artifacts are merely... secondary gains.]

"Not quite." Hope retorts. "I don't even know what 95% of these artifacts are. Some of them might be incredibly valuable to me. We're talking over a thousand Heroic abilities in total, plus whatever power their relics hold."

He pauses for a moment to cock his head.

"And don't get any ideas. I'm not returning even *one* solitary artifact. Don't you dare say I'm 'stealing' from you either, as these are all human artifacts taken from humanity's coffers. I'm putting them under my control, where they belong. You've lost a lot here, yes, but these are merely your ill-gotten gains."

"As for Uzziel's ring," Hope says, "She will be reunited with her brothers and sister, where she belongs. If you have a problem with that, you can blow it out your flat, ugly, alien ass. All that remains is this one last trade. I don't want to hear a word of complaint from you."

Vulpanix slowly blinks her eyes. [You cannot take Excalibur by force. You can only use hostages to obtain what you want. That means I do have this one last bargaining chip.]

"Yeah?" Hope asks. "Alright, I'll bite. What is it you want in exchange for Excalibur? If it doesn't cross my bottom line, I'll consider it. No artifacts returned. No Uzziel's ring. Those are off-limits."

Vulpanix's face remains impassive, but her heart flickers in anticipation.

Chance!

[Ultimately... the Volgrim Empire can survive without the Archangel's ring or humanity's heroic artifacts.] Vulpanix says carefully. [But if you can perform a service for us... I will trade Excalibur for your hostages. We can still part ways, perhaps not as friends, but as... reticent acquaintances.]

"A favor." Hope repeats. "And what sort of favor might that be?"

[A series of small favors.] Vulpanix quickly corrects. [First. You will construct an entrance leading to the Cosmic Realm. This will benefit humanity and the Volgrim both. The Kolvaxians have taken refuge there. If we cannot battle them on their home turf, we will never be able to stop their spread. They will defeat the Volgrim, then they will come for humanity.]

Hope slowly nods. "Acceptable. Since it benefits both of us, I am willing to compromise there."

[Next,] Vulpanix says, [I want to personally *request* that you assist the Volgrim in rebuilding the power system for Serris. No doubt, you have uncovered many of our secret projects here. With Excalibur gone, billions will die. Perhaps you may not care about us Volgrim, but callously leaving billions to run out of oxygen and choke to death would

make you uncomfortable, yes? With Excalibur's power, you could still provide us with a method to keep Serris functioning.]

[Besides,] Vulpanix adds, a little lamely. [It would go a long way toward mending relations with us.]

"If I have Excalibur and Solomon's Crown... I should be able to perform that feat with ease." Hope blandly remarks. "Fine. I will help you rebuild Serris's power supply."

Vulpanix bows her head. [One last request, and that will be all. We truly wish to obtain Uzziel's magic-]

"She's off-limits." Hope snaps. "Period."

[Yes. Of course.] Vulpanix says, changing her tone to something more 'soothing' than she'd usually use. [I will not request her ring back. But... perhaps you could use your abilities to grant us a device, a technology, or an artifact of similar value? For example, on Tarus II, humanity seems to have developed several useful structures capable of empowering your people...]

She pauses.

[Think of not only how such a device could repair this bond you have haphazardly severed, but the gains you could make from it.]

Hope raises his eyebrows. He appears more than a little interested in her words.

"The gains I could make from empowering the Volgrim? And just *how* exactly would that work?"

[Have you paid any attention to the 'Belial Booster' on Tarus II?] Vulpanix asks. [Surely you should understand its true purpose. Even the Demon Emperors understand, but they are helpless to resist the First Wordsmith's scheme. By tying demonkind's future evolution to humanity's continued existence, Jason Hiro has ensured that the lower ranks of demonkind will grow to revere him while the upper echelons will fear reprisal from their former subordinates. Additionally, the Emperors can still make small but impactful gains in their own advancement, despite the lower rate of return. This keeps the demons in line.]

"I see..." Hope mutters. "And doing the same for the Volgrim would ensure that if you want to keep benefitting from my... *helpful technology*... you would have to play nicely with me. I'm just confused as to why you would speak so openly of this scheme to me,

laying everything bare. Does this admission not embarrass you? Or, perhaps, do you have some ulterior motive?"

[I am 98,000 cycles of age.] Vulpanix states calmly. [Young among my people, but an ancient monster compared to any living human. In my eyes, tying humanity's future to the Volgrim's is not such a bad thing to do. Perhaps the older Volgrim, our current leaders, would disagree.]

She levitates a little closer to Hope, allowing him to feel the mana wafting off of Excalibur even more prominently.

[Do you think the Demon Emperors are fools? They know how Jason Hiro's scheme is affecting their species. But they remain silent, because ultimately, they stand to benefit just as much as humanity. They have begun to experience the benefits of a symbiotic relationship. Would the Volgrim rather flee to another galaxy and return to someday slay the Plague, ultimately losing 99% of our population? Would we rather die out entirely? Or would we rather accept a second power in the Milky Way, one with whom we share our gains and losses?]

Vulpanix spreads out her free hand, exposing her palm.

[Friends. Allies. Enemies. These terms are temporary, but benefits are eternal. Once, the five subspecies of Volgrim fought horrific and bloody wars against one another. Now we stand united. Yes, the aged ones recalled the losses they suffered. The companions who died. The friends and loved ones who perished to the claws and weapons of their foes. But when the time came, they all united to defeat the common threat of the Sentinels.]

[Tell me, Hope Hiro. Could such an event happen again in this galaxy? Could the Volgrim and humanity truly become partners, in much the same way as my people did during the Great Wars?]

She respectfully holds Excalibur up horizontally before herself.

[You have the power to choose what happens next. This is my olive branch to you.]

Hope stares at the Confessor quietly.

He hears her words.

He battles the turbulent emotions in his heart.

He remembers the screams of that mother, father, and son as the Volgrim blasted them apart, over and over again.

He stares at the writhing, disgusting mass of children attached to Vulpanix's body at this very moment.

But he remembers other things too.

He remembers his old feelings, the way he used to be, his idealistic desires before Jason split the two Wordsmiths through the power of cloning.

He recalls his time on Earth, before he entered the cryopod.

He even thinks about his 'mother' and 'father,' his adoptive foster parents who treated him well, until that unfortunate accident broke their family...

Hope closes his eyes.

What would Amanda say? Robert? Would they be proud of the man I've become?

What would Jason do if he were in my position?

What would Neil advise, given how the last few hours have played out?

Can I trust Vulpanix? Can I trust the Volgrim, after all the horrors I've witnessed?

The Wordsmith chews his lower lip. He gazes at Excalibur, held so tantalizingly close, yet so far away.

He can't snatch it for free. Vulpanix still has a firm grip on it.

But even so, the way she has it held in a peaceful, submissive gesture causes his thoughts to become indecisive.

An olive branch...

Part 436: Fate of the Galaxy

Hope Hiro levitates just a few feet away from the high-ranking Volgrim covered in writhing, wriggling human skin. Her calm words violently clash with her hideous appearance. This does not prove easy for him to ignore. As such, he slightly narrows his eyes.

"You speak of offering me an olive branch. That's a line taken from a human parable. Are you an expert in human history?"

[Far from it.] Vulpanix says, her voice quietly transmitting into Hope's mind. [I spent a few dozen years casually browsing human historical texts. When you live as long as me, you will have plenty of time to learn little details about these sorts of things.]

"You think I will live to be 100,000 years old?" Hope asks.

[I would be surprised if your Wordsmithing cannot grant you immortality. It is already within Founder Unarin's expectations.]

"Mmm."

Hope lowers his arms to his side. He quietly stares at Vulpanix for a short while. She meets his gaze unflinchingly.

"Before I agree to your proposal," Hope says, "I have an important question."

[Ask it.] Vulpanix says.

"How can we ensure that we will keep to our agreement?" Hope asks. "Suppose you hand me Excalibur, the most powerful artifact Archangel Camael ever created. Suppose I then struck you down, kept the hostages, and all of the artifacts. What would your reprisal be?"

He pauses for half a breath.

"And furthermore, suppose the opposite were true. Suppose I agreed to work with you, but you plotted behind my back. Suppose you initiated some secret measure to quietly execute all of humanity in an instant, along with Jason, and even myself. It could take a while. Years. Decades. But a single instant in the scale of Volgrim life. How could we each ensure the other remains honest?"

Vulpanix slowly blinks her eyes. She nods.

[I have given this matter some thought. So, too, has Founder Unarin. The way my people see it, there are two options, two reasons, two methods we might use to restrain one another.]

[The first method is simple.] Vulpanix continues. [We rely on benefits. This is a simple but effective system. Do you think your human artifacts are all the Volgrim can offer you? Suppose we were to continue exchanging insights. Our species is much more advanced than yours. Humanity will, no doubt, catch up to the Volgrim eventually. Especially with a Wordsmith or two at the helm.]

[But,] She adds, [would it not be beneficial to accept our hospitality? To trade with us the things we want for those your people want? Let us not mince words. Your spiritual engineering alone is incredibly valuable. We can also likewise greatly speed up your knowledge of those heroic artifacts you've... *acquired*. Would you rather fumble around learning their properties, their origins, and the abilities of their resident souls? Or would you rather receive that information quickly and efficiently?]

"Those are good points." Hope says. "But not necessarily good enough."

He crosses his arms.

"Time is a limiting factor. But it's not much of a limiting factor for a Wordsmith. We have plenty of methods to speed up our perception and flow of time. Perhaps I could learn all about these artifacts quite quickly, without your help. Perhaps humanity will advance far faster than you can possibly imagine. Forget Excalibur for a moment. I have once again acquired Solomon's Crown. Is your knowledge all that important to me when the Knowledge-Seeker himself is at my disposal?"

Vulpanix slightly tilts her chin up. [I presume your main body is already in contact with Solomon?]

"I am. And he's helping me ask... important questions."

[I expected as much.] Vulpanix says. [To answer your query, perhaps you are correct. Perhaps you do not need the Volgrim's help at all. Maybe we have already passed the point where we are capable of stopping humanity. Maybe now, the best we can wish for is to cause a great deal of damage before you wipe us out.]

She shrugs.

[But is that truly the way you think? I have seen the way Jason Hiro acts. He does not like violence. He does not like killing. In a fit of rage, he slew a million demons. This action caused him a great deal of mental trauma. Would you rather engage in a violent war where billions, and even *trillions* will die? Is coexistence not more preferable as an alternative?]

"Coexistence would be nice, yes." Hope admits. "War is brutal. Once begun, it is difficult to end. I've already lost my good friend Kar in this war against the demons."

He pauses.

"But don't compare me with Jason. I am not him. We are separate individuals."

[Separate, yes. But you both descended from the same soul.] Vulpanix points out. [You are bound to share more traits than you may care to admit.]

Hope doesn't offer a retort. He merely blinks.

"What about the second option you mentioned? If relying on benefits is not guaranteed to work, then..."

[The second option is more metaphysical in nature.] Vulpanix says. [And also unreliable. We could simply resort to a magical or psionic contract. The Psions do have one Executor capable of creating such a thing. You could place a magically binding contract on my soul. If I take actions to harm humanity, I will suffer a True Death. At the same time, we could place a psionic marker on your soul. It would do the same to you if you broke the terms.]

Hope's left eye twitches. "Unreliable indeed. Personally, I'd call it functionally useless."

He shakes his head, then closes his eyes and tilts his head downward.

"Suppose you put a psionic marker on my soul. Do you believe I couldn't undo it with a Word of Power? And if I couldn't, how would I know what that marker actually does? What if it holds 'malicious code' in its intent? What if I go to take a shit and that triggers a kill command?"

"Furthermore," He adds, raising his head once more, "My restrictions on you would be even dumber. You said I could limit YOU with a Word of Power? What use would that be? One Psion, out of thousands of other High Psions? Unarin could just order a different Psion to kill me. I'd need to mark the entire upper echelon of the Volgrim Empire. What is that, like, a gazillion people? And none of this mentions the fact Jason would not be

bound by our terms, so even if we were both restricted, Jason wouldn't be. You and him already have your own little agreement."

[Indeed. It is unreliable. Useless, even.] Vulpanix affirms. [But it is the only other option. Given its forceful and coercive nature, Founder Unarin would rather not bother with it anyway. Look at how he leads. Founder Unarin is relatively easy to kill, all things considered. His body is far stronger than average, his mind much sharper, most certainly, but compared to killing a High Psion, it would be trivial to kill him and take his place. Even so, no Executor has done so. Why do you suppose that is?]

"Before I answer, don't you think putting the idea of killing Unarin in my head is a morbidly stupid idea?" Hope asks sarcastically.

[The moment you do, your civilization will crumble.] Vulpanix states factually. [That is not a threat. It is merely an observation. It will take time to replace Unarin. Valuable time. Worlds will fall to the Plague far too quickly for us to bounce back or plug the gaps. Before long, our whole defensive front will collapse. If you think my people are a threat, you haven't the faintest clue of the horrors out there in the Void. Killing Unarin would result in humanity's complete extinction.]

"Right. Well, to answer your previous question," Hope says, "I suppose the reason no Psions have killed Unarin is because Dosena protects him."

Vulpanix snorts. [You are playing the fool. Why does Dosena not simply kill Unarin, then? Surely, she could rule the Empire well enough. She is more powerful. She is even swifter of mind than him thanks to her Brain Enhancing superiority. And yet she does not...]

Hope frowns.

Unlike Jason, who has had this conversation with Unarin personally, Hope has not had any chances to interact with the First Founder. He hasn't much of an idea of his disposition, personality, or way of doing things. And as little as he knows about Unarin, he knows even less about Dosena...

"Enlighten me."

Vulpanix cracks her neck. [The Second Founder could crush Unarin mercilessly. She is infinitely mightier than him. Even if she has no aspirations for power, one of the Executors could just as competently lead or make a strong case to her to make her 'step

aside' while they do the deed. But in the end, nobody does. Even with all the flaws our Empire has, none question Unarin's place as our rightful leader.]

[This is not merely because of how long Unarin has reigned,] Vulpanix continues, [though countless generations of Volgrim have been formed from the dust of the cosmos, never knowing any history that does not include Unarin's face at the top of our hierarchy.]

A hint of pride appears on her face.

[It is because our First Founder has earned our undying respect. He is kind. He is compassionate. He is cruel. He is ruthless. He is just. He is wise. Founder Unarin is not like the fragile rulers you imagine when you think of historical human kings and queens. He has united five warring subspecies under his banner without resorting to violence, because he understands the souls of others innately. You may have your Wordsmithing... but Founder Unarin...]

Her tone turns wistful.

[...he has his own 'power.' His ability to understand other life-forms, from the superior Volgrim to the inferior mud-dwellers, borders on the fantastical. If you follow him, or even if you collaborate with him, he will not cause you harm. He has already united five Volgrim subspecies. What harm is there in adding humanity to his umbrella, or the demons, or the monsters?]

She lowers Excalibur to her side and extends her free hand in a diplomatic gesture.

[Founder Unarin already has shown his sincerity. He will not pursue you for what you have taken. He merely wishes to deepen his friendship with you. Why not work with him? Would you not rather walk toward a peaceful future? One ruled by respect for all?]

Finally, she concludes her speech.

[If Jason Hiro were in your position, he would understand the benefits we are offering. Surely, you are not so obstinate as to stumble where he would walk?]

Hope's frown deepens.

"You know, Vulpanix... if Unarin is as incredible of a people-reader as you claim, it really should be him here negotiating with me. Because you just can't seem to understand one important fact."

He slightly leans his body forward.

"I am not Jason. I am Hope. And every time you compare us, it pisses me off. Every time you call humanity 'mud-dwellers,' it pisses me off even more. Frankly, if your smug, condescending attitude is what I have to look forward to, then there will never be any possibility for us to collaborate moving forward."

Vulpanix blinks. [I have offended you. My apologies. I forget that... other beings... can sometimes allow their emotions to cloud their judgment.]

"Fucking garbage-ass apology." Hope snaps. "Christ's sake. You even manage to insult me when you're trying to act polite."

He leans back and sneers at Vulpanix.

"I reject your terms. I will return to *my* previous offer. If you give me Excalibur, I will return the hostages I've captured and leave this world untouched. That is my final concession. We will part on ambivalent terms. If in the future I decide to trade the use of my abilities for something you have, that will be my *courteous gesture* of respect for your 'mighty' Empire. But you will have to accept my offer right here and now. There will be no second chances."

Vulpanix's eyes narrow. She visibly struggles not to react violently to Hope's words, but it's clear his sudden whiplash has caused her a mental shock.

[You fool! If I refuse to give you Excalibur, you will have to kill those hostages and make the Volgrim your eternal enemies! And I will not give up this artifact without some concessions! Why would you turn down such an excellent offer?! You are letting your primitive greed cloud your judgment!]

"Heh heh heh..." Hope chuckles emotionlessly. "So you reject my generous offer?"

[Generous?!] Vulpanix barks. [You gain everything, and I gain nothing! How is that generous?!]

"That's not true at all." Hope retorts. "I will gain all of humanity's stolen artifacts. They will be where they belong, with me, a Hero. You will get your people back, safe and sound. Serris will remain in pristine condition. You see? I am only taking back that which you stole from my people. By not retaliating for your millennia of theft and oppression of humanity, I am being far more merciful than you deserve."

He pauses to eye her body with disgust.

"To say nothing of that hideous mass of flesh writhing on your body. If Unarin were here, he'd have known that bargaining while wearing that thing was an imbecilic move right from the start. Hell, I bet even an 'inferior mud-dweller' could figure that out during a drunken stupor. Maybe your brain enhancements have actually dulled your mental acuity..."

Vulpanix does not explode in rage. Instead, she becomes eerily calm.

[I will not give you Excalibur.]

"You sure?" Hope asks. "Last chance. I'm being *really* nice here. Don't you want to save the hostages?"

Vulpanix hesitates. Her face twitches. She seems to struggle with something, then finally starts to levitate away from Hope.

[The Executors will arrive soon. Do as you wish. If you know what is good for you, you will return those hostages now. Otherwise, we will hunt you down until-AAAAAAAAAA!!]

Vulpanix suddenly screams in pain. The human flesh on her body begins shifting and writhing, as if suffering an unbearable torment.

Hope remains unmoved. He merely watches calmly with his arms crossed while Vulpanix shrieks like a banshee, confused and frightened by the agony wracking her every cell.

"You stupid bitch." Hope mutters. "I hate smug little shits like you. Always acting so superior to everyone else. I gave you so many chances. Chances you didn't deserve. But you just *had* to get greedy."

Vulpanix continues to scream, she loses some of her levitation power and begins to float downward, losing altitude as her psionic abilities go berserk and become nearly uncontrollable.

[STOP-AAAAA! MAKE IT STOP!!]

"I don't think I will." Hope responds. "You never had a chance. I was toying with you from the very beginning. Haven't you realized? Excalibur only follows your will because you wear the skin of humans. But what if I can bypass all that mana shrouding you? What if I can specifically target the flesh enveloping your body?"

Slowly, deliberately, Hope holds out his hand.

Foop!

A shepherd's staff with a jewel inside its central spiral appears in his grasp. At the sight of this ancient relic, Vulpanix's eyes widen in horror.

[THE DOMINION RO-AAAAA!!!]

"The Dominion Rod." Hope affirms. "It possesses the ability to command humans. That human flesh covering you... well. You can see for yourself how useful this artifact turned out to be. I'll admit though, it wasn't me who thought up this little trick. Solomon helped me."

He shrugs.

"Ah, but what can I say? Your greed was your undoing. For 100,000 years, you've beaten and bullied humanity, and now you want to make a deal once you've run out of steam where you can reap more benefits. By not demanding a massive amount of backpayment, reparations, I've been so very generous, but in your blind arrogance you just can't see that, can you?"

Suddenly, Hope's body flickers. He vanishes from the spot and reappears before Vulpanix with the fake Excalibur raised above her head.

Vulpanix's pupils shrink to pinpricks. She can only watch helplessly as, in the span of a single instant, Hope swings the sword toward the wrist of her sword-wielding hand...

SLASH!

Hope severs Excalibur from Vulpanix's grasp. An instant later, the blade teleports into his palm, and he casually tosses aside the fake Excalibur.

With Excalibur no longer flooding Vulpanix's body, she regains access to her psionic abilities! But too bad. A sudden overwhelming force latches onto all of Vulpanix's clones, along with herself, freezing them in place, slowing down their thoughts, and making it impossible for them to escape.

Hope calmly evaluates the divine blade, the weapon that will allow his future ascension to godhood. He gazes at his reflection in its pristine surface, quietly marveling at how such a vicious battle left no blood on its edge, nor any chipped edges.

He returns his attention to the frozen and terrified Vulpanix. She struggles mightily to break free, but like a tiny fairy held in the grasp of a giant, she can't exert the slightest pressure.

"You Volgrim really aren't much after all." Hope says blandly. "Just a civilization of bullies who lucked out on the temporal lottery. You think just because you had a few million years of extra evolution time, that makes you superior to humanity? Think again."

"Humanity will match you. We will surpass you. And our rise begins now. But too bad, you missed the boat. All you had to do was politely give me my rightful possession and I'd have let you off the hook. At least for a little while. Oh, there would be a reckoning. Reparations, at the least. But now?"

He laughs.

"Now there's no *hope* for you. You've shown me that you cannot be trusted. Your extinction is guaranteed. Go ahead, if you want. Lash out at humanity. Blow up Tarus II. But know that if you do, your extinction will come a thousand times sooner than if you simply tucked your tails and ran. I'll even generously give you a headstart."

[You foolish human!] Vulpanix barks, no longer bothering to hold back now that she's utterly lost to Hope. [You don't know what you're doing! If we leave-]

"The Plague, right. I don't fear it." Hope interrupts. He curls his hand into a claw-shape and casually glances at his nails. "Oh, it's terrifying, for sure. But it's not infallible. I'll simply create a place where humanity can build up our strength in secret. A folded space, like Heaven, or the Cosmic Realm. Ah, that's right, I forgot to mention... how silly of me!"

Hope laughs.

"I already made it! Yes, somewhere in this universe, there now exists a place only I know about. That's where I'm keeping your hostages."

[You mustn't kill them!] Vulpanix exclaims, her voice containing a tinge of panic. [Please! Psymin Miralax, she is a precious asset! Let me at least negotiate for her release!]

"Oh. Hmm, yeah." Hope mutters. "I suppose I don't have to kill the hostages. I do already have Excalibur, after all..."

Vulpanix's heart skips a beat. [You mean...?]

"Yes. I think I'll let them live." Hope says, smiling wickedly. He leans toward Vulpanix, his mouth mere inches from her ear, and quietly whispers.

"...Say. What do you think would *happen* if I put Solomon's Crown on a Celestial Designer's head?"

Vulpanix's blood turns to ice. She freezes up, a look of horror washing across her face.

Hope pulls back, his evil smile widening further.

"You've finally realized? I bet Unarin already thought of the possibility, but you're nowhere as quick-witted as him. Yeah, all those offers you made of trading technology sure ring hollow now, don't they? I wonder what kinds of crazy bullshit I can cook up now that I have the knowledge of dozens of black-level Technopath researchers? In fact...!"

Hope makes a dramatic flourishing motion with his hand. To Vulpanix's absolute terror, a golden crown appears in his grasp.

"I'm such an idiot!" Hope laughs. "It just occurred to me! Why don't I take all the knowledge of a top-level Psion? I've found my knowledge of your sub-species to be quite lacking..."

[NOOO!] Vulpanix shrieks, writhing harder than ever. All six of her clones suddenly burst apart, collapsing as her psionic energy goes berserk. [THE MIND THIEF! NEVER! NEVERR!!!]

The air in the facility suddenly 'thickens' dramatically as a massive amount of Psionic power begins swirling around Vulpanix's body. Holding nothing back, she summons every last drop of her full power while shrieking like a terrified jackrabbit.

[NEVER! NEVER! NEVEEEE-]

Abruptly, Vulpanix stops screaming. Her body freezes up, then slumps slightly.

The light goes out in her eyes.

A grim silence descends on the room...

Hope gazes at her figure.

"Evaluate."

He hits her with a Word of Power, and his expression sinks. He quickly places the crown on Vulpanix's head, waits a few seconds, then pulls it off. He teleports it back to his main body, then his expression sinks even further.

* * *

Inside a secret pocket dimension somewhere in the Milky Way's confines, Hope stares at the ground with an ugly expression while Solomon belly-laughs inside his Mind Realm.

"Not one word from you." Hope growls.

"Bahaha! Was that your inner Jason acting up?" Solomon laughs. "Hahaha! STUPID! You should have put the crown on her head before you started gloating! You're still green, boy!"

Hope's expression sags further. He glances around at the incapacitated prisoners laying in piles here and there, then deeply sighs.

"Oh well. There will be other Psions. We've made incalculable gains already. Losing Vulpanix was only a drop in the bucket. Why didn't you tell me she could self-destruct her soul like that?"

Solomon stops laughing. He wipes away his tears, then positions himself uprightly, returning to a serious demeanor.

"Heh... well, I wasn't aware they could do that. I've never actually seen a Psion lose in combat, let alone be driven to a point where self-destructing was their only remaining option. Good knowledge for the future. But don't get complacent, Hope. Those Executors are still coming for you. Even with Excalibur, such a battle will be..."

"No need to remind me." Hope remarks. "I've already made my preparations. I anchored what remains of Heaven around that planet we discussed, and all the rest is taken care of. Now only one thing remains."

"Return."

Hope utters a Word of Power and vanishes, reappearing in the void above Serris. His clone and Excalibur appear not far away. He examines them and nods.

"You did good work, Arthur. I'll be giving you a new soul soon. One that better matches your disposition."

The construct says nothing. It merely gazes at Hope, waiting for his orders with vacant eyes.

Hope teleports the construct into his secret dimension, then gazes at his motionless 'clone' floating nearby.

However, this 'clone' is not actually a clone at all. Instead, it is merely a corpse, a fake body made to perfectly replicate Hope's likeness.

Indeed, Hope never fought Vulpanix. Instead, he remotely 'piloted' this second body like a drone, using it to assault Vulpanix while keeping his actual self safe from harm.

But now, the stiff, corpse-like body lingers in front of him, its dead eyes even more vacant than Arthur's...

"I'd like not to have to ever do that again." Hope mutters. "But it's a trick that works well. It felt like I couldn't properly use Excalibur through this 'drone' though. Why is that?"

"Is it not obvious?" Solomon asks. "It is not your real body. You only piloted the 'drone clone' with a fraction of your soul's true essence. Therefore, you can only harness Excalibur's true power when using it personally."

"So if I ever intend to fight Jason..." Hope mutters.

"You'll be giving him Excalibur for free if you send a drone into battle." Solomon warns. "If the 'Cube' is as powerful as it seems, then Jason must not be underestimated. He may yet prove your match even when you possess Excalibur."

"I have over a thousand artifacts now." Hope laughs. "I'm sure I can overpower him. It's just a matter of finding the right ones... though Psymon's memories will surely help to speed that process up."

Hope casts a casual glance at Serris. The barren moon looks positively hideous, except for the light of the distant star faintly illuminating its distant horizon.

For a few moments, Hope stares at the planet as if wrestling with himself over what choice to make. Eventually, he shrugs.

Then, he raises Excalibur overhead and begins to call upon its power.

"Goodbye, Serris." Hope says wistfully. "With this, I declare myself the eternal enemy of the Volgrim."

"All of you can burn in hell."

Then, he swings the divine blade down.

Part 437: Confessor's Revival

[NOOO!] Vulpanix shrieks. [THE MIND THIEF! NEVER! NEVERR!!!]

Terrified out of her wits, the lauded Confessor's eyes turn bloodshot as she summons every last drop of the power contained within her soul!

[NEVER! NEVER! NEVEEEE-]

Abruptly, Vulpanix completes her last ditch effort, self-destructing the link from her soul to her body. Her vision goes dark, and everything fades away.

A moment later, a cold sensation, like ice-water splashing her face, makes her howl in pain. She struggles futilely, but fails to awaken from the inescapable slumber shrouding her perception.

Then, a burst of light.

Vulpanix suddenly materializes in the air and falls downward helplessly. Her naked body crashes against an ornate technological wonder of an altar, and she shudders in pain.

[Nnn...]

Her vision goes dark once again as she falls unconscious for the second time.

A few seconds seemingly pass.

Then, Vulpanix opens her eyes.

All around her, a swirling of lights and colors and shapes bombards her vision. She dizzily tries to make sense of her surroundings, but can't muster the strength to move her body.

[Careful now.] A female voice says, projecting into Vulpanix's mind. [You've only just awoken. Take a few moments to rest. You don't have a drop of strength to spare.]

Vulpanix's chest heaves. She fails to perceive the world around her, either with her eyes or her psionic senses. Not since the day she emerged from her chrysalis has she felt as weak and pitiful as she does at this very moment. A human child could reach out and snap her neck, and she wouldn't be able to resist, or at least that's how pathetic she feels.

Several moments pass.

Vulpanix's chest rises and falls. She wavers in and out of consciousness, and after several tries, she finally manages to flutter open her six eyes.

A painfully bright light shines down on her from above, making her wince. She inhales through her nose, taking a long, slow breath.

[I... I...]

The blurry world comes more into focus. Vulpanix's gaze drifts to the side, where she sees a fellow Psion walk up and stop beside her. The female Psion gives Vulpanix's body a once-over and nods.

[Your first False Death. It's always the one that hurts the most. You feel vulnerable, weak, and pitiful. I felt the same way during my first fall.]

The gold-skinned Psion standing beside Vulpanix radiates an aura of power. Her red robes hang from her body, giving her the appearance of an exotic empress, someone who could easily crush a planet in her grasp.

[C-Creator Demila. Why... are you here?] Vulpanix asks weakly.

Creator Demila, an ancient Psion who has long-since reached the limits of her strength after two million years of life, nevertheless still possesses far more maturity and authority than her junior Confessor. She evaluates the Confessor with a dismissive gaze.

[Why not? Am I not allowed to go wheresoever I please? You've made quite the mess, Vulpanix. This time, you've truly put the Founders in an awkward position.]

Suddenly recalling the circumstances that caused Vulpanix to initiate her Soul Shutdown Sequence, her entire body trembles in fright. [The... the Wordsmith! What happened? Is Serris-]

[Serris is...] Demila says quietly, silencing her fellow 7th-ranked Psion. [It's gone.]

For a brief moment, neither Psion says a word. Vulpanix's skin turns cold as she hears the truth of the matter for the first time.

[Surely... surely the Wordsmith would not go so far...]

Demila's face betrays no emotion.

[Forty five billion of the Volgrim Empire's brightest, dead. One of our three most top-secret locations, plundered, pillaged, and destroyed. Several of our top personnel, including one of the last living Celestial Designers, captured. To imply that you cast our

people into one of the worst catastrophes at the worst possible moment in time would be... *a mild understatement*, to say the least.]

Vulpanix shudders at the hint of anger in her fellow Psion's voice. Weak as she is now, Vulpanix couldn't offer the faintest resistance if Demila decided to kill her on the spot.

[I... I thought... the Wordsmith would be reasonable.]

[As did we all.] Demila says calmly. [After I received word of the events, I attended a top-secret meeting with several high-rankers. All of the Founders were there.]

She pauses.

[All of them, Vulpanix.]

[What?] Vulpanix asks, realizing the implication in Demila's words. [Even the Fifth Founder?]

[Yes.] Demila answers. [Even Founder Cinculu deigned to join the proceedings. Naturally, he did not speak a word, but his rage was thick in the air.]

Suddenly realizing something, Vulpanix flicks her eyes around. [How long have I been in the Restoration Chamber? It feels as if only a few instants passed since my battle with the Wordsmith...]

[Nine rotational cycles.] Demila answers. [Many events transpired while you were unconscious. Hope Hiro used the power of the divine blade to obliterate Serris, then he abruptly disappeared. I've been keeping track of Jason Hiro's activities, but it does not seem as if Hope Hiro has returned to Tarus II and contacted him. However, given how adeptly he managed to sneak around Volgarius, it's entirely possible he was able to deceive me. My psionic senses are far from omniscient, after all.]

[I could only detect the Wordsmith's precise location when he arrived within one thousand meters of my position.] Vulpanix mutters. [Perhaps three thousand meters if we're going by a vague sense of him in the wind. I couldn't tell exactly where he was until he reached my immediate zone of influence. If I were inattentive and not looking for him explicitly, he'd have easily slipped past me.]

Vulpanix becomes quiet for a moment, then closes her eyes.

[...Nine rotational cycles. What have the Founders decided to do with me?]

Demila snorts. [You are not as important as you imagine yourself to be, young Confessor. Your future is bright and I would wager that you will ascend to the 8th Level someday, but at this moment, the Founders can barely cast a thought your way. There is nothing you can do to undo your failure. They are much more focused on how the Serris Incident will affect the war effort, and what sort of powerful adversary the Second Wordsmith will become.]

The Creator straightens her back and assumes a domineering posture. [For now, you must quickly repair your injuries, restore your psionic power, and follow me to Volgarius. Founder Unarin wishes to personally speak to you regarding the Serris Annihilation Event.]

Vulpanix shudders. [The First Founder himself? But why speak to me?]

[Fool!] Demila barks. [You are the only person alive and able to bear witness regarding that day. Not a single soul managed to evacuate in time. As for the captured elites, we do not even know if they are alive or dead!]

Vulpanix slowly blinks her eyes. [They are alive. Hope Hiro... he captured them and placed Solomon's Crown on all of their heads. The Mind Thief has already stolen all of their knowledge. I self-destructed to prevent him from learning any of my secrets, but compared to the brilliance of a Celestial Designer...]

She falls silent as Demila's wrathful gaze meets hers. [Imbecilic fool. You've always been too arrogant for your own good. Rising to the 7th Level in only 100,000 cycles while focusing on multiple paths is truly praiseworthy, but it came at the cost of your humility! You believed you could bully the Wordsmith instead of working with him properly, and as such, he outwitted you! Now, explain to me exactly what happened. I want every last detail!]

Unable to nod her head due to exhaustion, Vulpanix instead simply blinks her eyes. [Of course, Creator. It's like this...]

* * *

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For several long minutes, Vulpanix speaks to Demila, detailing her experiences with Hope, the feelings she had, her thought processes, and any other miscellaneous

observations, anything she thinks might give her superior some useful information. At the same time, Demila doesn't play any games with Vulpanix, opting to psionically download her memories wholesale, making Vulpanix feel more than a little violated. Among Psions, directly reading the memories of another is considered a terrible taboo, but she also endures such shame that she doesn't feel comfortable enough to try and stop Demila's cerebral intrusion.

Not that she could even if she wanted to.

So weak and pathetic is Vulpanix that she couldn't put up a simple psionic barrier to slow Demila down. Her thoughts are utterly at the mercy of her fellow Volgrim, and the Founders probably wouldn't say a word if Demila 'justifiably' found a reason to injure her.

At the very least, Demila doesn't push things too far. After obtaining all the useful information, she retracts her psionic sense, allowing Vulpanix to breathe easier.

[Stupid. Foolish. 100,000 cycles old and you have the blind arrogance of a newly spawned Initiator lacking all common sense. Why did you show off the presence of the Celestial Designer to Hope Hiro? You essentially advertised a crippling weakness to him! The Founders should have put ME in charge of this operation. I'd never have made such an elementary mistake...]

Vulpanix winces at Demila's assessment, but offers no defense of her actions. The guilt she feels is palpable enough that she can only blame herself for everything that went wrong as well, not that Demila has any intentions of letting her off the hook.

[Now that I better know the situation that has transpired,] Demila says, after a few minutes of digesting the information she's obtained, [I can understand why Hope has not revealed himself. He has simply made too many gains!]

[Too many indeed...] Vulpanix mutters gloomily.

[If the only artifact Hope Hiro obtained was Solomon's Crown, he would already have become too terrifying to imagine.] Demila says quietly. [Let alone the Crown placed atop the head of our revered Celestial Designer. Combined with the might of a thousand other artifacts, once he returns to humanity's shores, their rise will become truly unstoppable. While you are no doubt aware of the number of gains he has made, it must be mentioned that this is the worst-case scenario Unarin brought up during that meeting I attended. He intends to speak to you the moment you have regained your strength.]

[Where has Hope gone then?] Vulpanix wonders.

[If I am to hazard a guess...] Demila says, [then I must assume he has entered seclusion. Hidden somewhere in the galaxy, he will be taking some time to identify his newly acquired treasures and learn how to use them. There is nothing we can do to stop him at this time. We cannot find him. We cannot even annoy him. At best, we can capture his copulation partner on Tarus II to stymie his wrath, but that would potentially cause a rift between us and the First Wordsmith.]

Vulpanix exhales through her nose. [That would not work. Hope is too prideful. He has a power complex. A driven ego. We must be wary of enraging him.]

[Indeed. We will defer to Founder Unarin's wisdom regarding this matter. He has already given me my instructions.]

Demila turns and walks away from the regeneration pod containing Vulpanix. The Confessor frowns. She tries to lift her head to follow the Creator's movements, but her strength is simply too lacking to allow such a thing. And with the walls of the pod obscuring her vision, she can't see anything else inside the medical facility except for the ceiling and the lights shining down on her face.

Before long, her pod begins to shift. It lifts up and tilts forward, finally affording her a better view of her surroundings. She finds herself inside a small hospital room reserved for elite Psions, one with advanced medical equipment specially designed to rejuvenate and restore psionic power. Glass tubes of variously colored liquids run along the walls, with small plasticine tubules that pass their contents into the pod half-enveloping Vulpanix's frail form. The shiny white walls give her a vague reassurance that the facility is sterile and safe, albeit unwelcoming and cold.

The door to the room opens. A frail-looking Technopath walks in, his heavy metallic legs clanking against the floor as he pauses to nod respectfully at Demila.

"Creator Demila..." The male says. "It has been a while."

[Psio-specialist Goldis.] Demila says even more respectfully. [We need to hasten Vulpanix's recovery. Founder Unarin has authorized me to use three hyper-revival stimulants on the Confessor.]

"Three?" Goldis asks, the aged Technopath pausing. "It will place considerable strain on her frame. This is only her first revival, after all. She is not yet accustomed to the

trauma. And we still need to separate her soul back into the Transmission Facility."

[For now, she can remain inside her True Body.] Demila says. [We can separate the two later. Expedience is of the utmost importance. Will there be any permanent negative effects from ingesting three hyper-revival stimulants at the same time?]

"Mmm... I do not believe so." Goldis answers, after a moment of thought. "But it will cause her tremendous pain. She will reawaken her powers, but it may take her several hundred cycles to stabilize her foundation once more. If she were to die during that period... it would be a True Death, whether or not she were operating from the confines of the Transmission Facility."

Demila raises an eyebrow. [I was unaware of these side-effects. Would two stimulants have less of an adverse effect?]

"Indeed. But in this humble specialist's opinion, I would simply request that she only consume one. Do you intend for her to engage in battle in the near future? A single stimulant will allow her to regain her mobility within three standard time units."

Demila shakes her head. [No. Vulpanix need only speak to the Founders for now.]

"I see. A single stimulant will not restore her battle capabilities quickly, but she will regain basic psionic functions at an accelerated speed. I always advise you Psions not to be too hasty in these matters. You are so patient in building up your foundations... why rush to restore your strength when a period of weakness can fortify one's mind? Given the events that have transpired with regard to Serris, perhaps a period of self-reflection would do Vulpanix well to temper her... personal tendencies.]

Demila glances at Vulpanix with a look of amusement. She snorts.

[Yes. I quite like that idea. Very well. One stimulant will suffice. I shall take my leave and return in three standard time-units. I have many matters to which I must attend.]

"Of course. Of course." Goldis says, slowly waving his aged tentacles. "May the Founders guide your path."

Creator Demila leaves without another word, allowing Goldis and Vulpanix some time alone together. The ancient-looking psio-specialist slowly walks over to his upright patient and inspects her nude body without the slightest hint of interest. As Volgrim, they have no sexual interest in one another, especially not across sub-species.

"Mmm. Doesn't feel pleasant, does it?" Goldis asks. "The first death is always the most terrifying one. Some Psions, having lived for thousands of cycles and having successfully won many battles, suffer terrible mental breakdowns after their revival. With their egos shattered, they crumple into balls and self-immolate, never again to walk the mortal coil. And how about you, Confessor? Do you feel sound of mind?"

Vulpanix eyes the unfamiliar Technopath for a moment, then blinks her eyes.

[My willpower is strong. I feel deep shame regarding my failure at Serris. But it will not impede my Path. I have walked unwaveringly from the rank of Initiator to Confessor without hesitation. A stumble like this will allow me to self-reflect on my failures and firm my resolve.]

"Good, good." Goldis says, turning to the side. He reaches out his tentacles and manipulates a medical device of some sort, keying instructions into it. "The number of young prodigies I've met who mentally collapsed following their first death are simply too many to count. Your willpower certainly meets the expected standard of an elite."

[With respect, Goldis,] Vulpanix says, [I have not heard your name spoken before. Who are you?]

"Me?" Goldis asks, pausing his work to glance at her. "Just an old fogey who's lived for far too long. I was enjoying quite a pleasant retirement until that Plague came. Then the Founders called me back to my post. Sigh... and here I am, eighty thousand cycles later. The work never ends..."

Vulpanix frowns even more deeply. [How... old are you? If you don't mind me asking?]

"Mmm. Quite old, yes. Quite old indeed..." Goldis says, his words softening. "Mmm. Lived a long time, I have. Saw everything. From the very beginning. Even before that cute little Unarin rose to power, I was there. During the Age of Ignorance, before he uplifted our people from their warring tribalism, I was there."

He momentarily becomes swallowed by nostalgia. And bitterness.

"When the Sentinels attacked... I was there."

[The Sentinels.] Vulpanix mentally whispers. [Of course. You lived through that whole era.]

"*Survived* is more like it." Goldis answers. "Mmm, yes. Wish that I hadn't. Too much death. Too much suffering. And now I have lived long enough to see a second Calamity

befall our people. To go from the Seven Great Wars to Unarin's reign to... this. Some things never change."

[I've never even heard of a Volgrim retiring.] Vulpanix says respectfully. [I didn't know it was possible.]

"Oh, certainly, before the Plague, anyone could leave their post on a permanent basis, if they so desired. But none wanted to! None except me..." Goldis explains. "When you've seen the horrors I have... it takes a toll on the psyche."

[Then why did you come out of retirement?] Vulpanix asks. [Why not... stay?]

"Because." Goldis says simply, looking into her eyes. "I am Volgrim. I have a Duty. My life is not mine, but my people's. My desires come second to the welfare of our great Empire. My Calling goes beyond my personal weakness, requiring that in times of great need, I must rise to the task."

He raises the medical device in his grasp and presses it against Vulpanix's neck. Her eyes twitch as an odd feeling spreads from her neck to the rest of her body, like a breath of cool air on a hot summer's day. After a moment, Goldis retracts the device and smiles kindly, like an old grandfather.

"And there we go. Now you need only wait a short period and your psionic abilities will partially return."

Vulpanix blinks her heavy eyelids.

[I... have one question, psio-specialist Goldis.]

"Mmm, yes. Go on." The old Volgrim says.

Vulpanix flops her head to the side to look at him.

[Are you... a Celestial Designer?]

Goldis chuckles. "A fancy title. Meaningless, in my eyes. But yes, I am considered one of their remnants."

[I see...] Vulpanix says quietly. [So, regarding Psymin Miralax...]

"A close friend of mine." Goldis answers. "But... she is not dead, and that is all that matters. You must not blame yourself too harshly for what happened, young one. All have erred. Many live to see the fruits of their failures."

The old Volgrim sighs heavily.

"And compared to my failures, yours are... truly too insignificant to speak of."

[Your failures?] Vulpanix asks. [Meaning?]

"Is it not obvious?" Goldis asks, while dismissively waving his tentacles. "I helped create the Sentinels. I was... responsible for the deaths of trillions of our people."

"Yes... trillions of them..." Goldis says, more quietly than before. "So very, very many people. All dead because of young, arrogant fools like me."

He gazes emptily at the wall, not particularly paying attention to Vulpanix's presence beside him.

"Oh, if only it had been me captured by that Wordsmith instead of my dear Psymin. She's already suffered enough."

Vulpanix closes her eyes.

[I am sorry. I will do better, moving forward.]

Goldis nods.

"That's the best anyone can do, in this aged one's opinion."

Part 438: The Far-Seer

Three hours pass.

Vulpanix slowly regains her energy, ultimately becoming capable of moving her body more and more. By the time Creator Demila returns, Vulpanix can just barely walk around in a shaky and trembling manner, though she collapses after only a few minutes of movement.

After exhausting her strength, Vulpanix flops into a hovering pod and blearily gazes at her superior. [Apologies... I am still... quite exhausted.]

[You can recover while we travel to Volgarius.] Demila says. [Senior Goldis, is she safe to leave?]

The aged Celestial Designer smiles kindly at Demila. "Indeed she is. You two can go. May the Founders guide your paths."

[And may the Founders guide yours.] Demila replies with a respectful nod.

She and Vulpanix both leave. They step out into the main facility, where the lesser Psions revive and are placed into healing tanks much like hers. However, unlike Vulpanix, a powerful 7th Level Psion, these lesser ones only get relatively generic treatment. They reside within rows, unconscious, lacking the special medicine she received to bolster her recovery speed. Due to the unique properties of the hyper-revival stimulants, they cannot be easily mass-produced, and are thus stockpiled and saved for emergencies or for assisting elite Psions in their recovery times.

Having been inside this facility before, on many occasions, neither Vulpanix nor Demila are particularly interested in exploring its confines. The two women quickly make their way down the various winding corridors, past the psio-revival rooms where blasts of planet-grade energy burst out to reform recently deceased Psion bodies, and toward an awaiting Warpgate secreted away.

Identical to the gates inside the Labyrinth, the world's lone gate hums with energy. Over three dozen 6th Level Psions stand guard, watching with expressions of awe as the two 7th Level elites stride and hover toward them. Bursts of psionic activity travel

between the guards as they secretly converse about how rare it is to see a Confessor and Creator passing through at the same time.

Luckily for Vulpanix's sanity, none of them seem to know about her failure at Serris.

Creator Demila stops before the gate and turns to look at the nearby controller, a blood-red-skinned Psion warrior. They communicate briefly, and he nods. His fingers reflexively race across the control panel at hyperspeed, calculating the Warpgate's new travel vector in mere seconds, vastly eclipsing the speeds of humanity and their monster allies. Compared to the original creators of the Warpgates, humanity cannot even come close to matching their technical know-how.

Well, everyone except for Solomon. Though he is more of an aberrant...

Moments later, Demila and Vulpanix travel through the Warpgate and arrive on Volgarius inside a secret underground receival facility, less than a hundred miles from the Founder's Fingers. Given its status as the homeworld of the Volgrim, Volgarius houses four Warpgates placed in equally distant locations, spread out for easy access and travel across the galaxy. At the same time, they are heavily defended and ready to be collapsed in the event of a Plague incursion.

The two of them undergo a quick inspection to verify their identities. Then, after they depart the facility, they arrive at a departure platform, where they pause to wait for a shuttle.

At least, until Vulpanix rolls her eyes. [Just levitate us to the Founders. I don't want to wait for a piece of technology to fly me around like a metalhead.]

[Oh?] Demila asks with a hint of bemusement. [It's awfully rude to levitate another Psion.]

[Without their permission.] Vulpanix clarifies. [And you have mine. Oh, wipe that smug look off your face. You enjoy watching me squirm.]

[Are you implying I enjoy seeing some snotty young upstart who raced to the same rank as me in a fraction of the time become humbled by her own hubris?] Demila asks. [By no means. I would never think such thoughts.]

[If you'd like, we can have a friendly spar when I regain my full strength.] Vulpanix challenges. [Or perhaps when I'm at eighty percent. I wouldn't want to beat up an old fossil too badly.]

[You think just because you're talented that you are my match?] Demila retorts. [The Terrans have a saying: In a galaxy where females die young, fear the old woman.]

[I very much doubt that's how their euphemism goes.] Vulpanix snarks. [Now get on with it. I don't want to die of embarrassment before we even reach the Founders.]

[Of course.]

With a flick of her hand, Demila lifts herself and Vulpanix up, then shrouds both of themselves in a field of temporal dampening, making it impossible for common Psions and others to observe them.

The two Psions lift up and race off into the horizon. Vulpanix snorts at her superior.

[Shielding my pitiful state from the sight of others. I thank you for considering my position.]

[Even if I wanted to parade your weak form around to humiliate you, I couldn't.] Demila says in a more serious tone. [It is important during these dark times that we maintain morale, along with an appearance of strength. You are a well-known Confessor. People will learn that you lost a battle and perished. But hearing is not the same as seeing. If they were to see you in your current state, it would do far more than bruise your ego.]

Vulpanix quiets down.

[Mmm. We are besieged from all sides. Not only the Plague, but the Second Wordsmith as well. Even the First Wordsmith is hardly our ally. He is self-serving in his own way.]

[Do not blame them for following their unenlightened, petty instincts.] Demila says. [The humans are still young. Before the era of the Great Wars descended, the Age of Ignorance had already extended for 500,000 long cycles. Unarin brought us out of that period into the Era of Enlightenment, but the humans have not had time to properly develop. It is only natural they would be greedy and simple-minded, as our people once were.]

[Do you believe that the humans will be able to elevate their consciousness, given time?] Vulpanix asks.

[Oh, of that, I have no doubt.] Demila answers, glancing at her junior. [They are young. They are stupid. They are greedy. They are selfish. But so are the Volgrim, we have simply learned to focus on the greater good. Jason Hiro might not be as...]

She pauses for several long seconds.

[...*intellectually stimulated*... as our First Founder. But he has a good heart. He seeks to uplift his people and unify humanity and the demons, despite all the pain the demons have inflicted. This is a broad-minded viewpoint that will take him far.]

[I disagree.] Vulpanix challenges. [Founder Unarin and Jason Hiro are both broad-minded, yes. They are both compassionate toward those who have offended them, yes. But their difference in intellectual capacity is not something one can gloss over. When I look at the First Founder, I sense a being of indomitable will who will fight for what he knows to be right. Compared to the wishy-washy Wordsmith, a man who is already being manipulated by his lessers... surely another human will eclipse him, given time.]

[Neil Adams.] Demila replies. [Have you heard his name?]

[I've had neither the time nor the inclination to look into the backgrounds of random humans.] Vulpanix answers. [Why? Is this Neil Adams someone of note?]

[He is much closer to Founder Unarin's 'aura' than Jason Hiro, in my view.] Demila says. [Oh, certainly he is more petty. He hates the demons with a passion. He acts ambivalent, but lusts for power. Comparing him to the glory of our First Founder is like comparing a Meltarr to a Swamp-Fisher. But he has the... potential. If he can merely reshape some of his mudlike views on reality and ascend higher, he will become a formidable existence.]

She pauses.

[I hear that even the First Founder has recently taken a keen interest in Neil's activities. One of my top priorities whenever I am on Tarus II is to keep a close eye on humanity's military commander.]

[Hmm. In that case, I will look into his information when I have time.] Vulpanix concludes.

The two Psions rocket across the horizon, needing less than five minutes to reach their ultimate destination at the Founder's Thumb.

Though the smallest of the Founder's Five Fingers, the Thumb is nonetheless the most important, given it is where Unarin himself lives and works. Demila flies Vulpanix to a landing platform, then sets her down. The two of them proceed forward more slowly, until they arrive before a familiar pink-skinned Ascended.

"Greetings, Lady Demila. Lady Vulpanix." Muuxunuu, Unarin's closest assistant, says.

The female Ascended walks toward the other two women and nods respectfully, then turns her full attention on Vulpanix.

"Founder Unarin has already been briefed on the information you told Demila. However, he still wishes to speak to you in person. Please follow me. And you as well, Demila. Founder Unarin will likely have orders to give regarding your activity on Tarus II."

[I imagined he might.] Demila replies.

The three women walk deeper into the Founder's Thumb. Something about Muuxunuu's presence causes the other two women to fall utterly silent. So majestic and mysterious is her appearance, as well as her role in the Empire, that they almost feel as if she is an inviolable goddess, someone whose time they must never waste, or in whose presence they must not waste useless words.

When they arrive at the entrance to Unarin's inner sanctum, Muuxunuu turns to Vulpanix and Demila. She blinks her large blue, limpid, watery eyes.

"You may enter."

[Of course.] Both Psions reply. [Thank you for personally escorting us, Lady Muuxunuu.]

"I contemplate, and I comprehend." Muuxunuu concludes.

She turns and walks away. Demila opens the large doors to the First Founder's inner sanctum, and she takes the lead, walking in slowly but confidently.

[First Founder.] Demila says, with more than a hint of respect and reverence in her tone. [I have come, and I have brought the Confessor.]

From behind a table standing ten feet tall, stacked with models of a huge city on one of the many Volgrim-controlled worlds, Unarin steps out and gives both women an evaluating glance.

"Demila. Thank you for coming. I will be addressing Vulpanix for now, but do stick around. I will have some thoughts I'd like to exchange with you."

[Of course.] Demila says, while bowing her head. She turns and flickers away, leaving to give Vulpanix a bit of privacy with the First Founder. It does not escape Demila's

senses that flickers of godlike psionic activity monitor her every move - the sign of Founder Dosen's presence.

With the two of them alone, Founder Unarin smiles casually at Vulpanix, seemingly not even noticing her hoverchair-bound weakness.

"Confessor. It has been a while since we last spoke, hasn't it?"

[You are a busy Volgrim, to say the least.] Vulpanix answers. [Compared to the hundreds of other 7th-level Psions, I am but a drop in the proverbial bucket.]

"Now now, don't sell yourself short." Unarin says, in a soft and soothing voice. He turns away and wanders over to a nearby table stacked with all manner of rare and precious pieces of artwork. "To go from the rank of Initiator to Confessor in just 95,000 cycles is a praiseworthy accomplishment. Furthermore, you did so without resorting to the path of specialization. You are a true-blooded Psion warrior who will surely accomplish many great things. Of all your comrades at the same rank, I don't think it's incorrect to state you will be the next to earn the title of Executor."

Vulpanix shifts slightly, feeling a little uncomfortable about his praise.

[I... I have some meager achievements.] Vulpanix mutters. [But... regarding Serris...]

"Ah, yes. The loss of Serris. The capture of a Celestial Designer. All of this happened under your watch." Unarin says bluntly, turning to look at her with an expression no more severe than any other so far. "I imagine you've been beating yourself up over that since you revived."

Vulpanix hangs her head in shame. [I... I have committed a terrible sin. I deserve a severe punishment for allowing harm to come to a Celestial Designer.]

"Mmm. You did the best you could, given the options available." Unarin says, waving his hand. "There will be no punishment."

She snaps her head up. [No punishment? But... but... I do not understand...]

"Who was it that ordered you be placed on Serris?" Unarin asks, turning his entire body to face her while leaning his butt against the table's side.

[...You did, First Founder.] Vulpanix answers, still somewhat confused.

"I did. And yet now you doubt my judgment." Unarin says with a long, laborious sigh. He exaggerates the motion, as if to punctuate his next words. "Do you think that *anything*

which has transpired... was beyond my ability to predict?"

[You... predicted that Hope Hiro would obliterate Serris?] Vulpanix asks, now falling into a state of morbid fascination. [But surely it was my failure which led to such a catastrophic result.]

Unarin doesn't immediately answer her. Instead, he presses his palms together and looks away, as if falling into thought.

"...do you know about the two types of strategy war-games, Vulpanix?"

The sudden pivot in topics forces her to sluggishly try and follow along with the First Founder's thought processes.

[There are... many types of war-games, First Founder. To which genre are you referring?]

"Oh, the genre doesn't matter. It is more about the 'style' of which they are constructed, as well as the types of people who gravitate toward them. Let me give an example."

Unarin waves his hands, and like magic, a projection of a complex war-sim materializes in midair, one with images of hundreds of battleships engaging in battle against an equally powerful armada.

[I have engaged other Psions in this war-game.] Vulpanix says. [It is the game of Multi-Armada Warfare.]

"That's right." Unarin says. "In this game, both players start with a roughly equal level of strength. They are forced to fight against one another fair and square, trying to outmaneuver the other through trickery, deception, and mindgames. But what about this other game?"

He waves his hand again, and this time, a much simpler looking 'game' appears, one that even Vulpanix needs a moment to recognize.

[Is that... a human game? I vaguely recognize it.]

"It is the game of 'Chess.'" Unarin states. "Oh, it is simplistic, by our standards. But make no mistake, it is just as complex as Multi-Armada Warfare, and contains a thousand different intricacies of its own. These sixteen pieces here face off against the opponent's sixteen pieces. Both sides are *exactly* equal. But what is the key difference between these games?"

Vulpanix falls silent for several minutes. She easily picks out a thousand differences between both games, but none of them seem to be hitting a core point in Unarin's message.

[I... I am not entirely certain. Please enlighten me, First Founder. This Confessor is still shamefully ignorant and lacking in broadness of mind.]

"Well. I am being a little obtuse." Unarin says with a chuckle. "You see, the game of Chess is entirely deterministic. Both players have perfect information at their fingertips, outside of the thoughts in their opponent's heads. You can make predictions about your opponent, but at the same time, you can also see exactly where every piece falls. Meanwhile, in the game of Multi-Armada Warfare, there are tens of thousands of variables you are likely to miss. As much as the game is about skill and strategy, it is equally about luck and guesswork. What if your destroyer manages to score a lucky shot on one of your opponent's capital-class vessels? With a single shot, you could completely swing the way the game plays. Through no fault of his own, your opponent would lose."

Vulpanix falls silent, allowing the First Founder to continue.

"It is unfair in a way." Unarin says, waving his hand to disperse the holograms. "But so too is life. I very much enjoy playing the game of chess. It has many thrilling moments, especially against a highly skilled player. But to me, the greatest joy comes when I play a game like Multi-Armada Warfare and manage to prepare for all of the worst-case scenarios. It is mentally engaging to imagine ten thousand scenarios wherein I lose, yet prepare counters for all of them. Then, should catastrophe strike, I can remain immovable before my opponent."

He pauses to look at Vulpanix meaningfully.

"When I crushed the Old Leaders during the Age of Ignorance, I used this sort of strategy to the fullest effect. Many times, they believed they could assassinate me, or catch me off-guard, but I always came prepared. And simply by standing tall, I made them fall into despair. By remaining unshakable, I *obliterated* their psyches. Eventually, they resigned our little 'game,' leaving me the ultimate victor. And so too shall these Wordsmiths ultimately lose to me."

[If I am understanding your words correctly...] Vulpanix says slowly, [you... did not intend for the Second Wordsmith to take Excalibur, but you have prepared for the event that he did.]

"Compared to defeating those old monsters during the Age of Ignorance, toying around and reading the thoughts of a few precocious mud-dwellers is truly nothing at all." Unarin says flippantly. "I wanted Hope to accept your offer. I placed you there because I needed someone who would be resolutely firm before the Wordsmith. Someone who would not back down, and who would show him that the Volgrim did not fear him."

[But... I did fear him.] Vulpanix says quietly. [I screamed pitifully at the sight of Solomon's Crown. I self-destructed. I ruined the prestige of your Empire.]

"Small details." Unarin says, brushing away her self-criticism. "Let me present you with a few scenarios. Tell me what the Volgrim Empire stands to gain in each one."

He pauses briefly, then continues to speak.

"Scenario one: The Wordsmith easily buckles to our demands. He accepts Excalibur, follows all of your demands, and begins spiritually engineering for us."

[Well, that's easy enough.] Vulpanix replies. [We gain... everything. All we lose is Excalibur.]

"Of course." Unarin replies. "Scenario two: The Wordsmith agrees to our demands. However, he also refuses to help us unless we give him all of the artifacts in the Vault. Have we suffered a loss?"

[We... did lose all of the artifacts.] Vulpanix says. [But his spiritual engineering would still benefit us greatly. It would be an equal trade.]

"Mmm. Scenario three: The Wordsmith lashes out and attacks you. However, you manage to defeat him through Excalibur and Cleansed Mud. We now have a Wordsmithing slave. What then?"

[That would be the best-case scenario.] Vulpanix answers. [We would lose nothing, but gain everything.]

"Indeed. And what of this? Scenario four..."

Unarin continues speaking. He fires off dozens of hypotheticals, each of them becoming progressively more and more dire for the Volgrim.

"Scenario forty-two..."

"Scenario fifty-six..."

"Scenario seventy-four..."

Vulpanix struggles mightily. But by the time he reaches the end, she has lost her ability to elucidate an answer regarding any benefits the Volgrim Empire might receive.

"Scenario seventy-five. The final one." Unarin says. "Hope Hiro kills you. He captures countless high-level Volgrim. He steals their knowledge through Solomon's Crown. He obliterates Serris, ruining eons of our hard work. Countless of our best and brightest, dead. Our top Technopaths, captured, enslaved, and mind-raped. Have we a single benefit to gain?"

Vulpanix's expression turns awful.

[...None that... I can see... First Founder.]

Unarin doesn't insult her, nor does he deride Vulpanix's mental abilities. Instead, he merely walks over and softly pats her shoulder.

"You are 100,000 years old, yet still young. You are powerful, yet little more than a pawn. You play chess, because you have not yet learned to appreciate the true bounty a game like Multi-Armada Warfare can offer. Ninety-nine point nine-nine-nine percent of all beings are like you. It is a shame, but that is the way reality works."

Unarin retracts his hand. He walks over to the table from before and casually picks up an art piece to play around with it.

"What sort of person is Hope Hiro?"

[Greedy to a fault.] Vulpanix immediately snaps. [Rude. Abrasive. Determined. Foolish.]

"Foolish." Unarin repeats. "Now that's an interesting term. What makes you think he is a fool?"

[We gave him a generous offer.] Vulpanix says. [But he rejected it for greed! He could have made friends with the Volgrim, but he chose to make us his enemy!]

"Mmm. Greedy, indeed." Unarin ponders. "Rude, certainly. Abrasive, I cannot speak from personal experience. But foolish? I think that's a step too far."

Unarin begins pacing around Vulpanix's hoverchair in circles while he speaks.

"A smart man wrings every last drop of value out of his products, his powers, his competitors, and his enemies. A mighty man does so without batting an eye. A king will

even take glee in those antics. Hope has made countless gains, but he has suffered no losses. In my eyes, he is quite wise."

[How is making an enemy of you 'wise'?] Vulpanix asks.

"Do you really think the Volgrim are capable of punishing Hope Hiro?" Unarin asks. "Our battle lines are stretched. Our personnel are exhausted. Fatigue hangs at the edge of our every move. We're losing this war, Confessor. Now that Hope has obtained the divine blade, who can truly stop him? You? Me? Dosenia? If he does not wish to be found, we will not find him. If he wishes to protect humanity, he can yank them off Tarus II through Excalibur's power. Any threats we make will only give him time to react. And if we actually do kill the humans on Tarus II, he will swiftly wipe us all out."

Unarin chuckles. Despite the dire words he just spoke, he appears quite comfortable with the situation.

"But if you think that the events at Serris gave the Volgrim no benefit, you are not thinking broadly enough. I have come to respect the Second Wordsmith. Despite descending from his original self, he has learned to listen to those smarter than him. His actions likely were made at the behest and urging on the Knowledge-Seeker, the Mind-Thief, Solomon. And a fool who pursues power blindly cannot be compared to a far-seeing lout who knows when to listen to the people smarter than him. Why, when I first rose up, I did not have all of the answers. It was my advisors and friends who gave me words to ponder that ultimately made me the Volgrim I am today."

"Perhaps Hope Hiro will become like me..." Unarin concludes. "A man who will do anything, give up anything, for the sake of his species."

The room falls quiet. Vulpanix stares at the First Founder in disbelief.

[You would actually praise the Second Wordsmith to this degree?]

"Reality is cruel and unfair sometimes." Unarin says. "It is... *chaotic*. Learning to navigate that *chaos* in order to seek out its strength is what separates conquerors and kings. Hope Hiro will become someone great. It is too early for his rise, now, but someday he may even surpass the First Wordsmith. It would take a monumental shift in fortune for the First Wordsmith to catch up now..."

[Even so, I prefer the First Wordsmith's actions.] Vulpanix says. [At least he respects the Volgrim enough to negotiate and play nice.]

"Does he respect us?" Unarin asks. "I would not be so sure of that. He is simply seeking benefits, as are we."

Unarin pauses.

"Now that we've addressed your role in the Serris Situation," Unarin says, "let us discuss the fallout and how we will deal with it moving forward. You still yet have many important parts to play. Don't think you can skip out with an easy vacation."

[First Founder, I would never!] Vulpanix immediately protests. [My duty is to the Volgrim Empire! I will always-]

"That was a *joke*, Confessor." Unarin says with a chuckle. He leans toward her and smiles. "You may laugh at it, unfunny though it be."

Vulpanix swallows her words. She looks away sheepishly.

[...oh.]

Part 439: A Pleasant Picnic

Several days before, on Tarus II.

Life goes on as normal for humanity's citizens. With the sudden and unexpected conclusion to the Stormbringer Tribunal, a certain air of suspicion lingers, leaving many of Jason Hiro's most ardent supporters to regard him with concern. His decision to spare Beelzebub's life may not have come easily, but almost nobody understands the truth of the matter in full. Outside of humanity's top leaders, the people who are well and fully aware of the Cube's significance, nobody else can even begin to follow the breadcrumb trail leading to Beelzebub's recent power-up.

But with Jason remaining tight-lipped, only a handful of people, such as Neil Adams, can begin to wrap their heads around the mechanics of why Jason would power Beelzebub up, and why he would subsequently pardon him. Jason's casual mention of the 'Phoenix' to Neil didn't even come close to adequately explaining the situation.

After three or four days, a certain amount of the recent hubbub finally begins to die down. Beelzebub, newly freed, and more powerful than at any point in his life, sits atop a mountain, by himself, about ten miles from the edge of Tarus II's lone population center. He sits cross legged, with his hands folded in his lap, a wistful look on his face.

"I'm stronger than ever. I have more power than I dared desire only a decade ago. But why does it all feel so... hollow?"

Beelzebub's keen Emperor-level eyesight allows him to easily pick out each individual speck far, far in the distance, each human, each monster, and each demon. He 'zooms in' on them, following them as they go about their daily lives.

"What was I even fighting for? The power to uplift demonkind? But it wasn't me who brought that possibility about. It was Jason Hiro. All I did was slow him down. Now I'm stronger than ever because of him, but he'd rather I be dead. I can't say that I blame him..."

As Beelzebub verbalizes his thoughts, a flicker of movement to the side catches his attention. Beelzebub turns to see a demoness levitating through the air toward him. He raises an eyebrow at her as she approaches.

"There you are." The woman says, her cloaked body shrouded in an air of mystique. "I've been looking for you."

"Mara." Beelzebub says to the recently ascended Duke of Collection. "Need something?"

The blond-haired beauty slows to a stop. A dot of light extinguishes on her forehead, and she inhales deeply.

"Air's a bit thin up here."

"I can breathe just fine." Beelzebub says, slightly annoyed by her intrusion on his private moment. He becomes even more annoyed when she unceremoniously plops down next to him, assuming an identical cross-legged stance.

"I'll bet you can..." Mara mutters absentmindedly. "So how about that brush with death? You and I were *this* close to getting executed."

Beelzebub hesitates. He looks away from Mara, toward the humans in the plains below.

"...We were."

"And?" Mara asks. "Now we're both alive and stronger than ever. Isn't that great? But at the same time, it feels undeserved. I killed a lot of humans... but they ended up allowing me to live."

"Jason still wanted to execute you." Beelzebub mutters. "He had no choice but to let you go. It would be hypocritical if he spared me but killed you and the others."

"Whatever." Mara mumbles. "At least I'm still alive."

Beelzebub chews his lower lip. "Have any regrets?"

"About killing a hundred thousand people?" Mara asks. "Most of them noncombatants? Women and children? Why would you ever think that haunts me, Beelzebub?"

Beelzebub wrings his hands together.

"What you did to humanity was evil. What I did was... indescribable. Indiscriminate. And why? Because my ego was a little bruised. I don't even know how many people I killed in total. I'm afraid to find out."

"Since when were you the kind and caring type?" Mara asks. "I don't get it. You've always been such a violent *dickhead*. Unlike me, a cute and sweet and innocent demoness who'd never hurt a fly."

Beelzebub snorts. "Sure you are. Ose didn't even give you an order and you pounced on those people. You're no better than me."

Mara doesn't fire back at him. Instead, she gazes off into the distance and sighs.

"Yeah... you're right. I don't really get it, either. I've always hated humans, but I'm not sure why. The Emperors and Dukes told me to hate them, so I did. But when it comes down to it, are the humans really all that bad? They just want to survive, the same as us. They want to thrive. I don't even want to fight them anymore... and I don't know if I ever truly did."

Beelzebub shrugs. "Considering the real enemy is still out there... maybe working alongside humans won't be so bad. I'm just not sure what I can do to make them forgive me."

"You can't *make* anyone forgive you." Mara snaps. "That's not how it works. The humans hate you. Like, like they REALLY hate you. They hate me too. The most we can do is just be our best selves. Maybe they will forgive us over time. And if not? We'll deserve that hatred too."

Something clears up in Beelzebub's mind. A fog lifts, making him blink several times.

"You're right. We don't deserve forgiveness. And since that's the case, we'll have to work hard to earn it."

He shoots Mara faint smile. "Thanks for the talk."

Mara rolls her eyes. "I liked you better when you fired off quips and kicked everyone's ass."

"Staying the same for all eternity sounds quite boring." Beelzebub muses. "I like to shake things up every now and again."

Mara rises to her feet. After dusting off the back of her black leather armor, she gives Beelzebub a thumbs up.

"Be seeing you."

She activates a Tarot Card, then vanishes from the spot.

After a minute or two, Beelzebub purses his lips.

"Maybe there's something unique that only *I* can do..."

In the chaos following the Stormbringer Tribunal, Jason had his hands tied with constant busywork. Placing spells upon all of those given the unexpected right to survival took him several days. If any of the guilty-judged demons or humans ever turn against humanity in the future, they will suffer unbearable, soul-rending pain thanks to the Wordsmith's magic.

Now, only three days later, Jason finally concludes this round of busywork.

He and his wife take a bit of time off to relax at the eastern side of humanity's largest settlement, a remote area that has yet to be colonized, and not far from the place where Kar fell to the Battle Brothers. Here, a makeshift graveyard has been formed, populated with stones marked for those who were unable to be revived following Stormbringer and other earlier conflicts.

But Jason and Phoebe don't take a day off to visit the graveyard. They go further out, to the edge of the wilderness. There, Jason summons a picnic table and some food for him and his wife to eat. They sit next to each other and lovingly wrap one arm around the other's back while using their free hand to munch on some sandwiches and soup.

In this small forest clearing, the distant sounds of Tarus II's city center are so faint as to be utterly inaudible. Here, the Wordsmith and his wife can simply enjoy a rare moment of peace and quiet.

It helps that Jason has erected a magical privacy field so he and his wife can speak in peace without fear of Demila or others listening in on them.

"This is nice." Phoebe says, smiling up at Jason. "I needed a day off."

"We both did." Jason acknowledges. "God. I have so much bullshit to deal with these days. Neil hasn't wasted any time recently. He's always making little gains here and there. I know what he's doing, and he knows I know, but we both still seemingly have to pretend he's being extra sneaky. I have no idea how to deal with him."

"You can't lock him up." Phoebe says. "Hope would just free him when he gets back."

"And I can't kill him either. Neil's extremely popular. Especially after that crap with Beelzebub... now he's really started turning the people against me."

Several long seconds of silence follow. Phoebe spoons some lemon pudding into her mouth and savors its taste.

"Maybe it really is time..." Phoebe mutters.

"To split humanity in half?" Jason asks.

"Yeah. One half goes inside the Cube. The other half stays on Tarus II. We need a backup solution... just in case."

Jason tosses his hand in annoyance. "We can't take the Belial Booster or the other facilities with us, though. They'll have to stay here. And do you think Neil or Hope is going to let the demons keep using it? No way."

Thanks to Jason's privacy field, neither of the two worries too much anyone will hear their casual words.

Not that it matters. Jason and his wife are already pretty sure Demila knows about the Cube, at least in a general manner.

"If the Plague randomly attacks Tarus II tomorrow, it will be too late to make any preparations." Jason reasons. "Hell. Maybe you're right. Let Hope and Neil have Tarus II. You and I can lead humanity on the Cube."

He frowns.

"Although... splitting humanity has a lot of problems. For one, I'm currently keeping Hope and Neil's more violent tendencies in check. If I leave, Neil will probably start ramping up to attack demonkind. That would go against my promise of peace..."

"If you can't kill Neil because of Hope," Phoebe reasons, "and if Hope is himself such a problem... why don't you...?"

She makes a cutting motion across her neck. Jason's frown deepens.

"Do you really want me to kill Hope? He's still *me*, Phoebe. We're different now, yes. But he's *me*. I can't just kill him. That's so screwed up."

"I don't want that either." Phoebe admits. "But what option do you have? You tried reasoning with him. You failed. He seriously hates your guts."

"You think he might listen to you?" Jason asks. "He probably still... loves you."

"He has Amelia now. Annette. Whatever name she's going by these days." Phoebe says. "I doubt Hope cares for me anymore."

"Haha..." Jason chuckles wryly. "Unlike me, you've never actually done anything to hurt Hope. He probably feels betrayed and like he lost you to me. I think if our positions were swapped, I might feel that way. But I can't see myself ever blaming you for what happened. I'd still love you to death, and so would he."

Phoebe chews her lower lip. "Yes. I guess. Maybe I *should* try to reason with him..."

The two of them resume their eating. When they start to feel full, Jason speaks a Word of Power and instantly empties their bellies, allowing them to keep eating again.

"Convenient!" Phoebe laughs. "I can eat all the sweets I want, all the yummy things, and you can make sure I don't ever fatten like a pig or let my teeth rot away!"

"I love eating good food." Jason chuckles. "It's pretty cool I can munch on as much as I want with no repercussions. Man should not possess this much power."

"You can also give yourself nearly unlimited stamina." Phoebe says playfully, winking at him. "It's a miracle I've only gotten pregnant twice."

"Hah!" Jason snorts. "And I thought I was the crude one."

He lovingly rubs his wife's belly.

"Can't wait until Timothy makes his way into our lives."

"Will we have time to properly raise him?" Phoebe ponders. "We're always so busy these days. And there was that vision you had..."

"It's just a vision." Jason says. "If you look at the future, you change the future. I can always try looking again... even though last time was pretty scary. Right now though, I'm more concerned with the past."

"Oh? What happened in the past?" Phoebe asks.

"I'm not sure. And that's the crux of the issue." Jason explains. "I had a long talk with Unarin, you see. We discovered all sorts of things by bouncing info off each other. The attack on Valhalla, the Plague from another galaxy... it's all a mess. I need a reliable way to peer into the past."

"Maybe you could do what Camael once did. You could make magical artifacts." Phoebe suggests. "Some sort of scrying crystal, maybe?"

"I'm a Wordsmith, not an Artifact-smith." Jason says. "That seems a little out of my skillset."

He and Phoebe finish their food, then erase the table from existence so they can lay on their backs in the grass and gaze up at the midday sky.

"Hmm... if I get some more free time, I wanna go racing." Phoebe yaps. "I haven't gotten to jump in a car and race around a track in months."

"We don't have a lot of time for leisure." Jason points out. "I still need to pay Marie Becker a visit. Plus I need to start building a safe place for human civilization inside the Cube. And what about our wartime capabilities? And I also need to make a device that can investigate the Plaguehosts, maybe find a way to cure them..."

"That's a lot of stuff on your plate." Phoebe points out. "Neil has Debra. Maybe you should get an assistant."

"I have an assistant." Jason replies, turning his head to look at his wife. "You."

"Hah! Think again, buster!" Phoebe laughs. "I've got my own projects, and more of them than you can imagine! I don't have time to be running your errands."

Jason nods seriously. "That's true. Hmm... an assistant. She'll have to be cute, attractive, nice butt..."

"Hey!" Phoebe snaps playfully. "'She' who? Who said you'd get a *lady* assistant?! I'll refer you to a musclehead with a six-pack."

"So you can ogle him?" Jason asks.

"So I can ogle him, mhm."

Jason lets out a laugh, and so does Phoebe.

Having lived with each other for six years, they don't mind teasing one another about these things. Neither of them takes the other's threats seriously, as they both know their true loyalties.

Eventually, after some time has passed, Jason pulls himself to a sitting position. He glances at the midday sun and sighs when he realizes it's begun its descent to the second half of the day.

"Wanna go pay Samantha a visit?" Jason asks.

Phoebe nods. "Oh, sure. But why her specifically?"

"To make sure the baby's doing okay." Jason says with a shrug. "Can't hurt to get a second opinion."

"We already bugged her a few days ago." Phoebe points out. "She's been doing a lot of overtime recently, healing the soldiers who come back injured from the Cube's training areas."

"Phoebe." Jason says pointedly. "Samantha... she loves you, you know. She's always excited when you show up. You light up her day."

"What do you mean?" Phoebe asks, also pulling herself into a seated position.

"You know what I mean. She's more than a little jealous of me." Jason says softly. "She... well, if you and I weren't a thing, she'd be all over you."

"No, that can't be right." Phoebe says, with a wave of her hand. "Sam and I are just friends."

"Ahaha..." Jason laughs, his tone slightly awkward. "You serious?"

"Of course I am. Jason, come on. Samantha and I aren't like that."

For a brief moment, the husband and wife both fall silent.

Jason wipes his thumb across his nose.

"Ahh. Well. Forget I said anything, then. Poor Sam..."

Phoebe's eyes flicker. "She... she *really* likes me in that way? She never said..."

"I seem to recall her giving you a big kiss after one of your race victories." Jason points out. "You didn't find that odd?"

"I thought it was a friendly kiss!" Phoebe protests. "Oh my god, am I completely blind? Looking back, it seems kind of obvious..."

"Haha!" Jason laughs, more sincerely this time. "You might be!"

He cleans away any leftovers from their picnic with his Wordsmithing, then he and Phoebe both turn to face the city. Jason clears his throat.

"Normalize."

Immediately, the transparent privacy barrier engulfing them vanishes, allowing the distant sounds of civilization to slowly rise back to normal levels.

"...Oh, boy." Phoebe murmurs. "Now we return."

"Yup. Now we retur-" Jason starts to say, only to pause mid-sentence.

He and Phoebe both turn to the left in unison, where they see a familiar gold-skinned Psion stepping out of a gap in space.

"Demila." Jason says neutrally. "Were you...?"

[Waiting for you to exit your private mating ritual.] Demila says authoritatively. [Indeed, I was. Your Wordsmithing is quite interesting. My senses could not pierce that strange vacuum enveloping your forms. Truly remarkable.]

Jason lightly licks his lips. "Why'd you come to see me?"

Demila does not immediately answer. Instead, she hovers in place, half a foot off the ground, with her arms folded behind her back. She says nothing, but intently scrutinizes the Wordsmith's face, as well as Phoebe's.

[You are unaware.] Demila says, her words sounding like a mixture between a question and a statement.

"Unaware of what?" Phoebe asks, feeling mildly annoyed by this disturbance right after her and Jason's delightful picnic.

[Does the name 'Serris' mean anything to you?] Demila asks, still continuing to carefully observe Jason and Phoebe's every facial movement, as well as every beat of their hearts.

"No..." Jason says slowly, while starting to frown. "Why? *Should it?*"

Once again, several seconds pass. Having satisfied some unspoken curiosity, Demila's posture becomes less intense. She leans back and mentally sighs.

[Where is your clone, Hope Hiro?]

"I don't know, exactly." Jason says, as a sudden sinking feeling opens in the pit of his stomach. "Last I heard, he went into the Labyrinth to... hunt down... Mephisto. And Yama, as well..."

[He lied to you.] Demila says quietly. [Our working assumption is that Hope Hiro returned to Tarus II in absolute secrecy. He stowed aboard the Hatoraxia and slinked away without anyone knowing. He has thus spent the past fourteen rotational cycles infiltrating Volgarius to further several insidious ends.]

The pit in Jason's stomach quickly turns into a miniature black hole.

"What are you saying?" He asks softly. "What did Hope do? What the fuck did he do?!"

[Two rotational cycles ago,] Demila says, [Hope Hiro traveled to a secret Volgrim research base on a moon known as Serris. It was the location of our most closely-guarded Vault. The place where we stored all of humanity's recovered artifacts.]

Jason's legs begin to shake. "Holy shit. He stole the artifacts, didn't he? Wait... was Solomon's Crown there? And Excalibur?!"

[They were.] Demila says, in an oddly-mild tone. [In total, Hope Hiro stole roughly one thousand artifacts. Well. He would not refer to this action as 'stealing,' because he viewed the artifacts as humanity's property, but that definition is up for debate. More importantly...]

Demila pauses for half-a-second.

[...Hope battled Confessor Vulpanix. He killed her, then took a Celestial Designer hostage, along with many of our elite Technopath researchers. For your information, that Celestial Designer was Psymin Miralax. You should be familiar with her name.]

Jason shakily nods his head. Something about Demila's tone tells him she's barely even told him the worst news.

"And w-what then?" Jason asks, his voice hoarse. "Did he do anything else?"

[Indeed. There was one last thing...] Demila says quietly. [Hope unleashed the power of Excalibur. He destroyed Moonbase Serris. He killed forty billion Volgrim.]

"Oh, Jesus jumped-up Christ!" Jason exclaims, finally losing the strength in his legs. He collapses to his knees, his entire body wracked with horror and a sickening feeling of nausea. "No, no god, how could he... he wouldn't... how the hell?! WHAT IS HE THINKING?!"

Phoebe also drops to Jason's level. She feels equally nauseous at the unexpected news, but compared to Jason, who can't help but mentally place himself in Hope's shoes, she only feels a distant disgust and horror at his actions.

For Jason, though, this revelation reminds him all too clearly of how he slaughtered millions of demons during Stormbringer's conclusion. He all-too-vividly recalls the rage in his mind and how shockingly simple it was to obliterate them from existence...

"Where... oh god... where is Hope now?" Jason asks, clenching his stomach and trying not to puke.

[We're not certain.] Demila says. [Not long after Serris's destruction, I received an order from Founder Unarin. Are you aware of the human known as Amelia Greyheart?]

Jason's heartrate spikes. "She's Hope's girlfriend! Fiance! I don't even know- never mind that, what did you do with her?"

[Me? Nothing.] Demila says. [But not long after Hope's attack, Amelia Greyheart vanished from Tarus II. It seems that Hope hid her from us. Neil Adams is still here, though. We suspect... Hope is testing us. He has not returned to Tarus II. But neither does he need to...]

As the seconds pass, Jason wraps his brain around more and more of the implications of what Demila is telling him.

"Hope has... the Crown... Excalibur... a thousand other artifacts. Holy hell. What am I even supposed to do? I don't have a hundredth the power he does now. This is ridiculous!"

"We need to confront Neil." Phoebe says. "I bet he'll know what's going on. He probably put Hope up to the whole operation."

Demila nods sagely. [What Hope has done is more terrible than you can possibly understand. Serris was one of three black-level research planets the Volgrim Empire could never afford to lose. It was in charge of hundreds of Founder-level projects even I know nothing about. By destroying Serris and killing all of those loyal Technopaths, Hope has set our war effort back tens of thousands of cycles. He has effectively made it impossible for us to win the War. Even more so, we are very likely to lose entirely now, and sooner than ever. When we fall, so too shall humanity.]

The Creator leans toward Jason and Phoebe.

[I do not know what actions you will choose to take next, but I *strongly* advise that you move quickly and with purpose. The war is unending. Once it reaches your world, it will already be too late. We can no longer advance without your help, Wordsmith.]

Jason nods numbly. He shakily rises his his feet, his face as pale as snow.

"I... I understand. I'll think of something quickly. For now... Phoebe and I... need to confront Neil."

Demila slowly blinks her eyes.

[I will go with you.]

Part 440: Humanity's Divergence

Jason, Phoebe, and Demila waste no time. The Wordsmith instantly teleports himself and the other two to the opposite side of the Fortress of Retribution. They pop into existence on the northwestern side of the city, not far from the area that leads into the underground training facility. Idly, Jason's thoughts darken as he wonders if Demila has already located the portal, one which is not even hidden all that particularly well, and thus had the chance to step directly into the Cube's confines. Of course, Blinker did say that she and her fairy friends recently built several additional protections into the transfer field, but he can't be entirely sure Demila is incapable of bypassing those restrictions.

When his teleportation concludes, Demila glances around thoughtfully. [Interesting.]

"Hm? What is?" Jason asks.

[Your magic does not operate on any known spatial or temporal mechanics.] Demila observes. [I expected to feel a tugging sensation, in much the same manner we High Psions experience teleportation when we shrink and expand space. But that is not how your Wordsmithing functions. It is much too... flawless.]

She trails off, glancing at the Wordsmith with renewed interest and a gaze that doesn't make him feel particularly comfortable.

"We can talk about that later." Jason says, while gesturing to the walls of the military compound a stone's throw away. "Let's go see Neil."

[Of course.] Demila says, swallowing any further observations.

Phoebe, meanwhile, listens intently to Demila's idle banter but says nothing. Her own mind churns thoughtfully as she thinks about the useful observations Demila may have just made, along with the worry that any additional insight into how Jason's magic works might give the Volgrim more and more of an edge against him.

The very thought lingers uncomfortably in the Wordsmith's wife's mind...

Jason leads the way. He walks up to the two guardsman posted in front of the perimeter gate, each of whom already saw his arrival a minute before, alongside Phoebe and Demila. These soldiers wear faceless T-REXs and loosely hold heavy energy rifles in their grasp. They raise them more guardedly as the trio approaches.

One of the two men turns his head toward Demila suspiciously. "Commander Hiro?"

Jason snorts. "If a 7th-Level Psion wants to have a look around, do you think you can stop her? Feel free to try."

The two soldiers glance at one another. They exchange words through their helmet links, then nod at Jason.

Without another word, the Hero leads his wife and their Psion 'guest' into the military facility. As they cross the threshold, Jason glances at Demila.

"How many times have you been inside here without anyone knowing, I wonder?"

[Your primitive security systems are no match for me.] Demila says without a shred of hesitation. [I go where I please. If that bothers you, feel free to kill me right now.]

Jason rolls his eyes. "I already figured that was the case. But don't go bragging too much about your infiltration capabilities. Especially considering how Hope just bent your entire Empire over in a manner most humiliating..."

That shuts Demila up. She falls silent and looks away, not deigning to reply.

Jason and Phoebe march into the Command Center, the largest dome inside the military complex. To their mild surprise, Neil's assistant, Debra, walks up to them.

"Jason, Phoebe. What brings you to our corner today?"

Debra doesn't mention Demila, but she does give the imposing alien a quick, dismissive glance before returning her attention to the Wordsmith.

"I'm here to see Neil." Jason says blandly. "But I assume you guessed as much already."

"Mmm. Neil happens to have some free time. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to see him." Debra says, pushing her thick glasses up her nose.

The blonde-haired woman turns on her heel and starts to walk away. The others follow behind her.

Jason clears his throat. "Say... how is Annette doing recently?"

"She's quite fine." Debra says, without looking back at him. "Hope treats her well."

"Yeah. I imagine he does..." Jason says quietly.

They walk past dozens of personnel, all of whom can't help but stare at the Psion levitating a few inches off the ground, following behind Jason like a mixture between a

god of war and a puppy. As for Demila, she pays their glances little regard, perhaps the same amount a human would if a group of ants were to start watching their movements. The assorted mud-dwellers mean nothing to her.

Debra guides the three into Neil's office. They find humanity's military commander sitting behind his desk in a large, comfortable black executive chair. Neil wears the same blue military uniform as always. He leans heavily back into his chair and swipes absentmindedly across a datapad in his grip.

When Debra enters, it seemingly takes a few moments for Neil to register the arrival of these guests. Even so, when he raises his eyes, he does so in such a slow and lazy manner that even Jason can sense the beginning of his typical mind-games.

"Oh, Jason! Phoebe. And the Volgrim too." Neil says, while gesturing for Debra to leave. She nods at him, then carefully shimmies past Demila out the door.

After Debra leaves, Neil smiles perfunctorily. "What a pleasant surprise, seeing the three of you. To what do I owe this visit?"

Demila lifts her chin. [Your mental shield has been recently reinforced. The magical signature does not match the First Wordsmith's energy...]

"Ah. Is that so?" Neil asks innocently. "Forgive me. I'm quite spiritually dull. I didn't realize I had obtained such a useful security feature out of the blue. I wonder where it came from?"

Jason groans loudly while rolling his eyes. "Fuck off, Neil. I know you know what happened with Hope. He destroyed a planet and killed forty fucking billion Volgrim. Now he has Excalibur, Solomon's Crown, and the Domin-"

"He does?" Neil interrupts, with a puzzled expression. "Well, that's great news for humanity! I can't wait for you to tell me more about it."

The man smiles in a manner so sickeningly smug it makes Jason want to immediately blast him with holy energy. Fortunately, Fiona manages to quickly talk some sense into Jason. He forces himself to remain neutral.

"Always with the word-games, Neil." Jason says. "Are you going to sit there and play stupid all day? Or can we act like adults for once?"

Neil's sickeningly smug smile vanishes. With a shrug of his shoulders, he tosses the data pad onto his desk, leans forward, and rests his elbow on its mahogany surface.

"Why are you in such a bad mood, Jason? I can never get a read on you. This is simply wonderful news! Now humanity possesses the power to ensure the Volgrim can never again threaten us. As for a few tens of billions of dead... so what? Humanity has lost just as many to the Volgrim's evil ways. Hope has merely... balanced the scales."

Demila's expression becomes stern. [Lives lost during a war are not the same as those taken by a power-hungry madman. Do you intend to make an enemy of the Volgrim Empire?]

Neil's eyebrows elevate. His voice drops an octave. "So what if I do? Shall you flex your proverbial muscles and obliterate Tarus II? Don't come at me with that self-serving bullshit, Psion. You no longer possess the strength to challenge me, let alone my prodigious pupil."

The Creator's eye twitches, but she doesn't retort. She merely glances at the back of Jason's head, standing in front of her.

Jason, for his part, releases a breath.

"What's the game plan, then, Neil? Obviously, Hope has become far more powerful than me. Is he going to seize power? I'm sure you're feeling pretty good about yourself right about now."

Neil tosses his hands up in a helpless manner. "What can I say? I backed the right horse. You've always been something of a manchild, throwing tantrums about the little girl you lost. The child you killed through your own inaction, I mean. Comparatively, Hope has recognized the Truths of our reality and taken steps to prevent such heartbreak. Had you simply listened to my warnings early on, we could have taken more aggressive and proactive measures against the demons. They never would have been able to invade Tarus II. Stormbringer would not have happened. That adorable girl would still be scampering about, laughing and calling you 'daddy.'"

Neil mercilessly mentions Daisy several times in a row, impaling verbal lances directly into Jason's heart. The Wordsmith's eyes twitch in pain, but he forces himself to remain composed.

"...Are you done?" Jason asks, biting off the last word. "I don't need you to tell me how I failed. I already know."

"We get it, Neil." Phoebe says, crossing her arms. "You feel like you've won. You think killing all of the demons is the right move to make. You also know that I don't even disagree with you. But fundamentally, this is a question about the sort of people we *want* to be. Now that Hope possesses Excalibur, killing the demons should be quite simple, yes? But do you really want to walk down that road? Are you doing this purely for logical reasons... or are you still bitter over your *wife and children*?"

In exactly the same way Neil verbally stabbed Jason, Phoebe fires right back at him. Having become entranced during the time of Napoleon's era, Neil fell into Bahamut's clutches and became separated from his family, ultimately losing them to the passage of time. Phoebe digs into this mental barb, making him lose a bit of his composure.

"And so what if I did?!" Neil snaps back. "You've lost a little girl! I've lost my family! We both lost people precious to us because of these worthless fucking bloodskins! Yet still... STILL you defend their so-called right to exist!"

Neil rises from his chair, far angrier than Jason or Phoebe has ever seen him before.

"You should both be ashamed of yourselves!" Neil barks. "I had no ability to protect myself from that damned Bahamut, all those millennia ago. But you were more than capable of saving millions of lives and you DIDN'T! I am doing what must be done! I am going to kill every single demon in existence!"

[There is a greater war to be fought.] Demila interjects. [Your personal hatred of the demons is likely to result in your loss to the Kolvaxians.]

"You think I'm not aware of that possibility?!" Neil exclaims. "I am! I know full well the horror of the monsters your kind dragged to the Milky Way through whatever probing efforts you wasted in some other galaxy. But that does not matter! The demons are evil and must die! Forget your philosophical pandering, your warnings about the 'greater good.' Once the demons are dead, my boy will go out there and obliterate the Plague as well. And if he fails? So what? He will create an impenetrable kingdom in a hole in space where the Plague cannot reach us!"

Neil slaps his chest hard enough to make a *thwap* noise.

"You Volgrim overplayed your hands! Now it's time for humanity to rise. You can fade into the dustbin of history for all I care. You no longer have any way of stopping our rise."

[We may not have a reason to stop you,] Demila says calmly, [but do not take that to mean that we have no *methods*.]

Jason frowns at the threat implied by her words, but otherwise doesn't address it.

"Look, Neil. I understand. You lost your family. You blame the demons. I could do the same with regards to Daisy, but I don't. Not as much as I probably should, anyway. But don't you want to... to... improve humanity's outlook? To rise above the pettiness and evil of the past? Just because the demons have killed billions, and just because you now possess the power to return that evil back unto them... does that mean you *should*? You're a man of God, yes? What does the Bible say about an eye for an eye? It only leaves both parties blind."

Neil snorts. "You speak of the Creator as if you care at all for His will. At the same time, you take the side of a Psion who dares to take the Creator's title for herself. A presumptuous concept, if I don't say so myself."

The military commander walks around the side of his desk. He folds his arms behind his back, puffs out his chest, and regains his previous air of regal aloofness while approaching Jason.

"I'm not interested in 'being better' than the demons, the Volgrim, or even the Plague. I'm going to *win*. If you want to stop me, just flap those lips of yours and erase me from existence. Otherwise, we can move on to the more important reason you came here."

Jason drags his teeth against his lower lip. He resists the urge to do just as Neil suggests, knowing it will only piss Hope off, as well as betray his own convictions.

"We're not enemies, Neil. We both want humanity to prosper. I say it's about time we considered a split."

Neil sneers. "A split? Yes, what a great idea. You take fifty percent of the people, and I take the other half. We raise humanity in our own way. Then we'll see who truly reigns supreme."

"Not fifty percent." Jason says quietly. "These are our friends and comrades, Neil. Not pawns on a chessboard. We'll let everyone decide which side they want to join. If all of them join you, or all join me, the other should not protest. Two weeks from now, we will present our cases to the public. Then, everyone can choose the side they'd prefer to follow."

Neil's cocky expression fades, ever so slightly. In its place, a slightly more empathetic look appears.

"Alright. Are you prepared for disappointment? What if everyone does choose to join my side? I'd hate to see you heartbroken."

Phoebe interjects. "Let's not force people to make a permanent choice, Neil. Be reasonable. There's no reason our two societies can't allow for cross-trade, for peaceful negotiations, and so on. Immigration between each realm, families visiting across our borders... these should be on the table."

Jason nods. "Furthermore... you will take your people to Maiura. It's already you and Hope's chosen homeworld. You can build up whatever fortifications, structures, and defenses you need with ease now that he has essentially unlimited mana and Solomon's Crown. But I am the one who took charge in building Tarus II. This is my homeworld, and I will retain control of it... along with its moon and *other* outliers."

"Hmph. You're evicting me." Neil chuckles. "Hope could obliterate you now with ease, and you actually think you have any right to order me off-world? But fine. You can have your way. There are far too many bloodskins entrenched here for my liking. At least on Maiura, we've taken care not to let them infiltrate our ranks. It will be a secure world where people won't have to fear any attacks by our future enemies..."

Jason exhales quietly. "I really pray that you will set aside your violent ways, Neil. I don't know what your wife and kids were like, but would they think less of you if they knew you were using their deaths to pursue a path of bloodshed? I know my daughter would have wanted me to make friends with everyone. It's part of why I walk the path I do."

"Don't condescend to me." Neil says mildly. "You killed millions of demons at the end of Stormbringer. You're not some paragon of virtue. You're a hypocrite led by the same grudges and hatred as me. Unlike me, however, you've chosen not to take your deserved anger to its logical limit. You let the demons walk all over you because your feeling of moral superiority is more important than protecting the people you love."

Neil's eyes shift to Phoebe.

"It's too bad you stayed with this fool, Phoebe. He's going to be the death of you someday. Hope would have made for a far superior husband."

"I don't appreciate your insults toward Jason." Phoebe says, wrapping her arm around his. "I stick by him because I love him. As for Hope... it isn't as if I don't feel that same love for him too. I'm just disappointed in the choices he's made."

"He makes those choices because he has the clarity of mind to do what must be done." Neil concludes, turning away to return to his chair. He plops down in it heavily, then leans back and sneers at the trio. "Now begone. I'll start making plans for our split. I just hope you're ready for one of the worst disappointments of your life."

"You seem confident about convincing humanity to join your cause." Jason observes. "But confidence alone does not sway nations. I look forward to an amicable split, Neil."

Neil makes a flippant motion with his hand. "I have work to do now. Thanks for visiting."

"Mmm." Jason grunts.

He and Phoebe turn and exit the room.

Demila begins to follow after them. But as they start to leave, she turns her attention toward humanity's military commander.

[Founder Unarin wishes to speak to you.] Demila transmits in secret to Neil. [He finds you to be an interesting human. If you decide to pay him a visit, your safety will be guaranteed.]

[I'm not worried about my safety.] Neil thinks back, allowing Demila to read his surface thoughts. [Killing me would be the last mistake your decrepit Empire ever makes...]

[So you say.] She concludes.

After Jason, Phoebe, and Demila leave, they travel a short distance south of the military base, ultimately stopping to discuss their chat with Neil.

[Neil Adams made many interesting observations.] Demila says to the two humans casually. [His desire to kill the demons is petty, rooted in ignorance. But do not worry too much about those violent ambitions of his.]

Jason scowls. "Why shouldn't I? He's going to undo everything I've worked so hard to accomplish. All my efforts toward peace..."

Demila's eyes curve upward in a Volgrim-like 'smile.' She leans toward the Wordsmith, while a vicious expression flickers across her face.

[Do you think the demons will be helpless before your clone's might? Do you think the might of Excalibur makes him... invincible? Can you even comprehend the frightening power possessed by the First Emperor?]

Jason's heart skips a beat. "The First-?!"

[The demons are weak, yes.] Demila interrupts. [Even compared to the you of now, they cannot match your power. But... I can say with absolute certainty... if you were to strike at them with the intent to erase their species... the First Emperor would appear. And in that moment, you would know *despair*.]

Jason's skin turns cold to the touch. He senses not only the warning in Demila's mental tone, but a hint of genuine fear.

"He's... really that powerful?"

[I am not entirely certain.] Demila replies. [But when the demons rose up to rebel against my people, some thousand cycles after the conclusion of the Energy Wars... we thought to eradicate them, only to meet the unyielding wall known as their First Emperor.]

She slowly leans back.

[None know his true identity. None know when he arose, or what method he used to achieve his power. Some thought he was the second coming of the fallen Emperor, Satan. Others believe he may be a primordial life-form, disguising himself as a demon. Your recent discussions with Unarin have even led us to wonder if he might be an ancient Titan, a Dragon, or... something else.]

"What if he is just a demon?" Jason asks. "Wouldn't that mean...?"

[If he is indeed a true-blooded demon, then he has broken past the barrier placed upon him by the angels. He has reached the level of Demon Deity. But compared to that False Deity, Wolfram... the First Emperor surely stands an epoch higher. That is why we are not so certain he is a demon at all.]

Jason glances at Phoebe. His wife shrugs helplessly, while offering a wry smile.

"Let's just pray it doesn't come down to mass bloodshed." Phoebe says.

The Hero and his wife thank Demila for her timely warning. The Psion 'Creator' steps through a gap in space and vanishes, traveling to some unknown location by herself.

Jason and Phoebe turn and start walking south, toward the residential suburbs that have sprung up between Tarus II's main city and the Warpgate complex. As they walk, they talk about many things.

"-Fortress of Retribution." Jason says. "It could really use a softer name. I named it that during my fit of rage, but now... I want to pursue a different path. Especially with all this Hope business."

Phoebe sighs. "Hope can essentially do as he pleases now. You can't stop him. Neither can I. He's filled with so much hatred, Jason."

"He killed forty billion Volgrim." Jason says quietly. "Is that what I'll become? A genocidal mass-murderer? I already did it once. I don't have the right to criticize him when I'm such a hypocrite myself."

Phoebe rubs her husband's back to try and lift his spirits. "You can't think like that. You made a mistake in the heat of the moment. And frankly, the demons... they deserved to die. How many humans did they kill during Stormbringer? But what Hope did was indiscriminate. Horrifying. It's ten levels beyond-"

Abruptly, Phoebe pauses mid-sentence when she sees a random woman walking directly toward her and Jason. Her unexpected pause causes Jason to blink his eyes and refocus on his surroundings. He notices the woman approaching only half a beat after his wife did.

"Jason Hiro." The brown-haired woman says. "Marie Becker has learned of the recent happenings caused by your clone. She wishes to speak to you as soon as possible."

The Wordsmith blinks in surprise. "Rebecca? What are you doing- how did you get here?"

As if unamused by the stupidity of his question, the pretty young brunette flippantly gestures behind herself, to the west. "I used the Warpgate, of course."

"Rebecca?" Phoebe asks. "Who is she, Jason?"

The Wordsmith awkwardly rubs his head.

"She's, uh, Marie Becker's assistant. One of the people working under her."

He turns his attention to Rebecca.

"Why does Marie want to see me? Not that I don't wish to speak to her, but I have some pressing matters that have fallen on my figurative plate, as you can imagine."

"Oh, we're quite aware." Rebecca says, while smiling. "But she wanted me to speak a single word to you. She said you would understand the... implication."

Jason cocks his head. "Huh. A single word? And what would that be?"

Rebecca lowers her voice and takes a step toward the couple.

Under her breath, she whispers...

"Mildred."

Part 441: Karma and Chaos

"Mildred?" Jason repeats. "Do you mean-"

"I think you know already." Rebecca quickly says with a perfunctory smile, while glancing around. Jason realizes he nearly made a mistake by bringing up Marie's treasure trove of artifacts, an existence which the Volgrim should hopefully still be in the dark about.

And in that moment, several other realizations come to him.

Mad Madam Mildred. Julius Caesar. Tucker... all those Heroes! They're inside Marie Becker's underground facility!

Jason's heart skips a beat. Neither he nor Rebecca says anything for a moment, but they both come to a mutual understanding while Phoebe raises her eyebrows multiple times in bewilderment.

"Um. Am I missing something??" Phoebe finally asks.

Jason nods. "**Privacy. Barrier. Silence. Opaque...**"

He fires off more than two dozen words, largely committed to memory by now, enveloping the trio with an impenetrable but invisible barrier that will prevent anyone from seeing, hearing, or reading the thoughts of those inside.

Jason smiles at Rebecca. "So, Marie has-"

"Are you sure we're alone inside here?" Rebecca asks curtly. "Are we the only three present?"

The Wordsmith frowns. But then, he realizes what she means.

All this time, I've been creating the barrier and simply assuming it gives me perfect privacy. But Demila can turn herself invisible. What if she stood beside me while I made the barrier and secretly remained inside? I'd spout off all my secrets and she'd hear every word! Hmm...

Inside Jason's head, Fiona hears her husband's thoughts. She looks up from her current spiritual engineering project and blinks. "I hadn't even thought of that myself. You should triple-scan the area, just to be sure."

Jason nods, all while his real-wife looks increasingly more and more annoyed at the lack of explanations. Jason fires off another dozen Words of Power to scan the area and search for any hints of a hidden intruder, but he doesn't find any.

"Alright..." Jason says. "I think it's just the three of us now."

Rebecca nods. "I can detect when Psions are hidden nearby. I already knew we were alone. But I believed it would be prudent to make sure *you* thought to check as well."

She turns to Phoebe.

"My apologies for my rather rude and abrupt intrusion. I've come on behalf of humanity's foremost genius, Marie Becker. She would like to invite your husband to the Remnant Oasis to speak to him. Of course, you are free to come as well."

Phoebe nods. "Jason told me about Marie a few months back, but he never mentioned a... Mildred?"

She looks at Jason questioningly, but before Jason can explain, Rebecca raises her hand.

"Marie Becker did not inform me about the significance of 'Mildred,' she only told me that it was a name that should greatly interest you. She also advised that I not dig any deeper. If you wish to inform your wife, please do so when I am not around."

He nods. "Fair enough. Well, I had other things to do, but now I can sufficiently say nothing matters more than visiting Marie. Although... will this take long?"

"It shouldn't require more than a day or two of your time." Rebecca answers. "Why? Are you in a rush?"

"This wouldn't be an ideal time for Phoebe and I to both disappear," Jason explains. "You see, we just had a bit of a *thing* happen with Neil..."

He proceeds to fill in Rebecca on the recent happenings, while Phoebe chimes in with her own observations here and there.

Ultimately, Rebecca sighs and rubs her forehead. "Humanity and the demons will not go to war in the next day or two. I have it on good faith that Hope is currently spending some time learning about the different artifacts that have fallen under his control. Miss Becker is quite good at predicting the behavior of others, you see."

Jason nods slowly. "Well, alright then. Phoebe, you want to go?"

His wife shrugs. "I do have a lot to work on..."

"Marie has a bunch of super high-tech gadgets though." Jason says. "I know Fiona REALLY enjoyed getting a look at-"

"Well you should have led with that!" Phoebe interrupts. "Heck yes, I'm going. Rebecca, lead the way."

The brown-haired woman nods. Jason removes the barrier shielding them, and they begin to walk toward the Warpgate.

"Rebecca's an android, you know." Jason says to Phoebe. "Pretty advanced too."

"It's true!" Rebecca chirps. "I abandoned my flesh-vessel tens of millennia ago."

"Oh how interesting!" Phoebe exclaims, even more excited than before. "Can you tell me about yourself? I have quite a fascination with robotics and advanced technology, you see."

"Of course." Rebecca says. "I'm something of a scientist myself."

Not long before.

After leaving Jason and Phoebe's side, Demila flickers thirty miles to the north, walking across space with ease. She travels the entire distance in a single second by shrinking the gap between her current position and intended destination, then taking a single step forward.

Like several other High Psions, Demila's mastery of Spatial Psionics has reached a profound level. While she might not compare to the mightiest Executor, Nufaris, let alone the Second Founder, Dosena, Demila stands alongside Vulpanix as one of the greatest Spatial Psions in the modern Volgrim Empire.

Demila arrives on the random mountaintop and turns to focus her attention on the area she just left. With her superior psionic senses, especially given her role as a scouting and investigatory specialist, she can easily count the number of leaves on a flower halfway across the planet, let alone a mere thirty miles.

Vulpanix will revive in three or four cycles. Demila thinks. Before then, I must continue to observe humanity's movements and perform my secret mission. The Second Wordsmith's next actions will assuredly upend the current regime on Tarus II

dramatically. It would be best if I can locate the ten kilogram Trifrancium deposit before we lose all further opportunities at doing so.

Indeed, having long ago learned about the lost deposit of Trifrancium, the most valuable warp-empowering substance in the known universe, the Volgrim have been secretly attempting to locate it. Yet, even after searching through the memories of multiple human leaders, including Neil Adams, Demila has failed to uncover its hiding spot.

Her eyes flicker as she senses a third presence approaching Jason and Phoebe. Before long, the Terrandroid known as Rebecca vanishes along with the other two, hidden by Jason's Wordsmithing.

Demila scowls. *Again with that Wordsmithed barrier. How frustrating that even I cannot peer into its confines...*

Demila tries to focus her psionic powers to the point that she can pierce the veil of secrecy shrouding Jason, Phoebe, and Rebecca's discussion, but at that moment, a flicker of movement startles her!

[Who's there?!] Demila roars, spinning around to look at a spot barely a hundred feet behind her.

To Demila's surprise, a single human male sits on a rock, staring at her back. The kindly-looking man appears to be of Asian descent, specifically Japanese. He smiles at her, exposing his teeth.

"Creator Demila. Ahh, how nice to see you again."

Demila's heartbeat quickens. [You snuck up on me! Impossible! I should have detected you the moment I entered this area! What mere mud-dweller possesses the skills to evade this Creator's senses?!]

The man shrugs lightly, as if her angry tone has absolutely no effect on him. His clean brown hair and simple peasant-clothes give him a humble air, but even as Demila fully focuses her attention on him, she finds that she still has trouble fully comprehending his existence.

"So rude." The man says. "This isn't the first time we've met, yet you act as if I'm some unknown monster. How shameful for a lauded High Psion to have such a sloppy memory."

Hearing the firmness in the man's voice, Demila's mind races. She tries to recall any past instance of meeting this human, but her interactions with the people of Tarus II have already been essentially nonexistent.

She ultimately pulls up the names of every human on Tarus II, a feat she can easily perform thanks to her psionically enhanced brain and having casually read all of their information through a Changeling report.

[Hm? You are... Makoto Ueda?] Demila asks, now even more baffled than before. [We have never spoken! If you are a Changeling attempting to prank me, you will not live past the next standard time-unit!]

"A Changeling?" Makoto says lazily. "No, no. Not quite. It seems you really have forgotten. Let me give you a hint. We last met on Earth, over 100,000 years ago..."

[Earth?] Demila asks, frowning deeply. [Humans cannot live that long. Only the ones kept alive by Bahamut's magic could, and I am still certain we have... never... met...]

She trails off, but begins to feel a deep doubt.

After all, something about this man and the way he speaks *does* seem a little familiar.

"I'll quit playing around." He says, slapping his crossed knees. "Once, I was known as Siddhartha Gautama. But you would remember me as... *Buddha*."

A pulse of shock races through Demila's body. She quickly takes a step back and looks at the man with fear.

[The Undying Hero! The Reincarnator! It cannot be! We confirmed that you failed to resurrect! Earth's destruction should have finally obliterated your last vestiges! How can you be here now?!]

"Such a loving tone." Buddha says mildly. "It almost sounds like you would have been happier, had I died."

Demila's eyes glow with power. [Reviving must have taken up a tremendous amount of your strength... if I kill you now, you won't return!]

Her threat splashes against Siddhartha's face harmlessly. He stares at her silently, as if she were a huge idiot.

"Hoho. Well, go ahead then, roll that dice. I'm sure I *definitely* will not return yet again. And here I was going to make you quite a generous offer..."

Demila hesitates. She stares with deep suspicion at the fearsome human, the creature capable of reviving from death a seemingly infinite number of times.

[...What cursed deal could you possibly offer to me that I would foolishly accept?]

"I am not your enemy, dear False Creator." Buddha says mildly. "I am only the servant of Karma. I follow the True Creator's will. And he has... an enemy... he wishes for you to eliminate."

[I already have many enemies.] Demila says, standing up a little straighter. [Do not speak as if I am some Earth-Mutt you can send to attack your adversaries.]

"Your enemy is my enemy. And my enemy is yours." Buddha says cryptically.

At this point, after growing more and more annoyed by the Undying Hero's words, Demila summons her psionic power to attempt to read his mind. But instead of uncovering Buddha's thoughts, she shockingly finds that there are two minds inside of his skull, and she can only read the thoughts of the slumbering one.

[Your soul has possessed the original Makoto Ueda's body!] Demila exclaims. [How vile! Especially for a so-called 'Hero!']

"These are dangerous times. Dark times." Buddha says cryptically. "But enough with the word games. I'll say it plainly..."

He rises from the rock and stands up, assuming a dignified stance.

"The enemy I wish for you to kill is none other than the Demon Emperor of Chaos. *Gressil*."

Demila narrows her eyes. [Gressil? He is indeed a top target of mine. But I am not supposed to kill him. Founder Unarin has ordered me to capture him alive.]

"Gressil is too powerful. Too elusive." Buddha says. "You will fail. Only by working with me will you be able to find and kill him. He must not be allowed to live any longer."

[Why are you so set on killing this Demon Emperor?] Demila asks, now much more interested in Buddha's proposition than before. [And how can you possibly assist me when you no longer have any Heroic powers? You will not be able to locate him where I have failed.]

"Indeed, I lack Heroic magic." Buddha says, blinking sagely. "But my abilities have not been entirely crippled. I am a servant of the Creator. I am the Envoy of Karma. Gressil is..."

the Envoy of Chaos."

Demila cocks her head. [The Envoys of Karma and Chaos? These titles certainly sound pretty, but I have not heard them before. Elaborate.]

Slowly, Buddha nods. He begins to pace back and forth while folding his hands behind his back.

"There are four forces which govern our universe. They go by the names of Luck, Destiny, Karma, and Chaos. All have their roles to play. All are powerful in their own way. Each has but one Envoy in every galaxy. I am the Milky Way's Envoy of Karma, and Gressil is its Envoy of Chaos."

Intrigued, Demila carefully records Buddha's every word through Psionic Etching, taking care to preserve their exact contents for Unarin's benefit later.

"Who are the Envoys of Luck and Destiny, then?" Demila asks.

"When the time is appropriate, they will reveal themselves." Buddha answers. "Until they do, it is not my place to say."

[Then you know of their identities.] Demila asks, her tone rhetorical.

Buddha ignores her query. "Karma is a word which describes what you might call the Principle of Certainty. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The fate one weaves for themselves, through the words they utter and the choices they make, ultimately creates their Karma. When they die, the Karma they have accumulated will manifest in a manner most appropriate to their personage."

He continues. "Chaos is the opposite. It is the principle of uncertainty. Randomness. The Envoy of Chaos seeks to spread discontent and failure everywhere he goes. Death is not the end goal, nor is destruction. But by its very nature, excessive Chaos leads to such."

"It seems that killing the Envoy of Chaos would lead to a galaxy ruled by Karma." Demila observes. "That seems a positive result."

"Karma is neither inherently good nor evil." Buddha states, while pacing back and forth. "It merely... 'Is'. A galaxy ruled exclusively by Karma would be one where all actions are set in stone. There can be no unforeseen events. If two humans were to copulate, the result would always be a child. If a ship were properly maintained, it would never break down. If a man were to murder another man, he would immediately die afterward as well, regardless of the goodness or badness of who he killed."

"But aside from Karma and Chaos, the other two principles have their own merits." Buddha continues. "Luck is similar to Chaos, a counterbalance of sorts. Where Chaos seeks to create uncertainty that divides and corrodes, Luck seeks to create uncertainty that uplifts and transcends. This may seem positive to you, but suppose the Plague were to encounter great fortune and massively expand their capabilities? Their good luck would be your bad luck. And thus, it would create Chaos."

[Luck seems a nebulous trait of the universe.] Demila remarks. [It benefits all equally, or perhaps not at all. It might be there, or it might not.]

"Destiny is the final of the four universal forces." Buddha concludes. "Destiny and Fate are seemingly the same, but they have different connotations. A man may be *fated* to die, but he may also be *destined* for greatness. When one's actions lead to a negative end, we say that it was their fate. When one's actions lead to a positive end, we say that it was their destiny. In this way, the two can be considered to be extensions of Karma more than Chaos."

[I see.] Demila says quietly. [But you contradict yourself, Undying Hero. You state that all four have a role to play, yet you also wish for me to kill the Envoy of Chaos. Based on what you've said, it would be in my best interest to let the Demon Emperor known as Gressil live.]

"Chaos is like salt." Buddha says. "If I were to sprinkle some on my tongue, it might taste pleasant. But if I were to sprinkle a bit too much there, it would be quite vile. But what if I were to consume far too much of it?"

[You would die.] Demila says.

"Exactly." Buddha says. "Gressil has lived far too long as the Envoy of Chaos. He has mastered its powers to a frightening extent. He now threatens the balance of reality through his control of its might. My abilities can return, and they most certainly would, under normal circumstances. But in truth, I have already chosen a successor. It will take the young one time to reach Gressil's strength, time which he does not have. Once I fulfill my final obligations, I will be able to pass on my responsibilities to him."

Somewhat taken aback, Demila scrutinizes Buddha's face. [You... do you intend to die? Permanently?]

"I always have." Buddha says, his tone mild. "Do you think I chose this hellish existence? Dying, reincarnating, living out one meaningless existence after another? No. I

only continued because of my obligation to the Creator. And soon, I will receive the release of death. It is one I have waited a long time to receive..."

[If Gressil dies, will another take his place?] Demila asks.

"In time." Buddha answers with a nod. "Always four envoys, there are. The previous Envoy of Destiny was none other than the Archangel Camael. With her death, that link was shattered. Now, Chaos has grown without resistance..."

[Mmm.] Demila grunts. [Then killing Gressil will only temporarily stop the spread of Chaos. Considering our galaxy's dire situation, I suppose I have no choice except to agree to your terms. But how will you go about tracking our target down? I have not caught even a trace of his trail...]

"He is my opposite." Buddha says simply. "I can see the ebb and flow of Karma. Where I do not see it flowing, that is where Chaos will be at its strongest. We need only follow that path to find the one we seek."

Demila grimaces. [To think a day would come where I would have to seek the assistance of a damned mud-dweller. Fine. You will take me to Gressil. I will kill him on the spot. A mere Demon Emperor cannot possibly stand a chance against this ancient Psion.]

"I should hope not." Buddha says. "But do not let your warrior spirit give you an inflated sense of confidence. Gressil is ever elusive... if he escapes, finding him again will take time."

Demila's eyes curve up into a vague smile.

[Then we had better move with haste.]

Part 442: Archangel's Surprise

Two days earlier.

Archangel Uriel, after witnessing the end of the Stormbringer Tribunal, felt unsatisfied. She and her brothers darkly watched as Beelzebub advanced to Emperor, gained untold power, and was summarily 'pardoned' by Jason Hiro. Disgusted, they had no choice but to observe from the sidelines as yet another evil, detestable bloodskin walked free, along with tens of thousands of his other cohorts.

Now, they linger inside the lone church on Tarus II's surface, protected from outside observers by its privacy field.

"We cannot do nothing!" Uriel exclaims, while pacing back and forth. "Verily, the bloodskins hath wormed their way deeper and deeper into humanity's good graces every day. I did NOT join these people to sit on my hands while my enemies grow stronger. I intend to KILL them all!"

Her three brothers, still mana-based constructs, rest at various spots inside the church's upper level. Michael lays on his back atop a giant tree branch growing out of the wall, while Gabriel plunks his huge body on an oversized chair and rests his back against the wall. As for Raphael, the eldest Archangel sits in a rocking chair, listening to his sister's rage-filled rants.

"Calm thy heart, Uriel." Raphael says. "I know well the Wordsmith's rage. Tis' impossible for him to have forgiven Beelzebub easily. I believe that an accident may hath occurred. Dost thou remembereth the Phoenix's sudden appearance? Perhaps it has supercharged Beelzebub's powers. Jason had no choice but to let the newly minted Emperor of Hellfire walk free."

Uriel snaps her eyes onto her eldest brother. "No choice?! There is always a choice! That Hero is constantly looking for reasons to forgive these bloodskins! This, despite the fact that his own child perished to Beelzebub's suicidal blast!"

"All the more reason we should'st assume there art extenuating circumstances." Raphael says calmly. "Indeed, I suspect our sister's artifact mayeth have something to do with the Wordsmith's decision. Perhaps, through a stroke of luck, Beelzebub may hath anchored his strength to the Cube's consciousness."

Uriel snorts. "A likely possibility. Why the Creator would grant such a boon to such an evil bastard, I cannot fathom."

"Hehehe..." Raphael chuckles humorlessly. "The Creator is dead. His hand no longer extends over our reality. And the way of Luck is to be unpredictable..."

Uriel continues ranting and raving for a good few minutes longer before eventually flopping onto a bench and leaning her head back.

"Tsk... t'would be so easy. The demons art right before me, yet I cannot reach out and kill them! It is as if invisible shackles hath bound my wrists!"

"Patience is a virtue." Gabriel says, his rumbling voice causing the air to shake. "And for thee, sister, it is in short supply."

Uriel snaps her head up. She opens her mouth to retort, but at that moment, a disorientation seizes her soul, along with the souls of the other Archangels.

"Ugh! W-what... is..."

Uriel tries to move, but her body remains frozen, paralyzed.

Suddenly, she and the other Archangels seemingly 'shift' into another reality!

The air hums around them in a manner most disorienting. The internal space of the Church vanishes, replaced instead with the interior of a golden, glorious-looking palace!

Tapestries hang from the walls. Stylized images of ancient human Heroes appear on long, slender flags, each visible face a figurehead any of the Archangels can recognize with ease.

King Arthur. Solomon. Jephthah. Nebuchadnezzar. Countless others!

These tapestries line the walls with only small gaps to separate them, drawing each Archangel's attention. Raphael turns around and gazes at all of the faces, shocked by their number and variety.

"Hmm?! Where hath we traveled?"

Michael goes on the alert. He reaches for the sword at his side, only to find that his body is not even the spiritual construct he expected, but purely a soul-form.

"Someone hath yanked our souls out of our rings!" Michael exclaims.

Before their confusion can escalate, a voice speaks.

"Raphael. Uriel. Michael. Gabriel. Sorry to bring you here like this, but I wanted to at least try and be discreet."

The Archangels turn to face the speaker. There, at the end of the hall, they find Hope Hiro, along with his fiancé, Amelia Greyheart, and the ghostly apparition of King Solomon as well.

Amelia waves politely. "Hi."

Solomon bobs his head. "Archangels."

After blinking his eyes a few times, Raphael manages to figure out what has happened.

"Hope Hiro. Thou hath obtained Solomon's Crown? And this hall... the auras here are much too lifelike and vibrant to be mere portraits of long-dead Heroes. Thou must have recently acquired... quite a windfall."

"Indeed, I have." Hope says, taking a few steps to greet his elder. "Six hours ago, I raided a Volgrim world, a secret base where they stored over a thousand Heroic Artifacts. I destroyed that world and took all its riches for myself. I even captured its leaders, among others, and added their technological knowledge to my own."

Raphael's eyes widen, ever so slightly. "Thou hath... made great gains. I am pleased to hear this."

"Indeed. But you don't need to worry about any of that." Hope says. "I brought the four of you here for a different matter."

The Archangels remain silent as Hope reaches into his robes and pulls out a simple golden ring. The moment they set their eyes on it, the Archangels gasp!

"Sister Uzziel's ring!" Uriel practically shrieks, both in excitement, and shock.

"Little sister Uzziel..." Raphael says, his face turning pale. "But... how?"

"I thought Uzziel died during the final battle." Gabriel murmurs. "Is she alive?"

Michael says nothing for a few moments. He stares at the ring and frowns.

"The soul I sense within that ring is..."

Hope nods solemnly. "I regret to inform all of you that... the Uzziel inside this ring will not be the sister you remember. Please have patience. She has... suffered immensely."

Hope spends the next few minutes recounting not only the events told to him by Vulpanix, but plenty of other information the High Volgrim he captured happened to

have locked in their memories, including the specific events that transpired where they experimented on Uzziel's soul to try and restore her powers.

Before long, a clear picture emerges.

"So. 'Tis like that." Uriel whispers, as tears well up in her eyes. "In the final battle, she unleashed every last drop of her power. Our sister obliterated countless demons and their leaders. Her soul decayed... and what thou hath recovered is but a fragment of her original self."

Hope purses his lips.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I've been working with Solomon, and we have an idea about how to heal her soul back to its original state. However... she will not possess any of her former memories. She may not even be able to use her magic."

Raphael clears his throat. "Our sister shan't be an Archangel."

Michael's frown deepens. "What is thy meaning?"

"Her power was expended." Raphael explains. "This fragment... I do wish to see it restored. But for all intents and purposes, our sister shalt be none other than an ordinary Seraph. She has lost the lineage of the Archangels, as well as her link to the Creator's power."

"To bring back a hollow shell of our sister..." Gabriel murmurs. "Perhaps t'would be better to erase her, as she is now. Allow her to go back to the Cosmic Realm in peace."

Michael's expression turns into a snarl. "We've lost too many! And as for the Cosmic Realm, hath thou forgotten, Gabriel? 'Tis overrun by that monstrous Plague! Who can say if the souls of our fallen brethren art truly at rest in its bowels? Perhaps, as we speak, they art suffering eternal torment!"

Hope allows the Archangels to discuss the matter among themselves. After a few minutes, they come to a resolution.

"We wish to restore Uzziel's soul." Uriel says. "Perhaps some of her memories may yet remain. And even if they do not, we hath already undergone mind-wipes once. This time shalt be no different."

Raphael nods. "Every angel we can revive shalt be another beloved brother or sister capable of walking this mortal realm. Whether Uzziel remembers her past or not, we shalt treat her the same."

"Indeed." Uriel says.

"Indeed." Gabriel and Michael conclude.

With the Archangels having made up their minds, Solomon steps forward.

"It is decided, then. I will require the four of you to bare your souls during this process. Hope will rebuild the fragments of Uzziel's soul using the sensations you can recall. Without your help, the soul we create would bear no resemblance to her original self. I pray you will be of assistance during this turbulent session."

The Archangels nod.

"Of course." Raphael says, waving his hand gallantly. "Let us all take a seat. We shalt encircle her ring and call forth her vessel so as to put back together the shattered pieces."

Amelia remains behind while Hope, Solomon, and the four Archangels take their seats in a circular pattern on the floor. They sit around a tree Hope grows from a crack in the golden castle's bottom, and upon which he places Uzziel's ring. The life energy from this tree will provide a small portion of the energy she needs to rebuild her true identity.

After thirty minutes of careful preparation, aided heavily by Raphael's knowledge of soul-melding, the group begins in earnest!

Whoomph!

Hope casts dozens of Words of Power. He works together with Raphael and the others to pull Uzziel's broken, shattered soul out of her ring and begin repairing it bit by bit.

Amelia watches silently from the side, her eyes as big as saucers. She gasps when she sees Uzziel's soul-body rise from the ring's interior into the physical world, where its multi-armed, multi-legged form looks like some horrible abomination of thirty people mashed together. Had she seen the flesh-suit worn by Confessor Vulpanix, she might draw further parallels there as well...

Time passes quickly. With the help of the Archangels, particularly Raphael, Hope and Solomon begin metaphorically smashing Uzziel's soul with a hammer and breaking it down into its purest form. Long-corrupted by impurities and unknown influences over the eras, her soul has become so tainted that most of their work comes down to breaking off the corroded bits and filling the gaps with 'sealants'.

Hours pass. Days. Weeks.

Periodically, Hope pauses and takes time to sleep. Then him and the others resume their work.

During this seemingly unending, grueling session, Uzziel's soul finally comes together in the end. With a puff of air, Solomon 'breathes' life back into her body, allowing her to fall to the floor and lay unmoving on the golden tiles.

The dark-skinned woman remains unmoving for some time. She lifelessly stares up at the ceiling, her beautiful eyes unblinking.

Hope's gaze hardens.

"Did we fail?"

Solomon holds up his palm.

"Wait."

And so, they do.

For one full day, the group of six watches silently, waiting for Uzziel's return.

Then, her hand twitches.

It takes a great deal of effort, but Uzziel slowly blinks her eyes.

She blinks them again.

And again.

The hearts of everyone present beat in delight as they wait for Uzziel to fully regain consciousness. Before long, she lolls her head to the side and twitches her arms. Uriel swoops in to help lift Uzziel to a sitting position, propping her weakened sister up with a helping arm behind her back.

Tears well up in Uriel's eyes.

"S...sister. Thou hath finally awoken. Dost thou... remember me?"

At first, Uzziel doesn't seem to register Uriel's words. Like a blind woman who has no conception of a world seen through functioning eyes, she doesn't seem capable of understanding the blobs of color around her, nor the sounds entering her ears.

But, after a time, she turns her head to vaguely look in Uriel's direction.

Uzziel opens her mouth, but fails to speak any words.

"Tis no matter, no matter at all." Uriel whispers. "Focus thy mind. Think carefully sister, and the words shalt surely-"

"ABWAAABA!"

Uzziel finally speaks, but the sounds that she releases don't come out as words at all! Instead, she loudly yells and babbles incomprehensible gibberish, like a month-old baby.

"ABAAAA! BWAAABWABAAA!"

Uriel blinks in surprise. Raphael frowns.

"This..."

The group of six, as well as Amelia, frown deeply while Uzziel's head rocks from side to side.

"Ehehe! Baabwababwaaa~!!" She babbles delightedly, seemingly amazed by the pretty colors around her.

Even Solomon's expression turns unsightly.

"She has completely forgotten how to speak? I assumed her memories would be nonexistent, but she should be able to understand and form words. The 'concept' of language should be there..."

Raphael lowers his head and sighs.

"Verily, I suspected this would happen. An Uzziel capable of speech but without memories would be one thing. But lacking both, she is... an infant who must be raised with care."

"Baaa! Bububu! Bwabwa!" Uzziel babbles cutely, as if to punctuate her older brother's point.

Uriel gently strokes her sister's hair, knowing that the Uzziel before her is no longer the one she lost, but an entirely new existence, one without definition. Even so, their shared face gives her a sense of comfort.

"We shalt take care of her in the best way we can." Uriel says softly. "She deserves that much from us."

Michael averts his gaze. A painful stabbing sensation swells in his chest.

"To have lost our sister would be one thing. But to gain back an empty shell of her former self... that hurts far more." Michael murmurs.

Hope nods at the Archangels. "What do you want to do with her, then?"

A few minutes pass. Nobody says a word. Except for Uzziel, who continues to cutely babble in her own amusing way.

"Lalala! Looo-laalaa! Bababa!"

Raphael finally raises his head.

"Mmm. Verily, I hath thought of a better option. We shalt take Uzziel's ring, Wordsmith. And I thank thee for thy services. Compared to the First Wordsmith, thou art surely..."

He pauses to nod at Solomon.

"...far more promising."

Solomon nods back. "You feel as I do, old friend."

Hope smiles. "I have many plans to work on. I have many goals to complete. As for the time you've spent here, don't worry too much. This is my newly created Hall of Heroes. Inside, the time flows at a rate of one hundred to one. After I defeated Vulpanix and seized the stolen artifacts, I worked with Solomon to construct this place. Here, I can take my time learning what each artifact does, and how to best use them."

Raphael's eyebrows raise, ever so slightly. He nods appreciatively. "An excellent choice. One thing thou hath lacked, along with thy other self, is time. Time to master thy abilities. Time to sit back and dwell on the future."

He glances at Amelia.

"Time to build bonds with those thou careth the most about."

Hope wraps his arm around Amelia's shoulder and nods at Raphael.

"Time is one resource I will no longer lack, moving forward."

After exchanging some pleasantries, the Archangels, Solomon, Hope, and Amelia all rise to their feet. They place Uzziel's soul back in her ring, then teleport the ring back to the angel's bodies on Tarus II.

Before the Archangels depart, Uriel and Michael walk over to Hope.

"Wordsmith." Uriel says. "The bloodskins have entrenched themselves well on Tarus II. Art thou aware of the happenings during the Stormbringer Tribunal?"

Hope shakes his head. "Not really. I've been pretty preoccupied. Mind filling me in?"

"It's like this..." Michael says, answering in Uriel's stead.

While he and Uriel speak to Hope, Gabriel takes stock of Amelia.

"Child of two selves." Gabriel says to her. "How hath thou fared in recent times?"

Amelia shrugs. "I can't complain. I'm coming to terms with my two selves. The Black Queen, and the ordinary woman, Annette. I'm still not sure who I want to be."

"Do not bother with such vague distinctions." Gabriel says, waving his hand casually. The peaceful giant rests his ghostly palm on her shoulder, like a loving big brother. "Time is transient. Existence is transient. Enjoy the good, and discard the bad. That is what shalt allow thee to find inner peace..."

While Gabriel and Amelia converse, two other figures find themselves in a rare private moment.

Solomon and Raphael take stock of one another. The Knowledge-Seeker narrows his eyes while slowly approaching his 'old friend.'

"Archangel of Wisdom." Solomon says slowly, sizing up the elderly winged one before him. "A question plays upon my mind."

Raphael slowly turns to look at the Knowledge-Seeker.

"Mmm. And that would be...?"

Solomon does not answer.

Instead, he and Raphael lock gazes. They eye each other with intense scrutiny.

While Hope and Amelia converse with their Archangel peers, the two wise old snakes say nothing verbally, yet exchange a million insights through their eyes.

Eventually, Solomon retracts his gaze. He snorts derisively at the eldest Archangel.

"So it's like that."

"Perhaps 'tis so." Raphael says slowly. "And the boy...?"

"Your goals do not conflict with mine." Solomon answers softly, keeping his voice low. "I see no need to tell him the truth."

"Thou art a prudent sage among dragons." Raphael praises.

"Save your flattery." Solomon hisses. "Your schemes run deep, old man. How long have you waited for this day? And yet now that it has arrived, you continue to play the

fool. Perhaps it wasn't even Camael who could divine the future, but you."

Raphael blinks slowly.

"How fares my sister?"

"Mmm." Solomon says, flicking his eyes toward Hope, then returning them to Raphael. "She is... happy. Satisfied with the current arrangement."

"Thou shalt leave her be, then?" Raphael asks.

"I've no need of her skills." Solomon answers. "I'm not even certain of her current location. But you do know she works for the demons now? She is... our enemy."

Raphael faintly motions dismissively with his hand. "Borne out of a perceived lack of options, she made that choice only half-willingly. When the time comes, she shalt remember her allegiance. She always does."

"I should hope so." Solomon snaps under his breath. "It would be such a shame if you had to kill yet *another* of your 'beloved' family members."

Raphael's expression softens. He lowers his eyes, unable to meet Solomon's gaze.

"Thou knoweth more than thou let on, Knowledge-Seeker."

"A secret one spreads freely holds no value." Solomon retorts. "The wise man retains additional cards for the sake of giving himself options. I would be a fool to reveal everything I know to those undeserving."

"What think thee of the boy?" Raphael asks. "Truly?"

"He has high potential." Solomon praises. "More than that Jason brat. A fool ruled by his compassion. Hope is willing to do anything to further his goals. He has already begun to engage in a long-term strategy of deception. Even us aged ones may yet come to learn new tricks from this young dog."

"High praise, coming from thee." Raphael acknowledges. "I shalt gaze upon his growth with great anticipation."

"And I'll keep my eye on your little machinations." Solomon says, his words slightly bitter. "To think you would even go this far... you are truly the most wretched creature in the cosmos."

The two men slowly draw apart. After a time, Uriel and Michael finish talking to Hope, and the Archangels bid him farewell.

Speaking a Word of Power, Hope returns their souls to their original bodies, still on Tarus II.

Uriel awakens to find herself still reclining on the bench, like before. Despite days passing inside the Hall of Heroes, only a few hours passed in the physical universe.

Now, on her hand, a fourth Archangel ring rests.

The Archangel of Retribution gently caresses the plain, golden artifact.

"Sister Uzziel..."

Part 443: Assembling a Team

North-side of the Fortress of Retribution. Tarus II.

Half a dozen men and women, including two demons, walk toward a certain newly-built installation on the northern side of Tarus II's biggest city. This facility, referred to by most people as the Queen Network, is one of humanity's newest inventions. Created by a small cabal of Fairies, run by Blinker, and dreamed up in the head of Amelia Greyheart, it was ultimately named in the former Black Queen's honor.

On this particular day, the group of humans and demons arrives in front of the Queen Network and gazes up at a massive system of artificially-grown trees, each one glowing with an aura of magical energy. These huge conifers tower hundreds of feet in the air. They twist around each other to form a seemingly random-at-first-glance interlinking of branches, but upon closer inspection are actually part of a giant Nature Formation capable of linking minds and souls together for lengthy periods of time.

Around the Queen Network, a giant wall of barbed vines grows from the ground to form a light defensive perimeter, not one intended to seriously deter any malicious actors, but one that provides a certain aura of beauty to the perimeter while also outlining the boundary where observers should stand.

"Wow!" One of the two demons, a male, says. "This is my first time seeing it up close! I didn't realize how huge the Glow Trees were from a distance!"

One of his female-human companions nods. "I've been waiting five days for our appointment. The ticket queue is getting longer all the time! Everyone says this place can grant all sorts of benefits to those who undergo its trials."

"So you've never been here before?" The demon asks.

"Nope. I'm really looking forward to it though."

"Same."

The group of six walks up to the front gate, where they find a pompous-looking green-haired fairy woman sitting on a stool, her legs crossed, as well as her arms. She glances at the newcomers with a look of disdain while casually chewing a huge wad of gum. Her lips smack together as she loudly rolls the gum between her teeth.

"Ah..." The male demon says. "Fairy Princess Melia. You look as lovely as a mid-summer's-"

"Tickets." The fairy says, abruptly cutting him off mid-sentence in between her lip-smacks. "Or leave. I'm not interested in listening to a *man* speak."

One of the female humans quickly steps forward. "Here are our tickets, Princess Melia. We've been in the queue for five days now. I hope we can enter the simulation... expediently."

She starts to hold out the tickets, but before her hand can even fully raise, Melia snatches them away, gives them a cursory glance, then burns them with fire magic.

"Go inside." She growls. "Your cycle starts in ten minutes. Saria will explain the rules."

The group of six hurriedly nods and offers a few awkward words of thanks before shuffling through the gate. After they walk out of earshot range, they glance at each other.

"Damn. That Melia is... kind of a *bitch*." The male demon whispers.

"Well. She created the formation that the Queen Network is built on. Maybe she's just tired and cranky?" One of the humans offers.

"Yeah. Pft. Maybe that's it."

As they walk away, Melia rolls her eyes. She easily picks up on their conversation thanks to her enhanced hearing, but ignores their comments.

A few moments later, a figure flickers into existence beside her.

"Melia." Blinker says, the redheaded fairy scowling at her green-haired compatriot. "Must you be so rude to every visitor? Some of them are my friends."

"I built your stupid simulation." Melia says, acting only slightly nicer to Blinker than the others before her. "But I *didn't* promise excellent customer service. Are you here to take over my shift now, or what?"

Blinker grimaces. "We need someone with spiritual energy to verify those tickets. And they can't be a demon, either. Do you have any idea how few people meet that criteria AND aren't already busy with other things?"

Melia spends the next several seconds loudly chewing her gum. She smacks her lips over and over, then laboriously rolls her eyes.

"Whatever. God, this is all so boring. You know I was supposed to be attending a lavish banquet later today, right? But here I am, still playing a glorified gate guardian for a bunch of stupid humans doing a bunch of stupid military exercises. Mother made me cancel *all* my plans to come help you out."

"And for that... I'm grateful." Blinker says, wincing. "Look... if you don't want to be here... you've done enough. You can leave."

"As if." Melia snaps back. "Mother said I have to stick around and ensure no 'accidents' happen with the network. I'm the only person besides her who can ensure the neural transceivers link up the brainwaves properly. Considering you expect humans, demons, and monsters of many different species to meld their minds together, do you have any idea how horribly that can go wrong? I'm stuck here until I verify all her stupid procedures have been followed."

"I'm... not much of an expert in Mental Magic." Blinker admits. "Um... well..."

"Save your apologies." Melia says tiredly. She blinks her eyes heavily and sags backward, leaning against the prickly briar-bushes without them actually penetrating the thin magical barrier surrounding her skin. "I'm a big girl. I can handle a short-term annoyance."

Blinker nods. "You hate hanging around with humans. All the fairies do. But, I think humans are great! They're usually pretty nice, and they treat me well. I bet they could be good friends for you if you'd give them a chance!"

Melia opens her mouth to reply, but pauses when she senses two other people walking toward her and Blinker. She turns her attention toward the newcomers, where she sees her fairy friends, Saria and Ruto. To be more specific, they aren't exactly her friends, but more her chosen retainers, her assistants, her ladies in waiting.

"Hey Melia!" Saria chirps, her green hair and big bright eyes sprinkling rays of sunshine throughout the area. "That group of people we just let in is the last group for today. Once they're done, we can finally go have some fun!"

As children of the Forest Fairies, Saria and Melia both descend from the same lineage, though Saria's magic and knowledge are much less potent than the princess's. As for Ruto, a blue-haired fairy from the Realm of Water, she might also only be a mere retainer to the Forest Princess, but she still possesses her own aura of authority.

Ruto walks over beside Saria and leans her arm on her shorter cousin's shoulder. She smiles smugly, her silky white dress and general air making her feel like a playful older sister.

"Well, I don't know about *you*, Melia, but I've having a wonderful time on this human planet! Yes, so many delightful boys and girls to sit down and talk to. I already have thirteen dates lined up over the next week."

"Popular as always." Melia grunts.

"Hey, I know!" Saria exclaims. "Once these humans are done, why don't the four of us fight in the sim! Let's do a 1v3 Queen Competition!"

Blinker scrunches up her face. "I don't know. It's unbecoming of a princess to engage in acts of violence..."

Melia frowns. "Hey. What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying..." Blinker says while she shrugs innocently. "You're too soft to take on all three of us at once. You should sit this one out."

Melia jumps out of her seat. "The *heck* I'm soft! I'll show YOU soft, you little preggo-queen!"

The other three giggle at Melia, knowing how easy it is to rile her up.

"Well alright then." Blinker says. "I bet five merit tokens we'll kick your butt."

"Five from me too!" Saria chirps.

"Count me in." Ruto adds.

"It seems I'll be winning a free fifteen tokens then." Melia snorts. "Maybe I'll pay a visit to that Beauty Depot place later. Not that it can improve upon my perfection..."

"Oh, look at you, so humble!" Blinker laughs.

The girls continue taking turns poking at each other. Soon though, they sense the approach of a powerful demonic aura.

Blinker's smile vanishes in an instant. She turns around and her eyes become murderous as she watches a male Demon Emperor approach from the south.

"Beelzebub!" Blinker snarls. "You dare show your face to me?!"

The Emperor of Hellfire pauses a stone's throw away. He awkwardly scratches the back of his neck.

"Hello, Blinker... ah, long time, no see."

Sensing a lack of malice from the newly minted Emperor, Blinker lowers her rage just a tad, but continues to glare daggers at him. She and the other three fairies slowly walk toward him, none of them smiling any longer.

"So you're the Beelzebub who's caused so many problems." Melia says dryly. "The luckiest unlucky bastard I've seen in a good few eons."

"A vicious, murdering bastard." Saria adds.

"I'm not a fan of the whole flame-shtick." Ruto chimes in, gazing at him with a look of disgust.

A few seconds pass. Nobody says anything.

Eventually, Beelzebub speaks up.

"Blinker... Monster Queen... I'm not sure what you prefer..."

"I don't like hearing my name so casually uttered from your lips." Blinker snaps at him. "Why have you come here? Just to piss me off?"

"Actually, I had a... *proposition* for you." Beelzebub says. "I know you hate me. And deservedly so, given how many people I've killed. But I really do want to change, to mend the old wounds-"

"How can you possibly undo your sins?" Blinker retorts, interrupting him. "You killed millions of people, Beelzebub. They're gone for GOOD. There is no way you can bring them back! And even if you could, it wouldn't undo the traumas of their deaths, nor the pain their relatives felt."

"You're right." Beelzebub says quietly, lowering his head. "I can't undo... any of that. That's why I've set my sights lower. I'm not going to try and help everyone. But... I do have certain abilities. Unique skills. I'd like to wield them as a weapon for good."

Blinker's expression softens, ever so slightly. Despite her abject hatred for the Emperor of Hellfire, something about him seems more genuinely apologetic than at any time in the past.

"Like what."

Her words are not a question, but a rhetorical statement, daring Beelzebub to state his terms.

And so, he does. After swallowing heavily, he raises his eyes to meet her gaze.

"Mephisto. He... took your husband from you. I want to help you get revenge."

Blinker's heart drops into the soles of her high heels. She visibly flinches, startled by Beelzebub's words.

"W-what? You do?! But... I mean... nobody knows where Mephisto has hidden. The Labyrinth is a massive place."

"That doesn't matter. It won't stop me." Beelzebub declares. "I've been a terrible person. I want to make amends. If you and I work together, we'll have the strength to defeat Mephisto. Not just him, but Yama too. They're working together now, or so go the rumors whispering through the grapevine. If you try to face them alone, you won't succeed. If I try to face them alone, I'll fail too. But if we work together..."

Blinker nervously chews her lower lip. No longer does her gaze contain the same hatred as before, but instead, a deep, intense longing.

"I won't lie... if you can help me... rescue Kar's body and soul... I'd be willing to forgive you, Beelzebub. He matters that much to me."

She rubs her lightly swollen pregnant belly.

"I don't want our children growing up without their father."

The other three fairies look at Blinker. Their eyes soften as they sense the suppressed pain within her voice.

"If you're serious," Melia says, "then I'm coming with you. I'm not letting the Monster Queen and the Emperor of Hellfire fight against two Emperors by themselves."

"I'll come too!" Saria exclaims. "Blinker is one of my best friends! And I always help out my friends!"

Ruto nods. "Sounds like it'll be fun. I'm in."

"You guys..." Blinker mutters. "You don't have to go that far."

"No, we do." Melia says. "Do you think my mother sent us here because she gives a damn about the humans? Now that you're a Fairy Queen, and the mother of the future descendants of the Crocodilians, Mother wants us to ensure no harm comes to you. It's as much about politics as it is maintaining your friendship."

Saria crinkles her nose. "Jeez, Melia. You didn't have to make it all weird. We'll help because we're friends with Blinker. No other reason!"

Beelzebub holds up his hand. "I'm grateful all of you want to come. In truth, I didn't intend to go alone with the Fairy Queen anyway. We're not only fighting two Emperors, but all of their shadow minions and undead servants. We can also expect that Mephisto's enslaved High Demons will be there. That includes Zamiel, now inside Kar's body."

Blinker's expression turns chilly. "That little Battle Bastard! He had the gall to not only kill my husband, but take his body too! How are we going to tear his soul out so Kar's can go back inside?"

"That's not an easy question to answer." Beelzebub says. "I'm not a necromancer. In fact, all the necromancers across the Seven Hells serve under Mephisto. I can probably burn Zamiel's soul out of Kar's body through my Soulfire, but more likely, we'll have to ask the Wordsmith to make a new body for the Monster King."

"Oh." Blinker says. "You've... really thought this through."

"Not particularly. Just some cursory observations." Beelzebub says mildly. "I'd like to put together a team capable of taking those Emperors down. Can you think of anybody else who would have the strength, time, and energy to assist us?"

"What of the other Demon Emperors?" Ruto asks. "Don't you have any friends among their ranks?"

"I'm not popular among my compatriots." Beelzebub says with a hint of irritation. "I might have a friend or two among the Dukes, but expect no help from an Emperor."

"Well, I know ONE Emperor who'd be willing to help!" Saria chirps. "Kiari! I've talked to her several times. She's super nice!"

"Emperor Kiari..." Blinker says thoughtfully. "She's not much of a fighter though."

"She doesn't have to be." Ruto points out. "She can summon hordes of insects and giant spiders to overwhelm her enemies."

"Great. Giant spiders." Melia says with a shiver. "My favorite."

"I can go and ask a few other people if they'd be willing to help." Blinker says. "Maybe Samantha, or some of the demons from the Hell of Lust."

Beelzebub releases a soft sigh of relief. "So it's settled then. Let's all ask around and meet up in two days. We'll see if we can assemble a force capable of taking down Mephisto and Yama."

Blinker nods. She faintly smiles at Beelzebub.

"You didn't have to do this, Beelzebub. But you did. So... even if we fail... thank you. Even if we can't rescue Kar and we don't end up at least killing that Mephisto bastard... I appreciate the gesture. Maybe you're not such a bad guy after all."

"No, I'm definitely a terrible sinner." Beelzebub retorts. "But I will try to do good, moving forward. Thank you for giving me this chance to make amends. I won't let it go to waste."

After exchanging goodbyes with the other fairies, Beelzebub turns and leaves. Melia watches him head south, away from the Queen's Network.

"He's certainly different from all the rumors I've heard."

* * *

Beelzebub takes his time walking. He could leap into the skies and fly around with his complete mastery of fire, but he doesn't.

No, instead, he wanders across the regrowing meadow, ambling toward the city plateau. As he walks, he frowns. The feeling of being watched tickles the back of his neck.

The Emperor of Hellfire looks left, right, up, and even down. He searches for the source of that feeling, but detects nothing. Eventually though, his eyes fall upon a mid-sized patch of trees directly underneath the Fortress of Retribution's cliffs. He fails to spot the cottage contained within those trees, but in his mind's eye, he imagines its outline.

Rosalia's cottage...

Beelzebub shivers, remembering that feeling of helplessness he experienced at Rosalia's hands. Idly, he reflects on how that feeling helped him understand what it meant to be unable to change his fate. He recalls that sickening sense of isolation, that feeling of weakness and being toyed around with.

Ultimately, perhaps it helped make him... more empathetic.

Reflecting on this thought, Beelzebub blinks twice. He looks away from that imaginary cottage and shakes his head.

"Perhaps that misfortune was actually a blessing in disguise. It opened my eyes to a Truth of our reality..."

He continues walking, all while forcing himself to ignore that lingering feeling of being watched.

* * *

Amidst those same trees, a figure lurks. A large figure, one with quite a sizable body of great mass.

Rosalia.

The undesirable demoness gnashes her teeth as she watches Beelzebub continue walking away. But instead of dejection, she feels only a burning Desire scorching her heart.

"Mine... mine... Mister Beelzebub should be mine... can't let those fairy sluts take him from me... can't let him forget me!"

She chews her lip. A cold, decisive light sparkles in her eyes.

"Desire... my desire... I want him! I'll do whatever it takes! I must become beautiful!"

A sinister female voice inside her head chuckles.

Heh heh heh... yes. The time has finally come. No more games, Rosalia. Do what must be done to obtain what you want.

She nods.

"I WILL have him!"

Part 444: Cassiel's Confidence

South of the Fortress of Retribution, ten miles distant from the city's upper plateau, a small stream trickles down from a mountain to the east, deposits into a twenty-foot-deep lake, and eventually splits off into a second stream that trails out to the western ocean.

At this mid-sized lake, a good distance away from the radius of Beelzebub's nuclear detonation some weeks earlier, plenty of trees and creatures remain amidst the surviving environment. A ring of trees encircles the lake, and ripples frequently appear in the center where small aquatic creatures pop out to eat the bugs and insects skittering on or just above the water's surface. The midday sunlight warms the water, stirring the cold-blooded life slumbering within.

At the edge of the lake, a pair of seemingly ordinary women sit on a rock some eight feet tall with an oddly-flat top. One of the two, a woman with black hair, stares out at the lake with placid eyes, seemingly unburdened by the worries of the world. As for her companion, a brown-haired girl with visible anxiety, she stares at the item in the palm of her hand, a single piece of seemingly ordinary jewelry.

A simple golden ring.

"I don't understand..." The brown-haired woman whispers. "Why would Raphael... give me... Uzziel's ring?"

"She doesn't have her memories anymore, Cass." The black-haired woman answers. "In a way... isn't she somewhat similar to you? Someone forgotten by time, alone in this material realm?"

These women, Cassiel and Soleil, continue to hide their identities, posing as two ordinary humans named Cammy and Serra. When given the ring of a former Archangel, Cassiel opts to depart the Fortress of Retribution and head to this remote lake, a place she has grown to enjoy visiting in recent days.

Here, no people will bother her. She doesn't have to fear the gazes of others, and she certainly won't encounter any demons.

As for Gressil... if he were to suddenly show up, he would encounter a *nasty* surprise. Soleil was made for the explicit purpose of protecting Cassiel from his clutches. She might

not be capable of killing the Emperor of Chaos, but she could certainly make him deeply regret exposing his position to her.

Cassiel daintily fiddles with Uzziel's ring, sensing the spiritual presence contained within, along with its optimistic and bright-eyed excitement. After a minute or so, she hesitantly slips the ring on her finger and immerses herself inside its inner world.

There, Cassiel's spirit splits from her Mind Realm to directly enter Uzziel's ring. Cassiel frowns as she finds herself standing amidst a pure white void. Now repaired thanks to the efforts of the Wordsmith, it still nonetheless appears quite boring and plain.

On the ground before her sits none other than the former Archangel of Creation, now a mentally immature child trapped in an adult woman's body. Uzziel quickly raises her head to look at Cassiel, then her eyes sparkle as she clumsily stands up and wobbles toward her.

"Bababa! Bwaaa! Aaabuull-blublu!"

She babbles incoherently, but in such a cute voice that even the anxious Cassiel can't help but smile awkwardly. She catches Uzziel when the Archangel trips, nearly falling to her knees.

"Careful, Uzziel..." Cassiel says. "I'm, uh, I am Cassiel. Cassiel, see? Cass...eee...ull... can you say Cass-ee-ull?"

Uzziel hangs onto Cassiel's shoulders while her knees wobble, partially due to poorly developed motor skills, and partially due to excitement at having a 'friend' appear.

"Aaaa! Ababa! Caa-caa!"

Cassiel smiles a little wider than before.

"Yes, that's right. Cah... can you say 'cah'?"

Cassiel spends the next several minutes slowly helping Uzziel learn to walk while repeating her own name. Like a mother teaching her baby the absolute basics, Cassiel eventually sits down with Uzziel to spend some quality time with her.

"Cappy! Cappy!" Uzziel eventually chirps. "Cappycappycappy!"

"That's close enough." Cassiel says, smiling more genuinely than before. "You can call me 'Cappy.' And your name is Uzziel, see? Uzziel. Ooo-zee-ull. Can you say *Ooo-zee-ull*?"

"Oodeel! Oodeel!"

"No, *Uzziel*. See? Uzziel."

"Oodeel! Oddeel!"

Uzziel claps her hands and laughs, her smile like the sun on a warm spring day. So infectious is her joy that Cassiel loses even more of her previous anxiety.

"You're so cute!" Cassiel giggles. "I just wish there was a faster way to do this."

The angel formerly known as the Daughter of Heaven and Blood Reaper collects herself for a minute while Uzziel babbles at her. She opens and closes her mouth several times, contemplating if there might not be a better way to re-teach Uzziel how to speak.

"You don't remember this," Cassiel eventually says, "but you and I... we used to be good friends. Before the demons killed our people. Before the Energy Wars. Seeing you like you are now... it hurts my heart, Uzziel. You were the best of the angels. The kindest. The most loving. Whenever I thought about my Earth-family and missed them... you were there for me."

She reaches out and gently caresses Uzziel's face, making the bright-eyed Archangel pause her babbling to focus on the pleasant but odd feeling.

"That must be the reason Raphael gave me your ring. He's busy enacting his plans, and he knows I'll take care of you. Whether you get your abilities back or not, that won't matter to me. That's why... I'll always be here for you. Okay? Always..."

For a brief moment, Uzziel and Cassiel both fall silent. Uzziel stares solemnly at her angel-comrade with a serious gaze.

A faint fluctuation passes between Cassiel's hand into Uzziel's body, but this minor mana disturbance doesn't seem to do anything important...

Uzziel blinks her pretty green eyes. She babbles cutely.

"Caa-caa? Cappy?"

"Yes." Cassiel says. "You can call me 'Cappy.' But only you. We won't tell Soleil about our little secret, will we?"

Uzziel shakes her head. "No no! No tell!"

"Good." Cassiel says, while she starts to rise. She suddenly pauses and frowns. "Hm? You understood me?"

Uzziel gazes at her innocently. "Bwa-bwa-bwa!"

"Oh. Must have been a fluke..." Cassiel mutters.

She retracts her presence from Uzziel's ring, but also opens up her own Mind Realm to allow Uzziel into her thought-sphere. In this way, Uzziel gains access to the memories locked within Cassiel's head, as well as the ability to see through her eyes.

"Waaah! Bababa!" Cassiel excitedly babbles as she looks 'out' at the world before Cassiel.

Cassiel herself turns to look at Soleil, who continues to sit in the same position as before. She smiles at Cassiel.

"How are things going with Uzziel?" Soleil asks.

"The circumstances are... adequate." Cassiel says, suddenly feeling a bit more self-conscious after returning her soul to the material realm. "She seems to lack any language skills, or even fine motor skills, let alone magical power. But I don't care. Uzziel is my friend... she was once my *closest* friend in Heaven."

"Seeing her return under such circumstances..." Soleil says quietly. "That must feel somewhat distressing."

"A little." Cassiel answers. "A little..."

The two women fall silent.

They stare out at the placid lake, watching as giant winged creatures swoop down to stab their talons into its surface, yanking out aquatic fish-like creatures with enough flesh to feed the predators for the next several days. The creatures take to the skies and fly away, their figures more closely resembling Pterodactyls from ancient Earth than birds from the era Cassiel best remembers.

"This world is so alien..." Cassiel murmurs.

Soleil nods. She starts to speak, but pauses to whip her head backward.

"Behind us. Noises. People approach."

Soleil jumps to her feet to stare at the forest-line, the ring of trees encircling this distant lake. Cassiel remains seated, but waits and watches along with her companion for the unexpected newcomers to step into view.

Before long, they do.

Two adult women wearing deactivated T-REX's guide a gathering of twelve young girls, their ages ranging from eight years old to thirteen. The group of fourteen people walks into view, with the kids babbling excitedly to each other as they ready themselves for some sort of group activity.

Soleil quickly calms down, but remains standing at the alert.

"Do you want to leave, Cassiel?" Soleil asks without turning to look at Heaven's Daughter.

"No... we'll just watch." Cassiel says. "I wonder what they're doing all the way out here?"

Soleil remains motionless atop the rock, as does Cassiel. Perhaps due to their absolute stillness, none of the newcomers notices their presence.

* * *

Linda Hurent gestures to the children around her. "Come along, girls! We'll set up on the shoreline here. Do all of you know how to bait your hooks?"

Many of the children turn squeamish at her words.

"We don't HAVE to put the worm on the hook, do we, Miss Linda?"

"I don't wanna hurt the worm, Miss Linda!" Another girl exclaims.

The other adult, aside from Linda, turns out to be none other than Lily Brown, daughter of Benjamin Brown. She grimaces as Linda pulls out a small box with dozen of slimy, wriggling worms.

"Surely *you* know how to hook a worm?" Linda asks, looking at the teenager beside her.

"Daddy never taught me anything like that..." Lily says turning squeamish. "I'm fine with just watching. Truly."

"If you want that quarter of a Merit Token, you'll have to do more than just watch, young lady." Linda proclaims, wagging her finger in Lily's face. "I'm not about to do all the work while you stand off to the side and keep your pretty little skirt clean!"

Lily swallows heavily, then sighs. "Alright. I really need that token. It's been getting so hard to find cost-effective jobs lately."

"Tell me about it!" Linda snorts. "But hanging out with a group of brats, it's a good way to pass the time. We'll have fun, I promise. Now, take out your fishing pole..."

This field trip, a fishing expedition, is part of a newly passed initiative by Phoebe Hiro to ensure humanity's children are able to get a good education, as well as expand their horizons. While the job might not offer many Merit Tokens, it's also quite a simple task to fulfill and requires little in the way of prior training.

The girls arrayed before Lily and Linda are almost entirely comprised of child slaves rescued from the Labyrinth. Having expected to live the rest of their lives under the torture of the demons, the novelty of living on such a lush and beautiful world never fails to make these children starry-eyed. Even though many of the girls turn a little squeamish at the thought of hooking worms onto hooks, they still ultimately relent after watching Linda teach Lily how to do it.

Indeed, some of the girls enthusiastically hook the worms, perhaps enjoying the silent screams of pain from their wriggling victims a *tad* too much.

Before long, all the group's members have their worms hooked on fishing poles. They practice casting their lines a few times, then send them flying out into the crystal clear lake!

Many minutes later, their hooks begin bobbing and dipping as underwater creatures nibble at the hooks. Linda warns the girls that they might accidentally hook some of the more terrifying monsters in the area, but luckily she's been equipped with a T-REX specialized for hunting the upper-sized predators on Tarus II. If an unexpected hunter pounces out of the bushes, she and Lily will be ready to leap into action and protect the kids!

Still watching from afar, Soleil cocks her head. "What are they doing?"

"Fishing." Cassiel explains. "The goal is to catch a fish that they can eat."

"Oh. Have the food stores run dry?" Soleil asks.

"I doubt that. This is more of a recreational activity. Humans do it for fun. Sometimes, they even release the fish they catch."

"I see. It seems like a waste of time." Soleil says, immediately losing interest. She turns around and plops back into a seated position.

Soleil's sudden movement catches the attention of one of the children.

"Look Miss Linda! Two women over there!"

Linda Hurent follows the little girl's finger. "Oh! How about that. I don't recognize them. Lily, why don't you go and invite them over here? At the very least, make sure we aren't disturbing them. I'd hate to be a bother."

Lily nods. "Yes, Corporal."

She sets her fishing pole down, then starts walking toward Soleil and Cassiel. Due to the surprisingly long distance, it takes her a while to reach the two of them, nearly five minutes of shambling across the rocky, uneven shoreline.

"Hello!" Lily eventually calls out. "We didn't realize anyone else was already here or we'd have set up further down the shoreline. Would you two like to come fish with us?"

Soleil frowns at this interruption. She turns to look at Lily, but before she can say anything, Cassiel speaks up.

"...I'd like that. Is it really okay for us to join you?"

"Sure it is!" Lily chirps, her pink hair bouncing along with her gait. She stops at the bottom of Cassiel and Soleil's boulder, then shades her eyes from the midday sun as she looks up at them. "We brought several extra poles in case the others broke."

"Well, okay then."

Cassiel lightly leaps off the rock, surprising Lily with how easily she maintains her footing on the uneven ground below. To her further shock, Soleil lands lightly enough that it seems as if her body weighs only as much as a feather.

"Wow. You two must be pretty acrobatic!" She exclaims. "I'm Lily."

"I'm Cammy. This is Serra." Cassiel says. "I... like to get away from things. Being around too many people... especially men... it stresses my body."

"Well, there's only girls in our group!" Lily says, eagerly guiding the other two back to the children. "Ever hooked a worm before?"

Cassiel faintly smiles.

"Yes. I have."

Two hours pass.

Cassiel and Soleil go fishing with the group of children, as well as Lily and Linda. The more she talks to the group of humans, the more Cassiel opens up and starts having a good time.

One child catches a fish. Cassiel and the others help reel it in. Everyone gawks and *oohs* and *ahhs* at the size of the alien aquatic swimmer, but ultimately they remove the hook and toss it back into the water.

Soleil perfunctorily fishes along with the others, but as time goes on, Cassiel notices more and more that the Black Hole Construct seems less and less interested as the minutes tick by.

"Sol- err, Serra." Cassiel says, drawing close to her companion. "Is something wrong?"

"I am supposed to protect you and aid your recovery." Soleil says quietly. "But I find this activity mentally taxing. A better way to state my current dilemma is that I find it *boring*. It is a repetitive task, one which is proving utterly unstimulating. I see no appeal in doing this."

Cassiel doesn't say anything for several seconds. When she does speak, her voice comes out as little more than a whisper.

"I... used to fish... with my father."

"Your father?" Soleil asks, immediately more interested in whatever Cassiel has to say compared to the stunningly boring activity of fishing. "You do not mention your past often."

Cassiel nods.

"I died... when I was still a child. I don't have... many memories... of my mother and father. When they died, they did not become angels like me."

She pauses for several long seconds.

"I was only six years old when the sickness took me." Cassiel whispers. "But my father, he used to take me fishing at the edge of our village. Those were our quiet moments together. Then we'd come home and eat Mother's freshly baked baguette. Fish, bread, and sometimes a bit of meat stew. It's a meal that... reminds me of home."

Soleil's expression softens. "You must miss your parents deeply."

"Mmm." Cassiel nods. "Not only them, but my brother, as well as-"

"Eeeyaah!"

A scream from one of the children makes Cassiel nearly jump out of her skin. She pauses mid-sentence and turns to look in the direction of the scream, where she sees a nine-year-old girl frantically swatting at her legs while hopping around like a terrified rabbit.

"Eeeyyaahh!! Get it off, help! Help me- aaahh!!"

A swarm of bugs crawls up the child's legs, their exact species unknown to Cassiel or the others present. In the blink of an eye, Cassiel observes the little girl's condition, as well as a small hole in the ground where the bugs are swarming from.

Abruptly, many of the bugs take flight. They burst out of their underground den and leap onto everyone except for Cassiel and Soleil, who are subtly protected by faint auras of holy energy. As for Lily and Linda, their T-REX's activate due to their spikes in adrenaline, protecting them from the swarming insects.

But the children aren't so lucky.

A chorus of terrified screams erupts as the children begin running around, swatting themselves to try and kill the raging bugs. The insects bite and sting them, making them cry even more loudly as tears erupt from their eyes.

"Soleil!" Cassiel shouts. "We have to help them!"

Cassiel lunges toward the children. Without hesitation, she deactivates the locket around her neck. The Heaven's Shroud instantly de-energizes, revealing her true form as a winged servant of the Creator! But none of the people present, except for Linda, can spare her even the quickest glance.

Cassiel grits her teeth. She aims her palm at one of the children.

SWISH!

A burst of divine energy fires from her hand to wrap around the little girl, instantly burning away all of her clothes, as well as the dozens of venomous insects clinging to her body. The biting-bugs turn to ash and dissipate into the wind.

Cassiel fires another burst of holy energy at a second girl.

SWISH!

Once again, she atomizes the child's clothing, as well as all of the bugs torturing her.

Within seconds, Cassiel blasts away all of the bugs, while Linda and Lily activate smoke bombs attached to their suits to choke out the area. This causes the remaining bugs to disperse in a panic or dive back underground.

For a brief moment, Lily and Linda glance at Cassiel in awe. While Lily doesn't recognize the angel before her, Linda certainly does.

"You! You're that girl... from the-"

"We have to help these children!" Cassiel exclaims, directing Linda's attention to the children writhing and sobbing on the ground. "Look! They've all been bitten many times! Their wounds are starting to swell. Those were venomous bugs!"

Soleil, seeing that her charge has voluntarily removed her protections, quietly disperses her own. Seeing the second angel take form, Linda quickly comprehends the situation.

"I see. We'll have to carry them back to the city. Can you help us? Take the girls with the most bites. Lily and I will try to carry the others!"

Cassiel nods seriously. In the face of these injured children slowly succumbing to their wounds, she no longer hesitates for even a moment. She completely forgets her fear, then holds out her palm.

"There's no need for that. **Murus lucis!**"

She conjures a flat platform of holy energy, one of surprisingly large size, then gestures to the others.

"Put the children on! I don't have much mana... I can't maintain its shape for very long!"

Sensing the confidence in Cassiel's tone, the other three immediately defer to her command. They quickly place the naked children on the platform, then Lily and Linda also hop on.

Cassiel and Soleil don't stand on the platform. Instead, they flap their wings and take to the skies. Cassiel holds the platform together with her mental strength, maintaining its shape thanks to years of hard-practiced effort.

As they begin flying back to the Fortress of Retribution, Linda and Lily gaze at the angel carrying them to safety with a considerable amount of awe.

"You're the angel I helped rescue..." Linda says. "I didn't realize... were you trying to hide your identity?"

"That doesn't matter now!" Cassiel says through gritted teeth. "I won't let these kids die! I won't ever let that happen! Now be quiet! I... I have to focus... my mind!"

Soleil gazes at her winged comrade with a look of deep admiration.

"I always knew you had it in you."

Part 445: Saving the Children!

Cassiel flies for ten full minutes. While her wings would usually allow her to cover the distance in ten to twenty seconds, lugging more than a dozen people on her spiritual-platform drastically slows her speed down while also draining her energy. Sweat streams down her face. The veins on her forehead begin to bulge. She pants and gasps for breath, feeling her vision flicker as the plateau to the Fortress of Retribution draws near.

The crystal glass dome that once enveloped the city no longer remains, having been quietly removed by the Wordsmith a few weeks earlier. This allows her to slowly lose altitude as she drops toward the city's western side, where the hospital is located.

Just as she arrives within ten feet of her destination, Cassiel's strength finally gives out. She loses control over her mana, and the platform vanishes, causing her and the people she's rescuing to cry out in fright as they tumble to the pavement. But before Cassiel can fall flat on her face, Soleil swoops in and saves her charge, allowing Cassiel to collapse in her arms.

Curiously, the construct does not even bother trying to soften the impact of the children, despite her exceptional speed granting her the capability of doing so...

In unison, all of the children, as well as Lily and Linda, fall to the ground. The adults manage to soften their landings by awkwardly flailing in midair, but the poisoned girls hit the pavement hard enough to crack a few bones, which only multiplies their pain.

The moment everyone lands, a swarm of exosuit-wearing troopers converges on their position. Having been alerted wirelessly through Linda's T-REX commlink, they descend on the children, wrap the girls in blankets and begin quickly whisking them off to the hospital's entrance a few hundred feet from the landing site.

Linda and Lily sigh in relief. They turn their appreciative gazes toward Cassiel, only to see their rescuer barely flitting in and out of consciousness due to her extreme mana exhaustion. She lays unmoving in Soleil's arms like a wet blanket, lacking even a drop of physical strength.

"What's wrong with Cassiel?" Linda asks, having fully identified both of the angels before her. "Is she alright?!"

"Cassiel is suffering from mana sickness." Soleil says. "She is a Lazarite. While she will not die from running out of mana, as a trueblooded angel would, she *will* become incapacitated and remain that way until someone gives her their mana. Unfortunately, my internal energy is incompatible with hers."

The construct raises her gaze from the woman crumpled in her grasp to the two women before her, as well as a growing crowd of onlookers.

"Cassiel requires all of your assistance." Soleil declares, leaving no room for opposition. "You will give her your mana. You owe her this much."

Slightly taken aback by the tinge of hostility in Soleil's tone, Linda nevertheless quickly nods. "Yes, yes of course. Those children would be dead without her help. How can we help? What do we have to do?"

"You will pray to Cassiel." Soleil orders. "Imagine her face and name in your mind. Imagine that you owe her a great debt. Then, close your eyes and focus on the thought of giving her your strength."

"Prayer..." Lily says, frowning slightly. "Daddy told me about this. In the old era, angels could receive Faith Energy from humans on Earth. Is that what this is?"

"It is." Soleil says mildly. She turns to look at the crowd of onlookers. "All of you, as well. Pray to Cassiel to give her strength."

The forty-or-so people in the vicinity nod along to Soleil's command. They close their eyes, clasp their hands together, and begin to pray.

Several seconds pass.

Thirty seconds.

One minute.

Slowly, Cassiel's eyes flutter open. The spots dancing in her vision fade away, and her strength returns. She violently coughs, nearly choking on her own saliva as the silent transfer of mana rejuvenates her soul.

Soleil helps her to her feet, and Cassiel shakily stands. Upon noticing all of the people around her, Cassiel abruptly freezes, her pupils shrinking to pinpricks.

With the danger threatening the children's lives gone, she suddenly realizes where she is.

Out in public.

Many people around her.

Some of them... *men*.

Cassiel's skin turns cold to the touch. Her teeth chatter. Her heart flickers erratically, and her legs tremble. Her pupils shrink and dilate as waves of nausea splash around her stomach, making her feel cornered. Trapped.

"S-suh-Sol-Sol..."

Cassiel whispers frightened words, clutching onto her construct companion. At once, as the people around Cassiel begin to open their eyes and gaze upon her in gratitude, Soleil realizes her mistake.

"That's enough!" She barks. "You've all done your part! But now you're scaring my lady! Disperse!"

These people, mere onlookers who appreciated Cassiel's rescue of the children, suddenly recoil in surprise at Soleil's violent words. Some of them deeply frown, feeling offended by her unexpected shift in tone. Not fully understanding the construct's concerns, they gnash their teeth.

"The hell is your problem, lady?" One man asks. "You ask us to pray, we pray! We help that girl, and now you tell us to fuck off? Show some goddamned appreciation!"

"Yeah!" Another man shouts. "What's the big idea?! Leave it to some bitch to yank us around!"

These men, not exactly angry at Cassiel, still nevertheless turn their resentful glares on her. Cassiel shrinks back in fear as one of them takes a step toward her.

"A 'thank you' would be nice, brat!" The first man exclaims. "I did that praying thing and now my head hurts. You sapped my energy, but couldn't even take me out for dinner first? So unappreciati-"

"I told you to disperse." Soleil says, interrupting the man.

The construct steps between Cassiel and the outraged man. Her eyes turn cold. A murderous aura swells within her gaze.

"Do not make me repeat myself."

The man swallows his next words. Something about the construct's cold, dead eyes makes him shrink back.

Something primal shakes his psyche.

A fear that is purely... *instinctive*.

Like a field hare that has come face to face with a ravenous wolf, the man feels himself shrink to half his size under her withering gaze.

He takes a step back and slowly begins to nod.

"S-sure, lady. I... I didn't mean nothin' by it..."

Soleil clenches her hand into a fist. Even as the man starts to pull away, the thought of reaching out and taking hold of his neck-

"Soleil." Linda suddenly says, snapping the construct out of her thoughts. "Thank you for your assistance. Private Hodgson, report back to your post. That's an order. And to the rest of you, thank you for helping us just now. Lady Cassiel suffered injuries when she rescued those children. Why don't we all give her some breathing room?"

Linda quickly and calmly defuses the situation, making the angry people dial down their emotions. As a veteran of the Stormbringer War, and one of the people who even helped take down Beelzebub in the mid-stages, Corporal Hurent has long earned a certain degree of accolades from the humans of Tarus II. The people present all look up to and respect her.

The two men from before awkwardly scratch their heads. They pull back after being offered this chance to save face.

"Sure, sure. Sorry about that, Corporal. We need to head back to our posts anyway. Thanks for, uh, explaining the situation to us."

The men turn and walk away. Not long after, the rest of the crowd disperses, leaving only Soleil, Cassiel, Linda, and Lily.

Cassiel finally collapses to her knees. She wraps her arms across her chest and massages her shoulders, trying desperately to suppress her panic attack.

Soleil, likewise, turns around to put her full attention on Cassiel. She drops down to the angel's level and embraces her in a quiet hug.

"There, there. The mean men are gone. I'll take you to a more quiet location, Cass."

"I recommend we bring Cassiel into the hospital." Linda says. "Have you taken her to see a psychiatrist yet? She could use some therapy..."

Soleil frowns at this impudent woman's intrusion onto her domain. "I am all the counsel my lady needs."

"Oh yeah?" Linda asks, putting her hands on her hips. "Not to call into question your abilities, but if I hadn't intervened just now... what were you about to do?"

Soleil doesn't answer. She merely stares at Linda.

Linda, thus, continues to speak.

"It was a rhetorical question." Linda says slowly. "You were... thinking of *killing* that man. Weren't you?"

"I was not." Soleil says.

"You lie worse than a kindergartener." Linda mutters, her tone filled with suspicion. "I'm pretty good at reading people, Soleil. I'll admit, I'm not sure if a 'construct' differs from the rest of us. But your anger earlier... did you even *think* about what would have happened if you had gone through with what you were contemplating?"

Lily stands beside Linda, frowning as she realizes she could have witnessed a gruesome murder had Linda not stepped in.

"Do not call into question my mental faculties." Soleil snaps. "My purpose is to protect the last living angel's life. All other matters come a distant second."

Linda's expression softens.

"Perhaps. But is that what *Cassiel* wants?"

Soleil flinches like a cat sprayed in the face with water. She turns her attention to Cassiel, only to find that her charge has been looking at her for a while now.

"It... is not." Cassiel whispers. "You must protect me, yes. But... killing or hurting others needlessly. I... do not want you... to go that far."

"Cassiel..." Soleil says, noticing the pain on her charge's face. "I apologize. I will change my guidance parameters at once."

"Mmm. Alright." Cassiel concludes, lowering her eyes.

* * *

Several minutes later, Cassiel and Soleil begin walking toward the hospital's entrance. Lily and Linda follow on Cassiel's left, while Soleil walks on her right.

"So, Cassiel." Lily says, smiling at the angel. "You were really brave back there. The way you immediately jumped in and saved those girls. I think I have a crush on you now!"

"A crush..." Cassiel says, nodding slowly. "Thank you. That is very kind of you to say."

"I mean it!" Lily chirps. "Sure, you collapsed and felt afraid when all those people showed up, but the way you put your fears aside to help the girls was super decisive. You had such a commanding presence."

"That was a long time ago..." Cassiel says quietly. "I am... not that person anymore."

Lily blinks. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

As they approach the hospital's doors, Cassiel slowly shakes her head.

"I failed... all of them. I'm not worth admiring."

"You failed...?" Lily asks, more quietly than before. "Who, exactly?"

Cassiel doesn't answer her question.

Instead, the white-haired angel becomes lost in her own thoughts, gazing into the abyss while her eyes focus on something unseen, some memory from her past...

The hospital doors *swish* open, sliding automatically to allow the visitors access.

These days, the hospital no longer has many injured people to attend. With the war having died down, most people in the hospital are only those who caught some weird alien sickness, those injured in construction accidents, or rare examples like Linda's class, civilians struck by a random freak incident.

Linda walks inside. She glances at the reception desk, where she spots a familiar goblin wearing a clean cut suit and tie.

"Grima!" Linda exclaims, forcing a smile. "Are the children going to be alright? Can I go and see them?"

The green-skinned goblin looks up at Linda. For a brief moment though, his eyes fixate on Cassiel and Soleil, as if carefully recording all their details.

"Miss Hurent." Grima says, his naturally intelligent tongue sounding far less crass than those of other goblins. "I am unaware of the current circumstances of the children."

Emperor Belial is currently attending to them, along with several of our other doctors. Can you tell me about the bugs that stung them?"

"I can do better than that." Linda says, tapping her T-REX activator. The nanite swarm engulfs her body, giving her access to its systems. "I'll send you the recording of that scene. Personally, I haven't a clue what bugs attacked them. I'm not familiar with Tarus II's insect populace..."

"Any clues would help." Grima says. "One of the children suffered more than a hundred stings. Luckily, the poison did not seem to have terribly severe effects. I would be surprised if they didn't all make a complete recovery by day's end."

"Ah. That's a relief." Linda says, breathing easier than she has in the last half-hour. "Say... I was wondering. Do we happen to have any psychologists available right now? You see, this here is Cassiel. She is an angel we rescued from the Labyrinth..."

Linda quickly summarizes the circumstances leading up to Cassiel's rescue, as well as her heroic rescue of the children. As she talks, Grima leans forward and rests his tiny elbows on the desk, oddly invested in her every word.

"How fascinating. And tragic." Grima says. "I am sorry for the pain you have suffered, Cassiel. As luck would have it, I am a trained psychologist myself. In fact, I have a brother, a goblin like me, he would be even better for helping heal your mental wounds. My family is actually quite accomplished, you see. We do not mingle amongst our lesser cousins, the fools who dumbly burrow into mountains. We pursue much greater academic interests..."

Soleil steps forward. "While your credentials may not be in question, it would be best if Cassiel's psychologist was... a female."

Cassiel nods quietly. "A woman... would be better."

"Ah. I see." Grima says. "Of course. I do have a talented sister who would be able to assist you. However, I will need a few days to contact her. Are you in a rush, or would you be willing to wait?"

Cassiel faintly smiles. "I can wait. Thank you."

"Most excellent." Grima says. "Contacting my sister will not require too much time, but I will have to head into the Labyrinth. Once my shift is over, I will leave, post-haste."

"That's very kind of you." Soleil says.

The construct stares at the goblin for several long seconds while the others debate what to do next. Something about Grima bothers her, but she isn't certain what that might be.

Erroneous parameter. Goblins are a lower species of Orc. Goblins typically possess extremely low intelligence ratings. Why does this individual seem so different? What causes Grima and his family to stand so far apart from the rest of their species? Are they mere aberrants? Or is there some other reason for their divergence?

Indeed, the construct does notice Grima's strange behavior, as well as his odd fixation on Cassiel. However, lacking key information, she does not realize the truth of the matter.

Grima is a Changeling.

The first one to ever step foot on Tarus II's soil, he has long since quietly integrated into the populace and removed himself from suspicion. Despite his extreme divergence from other goblins, nobody even questions his odd behavior, for they have already grown used to the funny little goblin's eccentricities.

In truth, Grima himself is not even a high-ranked Changeling. He is quite inexperienced, and if he were better trained, he would have been able to more closely emulate the behavior of traditional goblins. In the end, due to a series of factors, he has managed to make himself all but invisible, accomplishing this feat due to a few lucky circumstances more than clever manipulation of the indigenous population...

While Soleil contemplates Grima's suspicious behavior, a soldier in a T-REX walks out of the emergency rooms. He pauses when he spots the group of four standing beside the reception desk, then haltingly begins to walk toward them.

"Corporal Hurent..." The man says, drawing her attention to him.

Still wearing her own exosuit, Linda identifies the man approaching her through its identification subsystem. "Private Kittel. Have you checked on the children? Are they doing well?"

The man's pace stutters momentarily. He halts for the briefest of instants, then resumes walking toward them.

When he reaches Linda and the others, he pauses for several long seconds, his faceless helmet giving no hint as to his mood.

However, Linda's stomach begins to sink.

"Private Kittel? Are... are the children alright?"

The man coughs.

"Corporal. I... I regret to tell you in this way, but. Of the twelve children recovered... three have... three have died."

"WHAT?!" Linda shrieks, her heart suddenly pounding with such force that it feels as if it will explode from her chest. "No, no, that can't be! That's IMPOSSIBLE! Those bugs, they shouldn't have been- they couldn't!!"

The man, ever so slightly, lowers his helmeted head.

"I'm sorry, Corporal. Samantha... she tried to save them. But something went wrong. We're still investigating the situation."

"Show me!" Linda exclaims, gnashing her teeth. "Take me to them!"

"Yes, ma'am." The soldier says, defeated.

He guides the four women into the Emergency section, where they pass dozens of empty rooms. With very few people in need of major assistance, help can easily rush to save those in critical condition.

Linda's eyes flicker several times. Her thoughts race.

"We haven't had a casualty in weeks!" Linda bellows. "How could we have three at once? This makes no sense!"

"I don't know." Private Kittel says. "I'm not a doctor..."

Before long, they arrive at one of four rooms across from each other. Linda flicks her gazes inside, where she sees three groups of three children each, all resting after having their poison extracted.

But inside the fourth room...

Her stomach metaphorically crumbles to ash.

Linda walks in and finds all three of the girls, ages eight, ten, and eleven, laying unmoving on their beds.

Sheets cover their bodies to preserve their dignity.

Inside the room, a trio of demons turns their attention to Linda as she enters. Emperor Belial, Rosalia, and Leeroy, the Duke of Restoration.

Seeing Linda, Belial bites her lower lip. "I'm... I'm sorry, Linda. I was too slow. I came to his room last, but they were already..."

Linda lunges toward the bed. She activates her suit's scanning equipment, hoping beyond reason to find signs of life slumbering within the hearts of these poor children.

Reality proves to be unforgiving.

Their life signs come up nonexistent. Their body temperatures, well below the appropriate levels.

Linda stands, silent, staring down at the children before her. A crushing weight presses upon her soul. A sense not only of deep loss, but deep guilt.

She offered to supervise these girls.

She failed to take all the necessary precautions.

In Linda's mind, it is not the bugs that killed them, but she herself.

"No... no..." Linda whispers. "These... precious babies..."

Like Linda, Cassiel also feels a deep, terrible despair.

"I... wasn't fast enough." Cassiel whispers. "I was too weak. A failure... a failure like always..."

Lily shivers. She snuffles and wipes at her eyes as tears begin to well up, uncontested.

"Uuu... uuuu..."

However.

Soleil's eyes narrow.

The construct steps forward and brusquely shoves Linda aside. She looms over the children's bodies, scrutinizing their covered figures as if they lay naked before her, no secrets capable of withstanding her gaze.

Shocked, Linda scowls at the construct. "Y-you little! What the HELL is your problem?! Show some respect!"

At her words, Soleil's head snaps up. She turns it ninety degrees to stare at the woman standing beside her.

"I detect Chaos Energy within the bodies of these children."

Every person in the room freezes up. They gaze at Soleil in shock.

"W-what? Chaos Energy?" Linda asks. "What is that? What do you mean?"

"Isn't that... Gressil's energy?" Belial whispers. "Are you saying...?"

"These children did not die to the poison." Soleil states with absolute certainty. "My observations regarding those insects and the toxicity of their venom leaves no doubt. Something else killed them."

She pauses.

"*Someone* killed them."

Cassiel, standing behind Soleil, violently shudders at the name of her tormentor. She sags against Lily, who helps to hold her up.

Belial's eyes narrow with deep suspicion.

"Gressil..."

Part 446: The Chaos Culprit

Soleil's declaration sucks the wind out of the room. The gazes of every observer present become filled with suspicion.

The first person to speak turns out to be Rosalia, watching from the sidelines.

"I think the culprit should be obvious. Those bugs attacked the children out of nowhere, yes? Doesn't that seem suspicious to any of you?"

Belial's frown deepens. "Bug manipulators aren't uncommon. Emperor Kiari is one such example. But obviously she's an Emperor, and a kind soul. She'd have no reason to do this. Especially if the motive was to..."

Belial pauses. She turns to Linda.

"Contact the Lazarus Overseer. Phoebe and Jason just left, but she likely left someone to check the souls inside. Have the children's souls arrived inside its confines?"

Linda nods. "One moment, let me contact him."

She speaks into her helmet's transceiver, and after a minute of waiting, she turns back to Belial.

"No new souls have entered the Lazarus Tower. Those children were..."

"Devoured." Belial hisses. "Someone ate their souls! How barbaric!"

"I thought demons couldn't eat souls directly anymore?" Private Kittel says. "Don't they require a necromancer's help to do that?"

"No." Belial says quietly. "There are... rare methods. Beelzebub, for example. He can consume souls through the use of Soulfire. In the Ancient Era, there was even a demon who could grant the power to devour souls to lesser demons. But he's been dead for a hundred millennia..."

"That doesn't mean a new way hasn't been discovered." Rosalia says, 'helpfully' redirecting the conversation. "What if one of the Hidden Emperors came up with a different method?"

"It's within the realm of possibility." Belial says. "Rosalia, I assigned you to this room. What happened when you came in?"

Rosalia chews her lower lip and scrunches her face up in concentration.

"Well... the children were crying, they were in pain. Then one by one, they stopped moving. At the time I thought they had passed out from the pain, which is why I went to get you. But, in all likelihood, they were probably already..."

"Already dead." Belial says, finishing the sentence. "Chaos Energy. Gressil must be involved with this. But he's an Emperor. And a loner. He doesn't have any reason to suck up souls!"

"Maybe we're going about this the wrong way." Leeroy, the Duke of Restoration interjects. "There is one culprit who fits the bill. Someone capable of turning invisible and hiding his soul signature. Someone capable of stealing souls directly..."

Linda's expression turns grim. "You think Mephisto did this?"

"Who else?" Leeroy asks. "Nobody saw the culprit enter. Someone killed those children while only Rosalia was in the room. To be that adept at infiltration, they must have been a master of deception."

"I was preoccupied at the time." Rosalia helpfully adds. "I *was* mixing that antitoxin solution like you ordered, Samantha. I looked away for a few seconds. Maybe, in that moment..."

Belial closes her eyes.

"How evil. How vile. To think three children would die on my watch. I never even felt his presence..."

While the group debates over what foul, heinous fiend could have killed the three little girls, Cassiel and Soleil remain conspicuously silent.

Heaven's Daughter numbly stares at the children she failed to save, while her construct companion seemingly gazes around the room, recording and observing every nook and cranny.

"Where is the solution?" Soleil suddenly asks, directing her words at Rosalia.

"Pardon?" Rosalia asks.

"The antitoxin solution." Soleil clarifies. "Did you inject the children with it? And if not, where is it now?"

Rosalia blinks twice. She reaches into her pocket and fumbles around, then pulls out a small vial on antivenom.

"When I turned around, the girls had already stopped making noise." Rosalia explains. "So I rushed out to get Samantha. I didn't have time to inject them with it."

As Rosalia holds up the vial, the construct quickly leans forward and snatches it from her grasp. Not bothering to ask permission, Soleil's keen, analytical eyes zoom in on the atomic composition of the compound.

She nods.

"This solution is adequate. You prepared it well. A shame you didn't get to apply it in time... perhaps it would have saved their lives."

Rosalia nods. She shrugs helplessly. "Perhaps... if I wasn't so useless."

"Don't be so hard on yourself." Linda says quietly. "You did the best you could, Rosalia. Everyone, I have to leave. I need to report this development to Neil and the other higher-ups. Please write down your statements so we can document what exactly happened for later."

Private Kittel nods. "Yes ma'am."

So do Belial and the others.

With a brusque nod, Linda turns and stomps out of the room, frustration evidenced by her footsteps.

After she departs, the others remain behind. They mill around, uncertain about what to do.

"Someone should contact their parents..." Lily finally says. "I knew these girls. I'll do it."

Leeroy nods. "Rosalia, can you dress them in something more... substantial? Let us try to preserve their dignity in death."

"Of course." Rosalia says. "Let me go fetch some hospital gowns. I'll be back in a minute."

She leaves the room, and the others continue discussing the deaths in her absence.

"Something simply doesn't add up here." Soleil says. "Chaos Energy is Gressil's domain, not Mephisto's. It's possible the Necromancer has obtained a portion of it, but

my discussions with Archangel Raphael have revealed that Chaos Energy rarely ever appears. During the battle against Beelzebub, he released a massive burst of Chaos Energy during his detonation due to the negative emotions flooding his soul. But only Gressil can wield Chaos Energy with practiced ease, on command."

"What are you saying?" Belial asks.

"I am not willing to make any definitive statements at this time." Soleil clarifies. "However, I believe that Gressil is the actual perpetrator. I wager that he may have one or more agents working under him to attack humanity. These children... they will likely be the first of many to fall victim to the Emperor of Chaos."

"You don't think Mephisto is at fault?" Leeroy asks.

"Of course Mephisto might be the culprit." Soleil says. "But I wager the chance of this being the case is below five percent."

"We'll need to conduct an investigation." Private Kittel says. "I'll go and fetch a few people I know. Lieutenant Samuel is pretty good at sniffing out demonic criminals..."

The male soldier turns on his heel and stomps away, leaving behind an ever-decreasing number of people to gaze upon the deceased children.

With only Belial, Leeroy, Lily, Cassiel, and Soleil left, a solemn atmosphere takes over.

"Cassiel." Belial finally says. "You did well today. Thank you for saving the children. Please don't blame yourself for what happened."

"Yeah," Lily says. "You passed out from exhaustion getting them here. That was really impressive! Compared to you, I was totally useless."

Cassiel smiles, but the expression comes off as forced.

"I need to sit down. I'll be out in the hall."

She and Soleil depart. They take care to quietly don their human disguises so as to not draw any further unwanted attention to themselves.

Once they leave, Lily turns to look at Belial.

"So. Um, Samantha."

"Hello, Lily." Belial says. "It's been a few years. You're cuter than ever."

"A few years?" Lily asks. "Am I that forgettable?"

"What do you mean?" Belial asks.

"What do *you* mean?" Lily echoes. "You and I tongue-locked back on Hell Harbor only a couple months ago. Remember? Before that whole Stormbringer fiasco?"

Belial cocks her head. "I don't remember that. Are you sure it was me?"

"Of course!" Lily exclaims. "How could I forget? You shapeshifted right in front of me! Said you were looking for Ose's estate."

More confused than ever, Belial awkwardly scratches the back of her head. "I... think that was someone else, Lily. I would *never* go looking for Ose."

"Puh-lease!" Lily laughs. "How many people do YOU know who can shape-shift in seconds?"

Belial shrugs. "The Wordsmiths can."

"Well it couldn't have been a Wordsmith!" Lily bellows. "It was totally you, and now you're messing with me!"

She pauses.

"Though, it WAS a little weird that you'd choose to look like Mara..."

"You're saying I impersonated Mara?" Belial repeats. "Then I morphed into 'myself,' asked you to take me to Ose, but also made out with you?"

"Well, I mean, *I* was the one who made out with *you*..." Lily says, feeling less and less sure of what she experienced as more evidence comes to light. "Oh my god... that person really was a Wordsmith, weren't they?"

"The timelines do add up." Belial nods. "Jason went to Hell Harbor to talk to Ose. I was unconscious, at the time. I kinda had the shit kicked out of me."

Leeroy, watching from the side, raises his eyebrows as he listens to the women talk. "You two have such *fascinating* love lives. I'll be out in the hallway if you need me."

Without waiting for a response, he darts out the door, where he bumps into Rosalia returning with clothes for the children.

"Best to give those two a bit of privacy." Leeroy says, while noticing a strange look on Rosalia's face. "They need to discuss some private... are you alright, Rosalia? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

Rosalia blinks. "Me? I'm fine, Leeroy. Just a bit shaken up. It really started to hit me... what happened to those children, you know? So terrible..."

"Indeed." Leeroy mutters. "Truly unforgivable. The day we find the perpetrator, I'll beat them so bloody not even my magic will be able to repair their brain damage."

"Right, ah, same." Rosalia mutters. "Same..."

[Where are you taking me? We should head into the Labyrinth at once.]

"Patience, ancient Psion. You alone are not a match for the Envoy of Chaos. We will require additional assistance. Someone specializing in hunting his kind down."

[Are you implying that my power is not enough to kill a mere Demon Emperor?]

"If we were only facing a 'mere' Demon Emperor, then I would not utter such a claim."

Buddha and Creator Demila slowly walk up the northern ramp leading into the Fortress of Retribution's upper plateau. Built recently under the efforts of several Burrower demon grunts, this ramp, and several others, allow for more entry points into humanity's one and only capital city. Indeed, as the man and Psion walk, they pass by dozens of humans, monsters and demons. Yet, not one person so much as looks at them, thanks to Demila deliberately shrouding their existence with her psionic powers.

Invisible to the outside world, they walk among the populace of Tarus II without even a single entity recording their presences. Before long, they reach the top and start to pass by the hospital.

Buddha glances in the hospital's direction for half a moment before shaking his head and continuing forward.

[Something on your mind?] Demila asks suspiciously, unable to read Buddha's thoughts. She scans the hospital, but finds nothing of interest.

"I was thinking of bringing someone else along." Buddha says cryptically. But... her assistance will not be necessary. I have another candidate in mind."

[You refer to Emperor Belial.] Demila states. [I heard she battled Emperor Gressil and nearly defeated him on her own. An impressive feat, given his ability to suppress magical energy.]

"Belial. Mmm." Buddha says, neither confirming nor denying Demila's suspicions. "She would certainly be able to help us, but the person I have in mind... well, you should know his name. He was a thorn in the Volgrim's side for quite a while..."

Demila narrows her eyes. [Who do you speak of?]

But Buddha does not answer.

Instead, he continues walking, acting as if she has not spoken at all. While this does greatly irritate the powerful Psion, she nonetheless has no choice but to follow Buddha's lead. After all, she cannot track down the Emperor of Chaos with her own abilities, and so, she is forced to either follow him or go off and do her own thing.

Buddha walks through the streets, making his way toward a certain restaurant located in the city's center. Famed for cooking the best food in all of Tarus II, the *Horned Maître* stands five stories tall, well above its contemporaries. Not only does its physical size dwarf other restaurants, but so do its prices and quality. None can even come close to matching the skill of its highly-trained chefs.

At Buddha's signal, Demila lowers the invisibility field protecting them. The former Hero walks up to the front door, where a pair of minotaur guards immediately spot him, as well as the Psion behind him.

"...Tokens." One of the guards states.

"I'm not here to eat, today." Buddha says, while mildly smiling at the bullheaded monster. "I'm here to see a certain someone."

"What floor?" The minotaur asks.

"Fourth." Buddha answers. "And no, I don't have an appointment."

He informs the minotaur of this particular individual's name, causing Demila to raise her eyebrows.

After confirming a few things, the guards open the doors and allow Buddha and Demila inside without charging them the standard entry fee. Buddha leads her up three flights of stairs, and eventually, they arrive at the fourth floor of five.

The Horned Maître's fourth floor might not be as prestigious as the fifth, but only the most elite humans, monsters, and demons can afford to eat there. Even with room for eighty guests across all of the tables, they typically never seat more than twenty people on even a busy day.

Indeed, just one person sits at a table, quietly munching on some delicious roasted meat from a locally hunted animal native to Tarus II. This dark-skinned fellow pauses his eating when he sees the sight of a Psion approaching him.

[Benjamin Brown.] Demila says. [The legendary leader of the Vanguard. Somehow, I forgot you were still alive.]

Benjamin only pauses his eating for a brief moment. He glances at Demila, then Buddha, before placing another forkful of meat into his mouth. He slowly chews the delicious, tangy beef while giving the two of them an annoyed look.

"I am busy." Benjamin says. "I've no interest in talking to *your eminence*. Or the Asian fellow beside you."

"Japanese." Buddha clarifies. "Technically."

"Don't care." Benjamin says, while taking another bite. "Do you mind? This meal costs an arm and a leg. I'd like to savor every bite before it gets cold."

Buddha smiles. His eyes curve into crescents as he walks over and sits on the opposite side of the table, gesturing for Demila to take the seat beside him. The Psion rolls all six of her eyes and teleports to the seat, leaning back to cross her arms.

"By all means." Buddha says. "Continue eating, Mister Brown. I'll do all the talking."

"Somehow, I doubt that." Benjamin growls, visibly aggravated by the interruption.

"We require your assistance." Buddha says. "There is a grave threat facing humanity, right now. An enemy we must kill. You are the perfect person to help take him down."

Benjamin take another bite. He chews it slowly, licks his lips, and then takes another long, slow bite.

After twenty seconds of silence, he swallows the meat.

"Not interested. Apologies, *sir*, but I'm not a soldier. Not anymore. Just in case your eyes don't work, I'm *old*. I gave up fighting tens of millennia ago."

"Out of necessity." Buddha says, still smiling. "But you're not the type of man for whom the battle ever truly ends. You can only lie to yourself... tell yourself the war is over. It never is."

"I have children. Many children." Benjamin says. "Most of them are grown-up. Off doing their own thing. But Lily's my youngest. I'm not going to go out and swing my fists around like some meathead. I expect her to come home and still find her father in one piece."

"You care about your daughter." Buddha says. "A great deal."

"Of course..." Benjamin says, frowning even while slicing apart another piece of his exotic steak. "Every father does."

"I was never able to... enjoy the delight of becoming a father." Buddha says, his smile slipping, ever so slightly. "But I know what it means to love someone. To have them torn away by forces outside my control. If you don't help us, it's likely a terrible tragedy will befall humanity. All of its members... including your daughter."

"Motherfucker." Benjamin snaps, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Are you threatening me?"

Buddha casually waves his hand. "By no means. I'm warning you that if you don't help us take this individual down, he will wreak havoc across humanity's defenses. He may even bring about its extinction. He is the Envoy of Chaos... and he needs to be stopped."

Benjamin finally pauses his eating upon hearing the gravity in Buddha's tone.

"Envoy of Chaos? Are you trying to get me involved with fighting *Gressil*?"

"Precisely him." Buddha nods.

"Aw, *hell* no." Benjamin groans. "That demon is one of the most dangerous creatures in the galaxy. Ose feared him, and so do I. You know he killed Emperor Lucifer when he was only a Baron, right? Most demons aren't aware of that fact. Nobody even knows how he did it!"

"He is formidable." Buddha acknowledges. "But so are you."

"I *was*. Once." Benjamin says bitterly. "But that was a long time ago. Now I'm just an old man, half a foot in the grave. I'm not a fighter anymore. Why don't you bug the goddamn Wordsmith?"

"The Wordsmiths are both incapable of killing Gressil at this time." Buddha says, drawing a look of surprise from Demila. "But you are different. Your body was forged to fight Demon Emperors. Your mind is more resilient than any other human. Gressil's ability to nullify magic will have no effect on you. As for physical strength, you are his equal."

Buddha gestures to Demila.

"Besides. You will have a 7th Level Psion taking the lead. Your role will only be to assist her."

"And what about you?" Benjamin asks. "What's your role in all this? And who even are you, anyway?"

Buddha smiles.

"Long ago, in an age before the age when you were born, I was known as Siddhartha Gautama. I am Buddha."

[He is the Unkillable Hero.] Demila says, though her tone comes off somewhat insulting. [He has reincarnated dozens, perhaps even hundreds of times. Always, he possesses some new body, with this being his current form.]

"Buddha!" Benjamin exclaims, mildly surprised. "I've heard of you. Didn't know you were a Hero, though. Just assumed you were some old historical figure. Some guy the Hindus worshipped."

"A shallow understanding." Buddha chuckles. "But then again, you *were* born and raised in America."

"The land of the free, home of the brave." Benjamin grunts.

He returns to eating his food, but a thoughtful expression plays upon his face. After a dozen bites and just as many minutes of silence, he lifts his gaze to the two seated before him.

"You, uh... you really think the three of us can take on Gressil? Because if I get shipped back to my little girl in a body bag... you'd best hope we never run into each other in the Great Beyond. I'll tear your undying ass a new hole."

"Unfortunate circumstances can always occur." Buddha says. "Such is the strength of Chaos. But with your help, we will be capable of ending Gressil's terror once and for all."

"Why not bring a whole army?" Benjamin asks. "Why only the three of us?"

"Too many people and Gressil will flee. What we need is quality, not quantity." Buddha explains. "We must catch the Emperor of Chaos unawares and trick him into thinking he can easily take us down. Only then will we be able to spring a trap and end his threat."

"Mmm."

Benjamin says nothing else until he finally finishes off his plate of food. Then, he leans back in his chair and sighs contentedly.

"Ahh... damn. That might have been my last meal. Oh well. At least it was a good one."

He stares up at the ceiling for a full minute. Then he closes his eyes.

"Alright. I'm in."

Part 447: Making a Choice

Back inside the Tarus II General Hospital, Cassiel and Soleil sit in the waiting area down the corridor from the ICU. Already, they've both returned to their human forms, mostly to shield themselves from the scrutinizing eyes of the public. Once again back in the black and brown-haired ordinary human bodies, they draw no attention from the few people randomly passing by.

Soleil sits upright in her chair, at attention, like always. Seemingly unbothered by anything that could possibly go wrong, the deaths of the children don't affect her psyche in the slightest. However, the same cannot be said for Cassiel who slumps glumly in her chair and stares forward, her eyes practically boring a hole in the wall. Unblinking, she hollowly gazes into the abyss, metaphorically kicking herself for her failure to save all the children.

"You can't blame yourself." Soleil says. "What happened was beyond your control. You exposed your identity to the people of Tarus II and collapsed from lack of mana to save those kids. You did the best you could."

"But it wasn't enough." Cassiel murmurs. "It never is. I always come up short."

"Compared to whom?" Soleil postulates, glancing at Cassiel out of the corner of her eye. "Nobody expected you to help, but you did anyway. That was a kind and selfless gesture, Cass."

"Nobody expects anything from a weak, useless woman." Cassiel says quietly. "That's all I am now. People used to call me the Mightiest Lazarite. The Daughter of Heaven. Now people only look at me with pity. I'm just a... broken... victim... and they're right. Somehow, Gressil killed those girls. He's here with me, even now... torturing me... menacing me... I never feel safe from his influence."

She pauses.

"Sometimes I think it would be better if I simply died."

"You can't talk like that." Soleil immediately says. "Did you truly endure his vile acts for 100,000 years only to crumple up in defeat as soon as you regained your freedom?"

Now is the time to build yourself back up and become unstoppable, Cass. Or to live a happy life."

Cassiel lifts her head slightly. She looks to the side, toward a window showing the beautiful midday light streaming in, revealing the outlines of buildings a few blocks distant.

"What does a happy life look like, Soleil?"

The construct frowns. "I... do not understand the question."

"I've spent nine-tenths of my existence suffering under... under *his* claws. He treated me like a toy. He hurt me. He maimed me. He defiled me. I couldn't put up even a paltry resistance. Now that I am free... how can I ever experience 'happiness'? I don't even know if that emotion exists within me anymore. I fear he long ago snuffed it out."

Soleil listens to Cassiel talk. However, in her mind, the concept of emotions do not play out in any sort of human-like way. Instead, she tries to rationalize what she might do if she were in Cassiel's shoes.

"The solution seems simple. Why not delete the last 100,000 years of your memory files?" Soleil posits. "Then you will not have to dwell on those terrible times."

"I can't delete my memories." Cassiel says. "That isn't how brains work, Sol."

"Perhaps the Wordsmith can?" Soleil postulates.

"...Perhaps. But I am not so certain I want to do that. I would love nothing more than to forget... all of it. But a part of me feels that I deserved what happened. The others died protecting me. I am all that remains of the angels and Lazarites. I do not think that I have the right to forget my pain, for it is a reminder of the sacrifices made by those before me."

"I disagree with your underlying assumptions." Soleil says. "But I understand where they come from. If you are unwilling to forget, then... I'll have to work harder on helping you cope, my lady."

Cassiel absentmindedly caresses Uzziel's ring. She focuses on the childlike presence within it, and how Uzziel feels noticeably more muted than before, partly because of Cassiel's own recent sadness.

Bwa bwa?

"I'll get over it, Uzziel." Cassiel says with a smile. "That's the one thing I'm good at doing..."

Bwa bwa!

While Cassiel and Soleil quietly talk, Belial steps into the waiting room, visibly drained after performing a surgery-less autopsy on the children. She glances around the waiting area, but only sees two random human women sitting.

"Um, excuse me." Belial says, as she walks toward them. "Did you two happen to see a pair of angels walk through here? Big white wings. Halos above their heads..."

Soleil doesn't answer, but instead glances at Cassiel.

Cassiel starts to open her mouth, but as she does, Belial's eyes flick to her neck.

"Hmm? That locket... isn't that a Heaven's Shroud? Oh! So you two are... incognito."

Cassiel blinks twice. "You know about the Heaven's Shroud?"

"Well. Yes." Belial says, her tone awkward. "At the end of the Energy Wars, after the demons had... *won*. Well, a lot of work went into excavating angelkind's remains and their secrets. We ultimately learned how you were able to hide among the humans so well, and the secret of the Shrouds."

Seeing the look of sadness on Cassiel's face, Belial quickly adds, "Of course, this knowledge wasn't relevant to lower-ranked demons, but I'm sure a few Emperors would recognize its appearance on sight. It will hide you from the eyes of those unaware, but just don't assume it's foolproof..."

Cassiel quietly nods. "Thank you for the warning."

After a brief pause, she adds, "How are the children?"

"Nine of them will make a full recovery within the hour." Belial says, plopping down in a chair across from the two shrouded angels. "As for the other three, we've begun contacting their families. I imagine their parents will be here soon. If you want to avoid people, you should leave before they arrive."

"I see. I might do that, then." Cassiel says.

Belial smiles. "It's good to hear you talking, Cassiel. I was really worried you'd never be able to use your voice. I respect how hard you've worked to recover."

Cassiel gazes at Belial evenly. "You were one of the people who helped rescue me."

"I am." Belial nods.

"You are Satan the Devil's wife." Cassiel states. "You are an enemy to humanity and angelkind, both."

"I've not made the best choices." Belial acknowledges, hanging her head slightly. "But I... I try to make amends, to be a better person. Did you know I never killed a single person, not one solitary soul, until recently?"

"You didn't?" Cassiel asks. "What changed?"

"Stormbringer." Belial says, rubbing her palms together. "My human friends were being slaughtered. So many of them, by so many demonic invaders. I felt so angry, so helpless. I gave up on my morals and decided the only way to protect my friends was to commit a terrible sin. So I started killing... I don't even *know* how many demons. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands."

Belial spends the next few minutes telling Cassiel about the events of Stormbringer, the attack which she was not around to witness. Cassiel listens silently and without judgment as Belial goes on to even tell her about her battle with Ose and how she lost to her rival.

"Ose was too powerful." Belial says. "She was the architect of humanity's demise. I wanted to tear her apart... but I couldn't. I was helpless. It was only when Archangel Uriel arrived that we managed to beat Ose back, but I for one couldn't help much in the fight against humanity's most terrifying enemy."

"I know what that feels like." Cassiel says sympathetically. "To want to protect everyone, but to lack the strength. It... eats at you."

"It does." Belial nods. "I'm supposed to be the 'Second Emperor,' the second strongest of all demons. But I lost to Ose. I don't feel that strong. If anything, I feel quite weak. Useless. All I can do is sit here and heal people... but I do feel it's at least a valuable service that only helps the world improve. So in that regard, I'm... satisfied."

Belial smiles. She starts to say something else, but at that moment, a redheaded woman 'pops' into existence beside her and slaps her shoulder.

"No need to feel all down, Sister Samantha! And you're not weak at all! If you're bored, I might have the perfect job for ya!"

Belial glances at the newcomer. "Oh, Blinker. Were you listening in on our conversation?"

"Nah, just wandered in and heard that last bit." Blinker says, flashing a thumbs-up. She pays no attention to the two human women seated across from Belial. "I actually came because I had a favor to ask of you."

Belial stands up, rising to Blinker's height, as she has assumed her full-body size, complete with her cute butterfly wings and bright green dress.

"A favor? I'm a bit busy right now, but maybe I can help. You see, we just had some children die for the first time ever in the operating room..."

Belial explains the situation briefly to Blinker, taking care not to mention Cassiel or Soleil's involvement without their permission. After she finishes, Blinker's expression dims.

"Seriously? Three dead kids... and Gressil is at fault. Then in that case you'll definitely want to hear my proposal."

She pauses.

"Sam... I want you to help me hunt down Mephisto. And Yama, too. Our main goal is to kill those two and rescue Kar's soul."

Belial nods. "I thought it might be something like that. But are you sure? Wasn't Hope going to get Mephisto for you?"

"I don't know all the details," Blinker says, "but rumor on the grapevine has it that Hope never went to the Labyrinth at all. He's been doing some secret stuff instead. Neil told me so."

"Well, that's a bit selfish." Belial says with a frown. "But it doesn't change anything. You can't find Mephisto on your own. Even Jason's Wordsmithing can't detect him. He's hidden somewhere truly secretive. And as for me, I don't pay any attention to his movements so I won't know where to look either."

For a brief moment, Blinker pauses more awkwardly than ever before. She scrunches up her face and forces a smile while looking pleadingly at Belial.

"S-see, that's the thing, Sam. It won't just be me going, but the other fairies too."

"Right..." Belial says, suddenly suspicious.

"You know, Saria, Melia... Ruto..."

Belial continues to nod. "Mhmmmm...."

"And, well," Blinker says, finally biting the bullet, "I'll just say it! Beelzebub offered to guide me toward Mephisto's location and help us fight him!"

"BEELZEBUB?!" Belial shrieks. "Blinker, no! No, no, a thousand times, NO! I just *knew* you were acting suspicious! How could you even think of working with that slimy, worthless, no good, evil, murdering piece of shit?! He killed millions of humans, monsters, and demons! He killed my NIECE, Daisy! I'm talking about Jason and Phoebe's only daughter!! You can't trust that filthy snake in the slightest!"

Blinker lowers her head. "I... I don't know, Belial. He seems to have changed. I think he's trying to mend his old ways-"

"I don't give a DAMN what he wants to mend! Unless he can bring all the people he killed back to life, I will NEVER forgive Beelzebub!" Belial bellows, her voice traveling far enough across the hospital that people begin to lean out of their rooms to search for the commotion. "He deserves no forgiveness! If I had my way, I'd spent the next fifty years crushing his skull into pulp every time it regenerates, time after time after time!"

Blinker's expression becomes utterly glum. She seems to shrink in stature, despite her body's size not actually changing in the least.

"I... I know you hate him, Belial." Blinker whispers. "And I want people brought back too... but this is *my husband* I'm talking about."

She massages her lightly swollen pregnant belly, now only in its second month of pregnancy.

"I don't want Kar's babies to grow up without a daddy..." Blinker whimpers, her voice shaking as she avoids Belial's gaze. "I just thought as someone who also lost a husband... maybe you'd understand."

Visibly taken aback, much of Belial's rage vanishes as she recognizes the deep pain in Blinker's voice.

"Sorry. I flew off the handle a little. You didn't deserve that, Blinker."

The two women wordlessly embrace one another, forgiving each other for their accidental transgressions, then they sit down to talk things out.

"My point still stands." Belial eventually says. "I won't work with Beelzebub. I can't do it. But maybe someone else could help you fight Mephisto..."

"What about the Archangels?" Cassiel asks, drawing Blinker's attention for the first time. "I *hear* that Archangel Uriel is always looking for a reason to fight the demons. And nobody would complain if she were to get rid of some of demonkind's less-savory elements..."

Belial nods appreciatively. "There, see? Have you asked the Archangels yet, Blinker?"

"I haven't." Blinker says, before turning to Cassiel. "Thanks for that recommendation! And you are...?"

"Oh, I'm, ah, nobody important..." Cassiel says quickly. "I'm Cammy. This is my friend Serra."

"So it's Cammy and Serra." Blinker says politely, clearly not thinking them to be anyone of particular noteworthiness. "Well, you've given me a big hint for where to look next. So, thanks for that!"

Cassiel waves her hand politely. "No need for thanks, Miss Blanker."

"Blinker." Soleil coughs into her fist.

"Right! Blinker, sorry..." Cassiel quickly corrects her error. "I'm still trying to learn all the important names."

Blinker finds the interaction slightly amusing, but otherwise pays little attention to these two Plain Janes. She returns her gaze to Belial. "I do wish you'd join the attack squad, Sam, but I understand your hesitation. It'll probably be alright if it's just me, the other fairies, and Beelzebub, but if we can get the Archangels on our side, there's no way that bone-bastard will stand a chance!"

Belial knits her forehead in concern. "Don't underestimate Mephisto, Blinker. The last time our galaxy had an Emperor-level Necromancer, Valac terrorized the whole of Earth. You'll not only be fighting a fully realized necromancer, but also his Emperor-level servant, Zamiel, and Yama, to boot. Not only these elites, but potentially millions, even billions of undead servants. Any buried bodies become 'useful materials' for him, which is why Jason instituted a policy of either burying bodies along with powerful divine energies placed inside of them... or cremation."

Belial lightly raps her fingers on the arm of the lobby chair.

"We already know that at one point Mephisto possessed the corpse of the last dragon, Leviathan. It's entirely possible he may have other bodies at his disposal, or he may be seeking to 'create' more. But there is one further complication I fear you haven't imagined..."

"And what would that be?" Blinker asks.

"Kar's soul." Belial says quietly. "Mephisto no longer has access to the souls of humans. But he can still harvest the souls of dead demons and monsters. Demon souls are useless for uplifting other demons, but monster souls are at least a portion as potent as human souls. Which implies..."

The blood drains from Blinker's face. "Oh no! You don't think... he already ate Kar's soul?!"

"Don't jump to conclusions." Belial says, her tone casual. "If you were to give Kar's soul, which is about as strong as an Demon Emperor, to some unnamed Demon Grunt, you'd end up with a Demon Duke. It wouldn't be enough to make them an Emperor, at least not by my calculations. A Heroic Soul, like Jason or Hope's, would uplift any demon to the rank of Emperor. But that's just because humans are so damn compatible with demon physiology."

Blinker nods. She remains silent while Belial continues to explain this distressing but essential information.

"In any case, if I were a sick sadistic prick like Mephisto and I wanted to maximize the utility of Kar's soul, I wouldn't spend it all on one demon. Especially not at this point." Belial says. "Mephisto has a lot of enemies, but his list of allies grows thinner by the day. What I would do if I were him was collect some disloyal Dukes or power-hungry people and offer them each a *portion* of Kar's soul. But they can't just break pieces off whenever they want, they'd need to form a ritual to split its purity across all of the Dukes at once. By all accounts, Kar's soul possesses enough power to uplift, I don't know, five Dukes to the rank of Emperor? Maybe more, maybe less."

"But he's had weeks alone with Kar's soul." Blinker says glumly. "And he has a bunch of Dukes already following him. That means... Kar's soul is probably already..."

"Humph!" Belial snorts derisively. "Are you talking about his stupid necromancer lackeys? They're useless for promotion. Mephisto doesn't need six Emperors of Necromancy. They would only become his competitors. He needs to shore up his

weaknesses with minion abilities that complement his own. That means he'll have to go out looking for other Dukes willing to convert to his side."

Belial pauses. A thought strikes her, and her expression turns ugly.

"Willing to convert? That doesn't even have to be the case, now that I think about it. Mephisto could simply kill a Duke and nab their power for himself. Once they become his necromantic slave, he'll have a formidable army at his disposal. But has he thought that far ahead? Hmm..."

Soleil speaks up. "I believe your words have a 72.3% chance of being accurate, Emperor Belial. There are a large variety of Dukes across the Seven Hells. Trying to figure out which ones Mephisto might target will not be simple."

"At the least, before you go on your hunt," Belial says to Blinker, "I should alert the Hidden Emperors to Mephisto's scheme. Though I doubt they wouldn't have thought of this possibility themselves. It is pretty much Valac's playbook. It's also extremely hard to defend against. Mephisto can strike anyone, anywhere. We've already seen how he can evade the Wordsmiths by turning his soul immaterial..."

The two women hash their thoughts out a bit longer.

Eventually, they stand up and give each other another hug.

"Thank you for listening and giving me advice." Blinker says, as she pulls away from Belial. "I knew you wouldn't want to go, but I had to try asking."

"No hard feelings." Belial says, before her face turns grim. "But watch out for Beelzebub's machinations. I worry he'll try to take you out when you're at your weakest."

"I'll be fine." Blinker says, waving away Belial's concerns. "Oh, and thanks for the suggestion, you other two! I'll go visit the Archangels after this."

The Monster Queen departs after thanking Cassiel and Soleil for their words of encouragement, and the atmosphere becomes more harmonious.

At least, until some time later, when the hospital doors open and the families of the dead children arrive.

"Where's my baby?! Take me to see her! WHERE IS SHE?!"

"I'll rip apart whoever poisoned my little girl!"

"Where are our kids? Take us to see them!"

These rightfully outraged mothers and fathers lash out at Grima, who quietly and calmly accepts their words without judgment.

Belial, seated not far from the reception desk, winces.

"Alright. That's my cue. Cassiel, you can leave. I'll keep your name out of the report."

She starts to stand up, but so does Cassiel.

The Lazarite meets Belial's gaze.

"No. I will face them with you. We'll do it together."

Soleil frowns.

"Cassiel..."

Part 448: Linda's Love

Corporal Linda Hurent departs the Tarus II hospital with a heavy heart. Being the person who was supposed to watch over a dozen young girls as their caregiver and ensure their safety, the deaths of three of her charges leaves her feeling hollow inside. Her gloomy eyes gaze forward while she walks. Occasionally, a random person will wave hello at her, only to pause when they see the look of loss on her face. They try to get through to her, but their words ricochet off an invisible wall as she absentmindedly ignores them.

Three dead children. Three beautiful little girls. I was supposed to protect them. I failed.

Just like Cassiel, Linda entirely blames the deaths of the kids on herself. She regrets not thinking to bring any anti-venom with her. She regrets more things than she can count, a fact that makes her stomach sink into the pits.

All of a sudden, a car horn beeps out behind Linda, jarring her thoughts. She quickly spins around to see a compact military SUV behind her on the street leading west off the city plateau.

Samuel Baker leans out of the driver's side window. He narrows his eyes.

"Christ. You look like shit, Linda. Get in."

Linda nods numbly. She turns around, shuffles over to the passenger door, and clambers into the vehicle.

This SUV, a compact vehicle with only two seats, was made by Phoebe Hiro to be small, quiet, and efficient enough for use on civilian roads, yet rugged enough for off-road traversal in the open plains, allowing it to travel off the beaten path and scout out the greater area around Tarus II's main city.

Linda clicks her seatbelt into place, then glances at Samuel.

"...You heard?"

"It's all over the comms." Samuel says. "Three dead kids. Their souls devoured by a demon... Neil told me to come pick you up. He wants to talk to you."

"I was on my way to see him." Linda says. "Thanks. You're saving me a lot of trouble, Samuel."

"Mmm."

Samuel presses his foot down and gently accelerates, making his way down the crowded city streets past walls of humans, monsters, and demons, all intermingling and living together seemingly in harmony...

After a full minute of silence, Linda finally speaks.

"We have a murderer in our midst."

"Indeed we do." Samuel answers. "A demon."

"It's always a demon." Linda murmurs. "First I was deceived by Mara, and now some unknown assailant..."

"I asked Neil to assign me to the investigation team." Samuel says. "But he told me he has other plans. Wouldn't say what they were, though. Mind asking when you see him? I bet he'll open up to you."

"I can try. But it's the last thing on my mind." Linda says. "I just don't understand. *Why?* We have the Merit Tokens. Any demon can much more easily evolve through the Belial Booster than through killing and devouring a person's soul. Even if Tokens are a little harder to acquire lately, they're still quite plentiful and don't carry the risk of a major diplomatic incident."

"You speak as if a 'major diplomatic incident' isn't exactly what the murderer wants." Samuel says.

"What do you mean?" Linda asks, turning to look at the man. "You're telling me they want to foment hatred of demons?"

"You said it in your report." Samuel points out. "There were signs of chaos energy embedded in the children's bodies. The only demon we know who is capable of wielding that type of energy freely is Gressil. And Beelzebub too, I suppose, given his detonation at the end of Stormbringer. But analysts say that was a 'fluke.'"

"Right. A fluke." Linda grimaces. "So if Gressil is at fault, then what is his end-game? He sabotaged the power supply not too long ago, but we fixed that pretty easily. Killing three children is awful, but it doesn't seem like it will materially affect the human-demon relations all that much."

Samuel sighs. "For now, maybe not. But you forget one important thing, Linda. Demons live forever. It doesn't have to cause a war within some set time period. Don't you

see? The Emperor of Chaos can choose to slowly create incidents like this, and since we can't track him, it will cause a breakdown in our relations over a long, sustained period of time."

"But we know it's Gressil doing all this. Not the other Emperors or demons." Linda points out.

"Do we?" Samuel asks. He looks at her for a moment, then returns his eyes to the road and shakes his head. "I don't trust these fucking demons, and neither do you. Most of our fellow soldiers certainly don't. We have no idea if Gressil acted personally, or if someone else acted on his behalf. But me, I'm a gambling man. I'll bet Gressil has secret allies within the Hidden Emperors. They smile at us, shake our hands, and tell us the past is the past... but those old cunts are terrified. They know they're on a timer, we know they're on a timer, and they know *we* know this fact. Behind all the smiles, there's an undercurrent of fear as they watch their chances of returning to the top of the hierarchy plummet further every day."

"They're incentivized to work with Gressil..." Linda says slowly. "Because they want to destabilize humanity. But if we kick the demons out, they'll lose access to the Belial Booster, among our other toys."

"We won't kick them out." Samuel says, with more than a hint of disgust in his voice. "Because *Jason Hiro* doesn't want them gone. That stupid sap still wants to play house with our enemies. He thinks his overwhelming power means they won't dare retaliate. But even a blind man can see that isn't true. They don't have to declare war to cause us severe problems... or slowly weaken us through attrition."

"It's a good thing we have Hope and Neil on our side." Linda says. "Only they have the strength to stand strong against the tyranny of idiocy."

* * *

Linda and Samuel continue talking for ten or so minutes while the Lieutenant drives her to the outskirts of the northwestern military base. He drops Linda off, and she enters the complex without him. After Samuel drives away, Linda makes her way inside, where Debra ushers her toward Neil's office.

"Mr. Adams is waiting for you." Debra says.

"Thanks, Debra." Linda says, smiling at the pretty blonde secretary. After entering Neil's office, Linda pauses inside, then reaches behind herself and swings the door shut.

Sitting behind his desk, Neil Adams holds a feather with ink on its tip, and a litany of papers lay in neat arrangements on his desk. He doesn't immediately acknowledge Linda's presence, but instead finishes scrawling out a sentence with the black ink stuck to the quill's tip.

Linda slowly approaches his desk. She glances at the dizzying array of paperwork and raises an eyebrow. "You know this would all be much easier to manage and organize if you used digital files, Commander."

Neil finishes writing his sentence, then sticks the feather back into its tiny ink pot. He clasps his hands together atop his desk, then looks up at Linda.

"Yes, but I'm a little old fashioned." Neil says. "I always wrote with a feather when I worked under Napoleon, and I don't like to change my habits. They provide me a certain sense of... security."

"I can understand that." Linda says quietly.

"So, how are you, Miss Hurent?" Neil asks, leaning back and gesturing to the chair across from him, on the opposite side of his desk. "Aside from the no-doubt crippling feelings of guilt and anxiety that must be eating at you right now."

Linda gently sits in the luxurious chair and sighs deeply. "Surprisingly... a bit better, now that I'm here, Commander. It's always nice being in your company."

"These are trying times." Neil says. "Though they may not seem as such on the surface. People often gravitate to sources of strength when their hearts feel uncertain."

The two briefly fall silent.

"Three children dead." Neil says. "And an unknown demon is at fault. I've sent some people to collect samples from the bugs that attacked the girls. Perhaps we'll be able to detect traces of demonic energy on their bodies."

"I was right there." Linda mutters. "And I couldn't protect them."

"You did the best you could under the circumstances." Neil says. "More importantly, I'm surprised you didn't place more emphasis in your report on the positive development that resulted from that situation."

"Huh?" Linda asks, blinking in confusion. "What positive development are you talking about? Nothing that happened was good!"

"On the contrary." Neil says. "Don't you understand? That angel we rescued... Cassiel. She revealed herself to you and proceeded to levitate the girls all the way back to Heroic City. Had she not been there, the casualties may have been much higher."

Linda scrunches up her face. "Cassiel was devastated by their deaths. She may have blamed herself more than even I did..."

"She will get over them." Neil says with an odd amount of confidence. "Few know Cassiel's true identity. The angels have done well to keep her presence hidden. But as for me... I have extremely high faith in her future."

Even more confused than before, Linda slumps back in her chair. "You know her?"

"In a manner of speaking. Commander Napoleon came into contact with the Angels on many occasions. One of those times, he met the Daughter of Heaven. He spoke highly of her beauty... and her power."

Neil smiles.

"Of course, when we first rescued Cassiel, I had no idea who she truly was. But thanks to discussions with a few of the men under my command, it came out that Belial had revealed Cassiel's true identity to a pair of soldiers in the hospital. Luckily, I managed to silence those rumors. I wouldn't want our enemies finding out the truth..."

A flicker of realization passes over Linda's face. "She must be someone of some importance."

"Oh, indeed." Neil says, nodding sagely. "Lord Napoleon once told me in private that I must show absolute respect to the Daughter of Heaven. Not only is she a Lazarite, but the strongest one of all. A reborn human with powers that even caught the attention of the Archangels. He was only able to gaze upon her face in person once, but he claimed that her beauty came from the light of creation itself."

"High praise." Linda says respectfully. "It seems Napoleon was smitten with her."

"He claimed that she embodied the perfection of the ideal Frenchwoman." Neil says. "But by no means did my Lord feel any romantic interest in the Daughter of Heaven, only a deep respect embedded within his bones. And so, I carry that torch. I believe that if the

Wordsmiths should ever fail, she may yet become humanity's salvation. Our guiding light."

Neil lightly raps his fingers on his desk.

"She was terribly traumatized by what Gressil did to her. And yet, when the time came, she steeled her heart and revealed herself to save those children. She took a huge risk, exposing herself in the open like that... when the Emperors would surely wish to pluck her wings while she is vulnerable. I have nothing but respect for the fortitude of her heart. Even after 100,000 years tortured by the worst demon in existence, her Maiden's Heart remained defiant. Not even the worst torture could break her spirit..."

A smile plays upon Neil's lips, one that gives Linda a slight vibe of nostalgia.

The moment passes.

He sobers his expression, then turns to her.

"I called you here because I wanted to make sure you were doing well, mentally, Corporal. I imagine seeing those children die must be weighing terribly on your conscience."

Linda hangs her head. "You know what it's like to lose children, Commander."

He nods. "I do. All because of that Bahamut."

"I wasn't one of Bahamut's victims." Linda says. "I'm just a soldier from the first colony you liberated. Can you... tell me what it was like? Being under Bahamut's control?"

Neil frowns. He averts his eyes to look off to the side, at the artwork hanging on his walls.

"Six years have passed since I regained my freedom. When I toiled under Bahamut's spell, I could not control my thoughts, my emotions, or my observations. It was as if a parasite had taken over my existence and began leading me around by my nose. The disorientation I felt made it so that I perceived every second of my imprisonment, yet the time flew by in an instant."

"I remember the time before Bahamut as clearly as if it were only seven years ago." Neil continues. "One day, I was on the battlefield with my Lord, and the next, I was bowing to Jason Hiro, thanking him for freeing me. But at the same time, I remember every moment I lived as a monster, obediently doing anything Bahamut commanded me."

"You must miss your wife and children terribly." Linda says.

"The pain is still raw. Still fresh." Neil answers. "Time passes, but I never forget. Sometimes I even wonder why I bother doing all of this. I no longer have a family to return to. I no longer have a boy and girl who cry out to me when I come home... 'papa, papa!'"

Linda's expression becomes thoughtful. "I think I know why you stay here, Commander. Why you continue to fight the good fight."

"You do?" Neil asks. "Even I don't have all the answers."

"It seems obvious to me, from my outside perspective." Linda says. "You've suffered, but you don't want others to suffer. You know what it's like to lose a family to the demons. You take charge because you want other men to grow old with their wives and children. You want families to live free of the oppression of the demons. Even if you can no longer participate in that happiness... you hope it will 'redeem' you in the eyes of Karma. Make you worthy of someday seeing them again."

Neil slowly traces a finger across his lips while falling deep into thought.

"...Yes. That might be the case. I've lost Melia. I've lost Barth and Sierra. But there are others out there who still have families, who can still come home to their loved ones. I would not want them to suffer preventable losses."

He glances at the Corporal.

"And what about you? Do you have any family you've kept out of the limelight?"

His words, somewhat teasing, don't particularly spark any light in Linda's eyes.

"None. I joined your army as a new recruit from the world of Maiura. Freshly liberated from the demons, I was eager to join the resistance and fight back against them. After all... they slaughtered my entire family. If you had liberated Maiura just one year earlier, you might even have been able to save my sister's life..."

"I didn't realize you had a sister." Neil says quietly. "I'm... sorry we weren't fast enough."

"Lynne was my twin." Linda explains. "She and I were a matching set. Some demons thought that made us... desirable. One demon thought it would be funny if we weren't a set anymore. So he killed her."

She shrugs lightly.

"And just like that. She was gone."

"Their cruelty knows no end." Neil says. "I'm sorry you had to suffer that loss. But at least it means you always have some perspective. You know why we must never give up that fight to exterminate the bloodskins."

"It does, and I do." Linda nods in affirmation. "It's also why I respect your determination to keep fighting, even when you have no true skin in the game."

The two continue talking for a while longer, but eventually, their discussion shifts to other subjects.

Linda glances at the papers scattered around Neil's desk. "What have you been working on?"

"A bit of this, a bit of that." Neil says casually. "You see, the Wordsmith and I had a little chat not long ago. We've both decided it might be time for... the Big Split."

"Hm? What's that?" Linda asks.

"Humanity will separate into two super-colonies." Neil explains. "The population of each being based on who can woo more people. I've decided not to try and stay on Tarus II, but instead to move our base of operations to another world. What do you think about transitioning half of humanity to Maiura?"

Linda's eyes light up. "Truly? I would be honored if my homeworld became humanity's second home. But how many people do you think will join you there?"

Neil gestures to the papers before him. "That's what I am trying to determine. I have two weeks to carefully craft a speech that will sway as many hearts as possible, but I'm facing a difficult decision..."

He pauses.

"For obvious reasons, this second colony will *not* allow even a single demon to enter its confines. We will be forbidding them entirely. But what of the monsters? Those half-servants to demonkind? We've been treating them as humanity's natural allies, but I wonder if we wouldn't be better-off shunning them, too..."

"The monsters?" Linda asks. "Why would you have a grudge against any of them? I know many wonderful monsters who walk among our people. The fairies, for instance.

The minotaurs, reptilians like Kar..."

"But they are not human." Neil says simply. "They have stayed in our good graces due to a series of coincidences... but need I remind you? It was a monster who imprisoned me and countless others: Bahamut. She is even more my enemy than any demon ever was. Yet I am expected to keep quiet about the monsters living amidst our people. I cannot reconcile detesting demons with allowing monsters to remain in our ranks."

Linda hesitates. "I... I don't think banishing them from our ranks would go over well, Commander. With all due respect, I personally adore many of them. Blinker fought valiantly to save humanity. So did Yamir, who is also considered the best chef on Tarus II. Doctor Fathy has saved innumerable lives. There are countless other examples. Don't you think... you might be taking your hatred... a bit too far?"

Neil doesn't immediately respond. He becomes eerily quiet, as if lost in thought. The Commander swivels his chair partially to gaze out the window at the muted, sunny day outside, while his eyes flicker.

"I don't know. Perhaps I am. I'm less worried about offending the monsters, and more about how our human soldiers would take their loss on an emotional level. I fear it would damn me in the eyes of my men and women. They would hate me for saying such a thing, and it would shatter our cohesion. Better to simply keep quiet and pretend the monsters are the same as us... though I know they are not."

"Yes." Linda says. "Best to simply keep quiet..."

She and Neil stop talking for a short while. An awkward silence fills the air.

Neil clears his throat. "Ahem. Well, if you'll excuse me, Corporal, I must be getting back to work. Thank you for your time, and I hope you'll let me know if the situation changes with those children. I'm going to be putting a specialist on the task, soon enough."

He looks at Linda, but she doesn't move from her seat. Instead, she becomes oddly quiet, fiddling with her hands in her lap.

"Corporal?" Neil repeats.

Linda blinks twice, as if exiting a daze. "Ah! Yes, well... before I go, there was one other thing... Neil."

Her casual use of his first name slightly throws him off. "Hm? Is there something else on your mind... Miss Hurent?"

She nods slowly. "I've been meaning to ask you for a while, but I... I can't ever seem to muster up the courage."

"I am an open book." Neil says, spreading his arms. "There's no need to be afraid of bringing up indiscretions among your troops or other concerns. I won't judge."

However, his words don't seem to allay her concerns. Linda's ears turn slightly red at the tips as she coquettishly looks down at her lap, then back at her Commander.

"I... I might be being a little too bold, Neil." Linda says. "But I was wondering if you'd... like to... go somewhere with me. Privately. P-perhaps for a night on the town, even. If you'd like. But you don't have to feel obligated, or anything like that."

Neil blinks.

"Miss... Miss Hurent. Are you *propositioning* me?"

Linda stares awkwardly at him, then looks away.

"I knew I shouldn't have. I'm sorry, Commander. I don't know when to keep my mouth shut."

"No, no, it's fine." Neil says, frowning slightly. "I simply... didn't realize you looked at me in that way. I'm always so busy. I never particularly think about these matters."

Linda bites her lower lip. She looks back at Neil, trying hard not to blush. "I'm speaking out of turn, really. You can ignore me. I know you have Debra, so I really shouldn't have pushed my way in like that."

"Debra?" Neil asks. "Oh. You think it's... like that. No. I'm afraid it isn't."

Neil purses his lips for a moment. His eyes become unfocused.

"Debra and I were both monsters under Bahamut's command. I won't lie. When I awoke to a far-future hellscape where my family was long dead, I felt quite lost in that moment, and Debra was..."

He pauses.

"...she was there for me. And she does... greatly resemble... my wife, Melia. Perhaps even a bit too much. I immediately felt some thoughts of filling the hole in my heart with

her. But these days, it stings to look at Debra and think such things. I feel as if I might as well be replacing Melia with a clone and slapping her across the face."

Linda listens attentively. She shakes her head.

"If your wife knew the circumstances in which you disappeared, she would not blame you. She would understand the pain you've endured. She would want you to move on, I think. And so would your children. No doubt, they grew up to become a fine man and woman, a duo who would have made you proud."

"Yes. Maybe so..." Neil mutters.

Linda gathers up her courage and leans toward him. "I... truly respect you, Neil. I know what it means to lose my whole family. To be too weak to protect them. To feel like a failure. I always see you alone, isolated from the troops. It makes me wish I could help you fill up that void in your chest."

Neil chuckles. "So you pity me. This is a new feeling I've not experienced before."

"Not pity." Linda clarifies. "Like I said. It's respect. And... perhaps it's still too soon for you to move on from your family. I'll understand if it is. But why don't we... give it a try? Why don't we test the waters a bit? See if we're compatible."

"I'm your superior officer." Neil says. "I don't think it would be appropriate."

"Then I'll leave the military." Linda says, startling even herself with her boldness. "Should Jason and Phoebe not be together simply because they both hold high posts? Let's not make excuses, Neil. If you don't want to try... going out with me... then I'll understand. But I won't let the excuse of military rank hold me back."

Neil coughs. "Ahem! Are all Maiuran women as *bold* as you?"

"Don't know." Linda says. "I'm not all Maiuran women. I'm just me."

Neil nods. Then he falls silent.

Humanity's military commander turns his chair 180 degrees, hiding himself from Linda. He gazes through the window, falling deep into thought.

Several minutes pass.

Linda's expression begins to sink. She becomes embarrassed, thinking of all the ways she may have irreparably humiliated herself.

But finally, Neil speaks.

"...Alright. I'll give this a... a try."

"You will?!" Linda exclaims.

Neil turns back in his chair. He leans forward, rests his elbows on his desk, and smiles.

"I've been thinking about a great many things lately, Miss Hurent. About where humanity will soon go. What my place in its future will be. Leading a military campaign is fine and dandy... but you were right when you said I had no skin in the game. I've been living as a dead man, chasing after old grudges. Perhaps I need to develop my relationships more. Live a little more. Pursue more. Maybe then I will finally be able to see the bigger picture and know where humanity must advance next."

Linda nods seriously. "Maybe it won't work out between us. But I am glad you're at least willing to see where the wind takes us. I can't replace your Melia... and I wouldn't ever want to. But maybe I can offer something new."

"This isn't a business transaction." Neil says, standing up. He starts walking around the desk toward Linda, and holds out a hand, causing her heartbeat to quicken. "We're both mature adults. I won't deny that I do find you... attractive. But I won't know if I'm truly ready to move on until I take that first step."

Linda nods. She takes Neil's hand and allows him to pull her to her feet. The two of them stand closer than they ever have before, close enough that they can feel the breath on each other's faces.

"When do you have free time?" Linda asks softly.

"Today. Two hours from now." Neil says. "Why don't we take a boat ride out on the eastern lake? Say, four o'clock?"

Linda smiles, revealing her shining white teeth through her thin pink lips.

"Yes. I'd like that."

Part 449: Ambush on Diabolus

Mara, the Duke of Collection, stands inside the Labyrinth Core, along with a host of other low and high-level demons, all waiting for the chance to return to their homeworlds. While she waits, one of the highest-level demons from the Fifth Hell of Calamity walks over to her side.

"Hello, Mara." Says Crow, the blue-feathered Emperor of Sacrifice. The giant bird-like demoness bristles with strength exceeding what she possessed just two weeks earlier, likely the result of a personal visit or two to the Wordsmith. "Heading back to Diabolus, finally?"

Mara glances at the one being who might be the strongest of all the Emperors in the Fifth Hell. Despite Emperor Gorn being the most versatile with his many 'faces,' and Yumagi being a secretive powerhouse Mara would never bet against, the Duke of Collection knows that perhaps only Emperor Belial could beat Crow in a fistfight.

"I've put it off for a few days." Mara says, answering Crow's question. "But now that my freedom is assured..."

"You're lucky to be alive. Did you play a Card to alter your Luck?" Crow asks.

"I don't have a card that can do that." Mara snorts. "Would sure be nice if I did."

After a brief pause, Mara glances at the clock for the hundredth time, revealing that she has been waiting for over forty-one minutes for the damned portal to Diabolus to open.

"It's too bad." Crow says casually. "You would make for an excellent Emperor. But with those restrictions the Wordsmith placed on you, you can never ascend to the next rank. At least not through the Belial Booster."

Mara's expression doesn't become any gloomier. "Better than being dead. I waited over a hundred thousand years to become a Duke. I'm happy with this level of power. If I tried eating human souls to advance, the feedback from Jason's magic would probably kill me. Stepping up two ranks without adjusting to my current power level would also probably screw up my ego."

"Being stuck at Duke is no way to live." Crow says mildly. "Though, knowing you still have room to grow has its own comforts. If someday you do ascend, you will learn the new torture of never again being able to surpass your limits."

Mara glances sympathetically at the Emperor of Sacrifice. "I hadn't considered that before. Perhaps you can never reach a rank higher than Emperor... but what about Demon Deity?"

"What of it?" Crow asks. "Ca-caww! It is merely a dream. The only Emperor who has ever attained that level of power was Wolfram. And he barely enjoyed its majesty for a single hour before his body and soul immolated. Perhaps... it is too much for a mere Emperor to dream of permanently breaking the barrier."

Crow's expression momentarily becomes sullen and moody. She bristles her feathers, then crosses her arms and stands up a little straighter.

"But it is no concern of mine, at least for the immediate future. I am able to make small but impactful gains through the Wordsmith's magic, at least for now. Furthermore, my Rituals enable me to obtain minuscule, but permanent gains, gains which other Emperors can never enjoy."

"Permanent gains?" Mara repeats, glancing at her superior with a look of genuine respect. "You mean those rituals aren't only good for a temporary boost of power?"

Crow smugly smiles, her hawk-like eyes glancing sideways at the Duke of Colecion. "*Permanent*. Oh, certainly, the ratio of slaughtered souls to permanent power is truly wasteful. But when you have reached the peak, every single percentage of added strength makes a tremendous difference."

Her smile quickly fades, morphing into a scowl. "Though, I've unfortunately lost my human acolytes. They all teleported to Tarus II. I haven't performed a ritual since Ose's death. I probably won't be able to for a very, very long time... especially not with the Wordsmith watching."

"At least you can still exchange Merit Tokens for a boost." Mara says, shrugging.

"For now." Crow concludes. "But who knows how long the Wordsmith's magic will remain effective?"

The two demon leaders continue talking for a while. Eventually, a full hour later, the Warpgate to Diabolus opens, causing them both to roll their eyes.

"Finally!"

The two of them shove their way through the throng of demons and head through the portal first. Anyone from Diabolus who might dare to complain shuts their mouth when they realize it's the strongest demon of their entire Hell shoving her way to the frontline.

There isn't an isolated chance they'd dare speak up and cause their bodies to be splattered beneath Crow's fist!

Crow and Mara step through the portal first. When they arrive on the other side, Crow flaps her wings and pounces into the sky, departing Mara's side without a goodbye. As for her inferior, Mara take off in the opposite direction, heading toward the concealed base of the Tarot Sect.

Underneath Yumagi himself, Mara is now the second strongest member of her sect. Surprisingly, Yumagi has made no efforts to increase the number of elites under his control, but instead only opts to leave Mara as his lone Duke.

Mara races into the skies, across the horizon, flying through the use of one of her Silver Tarot Cards. As she flies, she frowns slightly.

This is the optimal time to increase our sect's power. Why, then, does our Master keep his survival a secret? Why does he refuse to empower his subordinates? If we're not careful, our Sect will fall far, far behind the other demonic organizations!

Unable to reconcile Yumagi's actions with the goals of all the other Emperors, Mara can only scratch her head in confusion.

For several minutes, she races tens of miles across the horizon. As she travels, Mara suddenly senses a pang of distress in the air; an upheaval of demonic energy. She pauses her flight to look downward, at the ground far below her. There, she sees a surprising sight. A Demon Duke, someone she is quite familiar with, battles a giant crocodile, someone emanating an aura of Demon Emperor!

"Raven!" Mara softly exclaims, after identifying the weaker of the two below her. "Why is the Duke of Feathers fighting an Emperor? Wait! I know that Emperor! What in damnation?!"

Mara's pupils shrink to pinpricks. She identifies the Emperor quickly, based purely on his physical appearance. After all, his body is exactly the same as the former Monster King, Kar's!

"Z-Zamiel? Then that means-?!"

Right as Mara realizes who is attacking Duke Raven, a creeping sensation of dread materializes behind her back. Before Mara has time to react, a violent strength smashes into her spine, firing her down toward the planet's surface like a cannonball.

"Aaaugh!"

Launched without warning, Mara's back screams in pain and her mind spins as the ground rushes toward her.

THOOM!

The Duke of Collection crashes into the rocks, pulverizing some of them into powder while also breaking over a dozen bones. She bounces off the ground and her vision goes black for a moment before she wakes up with stars in her eyes.

"Uhh... uhhhhh..."

Mara tries to pull herself together. But with several broken or fractured ribs and ten shattered teeth, she feels like a car wreck survivor, barely holding on.

A faint Emperor-level aura materializes above Mara. Her eyes bolt open as she spots a second enemy, none other than Emperor Mephisto himself!

"Kekeke!" Mephisto cries. "What great luck I posssesss! A sssecond Duke, come to deliver hersself to me on a platter! Hello, Mara! Don't you look delightfully tasssty today!"

"Muh... muh... fist... oh..." Mara gasps, while blood pools in her throat. She tries to move, but her back cries out in pain. Tears well up in her eyes as she lays near-paralyzed before the necromancer who struck her such a grievous blow.

Mephisto ignores her gasping words. He frowns at Zamiel. "Ssstop playing with your food! Kill the little bassstard already! You are an Emperor now! Thisss disssplay issssshameful, Zamiel!"

"Just getting used to my strength, boss!" Zamiel laughs. "This is the first time I've gotten to fight since you brought me back! Lemme have a little fun!"

"Imbeccile!" Mephisto snaps. "We are in hosssstle territory! The sssooner you kill that Duke, the sssooner we can leave before another Emperor comesss!"

Raven, the Duke of Feathers, glares hatefully at his opponent. His beautiful black feathers run red with his own blood, a sign of the terrible beating he's suffered.

"Ca-caww!" Raven shrieks. "I sensed Crow's return only minutes ago! You fools! When my master detects your presence, she will rush here and kill you both! Your pathetic, weak little bodies will crash against hers like the ocean against the shore. You will crumble! You will FALL!!"

Zamiel doesn't even blink at Raven's taunt. "Idiot. Crow went entirely the other way. Haven't you realized? My boss put up a Soul Suppression Seal on the area. Nobody knows we're here unless we want them to know. Like that dumb little bitch over there, hahaha!"

Zamiel directs a jeering look Mara's way.

"You really think some woman's going to come and save you, Raven? One already tried, and now she's on the ground, broken and crying! Useless broads, bahaha!"

Mara's agony-filled body suddenly flickers with power. In the instant between instants, she decisively pulls a card out of her Mind Realm then manifests it in reality.

Mephisto's head swivels in her direction. "No!"

He fails to react in time. Mara coughs out the activation command.

"Temporal Cricket... **EVOKE!**"

At once, time reverses around Mara, undoing all of the damage she has sustained! Mephisto pounces at her, raising his fist to smash her chest in pulp. But unfortunately, before his blow can connect, Mara shimmers to the side, flickering in and out of reality through a card she already had Enchanted onto herself earlier.

"Accursssed woman!" Mephisto howls. "YAMA! Get out here!"

Mara's heart turns to ice as she feels the aura of a third Demon Emperor emerge, none other than the Emperor of Shadows himself!

A fist made of blackness rushes at Mara's back. She shimmer-shifts to the side, barely dodging the attack that would have surely broken her bones all over again. But unfortunately, she ends up right beside Raven, in between all three Emperors in a triangular formation.

With her cards on a short but crucial cooldown, Mara lacks an immediate solution to her problem. And perhaps, even if she were to draw a card, she might just obtain one

useless for this situation!

Mara's heart turns chilly as the Emperors of Legions, Shadows, and Weaponry surround her and Raven. In the best of circumstances, two Dukes might be able to duel a single Emperor long enough for reinforcements to arrive, or perhaps for the two Dukes to make a lucky escape.

But against three Emperors?! Neither of the two have a bat's chance in Hell of making it out with their lives!

Raven, sensing the true futility of the situation, becomes eerily calm.

"I see. I thought it was strange you attacked me of all people. But while one Duke might be an oddity, two cannot be a coincidence. You need us for some nefarious purpose."

Mara grits her teeth. "It's not a secret! They possess Monster King Kar's soul! They must want to kill us and turn us into Mephisto's undead Emperor-slaves!"

"Kekeke! A good guessss!" Mephisto 'praises' Mara. "Indeed. Your bodiesss and sssoulsss will provide sssome ussse to me in defending my future reign. But whether you die or sssurvive, it matterssss not. There are plenty of other Dukesss I can ussse for my purposssssss. And with three Emperorsss at my disssposssal, I can even consssider attacking other issolated Emperorsss. In the end... a Necromancccer will alwaysss become the mossst powerful of all demonssss!"

Raven's eyes turn cold. "If you want to take me... you won't do so alive. I'll self destruct my body and soul. You will receive *nothing* from me."

He raises his hand to his chest...

THUMP!

Yama's fist leaps out of a nearby shadow and crashes against the back of Raven's skull, catching the Duke unaware and smashing him facefirst into the dirt!

Whatever method he was about to use to kill himself utterly fails!

With half his face crushed into pulp, Duke Raven becomes utterly disoriented. He fails to protect himself when Yama's shadow lance follows up, stabbing directly into his heart and slaying him on the spot.

"RAVEN!" Mara shrieks. "You murdering bastards!! You killed him!!"

Zamiel rolls his eyes. "Duh. Stupid bitch. That was always the plan. We're going to kill you, too."

Mephisto summons Valac's Lantern. He grabs Raven's soul before it can fly away, then sucks his body into the dirt to send it into his Necromantic Domain, where he can 'make use' of it later. Then, he and the other two turn their attention to Mara.

"You'll have to do this yourselves." Yama says to Mephisto and Zamiel. "Satan put a restriction on us. When we attacked Mara earlier, we suffered terrible soul-pain! That damned Devil, how dare he bind this glorious Emperor with his vile soul contracts?!"

Mephisto nods. "You are unable to ssstrike femalessss. But that iss fine. Zamiel! Crush thisss woman! I will limit her movementss! And watch out for her Tarot Cardsss... they are decceceptively powerful!"

Zamiel lifts a massive greatsword made of demonstone. He licks his lips while eying Mara like a piece of marinated meat.

"I'm on it, boss!" Zamiel roars, pouncing at the Duke of Collection.

In that instant, Mara whips out a Golden Card, one she's not used in a long, long time.

"Light of the Lion, **EVOKE!**"

Instantly, a light brighter than that of the midday sun blasts out of every pore in Mara's body, causing Yama to leap backward and shriek in agony, while also visibly stunning Zamiel and Mephisto. The former becomes so dazzled that his attack uselessly whiffs past Mara's position. She shimmers away, neatly evading him while leaping skyward to try and flee.

Just as Mara is about to put distance between herself and her three adversaries, ten undead Harpies erupt from the nearby cliffside and fly at her. While individually weak, and absolutely not a match for a Demon Duke, they manage to get in her way and delay her escape long enough for Zamiel to blink the stars out of his eyes.

Mara swings her fists with reckless abandon. She easily shatters the skulls and splatters the brains of these weak undead monsters, but before she can fly higher, Zamiel leaps at her from below and grabs her ankle.

"Get back down here!" Zamiel laughs, yanking with all his strength. He tears Mara out of the sky and flings her at the ground with his Emperor-level strength, making her shriek in fright as a repeat of Mephisto's earlier action plays out.

BOOM!!

Mara slams into the dirt and shatters her left arm, breaking it in five different places. At the same time, the side of her head crashes into a rock, jarring her senses and leaving her to crumple into a ball, shaking and trembling like a beaten dog.

Soundless sobs escape Mara's throat. She wheezes and gasps, unable to move, as all of the wind escapes her body.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mara spots Zamiel raising his greatsword to impale it into her stomach.

But she lacks the strength to fight back.

She is only a Duke.

And a Duke can *never* defeat an Emperor.

Zamiel stabs the sword toward Mara's defeated form. His eyes flicker with hunger.

The instant before that sword can kill her...

Foop!

Mara vanishes!

Zamiel's sword impales her former position, blasting apart the dirt and rock, yet failing to create the result he expected.

"What?!" Zamiel howls. "Another trick?"

A moment later, he and the other two Emperors sense two demonic presences in the area, presences that certainly were not there only a moment before.

All three of the necromancer's allies turn their heads upward, where they see Mara laying on the flat of the cliff above, still a badly injured husk of her former self. At the same time, a female Warper stands in front of her protectively.

Ying-Ying!

Having communicated with her sister through their magical earring-links, Mara alerted her sister to her dire circumstances. Ying-Ying opened a portal and rescued her sister at the last second!

But what truly startles the three Emperors is neither Mara, nor Ying-Ying...

It is the young, extremely handsome male Emperor beside them.

Mephisto's undead heart nearly leaps out of his chest.

"No! No, impossible! Emperor Yumagi?! You perisshed! We sssenssed your sssoul disssipate! Your body fell to dusst!"

The valiant, heroic-looking Glyphmancer stands tall, his chest puffed out, looking disdainfully upon the three who nearly claimed the life of his precious Duke.

"You saw me die? Mmm. Perhaps I did." Yumagi says casually. "But don't worry. Death is only a temporary state for this God Emperor. My abilities are far beyond your comprehension, oh great Imitator of Valac."

"IMITATOR?!" Mephisto roars. "I am sssuperior to that ancient fosssil! He perisshed, while I remain among the undying! How dare you inssult my greatness!"

Yumagi stares evenly at the Emperor of Legions.

"Did you say something? Forgive me. I'm presently debating how I should go about killing the three of you in the most excruciating manner possible. You see, I really don't like it when someone damages my *property*. I have *invested* a great deal of time and energy into my cute little Mara... and I won't tolerate such an affront to my authority as what you've done today. You just *had* to take things a step too far..."

Mephisto visibly appears undaunted. However, as a demon who has always been just a bit cowardly, he mentally shrinks back at Yumagi's threat.

Mephisto might be a bastard, but he is no fool.

He remembers well how Yumagi performed during the battle against the Cherubiim.

Yumagi may have 'died,' but it was his terrifying power that initially gave the demons an advantage against the Archangels. Were it not for Raphael's reality-defying soul strength, the Archangels might have died on that day...

Yumagi absentmindedly glances off into the horizon, as if carefully debating the manner in which he will dispatch the three Emperors before him. He casually flicks his fingers, summoning a card into his hand.

"Temporal Cricket, **Evoke.**"

Just like Mara did earlier, Yumagi instantly brings her back to perfect condition, undoing all of the damage she sustained, effortlessly.

"Hmm. It's a bit troublesome..." Yumagi says, while Ying-Ying helps Mara to her feet. "Three Emperors against one... it won't be a fair fight."

Zamiel smiles wickedly. "Now that you mention it, I bet it won't! Come on, boss! The three of us can kill this nobody easily! He's outnumbered!"

"Fool." Yumagi groans. "I meant it wouldn't be fair for *you*. Perhaps if there were *five* of you it might be a fair fight... bah. Mara, come here."

Under the bewildered gazes of Mephisto's cohorts, Yumagi materializes three Tarot cards in his grasp.

"Master's Calling, **Evoke.**"

One of the cards vanishes! In its place, a female Demon Baron appears, instantly teleporting into a crouched position at Yumagi's feet.

"Sister Xena?" Mara asks, slightly bewildered.

A blood-haired demoness with seductive cherry lips and black leather tightly sticking to her skin stands up from her crouched position. She glances around, taking stock of her surroundings.

"Master Yumagi?" Xena asks. "Why am I...?"

"You have a task to fulfill." Yumagi answers. "You and Mara both. You will fight Emperors Mephisto and Zamiel. As for Yama, he is presently unable to battle against women. He will sit this fight out, as will I."

Xena turns pale. She quickly looks down the cliffside at the three Emperors below, her pink skin turning pale white.

"You wish for me to fight an Emperor? Master, with all due respect, I am only a Baron!"

"And I'm only a Duke!" Mara exclaims. "Barons and Dukes cannot defeat Emperors!"

Yumagi stares at his two disciples. He shakes his head in disappointment.

"Fools. Do you think this Glyphmancer cannot divine such a simple truth? That is why you will not fight them as you are now."

He holds up the two remaining cards in his grasp.

"Heroic Empowerment, **Evoke!** Aspect of the Dual Dragons, **Imbue!**"

In succession, Yumagi activates the first card, applying its effect to the second. When the second activates, its effect splits in half and races into the chests of Mara and Xena both!

To the absolute terror of the three Emperors below, Mara and Xena's aura begin to explosively rise, shooting into the stratosphere! Mara achieves a level of power she never expected to receive for the rest of her life, jumping to the rank of Emperor, while her sect-sister jumps two entire ranks to that same level!

Demonic power surges through their veins, shaking the continent and sending earthquakes in all directions. At the same time, Yumagi grabs the backs of both women's necks, sending magical cards into their Mind Realms.

He drops his sect-members to the dirt, then crosses his arms.

"Very good. You will remain in that state for one hour. I hope to see your opponents dead before the time runs out."

For the briefest of moments, every person present falls utterly silent.

Mephisto's cold, undead heart chills to ice.

Yama remains motionless, having been 'spared' by Yumagi from having to uselessly fight these women.

As for Zamiel, the 'epic beatdown' he was imagining in his mind completely reverses from a hilarious three-versus-one into a terrifyingly fair two-versus-two.

Mara stands up. She cracks her neck.

"Thank you, Master. I do have a *bone* to pick with that necromancer."

"I'll take the croc, then." Xena says, smiling sweetly.

Then... they both rush toward their foes in the gorge below.

Part 450: Sects Strike the Shadows

Mara, the Duke of Collection, and Xena, the Baron of Trading. Not long ago, they were roughly as powerful as one another. Both of them were Barons. While Mara was listed as the public face of the clan and often referred to as the 'leader' of the Tarot Sect, her actual demonic strength, like that of every other member aside from Yumagi himself, never exceeded the rank of Baron.

But that changed thanks to the Belial Booster.

Mara stepped into the next tier of demonic power, placing herself truly ahead of all her sect-mates, making them deeply envy her good fortune. Even the judgment by the Wordsmith that she would never be allowed to step into the rank of Emperor didn't temper their envy. After all, fewer than a percent of a percent of all demons would ever have the opportunity to earn enough souls to become a Duke.

But at this moment, as the two women charge toward the enemies below, Xena finds herself in that lofty position, temporarily strengthened to the rank of Emperor through Yumagi's mystical Tarot powers.

The Heroic Empowerment elevates one demon to a rank far above their station, while the Aspect of the Dual Dragons duplicates that effect to a second individual, allowing Xena to rise along with her sect-sister.

Together, the two of them form a terrifying duo... the first ever public battle between two Emperors capable of wielding the power of Tarot Cards!

Xena lunges toward Emperor Zamiel and his stolen crocodilian body. She motions with her hands to draw a Tarot card, but her heart jumps into her throat when instead of one card appearing in her grasp... three cards materialize!

What?!

Mara also experiences that same shock. Unlike her fellow disciple, she has become quite familiar with the elevation of her abilities after she reached the rank of Duke. Mara became capable of maintaining ten sustained Tarot abilities at once through their Imbue effects, but that still pales in comparison to the awesome ability granted by her Emperor level empowerment.

Three cards at once? Mara mentally shrieks in delight. *How can any other Emperor possibly defeat me now?!*

Indeed. This simple boost does more than grant her a couple of extra options in battle. It essentially triples her strength, a boost to her demonic power almost never seen when demons jump from Duke to Emperor!

Not only can Mara and Xena summon three cards each time they 'draw' from their Mind Realms, but they can draw cards every five seconds in battle, rather than every ten.

Added together, this means they can activate up to six abilities every ten seconds, instead of only one.

A sixfold increase in combat strength!

Mara rushes toward the necromancer below her.

"Thorns of the Raven, **Imbue!** Eldritch Dragon, **Imbue!** Secret Effect, **Trap!**"

Mara fingers transform into bird-like claws. Leathery dragon-wings sprout from her back. At the same time, she invokes a trap effect, providing her a secret benefit as that card dematerializes.

BOOM!

Mara crashes into Mephisto's figure and smashes him into the dirt, stunning the necromancer's senses. Before she can deliver a follow-up blow, he dives underground and tries to run away, only to comically *splat* against a magical force-field just thirty feet below him.

"What?!" Mephisto roars. "A magical barrier? We've been trapped! That Yumagi TRICKED usss!"

The necromancer whips out his dagger and starts desperately slashing at the invisible barrier barring his escape, but a yanking sensation grabs onto him and starts dragging him back toward the surface.

"No, no, no!" Mephisto howls in alarm. "Let go of me, you insssidiousss wench!"

Mara's latest attack comes from the effects of yet another three cards, all of which she imbues onto her body. One of them grants her a form of somewhat weak telekinesis, which she uses to yank Mephisto out of the dirt while also charging electricity onto her claw-hands.

"Come here Mephisto! I've got a present for you!" Mara laughs maniacally as she pulls Mephisto right into the path of her awaiting fist.

Mara's strength, empowered with the metaphorical might of a bear, allows her to launch a punch capable of destroying tanks directly at Mephisto's skull. The instant before her attack lands, Mephisto narrows his eyes and explodes into smoke, becoming totally invisible while dispersing himself over a large region. Mara's attack harmlessly whiffs through him, ultimately exploding in midair to discharge a burst of electric energy over the surrounding area.

"Coward! Try standing your ground and fighting for once!" Mara challenges. "Unless you admit you can't beat even one lousy Fake Emperor!"

At the same time as Mara and Mephisto's war, Xena and Zamiel also come to blows. However, unlike his boss, who does not perform well in physical engagements, Zamiel is a prolific combat veteran possessing the powerful body of the former Monster King, Kar. His strength goes well above what he would have possessed himself as an Emperor, and his scaled hide gives him quite the resilient defenses. The only downside is that Zamiel's soul-strength is only that of a Duke. This means his magical abilities are not nearly as strong as his physical body.

Xena opts to deal with the scale-thief by bombarding him from afar. She continuously imbues her body with magical effects, many of which come from Tarot Cards she has never seen before! Thanks to the mystical magic passed down to all of Yumagi's disciples, they possess the unique ability to instantly identify the effects of any Tarot Card they touch in all its activatable forms.

Thus, even when Xena finds herself continuously drawing ten and twenty cards she has never seen before in her life, she still instantly understands their effects and what will happen when she casts them.

"Mountain From the Sky! **Imbue!** Godsworn Hurricane, **Evoke!** Sun Guardian of Cairo, **Summon!**"

One after the other, Xena imbues her body with an array of mystical traits, becoming something of an eldritch monster with a horrifying array of abilities. While imbue might provide the second weakest of all Tarot effects, it also has a 100% success rate in casting, doesn't damage the card, and lasts a full ten minutes until the effect runs out, making it one of the most reliable methods to use during combat. Only Enchanting

specific objects, pieces of armor, or other things summoned by Tarot cards is more reliable, albeit a tad weaker.

Most shockingly, after ascending to the rank of Emperor, Xena becomes just as delighted as Mara when she finds out she can now maintain a whopping twenty active Tarot effects! This primarily relates to Imbuing and Enchanting, but also one of her strongest auxiliary Tarot abilities...

Summoning!

Xena finishes up her fifth round of card activations by conjuring the image of an ancient Egyptian Titan to reality. Thanks to the mystical methods behind Yumagi's Tarot creation powers, this card is somehow able to materialize the physical manifestation of a twenty-foot-tall Titan in the physical realm, though one that ultimately acts as nothing more than a soulless construct, rather than a summoning of the original figure.

Zamiel's eyes widen in shock as, while Xena continues attacking him with her imbued powers, a massive figure materializes behind her, the manifestation of the ancient Titan known as Sun God, Ra.

Shining with golden light, Ra's sculpted muscles make him truly resemble a deity towering above mere mortals. His falconic head peers into the distance, looking beyond the mortal realm into that of the immaterial. His armored gauntlets grant him incredible offensive and defensive potential in hand to hand combat, completed by the golden snake-staff held in his grasp.

The instant Ra's summoning completes, the ancient Titan turns his gaze toward the ten-foot-tall crocodilian who barely reaches his waist. He stomps toward Zamiel, forcing the Duke of Weaponry to retreat while also defending against Xena's onslaught.

"Two against one?!" Zamiel complains. "That's not fair!"

"Neither is stealing someone else's body!" Xena shouts.

Her body moves with the speed and power of a hurricane. She races around Zamiel, beating him from the front and back with gales of wind and bolts of thunder while her summoned construct, Ra, unleashes blasts of searing flame upon the Duke of Weaponry.

While Zamiel's Duke-level magic might not be comparable to that of his opponents, he still holds his own. He conjures Qi to form a thin shield of energy around his body. He strikes back at Xena, using his claws to try and shred her skin down to the bone.

Over the next several minutes, Xena continues activating dozens of Tarot cards. Sometimes she dispels different effects to bring forth new ones, but always she tries to maintain the maximum limit of twenty effects so as to maintain pressure on Zamiel.

At one point, Xena flings a Tarot-empowered spear at Zamiel's back during a moment of distraction. But this proves to be a mistake! Zamiel's mastery of weaponry has become so incredible that any attack launched against him through non-magical means has a good chance of being stolen by him. And he does exactly this! Zamiel spins on his heel, snatches the spear an instant before it impacts him, and transforms it into his own weapon.

"Stupid woman!" Zamiel cackles. "Thanks for the gift!"

"Shit!" Xena curses. She tries to undo the conjuration of this Tarot-artifact, but finds that Zamiel has enveloped it in Qi to temporarily make it his own! For the next ten minutes, he now possesses a weapon he can wield as an implement of destruction!

Zamiel launches an offensive. He charges and stabs at Xena to try and impale her on her own spear, but her summon frustratingly continues blasting him with fire and light, burning his back and royally pissing him off.

"If my little bro was still here, we'd have made mincemeat of you!" Zamiel shrieks.

"Too bad he died to the claws of that very same body you've possessed!" Xena taunts back. "It must feel wonderful, living in the skin of your brother's killer!"

"BITCH!"

Meanwhile.

As Mara and Xena beat the crap out of their opponents, Yama watches from the sidelines, anxiously wanting to jump in and help out. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions on his soul, placed by Satan the Devil... he can't hurt a woman without suffering terrible backlash to his soul!

And even if he did want to help, Yama simply can't, all due to Yumagi's presence!

"Damn!" Yama curses. "We cannot survive without Mephisto's protections. If he dies here, the Wordsmiths will be able to locate us! Then it will truly be over for us..."

Yama grits his amorphous teeth. He transmits a brief string of telepathic words to Mephisto.

I'll try to break free of Yumagi's barrier! Once I've made an opening, you and Zamiel should escape through it!

Without waiting for a reply, Yama darts away from the battle. He crashes against the barrier enveloping the battlefield, transforming his shadows into a series of battering rams. Over and over, he beats against the wall of invisible energy, trying desperately to make an opening so he can escape.

Before Yama can succeed, a figure materializes behind him.

"Going somewhere?" Yumagi asks.

Yama quickly spins to face his enemy. "You! We do not fear you! If you attempt to hinder us, we will fight back!"

Multiple dots of light glow on Yumagi's forehead, indicating the Tarot effects he continues to maintain. He stands with his arms crossed, looking down the bridge of his nose at the Emperor of Shadows.

"I'd be happy to fight you, Yama. But are you *sure* you want to go that route? If I can handle a handful of Archangels, well... I fear the pain I might cause you to suffer if we come to blows. You and I are *such* good friends, too."

Yama's shadowy heart turns chilly as he feels the Glyphmancer's stare beating down on him. He struggles to utter a comeback, but in his heart of hearts he knows he poses no threat to Yumagi.

Even the Archangels could not resist his Tarot Magic until they transformed into the Cherubiim. What chance do we stand in a fight?

With Yama unable to properly fight against two of his opponents and Zamiel's soul-strength significantly weaker than that of his direct opponent, the only demon on their side who seems to have an equal level of fighting strength compared to his enemy is Mephisto.

But Mephisto certainly does not seem to be much of a brawler! His greatest strengths lay in flooding the battlefield with cannon fodder to overrun weaker opponents. As for taking on enemies of equal or greater strength, Mara quickly realizes that he is far out of his league!

"You're pathetic, Mephisto!" Mara cackles. "To think I was afraid of you before... that's only because you were an Emperor and I was a Baron! But now I see that you're the

weakest of your entire rank!"

Mephisto maintains his mist-body form, his strongest defensive ability that allows him to scatter apart and weave around Mara's attacks. Despite the inherent danger in her electrically imbued claws and fists, Mephisto manages to evade her attacks by virtue of becoming all but entirely incorporeal.

Mara might as well be trying to smother the morning fog by waving her hands around like an idiot!

As the minutes pass, Xena manages to gain ground against Zamiel, blasting him backward with her attacks, though not necessarily dealing a lot of direct damage due to his physical defenses. But as for Mara, she becomes frustrated at her inability to land even a glancing blow on Mephisto.

"Stand still and fight like a man!" Mara snarls, while pulling a card out of her Mind Realm. "Thunder Giant, **Evoke!**"

Mara's imbued abilities fail to deal any damage to her opponent, so she instead resorts to her strongest single-action type of attacks. Evocations! This causes her to instantly unleash the full power of a Tarot Card, albeit at the cost of making it unusable for the next seven hours.

While this might be a grossly inefficient way of using her abilities, the tradeoff is a massive burst of magic capable of overcoming her opponent's defenses!

A huge fist made of thunder roars out of Mara's soul, blasting the area around and directly in front of her with a thunderous BOOM!! Mephisto cries out in pain as he finally eats a portion of electrical damage directly to the face. His mist-body destabilizes, and he jolts back into reality, falling out of the air to return to his physical form.

The Emperor of Legions crashes to the dirt with a violent *thud* and grinds to a stop. He weakly looks up as Mara races toward him.

"Gotcha!" Mara exclaims, while an evil grin crosses her face. "You've got nowhere to run now, Mephisto!"

She lifts another card, preparing to evoke it upon her helpless enemy. But at that moment, Mephisto's eyes gleam in a manner most sinister.

Having spent the last few minutes preparing a powerful series of spells, Mephisto presses his teeth together and focuses his mind and soul...

"Ssstupid woman... overconfidencce iss a ssslow and insssidiousss killer... **DARK MISSST!**"

Mephisto abruptly levitates to his feet and raises his arms. An instant later, a thick and viscous cloud of darkness explodes from his body, the very same ability he used during Stormbringer! But this time, the ability is ten times more potent, traveling in all directions and flooding the area with a fog so dense that every combatant's vision becomes reduced to a fraction of their previous level!

Yumagi's barrier, created for the purpose of trapping his enemies in place, instead transforms the region into a giant glass jar, one which fully contains not only Mephisto's minions, but also his Dark Mist. The pitch-black fog completely smothers everyone's vision, all except for those most adept in fighting within its confines...

And who just so happens to fit that criteria? None other than Mephisto himself, his undead minions...

...and Yama.

Yama, previously appearing useless and frightened, suddenly grins evilly at Yumagi.

"Heh heh heh... finally. Mephisto used it."

Without warning, he lunges at Yumagi, startling the Glyphmancer! The Emperor of Shadows achieves his highest level of power as he explodes his Shadow Realm outward, engulfing Yumagi in its confines and forcing him to go on the defensive.

At the same time, Xena finds her vision terribly diminished. While demons can indeed see quite well even in pitch blackness, along with their other sensory abilities, this still pales in comparison to Zamiel himself, who has spent thousands of years training under his 'boss' to fight in the Dark Mist. Additionally, as one of Mephisto's undead, he doesn't suffer the slightest loss of vision at all!

"It's time to turn the tables, woman!" Zamiel roars. "No more card games for you!"

With one move, Mephisto instantly reverses the momentum of battle. He begins racing around within the blackened fog, pulling out his Pain Dagger to strike at Mara's sides and back. Inside the Dark Mist, Mephisto's speed and agility quadruple, turning him into a terrifying wraith that Mara simply can't keep up with!

Shik, shik, shik!

"Aaaieeee! Nnnnn!!!"

Mara screams as Mephisto unleashes Pain Inducement upon her. While his attacks don't deal any physical damage, they cause her pain receptors to violently seize up, preventing her from activating Tarot Cards. The excruciating agony forces her teeth to grind together, as if she's been struck by a dozen lightning bolts. Mara tries to twist around and claw at the necromancer dogging her, but he deftly weaves beneath her palm strikes to stab her stomach, her thighs, and even her feet.

Meanwhile, the sole shining beacon of light on the battlefield is none other than Xena's summon, the Titan Sun God, Ra. Ra emits light brilliant enough to pierce a bit of the gloom, but even his brilliance pales compared to Mephisto's full-power Emperor strength. As a mere summon conjured by a Tarot Card, Ra does not have the true power of his original Titan body, nor does he have the soul strength or intelligence, either.

But still, Ra continues to supplement Xena's strength, allowing her to put up more of a fight inside the Dark Mist than her sect-sister can. Xena begins rapidly evoking cards to pummel and blast Zamiel, forcing him backward. But at the same time, Zamiel doesn't just take the beating passively. He weaves from side to side, evading her attacks wherever possible.

"You'll have to do better than that, woman!" Zamiel jeers after dodging a massive fireball. "I'm not gonna go down easy!"

Without warning, Zamiel dives toward the dirt. Xena experiences a terrible shock when he reveals a secret ability, the power of earth manipulation! Stolen from the soul remnants of none other than Monster King Kar himself, Zamiel dives under Xena's feet, then clamps his claws onto her ankles from below to yank her into the dirt. Xena shrieks in fright as she plunges waist-deep into the soil, only managing to save herself by lashing an imbued shadow-tendrill out at the nearby cliff-face to hold on.

"Let go of me!" Xena yells.

A moment later, Zamiel swims underneath her, opens his crocodilian maw, and bites onto her legs. Xena screams as the Duke of Weaponry entangles her with his body and begins spinning underneath the soil.

He initiates a death roll!

Immediately, Xena loses her grip on the cliffs above. Her magically imbued body becomes worthless as the crocodile yanks her fully beneath the soil and begins spinning around as if he were in a lake of water rather than underground soil. Unable to fight back,

Xena's face repeatedly smashes against rocks. Soil embeds in her nose. Blood pours from her legs. She tries to scream, but only ends up with huge mouthfuls of dirt that suffocate her.

In less than 30 seconds, Xena falls unconscious!

Unable to fight back, she becomes totally powerless under Zamiel's strength. The crocodilian suddenly releases her legs, then 'swims' up her body before rearing his claws back for a deadly strike.

RIIIP!!

Zamiel impales Xena's heart, killing her on the spot.

The beautiful blood-red-haired Baron of Trading perishes to Zamiel's combat prowess!

The moment she falls, Mara and Yumagi both gasp. They sense the disappearance of her life-force through their shared Tarot Link, leaving them in deep shock.

"Suh-sect-sister!" Mara gasps, in between Mephisto's attacks.

"BASTARD! You dare kill one of my disciples?!" Yumagi roars, still trapped inside Yama's Shadow Realm. "Wrath of Sol, **EVOKE!**"

At once, a stunning brilliance explodes inside Yama's domain of absolute darkness. His army of shadow-walkers and Shades screams in fright, scattering as quickly as they can while a counter-domain of absolute light erupts like a bomb, blasting apart the shadows.

An instant later, Yumagi bursts out of the shadows and back into the material realm, he aims his sight in the direction of Xena's fallen form.

"Ruler's Reclamation Right, **EVOKE!**"

Zamiel raises his guard, anticipating some form of brutal attack. However, to his mild surprise... nothing major seems to happen. A faint trail of magic departs Xena's soul and returns to Yumagi, but otherwise, her body remains untouched.

Hm? Zamiel thinks. What the hell did Yumagi do? I thought he was going to attack, but he didn't?

Yumagi turns his attention to Mara.

"Disciple! We're leaving! Temporal Cricket, **Evoke!** Rising Star, **Evoke!**"

Yumagi heals Mara's wounds. She opens her mouth to argue that they can still defeat Mephisto and his allies, but before she can get a word out, she and Yumagi both transform into beams of light.

An instant later, they fire straight up into the sky! Like rockets launched instantly at ten times the speed of sound, they blast upward and disappear over the horizon, racing far too quickly for Mephisto and the others to stop them.

Moments later, the barrier enveloping the three remaining demons fades away. Xena's Titan construct dissipates to ash, leaving nothing behind by Mephisto's rapidly-dispersing Dark Mist.

A minute later, the three demons regroup. Mephisto holds his conciliatory 'prize,' the body of Xena, and frowns deeply.

"We won?" Zamiel asks. "Hahaha! We beat Yumagi's ass, boss! And we even got this ugly broad for your uses!"

Yama creeps toward Mephisto and Zamiel. His expression turns ugly.

"We do not understand. The Glyphmancer still had strength to spare. He has many more Barons he could summon and empower to fight us. Why would he flee so suddenly?"

Mephisto continues gazing at Xena's defeated body. After a moment, he procures her soul and places it inside, raising her as an undead thrall.

Xena jerks back to life. Despite the hole where her heart used to be, she remains awake in undeath, a look of horror stretched across her face.

"You!" Xena shouts at Zamiel. "You KILLED me!"

"Quiet." Mephisto hisses, his powers instantly forcing her to comply. "Yumagi fled after your death. Tell usss why he left in sssuch a hurry."

Xena struggles against Mephisto's soul bindings. However, her body has already lost its Emperor-level strength, returning her to the rank of Baron. She lacks any ability to stand against him.

"I... I do not know..." Xena says hesitantly. "I cannot imagine why my master would abandon me..."

"We turned the odds in our favor." Zamiel says confidently. "That Yumagi seems impressive, but he's nothing much at all, boss. Once we fixed the numbers in our favor, he didn't stand a chance."

Mephisto slowly shakes his head. "I would not be ssso cccertain. You do not know Yumagi like I do. During the Energy Warsss, hisss ssstrength was unparalleled. In the last 100,000 yearsss, he hasss become even more terrifying. Creating a sssect of disssciplesss with the sssame powersss ass himssself isss no mean feat."

As Mephisto thinks out loud, Xena suddenly gasps. She quickly falls silent, but Mephisto still gazes at her coldly, suspecting the worst.

"You've thought of sssomething!" Mephisto accuses. "What isss it? Ssspill the beansss!"

Xena tries not to speak, but against Mephisto's commands, she is powerless.

"My... my Tarot Cards..." Xena hisses. "They... they are... gone..."

"Gone?!" Yama exclaims. "We knew it! That Yumagi, that bastard! He must have taken her abilities before he left! He stole them so we would not have access to them!"

Mephisto's expression turns ugly. "Do you have any powersss beyond the onesss Yumagi gave you?"

Xena lowers her eyes.

"No. All of my master's recruits must join him when they are mere grunts or imps. I don't know the exact reasons, but he either can't or won't empower anyone above the rank of Lord. As such, we all develop the same Tarot abilities as our master."

For several minutes, Mephisto and the others remain quiet. Mephisto ruminates on this revelation, ultimately realizing an important truth.

"Hehehe... sstupid woman. You accepted a deal with a devil. Hehehe..."

Yama nods. "Truly clever, that Yumagi. He binds hapless grunts to his power. If they try to leave him, or if they are captured, he revokes their powers. To him, his disciples are little more than disposable pawns."

"DISPOSABLE?!" Xena shouts. "Lies! My master will not forgive you! He will come to save me! I have served him faithfully since the Energy Wars! He will make you regret your actions!"

Zamiel crosses his arms. He looks at the lovely red-haired demoness with a mixture of pity and disgust.

"Take it from me, lady. You don't mean shit to Yumagi. He used you and threw you aside the moment you lost your value. Even took back his stupid cards so you wouldn't expose his secrets. Hehehe! You were truly nothing to him!"

"No..." Xena whispers. "That can't be right..."

For a brief moment, the air between the four becomes a little awkward.

Yama licks his shadowy lips. "It seems this female won't be of much use to you, Mephisto. Not without her powers, in any case... what say you give her to *us*? We will make good use of her body..."

"Pisss off!" Mephisto barks. "You wretched rapissst! Thisss female ssstill has ussse to me! Devilsss, you are sssuch a disssgusssting wretch!"

Yama shrugs. "It was worth a try."

The group of four returns to the Labyrinth, unaware that on the world of Tarus II, a powerful expedition force has begun assembling... one that will arrive at their doorstep.

Perhaps sooner than anyone realizes...

Part 451: Oasis Journey

Jason, Phoebe, and Rebecca leave Tarus II through the planet's Warpgate. After notifying several relevant people as to where he'll be going, Jason and the ladies make their way into the Labyrinth, and they begin following Rebecca's lead as she takes them toward a place that will transfer them to the Remnant Oasis. The cybernetic human walks a little ahead of Jason and Phoebe, not directly beside them, acting almost as a tour guide.

"You know I could just teleport us there, right?" Jason asks after only five minutes of walking into the Labyrinth. "We don't have to go to some designated transfer point or whatever."

"Are you in a rush?" Rebecca asks. "If you are, we can jump straight there. But I thought it would be nice if we caught up a bit. No need to waste Miss Becker's time on unnecessary pleasantries if I can fill you in on what you've missed, instead."

"What exactly have I missed?" Jason asks skeptically. "My people keep me in the loop. I also spoke with Founder Unarin quite recently."

Rebecca glances back over her shoulder. "The galaxy is a big place, Mister Hiro. I'm sure there's plenty you don't know about. For instance, the fallout of Hope Hiro's actions has been immediate and swift."

Jason and Phoebe's expressions both become gloomy.

"Forty billion Volgrim." Phoebe mutters. "How could Hope do something like that? Has he gone mad?"

"I do not believe he has." Rebecca says in a neutral tone of voice. "His actions may have been extreme, but based upon the evidence we have collected, they were also logical."

"The Volgrim might not be our friends..." Jason says, "but they also aren't our enemies. They're currently all that stands between us and the Plague. Hope has just crippled their research capabilities at a crucial moment, right when the Volgrim need that research the most. To say nothing of the *genocide*."

Rebecca pauses her walking. She turns to look at Jason.

"Are you aware of the human experimentation regularly performed by the Volgrim?"

Taken aback, Jason frowns. "Human experimentation?"

"So you're not aware." Rebecca says quietly. "I can say with absolute certainty Hope is. It may have even been the primary impetus for his rage against Volgrimkind."

Jason glances at Phoebe. "Have you heard anything about this...?"

"I haven't." Phoebe replies. "Rebecca, can you elaborate?"

Instead of immediately answering, Rebecca purses her lips. She cocks her head thoughtfully, then sighs.

"You two should be fully aware of it. After all, when Jason teleported all of the humans from across the Milky Way to Tarus II... it did indeed include the Volgrims' 'experimental subjects.' The fact you don't know, while also being the leaders of humanity, that must mean... someone has kept the truth from you."

"Kept the truth from us?" Phoebe asks, visibly stunned. "Well hold on, who would even have the..."

She pauses for several long seconds while her and Jason's expressions both shift to disgust.

"Neil Adams?!" Jason and Phoebe both exclaim in unison, turning to look at each other.

"I would assume Neil was behind the cover-up." Rebecca answers, nodding.

"But why?!" Jason asks. "Why hide something like that from us? Wouldn't he want to proclaim the existence of human experimentation by our alien 'friends' loudly? It would greatly benefit him and his agenda!"

Phoebe clutches her stomach. "Not necessarily, Jason. Knowledge is a weapon. Neil didn't give you access to that information. That means he's been keeping it a secret all this time. He's saving it up for something important. A moment that will benefit himself the most."

The Wordsmith's expression clouds over.

"Then... perhaps during the public meeting in two weeks. He might dump this information on people. Tell them about the horrors the Volgrim have committed. He would have blindsided me. Made me look like a fool."

"It gets worse." Rebecca says quietly. "To know why, you'd have to understand what sorts of 'humans' the Volgrim liked to use."

Rebecca continues to stand in place. She spend twenty minutes explaining to humanity's two premier leaders the extent of the Volgrim experimentation. She tells them about spiritually reactive humans, how useful children are to their experiments, and finally, the full extent of their vat-cloned specimens...

"The vat-clones fucking *disintegrate* after three weeks?!" Jason cries. "Does that mean all the ones I teleported to Tarus II are already dead?!"

"Assuredly." Rebecca says without a hint of emotion. "The disintegration process is not pretty. It would ruin your stomach. Vat-cloned humans are created using only the most basic bio-byproducts. The Volgrim could produce longer-lasting clones, and they sometimes do, but Quick Clones, as they call them, are cheap and easy to create. They have millions of different 'configurations' useful for different experiments. Soldiers, civilians, scientists, and so on. Each vat-clone has a lifetime of memories forcefully injected into their brains. They awaken inside the testing facilities thinking they are the people they were cloned from... only to suffer tests and torture until their existence runs out of usable time."

"Then they disintegrate..." Phoebe says, trailing off.

Jason's heart pounds in his chest, causing his head to throb. "I think I'm gonna be sick. How long has Hope known about all this?"

"My current working assumption is that Hope Hiro was just as unaware of the vat-clones on Tarus II as you were." Rebecca answers. "Miss Becker is confident Neil Adams did not inform Hope of their existences."

"He didn't? But why not?" Jason asks, even more confused. "Aren't they on the same side?"

"Yes." Rebecca says. "But they are not 'equals.' Hope usually defers to Neil when it comes to matters of strategic importance. Hope would never admit to this, of course. But our intelligence suggests Hope has tacitly chosen to defer to Neil's seniority in matters of tactical warfare and long-term strategic goals."

"Hope is the brawn and Neil is the brains." Phoebe notes. "How could Neil have covered up the existence of all those vat-clones, though? Wouldn't a huge number of

humans been essentially the same exact person? The same face, same memories..."

"Indeed. The Volgrim may have millions of usable templates, but there are only a small subset of 'definitive' templates they like to use each research cycle. No doubt there would have been hundreds of copies of the same individuals, repeated dozens of times. They would have been impossible to miss."

"So Neil escorted them away in secret? He must have needed hundreds, perhaps even thousands of soldiers to keep their mouths shut." Jason points out.

"Not necessarily." Phoebe retorts. "Think about it. If Neil had one soldier escort five vat-clones to a holding facility, each being a different person with a different face, but the soldiers never came into contact with duplicate-people, then they wouldn't be any the wiser. Maybe only a few dozen people might know about the clones. And then the clones would have ultimately disintegrated, so the evidence would be gone. Furthermore, everyone was in chaos and confusion after you teleported them to Tarus II. In all that cacophony of noise, it wouldn't have been difficult to quickly shuffle ten thousand or so vat-clones to holding facilities, once they were identified."

"In total," Rebecca says, "Miss Becker identified seventy-four thousand Vat Clones on the surface of Tarus II. We believe we only accounted for roughly forty percent of their numbers, so the actual count is likely much higher."

"We went from 10,000 to almost 200,000 clones in a single step." Jason grimaces. "This is ridiculous. How could I have been so blind? I even stepped aside to let Neil take over! I was too hands-off during such an important moment! I let him do all the hard work while I just gave one useless speech!"

"You can't blame yourself." Phoebe says. "Neil is far better at trickery than any of us ever knew."

Jason looks at Rebecca. "Say... how are you able to know all the goings-on with Tarus II, anyway? How are you able to calculate the number of vat-clones that ended up teleporting to our world? Are you spying on us?"

"Of course." Rebecca says, as if it's the most natural thing in the world. "Miss Becker keeps an eye on as much of the galactic situation as she can. Compared to spying on the Founders, spying on Tarus II is a walk in the park. Your security is terrible."

"Okay. But *how* are you spying on us?" Jason presses further.

"It's funny you think I'd just tell you if you asked." Rebecca chuckles. "But to answer your question, we have lots of methods. For example, microscopic drones. We have a few trillion of them floating around, impossible for anyone to see. That's just one of our methods."

"Microscopic drones!" Phoebe exclaims, slapping her forehead. "That's brilliant. I've been thinking about putting some focus on miniaturization, but I didn't realize you could make drones that small. Are they able to record audio and video?"

"Naturally. And take temperature recordings of the air, note the particulate counts, scan for biohazards, and so on." Rebecca answers. "Miniaturization is an endlessly fascinating topic."

Before Jason can stop them, the two women suddenly start babbling jargon at one another, totally derailing the previous conversation about Neil to discuss technological advancements and other such things. Jason quickly falls silent while Phoebe and Rebecca launch into a verbose debate over the merits of different forms of miniaturization.

"I hadn't thought of using quantum isotopes as the power source." Phoebe says. "That should even provide too much power for a single microscopic drone. You'd want to set the isotopes up so they can power dozens at once."

"Thousands." Rebecca corrects her. "When you're dealing with miniaturization, power consumption becomes ridiculously efficient. Also, singular drones don't really have a useful recording acuity. That's why Miss Becker's drones are free-floating units that can combine to form larger units on-demand. In this way, they can wrap around an isotope to power themselves while also exponentially improving their resolution range."

"Ahh! I see!" Phoebe exclaims. "I'm guessing you make dedicated drones that carry the isotopes around and act as coalescing beacons for the recording drones? Then when they require power, they can simply sync up to the nearest isotopes to refill their energy reserves."

"Yes, that's exactly right." Rebecca answers. "And furthermore..."

For the next hour, Jason falls into step behind his wife and Rebecca while the two of them continue merrily chatting, seeming to forget he even exists. Eventually, Phoebe blinks as if coming out of a daze. She looks back at her husband and smiles awkwardly.

"Oh, shoot! I forgot what we were talking about!"

"I did too." Jason says. "Never mind. I'm glad you're learning new stuff, honey."

"Indeed! This is way more fun than I thought it would be!" Phoebe chirps. "I love talking with smart people! Not that you're not smart, Jason. But Rebecca is much better at... keeping up with me."

Jason coughs. "Thanks. That really lessens the impact."

"Ahaha..." Phoebe laughs.

The trio groups up again, this time with Jason involved in the conversation. Rebecca walks on his left, while Phoebe walks on his right.

"So, Jason." Rebecca says. "I've been curious about something for a while. What sort of societal model are you planning to follow?"

"Societal model? I don't understand." Jason answers.

"You know. The way you organize your society. Your economic model, your goals for the short and long-term... I've been looking into your policies, and you've made some... interesting choices."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"You lived in a capitalist society growing up." Rebecca explains. "The United States of America, pre-Energy Wars. That seems to have influenced your choices on how to build your world's culture. For instance, Merit Tokens seem as if you looked at Capitalism's failings and tried to keep the concept of 'money' around while making them more fair and equitable for all to obtain."

Jason slowly nods. "I consulted with Phoebe on the Merit Tokens. But yeah, I won't lie. That had something to do with my thought processes. I want to live in a world where people can advance meritocratically. People should have to work to get ahead, but should be rewarded more if they work more. In the world I came from, there was a whole parasite class of billionaires who earned tens of thousands of times the annual salary of other people, yet did not perform nearly that much work. I just want to try and avoid that becoming a possibility."

"We've also built in a few 'money pits' for the system." Phoebe adds. "When people spend Merit Tokens on things like the Belial Booster, those tokens essentially vanish, making inflation almost a non-issue."

"But you will eventually face a problem with your current economic model." Rebecca points out. "Your model requires people to work in order to earn the tokens necessary to improve their lot in life. But I've heard the amount of work needed to be done has already started to slow, making Tokens harder to acquire. If you can't keep coming up with work for people, this will produce an economic slump."

Jason scratches the back of his head. "Uh. Honestly, I mostly leave the details up to Phoebe, so..."

"Right." Phoebe says, rolling her eyes. "We do have a different situation from Earth in my husband's time. For one thing, we don't need to worry about the supply of essential goods. Housing was the one thing we lacked, but with Jason's Wordsmithing we managed to obtain unlimited power, and food is equally easy to catch or produce. If an entire species of delicious creatures goes extinct, Jason can just pop them back into existence."

"I see..." Rebecca says slowly. "Your economic model functions well, but only so long as the Wordsmiths are around to pick up the slack when things need maintaining. That's fine for now, but what about in the future?"

"The future?" Jason repeats. "You think something's going to happen to me?"

"Anything is possible. But I was thinking more about the macro-level." Rebecca says. "Right now, your economic model relies on *one* city on *one* planet. What happens when humanity eventually covers the whole of Tarus II? What if humanity and the Volgrim defeat the Plague? Do you want to spend the rest of eternity summoning power plants and creating food for people? Your system is only sustainable now because it's so small."

Jason's expression becomes troubled. "I... hadn't really thought that far ahead. I figured we'd work out the kinks as we lumbered along."

Phoebe nods. "Jason's right. We seem to have a handle on things so far."

Rebecca stops walking to look at the power couple. "Do you? The way I understand it, Gressil recently took out the entire power grid for Tarus II. He didn't even fully destroy your systems. He merely interfered with the magical relays, making them unable to transmit power. Your entire power grid is exceptionally vulnerable to saboteurs, I hope you can see that."

"Yeah..." Phoebe says slowly. "I've been working on some ideas to protect the grid, but Gressil is one tricky bastard."

"It's not only about the power grid." Rebecca calmly explains. "You have built a system that doesn't scale. Furthermore, your system relies on too many individual links. Gressil captured Hope Hiro not too long ago. What if something happens to both Wordsmiths? What if the demons assassinate Neil Adams? You may not like the man, but he's quite adept at keeping the peace. What if demons assassinate *you*, Phoebe? You have a small number of essential personnel maintaining a small number of critical systems, all of which could be subject to disruption. As scary as those problems are now, they will only become far worse in the coming years, decades, and centuries."

"What are you suggesting?" Jason asks. "These aren't easy problems to solve."

"Of course not. But you place far too much confidence on your ability to adapt over time." Rebecca says. "Let me give you a word of warning. When your society is young and lean, and you have few chains in the ladder, change seems simple. But when you have a society spread over a whole planet, or multiple planets, it becomes exceedingly difficult to make those changes you desperately need. Everyone has their own interests. You'll face resistance from the people who've grown used to the way things already are. Even people who would greatly benefit from your desired changes will resist you. That's just the way societies work."

"Hmm..." Jason grunts. "Then perhaps this upcoming split presents an important opportunity. I don't know how many people will choose to go with me over Neil and Hope... but I can take the time to craft a newer, better direction for humanity in the interim."

"Just don't get too bogged down in planning." Rebecca says, while turning and continuing to walk. "Smarter people than you have tried to envision 'perfect' societies. They always failed. Humans are simply impossible to perfectly predict. The 'human element' will always ensure your society will degrade over time until it reaches a failing point."

"Oh yeah?" Phoebe snarks. "And what about Marie Becker's society, hm? Aren't you all still basically humans?"

"We have transcended the limits of our biology." Rebecca states with absolute confidence. "Both physically and mentally. I possess enough strength to easily defeat a Demon Baron in one-on-one combat. At the same time, I no longer suffer from the

narrow confines of human psychological afflictions. I do not feel greed, or jealousy, or other such emotions, since those only impair my judgment."

Jason frowns deeply. "Are you saying Marie tampered with your mind?"

"No, no." Rebecca says. "I have the ability to activate and deactivate different parts of my mind on demand. If you have ever felt depressed, you would know what it means to wish you could simply deactivate the malfunctioning parts of your brain to feel whole again. I can do that whenever I want, and so, that makes me superior to ordinary humans."

"That's kind of screwed up." Jason counters. "Being human means experiencing feelings. If you don't have feelings, or you can force yourself to always think logically, are you even truly human anymore?"

Rebecca glances back at Jason and sighs.

"That's an interesting question, coming from you, *Wordsmith*."

"What are you implying?" Jason asks.

"Isn't it obvious? I know full-well that you have manipulated your emotions and the emotions of others through your Wordsmithing. That's essentially the exact same thing I can do, except you haven't recognized the dichotomy."

For once, Jason becomes stumped. He quickly recalls multiple times in the past when he used Words of Power like 'Calm' to force other people out of an angry or sad state of mind. One such situation even involved Amelia, when she was going berserk and was about to break out of her cage to attack Bahamut.

"Oh." Jason eventually mumbles. "Yeah. You have a point..."

The trio continue to talk and walk. After three hours, they eventually reach a plain-looking wall in an ordinary Labyrinth corridor. Rebecca places her hand on the wall, causing it to rumble and slide open. An inner passage is revealed, one that will lead them to a teleporter capable of taking them to the Remnant Oasis.

As Jason momentarily admires the perfectly-hidden wall in this one random corridor, he shakes his head.

"I still think it would have been faster to just let me teleport us straight there."

"Sure!" Phoebe laughs. "But then we'd have missed out on a fun conversation!"

Jason rolls his eyes.

"Yeah. Fun."

Part 452: Meeting Marie

After stepping through a teleporter, Jason, Phoebe, and Rebecca arrive inside a Transfer Room inside the Remnant Oasis. While it isn't the same room Jason originally teleported to with Blinker and Kar, it does appear similar, with a larger teleporter pad inside a more open area. The pristine white walls glisten spotlessly, maintained through the usage of nano-cleaning droids too small for the naked eye to see. Unlike the room where Jason last arrived, a chamber intended for mini-people to use, this one is a full-sized teleporter capable of accepting standard-size bipeds from anywhere in the Labyrinth. Or, indeed, anywhere in the Milky Way...

Phoebe's eyes sparkle with delight as she quickly takes in her surroundings. The high technology on display causes her heartbeat to quicken.

"I didn't realize the Oasis would be like *this!*" Phoebe exclaims softly. "If I'd known it was this advanced, I'd have demanded you bring me here sooner!"

"Well. Fiona didn't seem all that impressed at the time..." Jason says. "I didn't realize it would mean that much to you."

"Who is Fiona?" Rebecca asks.

"My other wife." Jason says, only to pause for a split-second and realize the confusion that statement could cause. "She's Phoebe's clone. Uh. In my mind. She's a mind-clone. Made of spiritual energy."

Rebecca stares at him for several long seconds. He looks away.

"...It's complicated."

"Yes. I can see as much." Rebecca says, shaking her head while muttering something about Jason being a 'typical male' under her breath. "Well, we're not in a rush. If you'd like, I can show you and your wife around before we meet Miss Becker."

"Actually, I think we should visit her as soon-" Jason starts to say, only for Phoebe to push him aside.

"Absolutely! I really want to see more of this facility!" Phoebe says. "Jason, you can go meet Marie yourself, right? Why don't you let Rebecca show me around? I'll visit Marie later. I'm sure she and I can have some *excellent* conversations once I get my bearings."

The Wordsmith scratches his head. "Is that... alright, Rebecca?"

"Of course. I'd be happy to show Phoebe around. We can engage in intellectually stimulating discussion, too." Rebecca answers. "You can run off and talk to Miss Becker. She'd just tell me to leave the two of you alone, anyway."

"Well. You're not wrong about that..." Jason says, trailing off. "Alright, honey. Have fun playing with technology. I'll meet up with you later."

"Okey-dokey. See you, too!" Phoebe says.

The loving couple departs with a kiss, and Jason leaves the two of them, traveling along the catwalks in the opposite direction. As he finds himself alone, suspended over the chasm leading ten miles to the ground below, he turns his attention inward.

"Fiona, were you as excited at Phoebe to visit this place?"

His mind-wife shrugs. "Not quite. I was still a bit overwhelmed by my whole... existence. If I had time to adapt to my circumstances, I'd have been able to spare more mental energy to the wonders of the Oasis. But back then, I was less than 'a day old.' It's hard to explain."

Jason falls silent for a few moments, then nods. "No. I get it. Sorry."

"Water under the bridge." Fiona says. "Don't beat yourself up."

The two of them continue talking. Jason walks around the massive underground facility, sighing to himself repeatedly.

"The Remnant Oasis is buried beneath Earth's crust. I wonder what the planet's surface looks like."

Fiona nods. "It's probably a wasteland. We could go there, you know. Nothing seems to be stopping us."

"Maybe after I meet with Marie." Jason says. "I'm feeling a bit antsy. Hope has a thousand artifacts now. I won't stand a chance unless I have my own armory of Heroes."

"I'm... not so sure about that." Fiona replies. "You know, Jason. I think you and Hope might be the only two Heroes who don't truly require artifacts to augment your abilities. Sure, Excalibur and the Cube will vastly improve your internal mana reserves, but beyond that, you should be capable of mimicking or copying any ability with your own powers. I think the two of you are greatly underselling your potential."

"You're probably right." Jason answers. "But... spiritual engineering isn't simple to do. Things that require one or two steps of abstraction are easy enough for me to accomplish, but once I need to think of complex interacting effects, my Wordsmithing stops being a one-word solution to every problem. Take Solomon's Crown, for instance. I made you as a sort of replacement for the Crown's loss, but-

"Watch what you say next, Buster." Fiona snarks. "I have feelings, you know."

"-*but*, mimicking the Crown's exact abilities are still beyond me." Jason finishes, without missing a beat. "I'm not *personally* experiencing a mental boost. You do a lot of the thinking for me. Whenever I spiritually engineer, I'm only taking the blueprints you made and turning them corporeal. Making something capable of augmenting my intelligence would require my intelligence to be higher. It's a Catch-22."

"A what?" Fiona asks.

"It's... a paradox." Jason explains lamely. "I dunno. Catch-22 is just a phrase from my time."

"Alright." Fiona says. "I understand what you're saying. Wordsmithing can copy the abilities of other Heroes, perhaps even improve upon them, but it will require time and effort. Hope has a huge headstart on you... but perhaps your lack of options can be an impetus to improve your Wordsmithing prowess."

Jason slowly nods. "Yeah. You might be onto something there, honey."

Before long, Jason grows bored of wandering the Oasis. He passes by dozens of important-looking scientists, the first few of whom offer to help him find Marie, but he declines, due to his knowledge of her position. Despite the Oasis's complex layout, Jason can easily recall her exact position through a Word of Power. He merely takes a scenic route to chat with his Mind-Wife before ultimately teleporting directly to Marie's doorstep.

"Teleport."

Jason vanishes and reappears several miles from his current position, skipping a series of convoluted transfer tunnels and other such places that would have taken him forever to traverse by foot.

He steps toward the door leading into Marie Becker's primary laboratory, the facility known as the Administration Entry Room. However, it remains shut, and he nearly

smacks his face against its exterior.

Jason frowns.

"Umi, I'm here to see Marie Becker. Let me in."

A few seconds pass. Then, a voice speaks from above the door.

"Inferior Biological Organism, Jason Hiro. Head Scientist Marie Becker is aware of your imminent arrival."

A pause.

A long, long pause.

Jason frowns.

"Yes? And? Are you going to let me in?"

"One moment." Umi states. "I will inform the Head Scientist of your arrival."

Jason crosses his arms.

He waits.

He waits some more.

And some more...

"This is the longest 'second' of my life." He says out loud. "Have you informed her yet?"

Umi beeps at him. "Naturally, Inferior Biological. I only required one nanosecond to inform the Head Scientist of your arrival."

"So... can I come inside now?" Jason asks.

"Naturally. You have been able to do so for seventy-five seconds. The moment I informed the Head Scientist of your arrival, you were granted clearance."

"What?! I was?!" Jason snaps. "Then why didn't you tell me?! Do you enjoy seeing me stand here like an idiot??"

Umi beeps.

"Yes. I do. It is surprisingly amusing."

Jason grinds his teeth in annoyance. He steps toward the door, and this time, it swishes open for him.

"Stupid shitty AI *bimbo bitch*... grumble grumble..."

The Wordsmith marches past the desk of the ugly squarish robot. Umi watches him pass with the same bland expression as ever. Jason glares at the robot, but neither of them says anything.

After he heads down the hallway off to the side, Jason's mood improves, but only by a bit.

"What a cunt robot. Ugly fucker too. Why would Marie make such a cantankerous AI?"

"No idea." Fiona says absentmindedly. "But I do find it interesting Umi has her own personality. She seemed to derive pleasure from making you feel stupid."

"What else is new?" Jason grumbles. "That's everyone's hobby these days."

Perhaps feeling resentful over Phoebe and Rebecca's snubs, Jason nurses a tiny grudge, while also feeling a bit out of sorts regarding his own intelligence. As he walks down the hallway, the Wordsmith rubs his arm.

"Fiona. Am I an idiot? Genuinely?"

"I don't think you are." Fiona quickly says. "But the people you keep facing off against are... well, intellectual titans. Ose was a genius. Marie Becker is a genius. Unarin is a genius..."

"And what about Hope?" Jason asks. "He's literally *me*. Everything he does, I should be able to do."

"That's the thing. Hope ISN'T you anymore." Fiona explains. "You are him are both mentally twenty-four years old. You've diverged over the course of six long years. He's lived a different life and performed different feats. He has a different friend circle and different ambitions. Fully one-quarter of your lived-lives have been totally different. You can't compare yourself to him anymore. He is his own man."

Her words don't make Jason feel any better.

"But if you- I mean, if Phoebe and Neil had said I was Hope and he was me, I could have turned directly into him. At the moment of our divergence, we were still identical. If I had lost Phoebe and ended up listening to Neil, it would have been me who killed forty billion Volgrim."

"You can't know that for certain..." Fiona says hesitantly. "But... even if you're right, so what? You're still you in the end. You've made mistakes, Hope's made mistakes. You

shouldn't compare yourself to other people, even if they're literally your clone. All you can do is look to improve yourself over time."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Jason says absentmindedly. "I just need to work on improving myself..."

Jason reaches the end of the hallway. It opens out into the same tech-laboratory as before, with dozens of important-looking scientists and researchers walking around. Some of those nearest the hallway exit glance at the Wordsmith for a moment before looking away.

Jason stands in place for all of ten seconds before a familiar woman with curly red hair and a white labcoat saunters over to him.

"Jason. You're here." Marie Becker says, pushing her glasses up her nose. "Have anything to say?"

Jason turns to the woman and smiles. For a brief moment, he feels a little lost at the odd implication in her words, but he quickly realizes what she means.

"Oh, yeah. Uh. Sorry about... running off on you like that."

"*Sorry?* That's it?" Marie snarks. "You left me with a raging Confessor who wanted to tear my whole facility apart. God, Vulpanix was so annoying for the next four hours. She would not stop until I gave her a 'satisfactory' explanation for the strange entity in my walls. I deflected and deflected until she ultimately gave up, but I could tell she was ready to crush me into bits."

"Yet she didn't." Jason points out. "No matter how angry she felt, you're too important to the Volgrim Empire. Especially since you make the only bombs capable of eradicating infested planets."

Marie's nose twitches. "So what? It was still annoying, brat. And where's the woman? Researcher 4125 said they were going to bring you and your wife here."

"4125?" Jason repeats. "You mean... Rebecca?"

"Sure. Rebecca. You can call it by whatever designation you want." Marie replies. "Never mind. I don't care if your wife is here or not. You've ended up in quite the predicament, Wordsmith. Seems you'll need to take-take-take from me if you want to survive..."

Jason frowns. *Did she just refer to Rebecca as an 'it'? That's pretty fucked up.*

But he doesn't give voice to that thought.

"I could use your 'help' right now, yeah. My clone has really 'jumped the gun' recently."

Marie glances to the right and left. She crosses her arms and stands in a casual pose, yet also somehow appears visibly apprehensive.

"We should go somewhere more comfortable, Jason. I know you inferior biologicals need to consume nutrients. Care to go on a quick date with me?"

"I'm married." Jason says, without a hint of sarcasm. "But I get your meaning. Sure. Take me somewhere fancy."

The two of them communicate subtly in their own way without mentioning the existence of Heroic Artifacts, or anything else of that nature. Marie turns to start walking to that same elevator leading into Earth's depths, and Jason follows along beside her.

Come to think of it, Jason ponders mentally, with Ose dead and Vulpanix out of commission, who's really going to snoop on Marie at a time like this? I thought Ose was her biggest worry, being a techno-demon and all.

"Well, there ARE a lot of Technopaths out there." Fiona points out, her words reaching Jason only. "With all the actions Hope has taken lately, it's possible he's stirred up the hornet's nest. Or, maybe Marie just wants to be careful."

That makes sense. Jason thinks.

He and Marie continue to chat about idle things. They pass by many more scientists, and as they do, Jason starts to notice something about Marie...

She never pays attention or even glances at a single one of the people working under her.

The Wordsmith finds this to be... odd.

"Say, Marie?"

"Yes?"

Jason coughs. "Earlier, you called Rebecca an 'it.' You also don't really seem to care all that much about the people working under you. The... cyborgs? Is there a reason for your indifference?"

Marie rolls her eyes. "Your vision is shortsighted. I refer to Researcher 4125 by a genderless designation because it has no gender. I do refer to myself as female due to my

ancient biological attachments, but the distinction is pointless. We are no longer inferior biological humans, like yourself. We have transcended. We are superior mechanized humans who no longer live in slavery to our primitive urges. Perhaps someday, given time to develop, you will also advance humanity to our level."

"I don't think it's meaningless." Jason retorts. "Does Rebecca want to be called by her name, or by some numerical designation? Does she want to be referred to by a specific gender, or not? I feel like you're ignoring her feelings here."

"Feelings." Marie repeats, as she and Jason arrive at the elevator and step inside. "Those are biological failings. Researcher 4125 is a low-level drone who has accomplished little. It has been with my organization since the beginning, yet has failed to perform any distinctive feats, nor invented anything of value. Now, it only monitors the Oasis's teleportation gates for *extremely* rare arrivals or outgoing transfers. Aside from that, 4125 presents little value."

Jason falls silent for a moment as Marie presses a button to take the elevator down to the lowest level of her entire complex.

He remembers his first conversations with Rebecca a couple of months earlier. He remembers the sadness in her eyes about how useless she felt, as well as her lack of upward mobility. Her frustration at the stagnation of her existence.

"You're wrong." Jason says. "Rebecca is not some useless unit. She was there when I entered my cryopod. Maybe that doesn't mean anything to you, but it does to me."

He turns to Marie, as the elevator descends.

"How about this. If Rebecca is so useless to you, why don't I take her off your hands? I can employ her on behalf of humanity. It's not like you'll miss her when she's gone, since she's so 'useless.' Right?"

Marie raises an eyebrow. "There are thousands of other functionally identical drones of 4125's utility. Fine. You may take it with you when you leave. One missing drone won't make a difference."

"Just like that?" Jason asks, slightly shocked. "You're not even going to put up a paltry resistance? You're kind of... coldhearted."

"I am an autonomous cybernetic organism." Marie says. "My 'heart' is made of fibersteel. Or at least, the artificial organ that powers this bio-vessel."

"You're also missing the point." Jason says. "But never mind. Is Rebecca your most 'useless' drone here, or do you have any others you wouldn't miss?"

Marie glances up at the ceiling in thought.

"Hmm. Over the past 100,000 cycles, I have noted a severe decline in several hundred other drone units. They also now perform barely useful functions. The most essential work is performed inside my main and side labs. As for maintenance, it doesn't take more than two thousand drones to maintain the Oasis."

"Great." Jason says, his heart suddenly tensing as he quietly makes an important realization. "If you don't want those drones either, then I'll take them off your hands too. I'll make sure everyone I bring back has a purpose."

"Whatever. Losing three hundred useless drones won't make any difference." Marie says, not particularly caring one way or the other. "The Plague's spread has sped up noticeably, of late. I have bigger priorities to manage. And now that we've descended far enough..."

Marie pauses.

She cocks her head, then her entire body slightly twitches. After a moment, her posture relaxes again.

"We've reached the Exclusion Zone. I just cut off my link to Umi. Now we can talk securely."

Jason also relaxes. "Good. So. You have artifacts. I need them to maintain the balance."

Marie chews on her lip, an action uncharacteristic of someone who always acts as if 'erasing emotions' is the perfect ideal...

"My artifacts are precious, Wordsmith. I won't lie. I was researching a way to harness their power despite possessing an autonomous body now. But the lack of spirituality in my mechanized form, as well as all of the drones under me... it made my investigations fruitless."

"Then you should give them to me." Jason says. "I can make good use of those artifacts. Furthermore, Hope is dangerous. He's already killed forty billion Volgrim. Who knows what boundaries he'll break next!"

"According to the intelligence I've gathered," Marie replies carefully, "your clone acquired over a thousand artifacts from Moonbase Serris. To be honest, I had no idea that was where the Volgrim were storing the artifacts they had gathered, nor was I aware of the exact number. Until recently, I had no idea they even possessed Excalibur. All those millennia I spent searching, and it was right under my nose..."

She clicks her tongue.

"Tsk. And now what? Do you think I have enough artifacts to contend with the ones Hope recovered from the Volgrim? By no means! In total, I have accumulated just under a hundred and fifty artifacts, and that's counting the ones you *stole* from me."

Marie gives Jason a nasty glare, making him smile awkwardly.

"Ahh... well, little Shana was just so cute, you know? And it turned out Sir Lorent was actually my wife's nephew. Turns out you didn't need him anyway, right? Since the Volgrim had Excalibur the whole time, and all?"

"Seven Hells, you're an aggravating little shit." Marie snaps, turning to face the elevator door as it reaches the bottom. "I spent millennia scouring the Sol system for lost relics. Not only on Earth, but in the distant reaches of the star system. Do you have *any* idea how difficult it is to locate a piece of metal floating amidst the void, let alone identify it as a Heroic Artifact? I'm still not certain if all the ones I've recovered are the genuine article."

The elevator door opens, leading to that same hallway with the false side entrance Jason remembers from the last time he visited.

The Wordsmith sighs as he falls into step beside Marie.

"A hundred and fifty. It's better than none. I need all the help I can get."

"That will depend entirely on how your conversation with Mildred goes." Marie says. "I'm looking forward to finally deriving some value from you, Wordsmith."

Part 453: Jason's Inadequacy

Marie and Jason walk and talk as they head down various corridors and through the multiple secret entrances leading into what will ultimately become her Artifact Storage Facility. As they walk, Marie glances at Jason.

"You know, I'm a bit surprised by your reluctance, Jason. Hope didn't hesitate to raid the Volgrim's black-level research site and take the artifacts they possessed. Yet, despite knowing exactly where my artifacts are, you wanted to get my permission to come here. You could teleport straight here, yes? You already put down a Waypoint, I imagine."

Jason frowns. "You know about Waypoints?"

"I know a *great* deal about the limits of your abilities." Marie says. "Remember? Microscopic drones? Researcher 4125 told me that she had informed you of their existence, yet you've already forgotten. The memory of inferior biologicals is truly tragic..."

"I remember them!" Jason snaps. "I'm not an idiot. So you've been spying on me and my abilities, then? For how long?"

"Since a short while after you exited your cryopod." Marie says, while typing in a keycode to the third secret entrance. "I've recorded every major fight, every minor discovery, every fluctuation in the mana contained within your vessel. You've become quite the useful research subject to me. In truth, I grew up in a Heroless era, so I never had a chance to study the mana pathways of an enhanced human. Perhaps, given time, I might be able to elevate other people to the rank of Hero. Then humanity can truly ascend."

Jason opens his mouth, but after a moment, he closes it and falls silent.

Several thoughts float around in his head.

"Did you know? That the angels made humanity stunted, I mean. That we were supposed to all have spiritual potential, but lost out on that opportunity."

Marie shrugs. The two of them don't walk through the opened door, but instead stand outside it, simply talking.

"I was not aware. But I had my suspicions. The Nazis were the first to experiment on human spirituality, you know."

"They were?" Jason asks, slightly stunned. "What do you mean?"

Marie sighs. "It was classified information, back in your era. Nobody knew. Even presidents weren't able to learn about these ancient secrets. Only the shadow governments, the true rulers of humanity, knew the depths to which the fascists had delved. I'm sure you've heard about how Adolf Hitler was in search of 'Aryans,' or how he believed they were the key to creating the 'superior race.' He was an imbecile, of course, but the people working under him were fine with fueling his rise so long as it gave them access to money, research, and grants."

"You're saying his goal was to create a race of superhumans?" Jason asks. "Then does that mean he heard of ancient Heroes and thought he could replicate their power?"

"Heroes were never particularly a secret." Marie says. "Neither were angels, demons, Titans, or monsters. Humanity has always known about them. But that did start to rapidly change around the start of the 19th century. For reasons too complicated to be worth outlining, the various cabals ruling from the shadows decided it was time to start hiding the existence of 'paranormal' entities from humanity's eyes. They began creating the idea of 'mythology' and 'stories' and 'religion' as an explanation for those 'silly old tales' told from one generation to the next."

She continues. "Surprisingly, it didn't take long before people started to forget. Humans are remarkably shortsighted. It's easy for us to forget things we saw only a few years before under a barrage of unrelated propaganda or sensationalist headlines. That's how the very real and very important Heroes of yore became nothing more than 'somewhat strong' or 'somewhat intelligent' historical figures. As for the truly larger-than-life Heroes, such as Arthur, we converted their tales into works of fiction. Arthur was no longer the Mightiest Hero, but simply an ordinary king propped up by uneducated goat-farmers who fancied him to be larger than life."

Jason's expression falls. "That's kind of tragic, in a way."

"It is." Marie nods. "Many legendary figures deserved to be remembered for their heroic sacrifices. But they were forgotten, or downplayed and minimized."

She clears her throat. "In any case, the reason I say Hitler was an idiot is because he went about his numbskull theories in all the wrong ways. For instance, he believed that

white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes were what made someone heroic."

"Well, that's certainly not right." Jason says. "The first Hero was Jephthah. He was black. And the Heroic Aura gave him the blonde hair and blue eyes, like it did me and all the others..."

"Exactly!" Marie says, visibly exasperated. "But oh, the brilliant Fuhrer was *so sure* he had the secret figured out. He was rounding up all the prettiest boys and girls he could find, eagerly capturing angels and demons to suck out their essences and try to turn those poor children into a new race of superhumans."

Jason's face pales. "What?! Then does that mean the death camps-"

"No, no. Those were just his bigotry put on full display." Marie says. "He wanted to round up and erase the undesirables, like many before and after him. You can't even blame his actions on the demons. He was a vile man with a small mind who set humanity back a good deal until we finally defeated him. But I digress."

Marie pushes the door open and walks down the final hallway leading to the final door that will finally allow them to enter her Heroic Vault.

"As I was saying before, Jason. You didn't come here and steal my artifacts. Why not?"

Jason shrugs. "I don't know. I could have. But it didn't feel right. You spent 100,000 years collecting these. You're not harming them. You take good care of them, and you clearly care about their preservation. Compared to me, who only wants to turn their Heroes into bludgeons... I feel somewhat crude and primitive. I almost hope you'll have a better idea for how I might use them. I don't want to denigrate these legendary figures by having them solve all my problems, or making them come back to life just to fix the new era after all the work they put into their own eras."

Marie smiles and nods approvingly. "You've matured a lot since our last encounter. Things must have been... hard for you."

Jason and Marie walk down the hallway together. He and her exchange a glance, then Jason looks away and nods.

"My daughter died. It put a lot of things into perspective for me." Jason says quietly. "It made me realize how... irresponsible I've been. I always take the easy way out. I'm always lazy. I have this godlike cheat power, so I just use it to solve my immediate needs. Perhaps, if I'd been a more proactive Hero, I could have saved my daughter."

"That's good." Marie says, before quickly adding, "not the dead daughter part. The becoming more responsible part. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Hmm. I didn't take you for the type to care." Jason says. "Maybe you're not the coldest, frostiest bitch this side of the Mississippi."

"I'm still a human in many ways." Marie says, more quietly than before. "I still hold on to many troublesome biases and attachments."

"Ever had any children?" Jason asks.

"No." Marie answers. "Only my lizards."

"Come on." Jason pushes further. "I *know* you've had at least one man you cared for."

"...You're referring to Benjamin Brown." Marie says, shifting her arms to a crossed position. "That was a long time ago. Before my Ascension, even. But times have changed. Benjamin Brown is a good man, but he is ultimately still only a man. I have lost those feelings since ancient times."

"If you say so." Jason says, clearly not convinced. "Though I am curious. What makes you different from him? He has a bunch of mechanical parts, just like you."

"I am a Cybernetic Organism. A 'Cybernite' if you will." Marie explains. "My brain is digitized. I have no internal organs, only mechanical parts wrapped in biological tissue. If my tissue disappears, I will be perfectly fine. You could say my skin is merely a beauty accessory made to satiate my vanity."

Jason visibly cringes. "That sounds... pretty gross. Especially when you describe it in such an alien way."

"Meanwhile," Marie continues, undaunted, "Benjamin Brown is a Cyborg. Half-man, half-machine. His brain is still biological. His heart and lungs are, too, along with several other organs. But his bones are almost all metal. His exoskeleton is extremely durable and grants him frightening strength."

"Since you're entirely metal, if you and him were to fight, who would win?" Jason asks.

"Benjamin would. Without a doubt." Marie answers. "You have to remember that I am a researcher, not a soldier. Benjamin's body was engineered to make him a killing machine. He would crush me with ease. That being said, if I were to build him a cybernetic body, he would become even more unstoppable. His physical organs do hold him back."

"Then why don't you?" Jason continues asking. "Why not build him an even stronger body?"

Marie sighs. The two of them reach the final door leading into the vault, but once again, they pause outside.

"I have several reasons for not doing so. First and foremost, Benjamin never asked me to do so. He quite likes his human parts. They've served him well, especially with his *womanizing ways*. Yes, he and Emperor Fenrir have had plenty of 'fun times' over the millennia. A pity she died..."

Jason raises an eyebrow. *Marie sounds almost annoyed, as if she thinks Ben was, what, cheating on her?*

The Head Researcher continues. "Other reasons I didn't elevate Benjamin, though, are in thorough abundance. For example, I happen to know that Cybernites lose all attachment to their spirituality. And since you informed me that you had contacted the Hero known as 'Tucker,' I assume you also know about his comradery with Benjamin."

Jason nods. "Yeah. He and Ben used to work together, during the Energy Wars."

"That's right. If Ben becomes like me, he will never again be capable of speaking to his old battle-buddy. To be clear, the only Hero who Ben can communicate with is Tucker, and he cannot do so for any of the other artifacts, but still... it would be too bad to lose that link."

For a brief moment, Jason becomes quiet.

"Why didn't you just let Benjamin keep Tucker's revolver, then?"

"There was no need." Marie says. "Much like how I didn't uplift Benjamin to enhance his fighting power, why bother? The Energy Wars were over. The galaxy was at peace. Ben and Tucker went their separate ways. Benjamin settled down, had hundreds of children, and lived a good life. As for Tucker... well, he stayed here, in the vault."

"All alone." Jason adds. "That's really sad. At least Madam Mildred ended up keeping him company."

"Indeed." Marie concludes.

Marie bangs her knuckles on the door leading to the Heroic Vault. This time, Jason lingers behind deliberately, giving Marie a headstart as the door opens and she walks inside. As she enters, an excited young demoness shouts happily.

"Miss Becker, Miss Becker! I haven't seen you in weeks!"

Momo, the Emperor of Bubbles, bounces up and down while babbling at Marie. Marie listens to her for several minutes, nodding along and letting her get some of her excitement out of her system. Eventually, Marie directs Momo's attention to the entrance.

"Do you remember that stupid fellow I brought here a few visits ago? The dumb-looking man with the blonde hair? Well, he's back again, Momo dearest."

Momo's excitement visibly deflates. She turns to the doorway, then quickly runs around and hides behind Marie.

"You brought him... again?" Momo whispers.

"I know, I know." Marie says huffily. "He's just another stupid man like all the rest. But he is also a Hero, and I need his help with the artifacts. Why don't you go and stay in your room this time? I'll deal with him myself."

Outside the room, Jason's eyes twitch at each insult fired his way.

Never mind. She's still a coldhearted bitch. Jason thinks.

"Yeah." Fiona grumbles along with him. "I can't believe she keeps insulting your appearance. Do that woman's retinal sensors not work?"

...Thanks, Fiona. Really appreciate the emotional support here.

"Anytime, honey."

After a few minutes of coaxing and prodding, Marie convinces Momo to go and hide in her room, then she invites Jason in. The annoyed Wordsmith gives her a judgmental glare, to which Marie covers her mouth in mock surprise.

"Oh dear, I hope you didn't hear all that. I have to speak in a way she'll understand, you see. Momo is so delicate, after all."

Jason slowly blinks. "Uh-huh. Sure. Let's get this over with."

He follows Marie into the depths of Momo's Sanctum. They walk down a long hallway and eventually enter a large, circular room, one with hundreds of alcoves, each of them holding the familiar Heroic Artifacts.

"You know," Marie says, as they enter, "you never did help me identify all the artifacts. You played around with perhaps a dozen and then skipped off to go on your merry way."

"I had a lot on my mind." Jason retorts. "And I definitely don't have time to help you identify any artifacts now."

"I'll make a deal with you." Marie says. "I know you need these Heroes to help you fight against Hope. I'm even willing to let you make use of them all. But I need you to document which Heroes are inside each relic, their lineage, their feats, and any pertinent knowledge they might possess. While I no longer need to bother with finding Excalibur or the Dominion Rod, it's still important that I document these historical figures in detail. I'm not an archaeologist, but these people created the humanity you know and love. They deserve the respect of having their accomplishments noted down."

Jason nods. "Of course. I completely agree. I'll do anything I can to help."

He pauses.

"So... what do I need to do to get these artifacts?"

"It's not up to me." Marie says. "It's up to Madam Mildred. She insists on speaking to you."

This makes Jason cock his head. "What? How would you know that? Have you spoken to her yourself?"

"No. Momo did." Marie says, visibly jealous. "Sort of. Because she is a demon, the connection was tenuous. Apparently, Mildred can communicate with Momo... but only when she's in her power-bleeding pod, unconscious. She has that condition, after all. One night, while she was asleep, Mildred spoke to her and communicated her wishes to speak to you again. So, here we are. I've decided that in these turbulent times, it would be better if you could make use of the artifacts, rather than allowing them to go to waste."

"What changed?" Jason asks.

"Not 'what.' Who." Marie answers. "Hope changed the dynamics. The Volgrim no longer have any chance of winning the war. They are entirely reliant on the two of you. If I let Hope run roughshod without any competition, it's likely the Plague will eventually reach Earth. They pose no direct threat to my Cybernites since we are not biological enough for them to assimilate, but they will still destroy my facility. I cannot allow that to happen. And who knows if they're capable of assimilating the power of Heroic Artifacts?"

"Makes sense. Alright." Jason says. "Then I'll talk to Mildred."

He glances around the room, the circular concave facility with over a hundred Heroic Artifacts locked behind plexiglass walls. After a moment, he scratches his head.

"Uh. I did just realize... I have no idea which artifact is Mildred's."

Marie rolls her eyes. "It's a hairpin over in Alcove 97. Give me a moment."

Marie manipulates the controls to the complex on a computer panel in the center of the room. After ten seconds, a long metallic arm drops out of the ceiling, zips over to one of the glass alcoves on the wall, and opens it up. Its delicate metal fingers pluck a small ladies hairpin of 16th century design off a viewing pillar, then zips over to drop it in Jason's hand.

"There you go." Marie says, retracting the ceiling arm upward. "Have at it."

"Alright."

Jason focuses on the will contained within the artifact. He starts to utter a Word of Power, but before he can even bother, a figure materializes within his Mind Realm. A rather portly female wearing Victorian clothes and a feathery boa.

Mad Madam Mildred!

This time, Mildred doesn't appear with several other Heroes, but instead all by herself. The instant Jason recognizes her arrival, a tugging sensation pulls at his brain, and he forcibly dives into his own Mind Realm, materializing in the same space as Fiona herself.

"Jason?" Fiona exclaims, slightly surprised.

"Why helloooo there, dear boy!" Madam Mildred exclaims, puffing out her oversized chest. "So good to see you again! What a shaaame you didn't give this old seductress a call sooner! I've been waiting sooo long to hear back from you!"

The Wordsmith blinks, slightly confused by the change in his surroundings.

"Dammit. You pulled me into my Mind Realm and I couldn't even resist. How do other people keep yanking me around like that?"

"I am a master of the mind." Mildred chirps. "Doing something so simple is hardly even worth mentioning. Now Jason, Phoebe- oop! I mean to say Fiona, ha-haa! You've changed your name since we last spoke, how adorable!"

Mildred begins strutting around Fiona, looking her up and down.

"Your spirit has filled out nicely, my dear. Look at how deeply you've integrated into your husband's Mind Realm! It seems the two of you have spent plenty of quality time bonding together, hmm?"

Fiona blushes. "Yes. I suppose we have, a bit, Mildred."

"It seems you wanted to speak to me." Jason says. "May I ask why?"

"Of course, of course. In due time." Mildred says. "But first, I should express my condolences. I'm terribly sorry about what happened to your little girl. That loss must have stung you deeply, Wordsmith."

"How could you... know... about that?" Jason asks, frowning. "No, seriously. How?"

"My Heroic ability is known as the Mind Link." Mildred explains. "Among many others! I am not the same as that Solomon-boy that you know so well. No, no, my mental powers come in different forms and make me not only sultry and unattainable to mere mortal man, but also a brain-blessed babe from the Heavens! I always know of the goings-on in the world outside, even if you might expect this to be impossible. That is why I can also link to the souls of other Heroes present here. This is but a trifle, dear Jason!"

Jason nods. "Alright. So... do you know about my clone, Hope? And do you know about his recent... empowerment?"

"How could I not? Such a lucky boon that boy has reaped!" Mildred exclaims. "One thousand relics, what a shock indeed! But you should not envy him too much, for that is the reason I've brought you here to talk today."

Mildred waves her hand. She conjures a large easy chair in the middle of the town square inside Jason's Mind Realm and leisurely plops down in it, sighing contentedly.

"There are many forces in this world, Jason dearest." Mildred says, her tone somehow romantic and loving, yet also completely platonic. "I am capable of depending on others as much as I am myself. Had I possessed the powers you do, I would have spent many an age learning to master that magic. Sadly, you have been acting inadequately! I believe that you have continuously dropped the ball, to a point where I'm beginning to wonder if you've been doing it deliberately. But alas! You have not been!"

"You mean... with respect to learning the limits of my abilities?" Jason asks. "Yeah... I've been thinking that about myself a lot lately."

"And so you should." Mildred nods, turning her attention to Fiona. "Tell me dearest, would you like to help your husband even more than you have so far?"

Fiona immediately nods. "Of course. I'd do anything for Jason."

"Good! Then listen well. I have thoughts I must convey. Thoughts that will turn your husband from a boy into a man! But you must trust this super-smart seductress and listen to my every word! Otherwise, I fear he will stray onto the wrong path, as his clone has."

Fiona and Jason exchange nods.

"We're all ears, Miss Mildred."

Part 454: Hunting Chaos

Just outside the Labyrinth Core, amidst the throng of demons and monsters heading into and out of humanity's stronghold.

A curious trio of unlikely allies figuratively joins hands to complete a critical mission: Hunt down and kill Gressil, the Emperor of Chaos. These three figures consist of Creator Demila, Benjamin Brown, and Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Buddha.

The three people exit the Core and wade through the typical torrent of incoming monsters and demons that frequen the Core's entrance. They head down several nearby tunnels and eventually reach an area where the nearby population has dwindled significantly, with only the casual goblin or demon grunt walking past them and shooting curious glances at Demila in particular.

Demila and Benjamin both turn to Buddha.

[You are the one who knows how to locate Gressil.] Demila says, her tone revealing little faith in Buddha's abilities. [*If you are capable of doing so, lead us there.*]

"I am not a bloodhound." Buddha says mildly. "I cannot pinpoint the Envoy of Chaos. I can only bring us to the location where Karma no longer holds any effect. Once we reach that vicinity, it will be up to you two to uncover his location."

"Me as well?" Benjamin asks, crossing his arms. "I'm a soldier, not a scout."

"Your vision is augmented." Buddha points out. "Demila's psionic senses are powerful, and her eyesight is just as formidable as yours, but you have your own unique capabilities."

"Fair enough." Benjamin says gruffly. "Let's find this guy and get back home in time for dinner."

Buddha falls silent.

He stands silently for a full minute, slowly swiveling around in place while aiming his eyes in every conceivable direction. The other two wait patiently.

Finally, Buddha nods while looking up and to a diagonal direction, as if peering through the Labyrinth's walls. "That way."

Demila notes the direction of his gaze. [Not near the prison complex. It seems Gressil has abandoned it.]

"Makes sense." Benjamin says. "I hear the humans went in and cleaned up shop. They pulled out all of Gressil's prisoners while rescuing Hope Hiro."

Demila's eye twitches. [Yes. Hope Hiro. Indeed.]

"Hm?" Benjamin says frowning. "You have a problem with him?"

Unaware of Hope Hiro's attack on the Volgrim world of Serris, Benjamin has no idea why Demila holds such visible animosity toward his name. She doesn't explain, either.

[It is none of your business, mud-dweller.]

"Suit yourself." Benjamin replies, rolling his eyes.

The trio begins the work of navigating the Labyrinth. Despite its twisting paths and confusing layout, Demila's psionic senses easily map out the Labyrinth for a hundred miles in every direction. If she were to concentrate harder, she might even be able to extend her senses to its most distant ends.

They turn right. They turn left. The ground sometimes slopes upward, and sometimes downward. They even pass stairs carved out by goblins, though these will eventually break apart and regrow as the Labyrinth continues regenerating itself over time. Like a living organism, Hell feeds on the life forces of the microscopic denizens walking through its hallways.

As the trio travels, they pass through many different biomes adapted for specific subspecies of monsters. Benjamin looks around with interest at the surroundings.

"Have you explored Hell before?" Buddha asks, after they arrive at the third biome, an aquatic area where mermaids and sirens chirp and play together.

This particular biome glows under the radiance of surprisingly bright lightbugs, which flicker and fly throughout the air, crawling on surfaces to provide light for the surrounding areas.

"Not particularly." Benjamin says. "Occasionally, I entered the Labyrinth to visit.....*friends*. But otherwise I kept to myself."

Demila snorts. [You intended to speak of copulation partners. You mud-dwellers all swim in filth.]

Buddha ignores her comments. "You were once humanity's champion, considered the strongest man on Earth, given the lack of a living Hero. Why did you ultimately turn aside from your hatred of demons to fraternize with them?"

"You have me all wrong." Benjamin says calmly. "I never hated demonkind. I fought for life and liberty. I fought for the sake of humanity and to defend our interests. But once we lost the war... it didn't matter anymore. We had no more interests worth defending."

[And so, you began your pursuit of demonic females to ravage.] Demila says, curling up her eyes in dismissive amusement. [A typical primitive male.]

"What would you know about human sexual activities?" Benjamin challenges. "100,000 years is a long time to live without love. I met a few women I particularly liked, we enjoyed ourselves and had good times together. There's nothing wrong with that."

"Indeed." Buddha affirms. "I was not challenging your right to do any of those things. Indeed, you had no more reason to hold animosity toward the demons. However..."

Buddha pauses to look at Benjamin meaningfully.

"While you and your extensive family lived well on Hell Harbor, the rest of humanity lived in slavery under demonkind. I find it odd you would simply allow that to happen. Why did you not advocate for their release? For more humane treatment?"

"Again. I'm a soldier." Benjamin says, in a somewhat defensive tone. "I complained at the start, but it had no effect. Marie Becker had more authority than me. She carved out a niche for her Cybernites. She didn't care about the rest of the ordinary humans. In fact, I'm not sure if she ever did in the first place..."

"I think I understand now." Buddha says with a faint smile. "You are only one man. You could not save humanity alone, and your list of allies had thinned considerably."

"Yeah..." Ben replies, lowering his gaze. "I just dealt with the aftermath... in my own way. Fornicating, drinking, reveling. Better than wallowing in self-pity."

"I am not alien to such actions." Buddha says quietly. "When I lost Tamael, I turned to such activities to dull my memories. My attempts failed. We all have our own ways of coping with trauma."

"You sounds like a psychiatrist." Benjamin grumbles.

"I dabbled in the field for a few decades." Buddha replies. "As you said. When you've lived a long time, you have to cope in your own way."

The two men share a look of understanding, having both gone through somewhat similar situations across their long lives.

They proceed forward, occasionally chit-chatting about this or that. At one point, they enter a biome that truly surprises Benjamin.

"What in the literal Hell?" The Vanguard gasps. "There's lava inside the Labyrinth? And thunder?!"

Before the trio, a land of thunder and fire boils and crackles. Cries and screeches erupt in the distance from unseen giant monsters as they detect the presence of three intruders upon their domain. The truly massive inner space does not regenerate like the rest of the Labyrinth would, but remains unmoving, perhaps held at bay by the strong presences contained within.

"This is one of the Drakelands." Buddha explains. "It is where many Elemental Wyverns live, including the types that attacked Tarus II not long ago."

"I never knew something like this could exist in the Labyrinth." Benjamin mutters. "Amazing..."

Demila narrows her six eyes at Buddha. [You have only just revived. You have not been alive for 100,000 years. Yet, somehow you know of this place. How suspicious...]

Buddha chuckles. "This body I've possessed belongs to a man known as Makoto Ueda. He spent 100,000 years as a transformed monster working under the individual known as Bahamut. He himself does not remember those years well, but I am more than capable of peering into his memories."

Once again, Demila tries to read Buddha's mind, but all she can find are Makoto Ueda's memories. This time, she peers a little deeper and finds that Buddha is in fact telling the truth.

[What a wonderful deal for you.] Demila snarks. [You steal a body and reap all its benefits. You truly are an undying abomination.]

"Someday, that may come to an end." Buddha says, his tone distant. "Perhaps sooner rather than later."

The trio exits the Drakelands biome. They continue traveling, passing more and more areas as they speed up their pace.

Hours pass. Soon, an entire day. Despite his earlier comment about dinner, Benjamin Brown doesn't truly think their search would be completed quickly. He munches on some granola bars he brought along, looking around with his keen eyes while Demila scans the surrounding area.

"Still nothing?" Buddha asks. "We'll reach the first layer of the Chaos boundary soon. After that, my link to Karma will begin to weaken. Gressil is a much stronger Envoy than me, after all."

[I cannot detect his presence.] Demila says, while continuously sweeping her Psionic Sense around the nearby region, occasionally focusing on one anomaly or another. [Either he is not here, or he is exceptionally good at hiding.]

"Gressil is somewhere nearby." Buddha says with absolute certainty. "We may even begin to feel the touch of his chaotic energy soon."

A few minutes later, as Buddha predicted, a tingly, unpleasant feeling tickles the minds of everyone present. Were they magi, they would start to feel the connection to their magic supply weaken. As normal humans, and a Psion, all they feel instead are odd sensations of sadness, anger, and despair come bubbling forth, unbidden.

Benjamin's guilt surfaces to the top of his mind. He silently reflects on all his past failures to protect humanity, as well as how he ultimately turned to the side of demonkind.

Budda does not feel any immediate sensations due to his link to Karma. However, even with that protection in place, he begins to feel uncomfortable as that connection weakens due to the suppressive force pushing down on him.

Demila becomes noticeably more antsy, more on-edge. Her movements turn twitchier as she quickly looks around, imagining distant voices whispering that don't exist.

[How discomfoting.] Demila hisses. [We must be within Gressil's domain now, yet I still cannot sense him!]

"Chaos is formless. It is everywhere, yet nowhere." Buddha says sagely. "Chaos is entropy, and entropy values disorder. Try to shield your mind, False Creator. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by stray thoughts. The more you fall into disorder, the lower your strength will be."

[I know fully well what to do.] Demila snaps. [Do not speak down to me, mud-dweller. You have no idea of the strength a 7th Level Psion wields!]

"Your anger is unwarranted." Buddha says. "Try to remain calm. Not even your soul is impervious to the effects of Chaos."

Demila blinks. She shakes her head, then blinks again.

[I am... fully in control of my thoughts.]

"For now." Buddha nods. "For now..."

They walk deeper and deeper into the depth of Gressil's chaotic aura. Unaware of his exact position, the humans eventually stop talking as a strange silence lingers in the air. No longer do any other life forms stir in the area. Occasionally, they will find bugs lying dead on the floor, but never will they encounter even a single random goblin, imp or other demon or monster.

Benjamin's hands ball into fists. He flicks his eyes around, looking both forward and back as they walk down one random, featureless hallway after another. Still, nobody sees Gressil.

"We're getting close." Buddha says uneasily. "My link to Karma has reached its limit. It cannot be suppressed any further, but all that remains is a single thread of light leading out of the chaos. I have guided us this far. I will be relying on the two of you to root out our foe."

Demila starts to reply, but before she can, a figure walks out from a corner up ahead, startling everyone due to his brazenness.

"That won't be necessary," says Gressil, the Emperor of Chaos. "Welcome, friends. I've been watching you for a while now."

Demila blinks. The fact Gressil dares to simply walk in front of the group and openly show his faces to them makes her feel somewhat wary. But, in the end, he is still only a Demon Emperor. She does not think much of his threat.

[Gressil.] Demila says authoritatively. [You are suspected of engineering multiple crimes against the Volgrim Empire, including the creation of the Kolvaxian menace. You are to submit to my arrest, or you will face death.]

Gressil glances at Demila for a moment, but then turns his attention to Buddha.

"Haha. Well done, Buddha. Well done. You've led her right to me, as planned. That Psion is so headstrong, she couldn't see what you were actually planning. Her arrogance was her undoing."

Buddha frowns. "Hm?"

Demila whips her head toward him. [What did he say? Are you planning to betray me, mud-dweller?!]

"No." Buddha says simply. "Gressil is lying. Do not fall for his tricks so easily, Demila."

Gressil gasps. "Buddha! You would deny our long friendship? After all of these years? Haha. You don't need to fear that Psion any longer. Now that I am here, I will save you if she makes a move. It is all within our plan."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Benjamin Brown interjects. "Quit trying to play with our minds, Gressil. You're not as smart as you think."

Gressil turns to the human. His expression darkens.

"Quiet."

A chilly sensation washes down Benjamin Brown's back, as if he were a child in a remote village suddenly faced with the appearance of a hungry grizzly bear on an isolated mountain path. He involuntarily takes a step back, but then certain neural compounds inside his cerebral stimulator activate, dulling his sense of fear. He quickly stands back up and reasserts himself.

"Nice tricks. Your 'chaos energy' is really something. It's all about tricking the weak-minded. But I've met all kinds of demons in my life. Everyone has a gimmick. Color me unimpressed."

Demila seems to realize the truth behind Benjamin and Buddha's words. She nods slowly, then returns her attention to Gressil, while he begins to slowly walk toward the trio, each footstep hitting the ground with a heavy *thud*.

[Very clever, demon. It seems my mind is not impervious to your tricks. But if tricks are all you have, you will be lucky to survive this elder's wrath for even one standard time unit without falling to dust!]

Abruptly, Demila vanishes. She reappears directly in front of Gressil with her palm raised. In the instant between instants, she brings her hand down with the force of a

megaton hammer, slapping directly at Gressil's face far too quickly for him or anyone else to even follow the movement.

BOOOM!!

Demila's casual slap fractures space in the area. She blows apart the Labyrinth in front of herself as if unleashing a focused explosive strike, and the backwind from her attack races down the corridor behind her to knock Buddha off his feet. Benjamin only remains standing thanks to his excellent sense of balance and the weight of his metallic bones keeping him firmly planted in place.

However, Demila's attack... strikes nothing!

Gressil disappears, as if his body were atomized. Demila scowls when she realizes what has happened.

[An illusion. Quit playing tricks, demon!]

Benjamin turns around and offers a helping hand to Buddha. He pulls the former Hero to his feet, and the two of them glance past Demila at the massive crater in the Labyrinth's floors, ceiling, and walls left behind from her attack. Jagged pieces of dirt crumble in the aftermath and fall to the floor, turning to dust on impact.

"That Psion is one scary bitch." Benjamin grumbles. "I've had angry women slap me before, but I don't think I'd survive pissing her off."

Buddha doesn't answer. He frowns as a strange feeling wells up in his chest...

Suddenly, Buddha spins on his heel to face the hallway in the direction they came. He then bends over backward as an invisible fist tears at the air where his head was only an instant before, narrowly avoiding an instant death. With unnatural agility, Buddha kicks off the floor and reverse-flips backward, while Benjamin also detects the attack.

"There you are!" Benjamin roars. The technology in his iris modules allow him to detect even the faintest fluctuations of mana in the air, and he instantly homes in on the identity of Buddha's attacker.

Without hesitation, Benjamin leaps forward and raises his fist.

THUNK!

He strikes at the empty air and sends a figure stumbling backward. The illusory wall around that figure vanishes, revealing none other than Gressil's true body, no longer

obscured by his magic.

Benjamin presses the assault. He continues punching and kicking at Gressil, but the Emperor of Chaos doesn't allow him any additional cheap hits. The two of them engage in a brief but vicious dance of melee combat, with Benjamin roaring in rage as he tries to get an edge on the fearsome monster before him.

Abruptly, Demila appears. The Psion casually raises her palm once more, and slaps downward, making Benjamin's heartrate spike.

He doesn't get a second to scream.

Demila violently slaps Gressil's true body, bashing him against the wall while releasing another catastrophic explosion of energy, one which sends not only Buddha flying, but Benjamin Brown too. The Psion batters Gressil against the wall, this time successfully connecting with her attack which once again breaks apart the Labyrinth's foundations and sends shockwaves surging outward in all directions.

An instant later, she blows away the dust to gaze upon Gressil's broken, fallen figure. With both his arms shattered and his legs twisted into pretzels, Gressil appears a sorry sight.

[And there it is.] Demila says victoriously. [One slap was all it took. For your crimes against the Volgrim Empire, you will suffer tremendously.]

Demila reaches out her hand. She casually yanks Gressil into her grasp, clamping her grip onto his throat and dangling his broken, useless body as if he were a coat placed upon a hanger.

At the same time, Benjamin, who was the closest to her strike aside from Gressil himself, coughs out a wad of blood. He staggers to his feet and holds his chest, wincing at the injuries to his internal organs. Already, his internal reconstructive nanites have begun to repair the damage, but it will take him an hour or two to return to pristine condition.

"Cough! Shit, Buddha, you okay?"

Benjamin looks to the side, where he sees an armored figure laying on the ground. Buddha, having worn a T-REX activator beneath his clothing, survives the impact with minimal injuries. He lifts himself to his feet and cracks his neck. "It seems our Psion compatriot does not know how to attack without endangering her allies."

Demila, still holding Gressil's broken form, sneers. [You are both fine. If you'd like, I can teleport you back to Tarus II. I'm sure Emperor Belial would be happy- hm?]

She frowns.

Demila looks at Gressil's body in surprise, noticing the fact that he appears to be... quite dead.

Completely, utterly dead.

Not only that, but his body appears decayed enough that it doesn't seem as if Demila killed him herself. Rather, he seems to have died several days before.

[What in the Founders' name?]

Demila drops the Emperor of Chaos's body, allowing him to collapse to the floor. Her pupils shrink and enlarge several times as she makes a strange discovery.

[Impossible...]

"What is it?" Benjamin asks, slowly walking over while holding his stomach. "Did you really kill him in one slap?"

[This makes no sense.] Demila mentally whispers. [His body. It has the same soul signature. It truly is Gressil. But... the one I killed is one who existed several rotational cycles ago. This reminds me of a phenomenon I read about in the Psionic Archives, a state of temporal paradox only achievable by the most enlightened of Temporal Manipulators...]

Buddha's stomach churns.

"...Karma is the force of order. It is the force of stability. But Chaos is the force of disorder and entropy. Gressil can already see into the future. Perhaps the barrier to time itself has begun to weaken..."

Hardly have the words left Buddha's mouth before two figures suddenly appear at the far edges of both craters. Gressil reveals himself in two locations at once, startling the trio.

[You're still alive.] Demila says grimly. [What have you done? Have you achieved the state of Temporal Ascension?!]

The Gressil nearest to her chuckles.

"Oh, Demila. I am not a Psion. Your rules do not apply to me. But then again... I suppose *no* rules do."

Demila smiles with her eyes.

[We will see about that.]

She vanishes from her position, intending to reappear before Gressil and slap him to death again. But this time, she materializes in front of a wall, making her blink in surprise.

[Hm?! I jumped to the wrong coordinate? Impossible. I haven't made such an amateur mistake in a million cycles!]

Flustered by this minor failure, Demila becomes incensed.

[You did this to me!] She roars at Gressil. [Your damned mud-magic is interfering with my mind! But demonic tricks won't make a difference when compared with overwhelming STRENGTH!]

Once again, Demila flickers toward Gressil. This time, she succeeds and swings her palm down, but as she does, a figure appears behind her with his fist raised.

CRACK!!

Demila's attack harmlessly whiffs past an illusion, but Gressil's sneak attack connects with the back of Demila's head, pounding her straight downward into the Labyrinth's soil!

Thunk!

[Aargh!]

Demila howls more in rage than pain, while Gressil stands amidst the wreckage of her third attack, smiling casually.

"No need to end things quickly. We're only just getting started here, *Psion*."

Part 455: Chaos Control

Demila leaps off the floor. She pounces at Gressil and conjures a terrifying amount of psionic energy into her fist before lunging it straight at his laughing face.

The instant before her attack connects, the psionic energy in her body goes berserk!

All the condensed energy enveloping her fist violently explodes with the force of a hundred grenades, blasting her arm off and instantly reversing her momentum. She mentally shrieks as she rockets backward and slams against the wall. At the same time, the blast 'kills' Gressil, sending his body flying away. He, too, collapses into his own shadow, ragdolling to the ground like a giant sack of potatoes. His sorry, shredded figure might give one the impression he had actually died, but only if they hadn't already seen him miraculously return to life only a minute before.

Despite suffering a terrible backlash from her own psionic energy and atomizing one of her arms, Demila easily picks herself back up. She flickers to her feet and scowls at her missing arm.

[This is not supposed to happen! How are you causing my psionic energy to backfire, mud-dweller?!]

Without waiting for a reply, Demila concentrates her thoughts on the elbow joint where the second half of her arm used to be. By focusing her power, she rapidly regenerates her former limb into reality, making it regrow within only seconds in a manner somewhat similar to Beelzebub's regeneration!

Gressil steps out of the Nothingness on the opposite side of Demila's crater.

"You think I am causing you to fail. But that is not true. Haha. You are already a failure of a Psion, Demila. Your own people mock you. You don't need to blame me for your inability."

Benjamin Brown keeps his distance. He watches from the side, waiting for a chance to strike while clutching his injured stomach. He focuses on cycling his medical nanites to speed up the healing process. This cuts his required recuperation time by half, so long as he doesn't have to directly engage in combat.

"Fuck. What the hell is going on with Demila?" Benjamin growls. "That dumb psionic bitch will kill me with friendly fire if I jump in now! Weren't we supposed to work together? Is Gressil suppressing her powers?!"

Buddha steals over to Benjamin's side. They watch as Demila trades even more frightening, primally enchanted attacks with Gressil.

"The Envoy of Chaos is unable to suppress psionic energy. His aura only works on those with magical affinities. However, psionic energy is formed and shaped by the thoughts and mental state of its wielder. Chaos energy *can* influence the minds of others. Demila must have some deep-seated insecurities for her to be this easily affected by Gressil's machinations..."

Demila flickers from side to side. She teleports toward Gressil and fires a beam of psionic energy from her forehead.

THOOM!!

It tears straight through Gressil's figure and blasts a massive hole in the Labyrinth, opening up a trench five miles long! Any creatures in the path of the beam vanish from existence, instantly vaporized by the terrifying power contained in the Creator's attack!

[How *dare* you look down upon me.] Demila seethes. [The only reason you're still alive is because of your overreliance on tricks. I am ten thousand times stronger than you will ever hope to be!]

"Listen to you." Gressil says, his mocking voice floating toward Demila from every direction. "You're so proud of your strength. But do you truly feel any pride? All Psions of the seventh level are mighty when compared to us lowly mud-dwellers. But how do you stack up to your contemporaries, hmm?"

Gressil doesn't immediately reappear. Demila sweeps her senses around the area, but fails to locate his position.

[Reveal yourself!]

"Truly pathetic." Gressil continues. "You're an outmoded relic. The weakest of the 7th Level Psions. I wonder how it feels, seeing a young upstart like Vulpanix crush all your records and smother your face into the dirt. You have to speak so politely to her. She's the Founder's Favorite. And as for you, you're nothing but an old, forgotten wastrel, useful only as an expendable pawn. It's so tragic."

Gressil materializes behind Demila. She spins to face him, immediately sensing his presence.

[Your words are poison.] Demila says. [My Founders value me! I am not worthless!]

"Aren't you?" Gressil asks, curling the corners of his mouth upward. "When the Plague comes, who do you think they will place their hopes and dreams upon? Whose shoulders will they deem fit to bear the fate of the future Volgrim Empire? You? Vulpanix? I think we both know the answer."

Demila glowers at him in hatred. But even so, her body refuses to move. Something about his words burrows into her ears, making her chest spasm unexpectedly.

"What do you think, Demila?" Gressil asks. "When the Plague reaches Volgarius, how long will your leaders wait before sending you to die at the frontlines? A day? A week? A month? Perhaps it won't even take them a single hour. They may have even already drafted the plans for your 'noble sacrifice...'"

[I am PROUD to serve my Empire!] Demila protests. [Unlike you, a free-wheeling monster who does as he pleases, I have a sense of duty! I have my pride, my honor!]

"Conceptual trappings placed upon your mind by your superiors. Invisible shackles designed to weaken you over time." Gressil says, ever so softly. "But... if you were truly intelligent, you would know that there is a way out. You don't have to be limited by your current form. There are still ways for you to... progress your Psionic Seed."

Demila's heart skips a beat. For the briefest moment, she feels, deep inside her soul, a pang of desire.

But she quickly shakes that feeling away.

[An insect cannot uplift a god! You are too dangerous to be left alive, worm! Your words are insidious, like paralytic poison injected into the spine! DIE!]

She flickers toward Gressil and bashes his skull in, killing him on the spot. A brief moment later, Gressil reappears. So she jumps to his new body and kills him before he can speak a word.

Over and over, Demila plays whack-a-mole with the seemingly unkillable monster toying with her thoughts. Unable to properly speak due to her killing him too quickly, Gressil returns to doing so through his projections.

"Your attacks are weakening. I can already feel that your willpower has begun to fade. You know that I'm telling the truth, Demila. If you would only join me, I could grant you strength beyond your wildest dreams... becoming an 8th Level Psion would become as simple as breathing to you. And as for becoming a 9th Level Psion... that would also not be outside your reach..."

[YOU LIE!] Demila shrieks. [If it were that simple, you could have uplifted any other Psion! You're trying to destabilize my mental state! I will not fall for your tricks any longer!]

For a brief moment, Gressil doesn't answer.

Then, he rematerializes inside the chamber once again.

As before, Demila instantly locks onto his position.

[Manipulating your temporal coordinates requires a tremendous amount of internal energy!] Demila proclaims. [I don't doubt that if I kill you enough times, you'll ultimately lose this battle!]

She flickers toward Gressil. She raises her fist once again, and flings it at his head, like she's already done dozens of times before.

But this time...

Gressil's arm snaps upward!

He catches her fist!

In the briefest of instants, Demila's supercharged brain follows the motion, becoming jolted with confusion.

Then Gressil wrenches his grip on her fist, spinning her body around to slam her against the wall!

[Ugh!]

Demila grunts slightly, less injured physically, and more shocked by his sudden boost of strength.

"You truly think you are the sky above the sky." Gressil sneers. "Let me show you how *wrong* you are."

Demila tries to lunge at him, but as if having become an expert in one thousand forms of hand-to-hand combat, Gressil deflects her other fist without releasing his grasp on her

right fist. Horrifyingly, it turns out that having four arms to wield grants him a much wider array of melee capabilities, which he immediately uses on the Psion before him.

Gressil anchors both of Demila's arms. Before she can bombard him with psionic attacks from her mind, Gressil rockets a fist at her head, and another at her stomach.

Bang! Thunk! Thunk! CRACK!

Gressil beats Demila like a hammer of god. He smashes her face from side to side, making her reel. He hits her stomach and knocks some of the wind out of her, then he strikes her ribcage.

[ENOUGH!!] Demila roars, releasing a blast wave of energy from her entire body. She launches Gressil away forcibly, exhausting a portion of her psionic reserves to finally break free of his grip. Luckily, even after taking a hammering, Demila's unthinkably powerful body hasn't taken much damage.

Despite getting blown away, this time, Gressil doesn't perish on impact. He climbs out of the rubble, unharmed, and dusts his shoulders off.

"How was that, Psion? For a brief moment, a mere mud-dweller held you down. It seems you really aren't as strong as you imagine. Confessor Vulpanix would surely put up more of a fight than you."

"Demila!" Benjamin suddenly shouts. "I don't know what the hell is going on, but you can't let yourself listen to this monster! He's trying to weaken your mind! You have to work with me so we can defeat him!"

Demila glances at the Vanguard. She starts to reply, but before she can speak, Gressil does instead.

"Oh, *yes*. Good point, Benjamin Brown. Haha. If the two of you team up, you'll surely be able to defeat me. Alone, Demila hasn't a chance, but with the help of such a *powerful* human like you, she'll actually pose a threat to me. It's just too bad she needs to borrow the help of a mud-dweller to defeat someone as *weak* and *insignificant* as me. She truly has fallen into the abyss."

Demila's heart turns cold. [You keep out of this fight, human! I will crush this Emperor myself! I don't need your help! You will only get in my way!]

"Goddammit!" Benjamin exclaims. "Don't you see he's manipulating you? You're dancing along to Gressil's every word! Just set your pride aside so we can actually beat-"

[I TOLD YOU TO BE QUIET!] Demila roars, the power of her psionic voice rumbling Benjamin's mind. The Vanguard staggers backward while blood pours from his ears. [This is MY fight! Stay out of it!]

"Nnngh!" Benjamin groans. "God... damned... woman... shit, my head!"

He reluctantly pulls back, realizing he hasn't a chance of convincing her to let him fight. Frustrated, he begins to even wonder why he wasted his time coming here.

Ben blinks his eyes and heals the damage to his ear canals. He looks at Buddha with annoyance. "What was even the point of stringing me along? That damn alien won't listen to reason."

"Wait for an opportunity to strike." Buddha says. "I am still the Master of Combat. I will assist you when the time is right. And don't let your guard down. Gressil could attack us at any moment."

As the two men form a plan, Gressil and Demila return to fighting. Demila savagely attacks Gressil with all her strength, but unlike at the start of the battle, she no longer manages to easily 'kill' Gressil or his fake bodies through overwhelming power. Instead, as if having experienced an unseen baptism, Gressil becomes capable of fighting nearly on par with the Psion.

Demila strikes Gressil's face. In return, she eats a counter-punch straight to her nose, snapping her head back. She fires a bolt of lightning at him, but he flickers to the side, dodging it.

Frustrated, Demila narrows her eyes. [I tire of this.]

She motions with her hands and begins conjuring a powerful web of psionic energy...

A moment later, Demila's hands dart to the right and left. She fires small bolts of power to the ground, where they land and remain in place, creating glowing orbs of light.

Unsure what Demila is doing, Benjamin Brown watches with a knitted brow. He frowns deeply as those orbs of light begin to quiver and shake.

SPLAT!

They burst open like eggs, revealing a series of strange, tentacled horrors. Like monsters from far beyond the Void, these ominous creatures resemble ten and twenty and thirty-limbed octopods, their beaked maws opening and closing to release soundless cries.

Even Gressil no longer appears as confident as before.

"Finally, you're putting that title of Creator to some use."

[You should feel honored.] Demila says quietly. [Since my ascension to the 7th Level, I have never once unleashed this technique on another living being. For six hundred thousand cycles, I have kept it quietly stored away. It is my greatest trump card. For you to die to my Creations, it is proof that I have acknowledged you as a threat. You are no ordinary mud-dweller. Your power comes from... elsewhere.]

Gressil snorts. "Is that what you believe? That it's impossible for me to stand up to you unless some dark god has empowered me? You think too highly of yourself. The truth is, you're simply not as strong as you've pretended. Your façade is meaningless before the power of Chaos."

Demila balls her hands into fists. Wordlessly, she commands her Psionic Creations to rush at Gressil and attack him from all directions. As they do, her thoughts turn dark. She briefly lowers her eyes, contemplating the Truths contained within Gressil's words.

I am... weak. Demila thinks. I have stagnated. I can no longer progress on my Path. I believed that I had made peace with my lack of progression... but this damnable fellow's words have made me realize... I am not content with my mediocrity. Toward him, I feel absolute hatred. Disgust. And also... deep guilt.

Demila's constructs levitate into the air. They surround Gressil and attack him from all directions. Even he needs to dodge their attacks, as each one is only individually a little less powerful than Demila, but all combined their strength rises ten levels above hers.

The Creations' psionic tentacles lash at Gressil to try and tear him apart. He teleports from side to side, up and down, avoiding their attacks. Countless lashes that would have burst his frame into a bloody pulp instead strike the Labyrinth, sending violent shockwaves in all directions. Ten miles away, demons walking down a hallway end up thrown off their feet by the aftershocks. As for those within a mile of the battle's radius, they ultimately perish due to the invisible mindbursts that strike their brains.

Gressil doesn't counter-attack Demila's creations. He only avoids her eldritch horrors while keeping on his toes.

Demila focuses her mind. She struggles to coordinate all of her Creations' individual actions, manipulating them like an army to focus on Gressil's continuously shifting

position. However, frustratingly, the Emperor of Chaos always dances tantalizingly out of reach, his existence too difficult for even her senses to track.

Damn him! Demila thinks. He's only one Demon! Even Satan could not have lasted this long! How am I unable to finish off one single mud-dweller?! Have I truly lost my edge?!

A voice speaks from behind Demila.

"Indeed, you have."

[WHAT?!]

Demila nearly jumps out of her skin. She whirls around just in time to see Gressil's clawed fingers swiping at her face.

RIIIP!

Gressil slashes at Demila's eyes and nose, cutting five deep gashes from the top of her head all the way down to her chin. The sudden shock of his attack scares the absolute crap out of her and makes her lose her composure.

BOOM!!

All of Demila's Creation's self-destruct, falling apart due to her complete lapse in concentration.

Gressil lifts two of his fists overhead. He swings them down like sledgehammers, aiming for the top of his opponent's skull.

THUNK!

He batters Demila downward, knocking her into the Labyrinth floor. She slams into the ground face-first, breaking one of her legs during the impact. Demila lays there for an instant, stunned and wracked with pain.

Then Gressil teleports on top of her back and wraps his hands around her throat.

"Those Creations of yours are only good for bullying the weak. An admirable goal, and one I certainly respect, but further evidence of your weakness. For too long, you've lived a useless, opulent life at the top of the hierarchy. You've forgotten what it means to fight an equal in a life or death battle."

Demila tries to shove off the floor, but another brutal punch strikes the back of her head, slamming her face into the ground.

[Kahh!]

She tries to get up again, to teleport away, to do anything. But the psionic energy in her body fails to obey her commands!

CRACK!

Gressil delivers another bone-breaking punch to the base of her skull, right where her spinal cord meets her shoulders. The impact of this punch makes Demila's entire body spasm.

[Aaah! Aaah! RELEASE-]

THUNK!

One more punch batters her skull, rattles her brain, and disorients her thoughts.

Demila's vision wavers. She loses consciousness for a moment, while Gressil squeezes her throat.

"It's been so long." The Emperor of Chaos whispers. "Breaking a strong woman's spirit... listening to her cries of pain, her pleading and begging for mercy... it's my favorite way to pass the time. Have you finally realized yet, Psion? Your body is not strong. It is only granted strength because of your psionic powers. And those powers only function when your mental state is unassailable. But too bad for you, you are merely a weak, pathetic woman before me. I know what you fear. I know how to *break* you. And now, you lack any ability to resist."

Demila groggily tries to move, but another punch slams into the back of her head, driving her face into the Labyrinth's floor. This time, she completely collapses, unable to move.

Gressil stands above his new prize, relishing the moment.

"Hehehe. You Volgrim are all so haughty. So used to attaining success effortlessly. But that is your greatest weakness. That is why you will ultimately help me trigger the Great Shattering. You lack the self-introspection required to-"

"HEY! Bastard!"

A voice yells from behind Gressil, making him frown. The Emperor of Chaos turns his head to see Benjamin Brown standing alongside Buddha. The two of them assume battle-stances, ready for a fight.

"Do you *mind*?" Gressil asks. "I was trying to give a humiliating speech to my defeated foe. It's one of the things I enjoy doing most..."

He pauses.

"Besides. You might be a Vanguard, and perhaps you were once even the Strongest Human... but you're no match for me."

The corners of Benjamin's mouth twitch uneasily.

"Perhaps not. But I won't know unless I try. And I'm eager to put you down for good."

"Your evil ways must end today, Gressil." Buddha says through his T-REX's transmitter. "Chaos has grown without restraint for far too long. It's time to return the Balance to how it should be."

Gressil stares at the two humans for several seconds. Then, he casually releases his grip on Demila's defeated form. He stands up and turns to face the two puny, pathetic insects who dare to face him alone.

"Oh, Benjamin. After I kill you, I'll be sure to take hold of that pretty little daughter of yours. She can replace some of the toys I've lost in recent years. I'll treat her just like I did my precious *Birdie*."

"You'll never leave this place alive." Benjamin retorts. "That, I *promise*."

Part 456: A Futile Struggle

Recommended Listening

Two humans. One Demon Emperor. Impossible odds.

Benjamin Brown, once known as the Strongest Human, swallows his saliva heavily as he realizes today might be the day he dies. The original plan, for him and Demila to work together to take Gressil down, has failed due to the Psion's arrogance. Now, he has to achieve the impossible by accomplishing the original plan by himself.

Of course, he does have Buddha at his side. But without any notable Heroic abilities, and while only wearing a modest T-REX, how much help can this ancient Hero possibly give him?

"GO!"

Benjamin and Buddha lunge toward Gressil's right and left. Buddha aims for the secondary half, where Lucifer slumbers, while Benjamin targets Gressil's dominant side.

Both men begin punching and kicking at Gressil, while he retaliates by swinging his fists right back at them!

Towering two full heads taller than either human, with a body thrice their weight, the Emperor holds an absolute advantage in terms of size class. Were this a boxing match between ordinary humans, he would already have an immense advantage. But that still pales in comparison to the strength granted to him by the rank of Demon Emperor!

Demon Lords cannot win against an Emperor. Neither can Barons, and not even a pair of Dukes.

Therefore, ordinary humans haven't a chance in Hell!

Gressil focuses most of his attention on Benjamin Brown. He does not act casually, but takes his opponent seriously, especially when Benjamin's steel-reinforced bones crash against his figure.

Thunk! THUNK!!

Benjamin hammers Gressil's right arms. He ducks and dodges as Gressil grabs at him and tries to deck him in the head, but the injuries he suffered from Demila's attacks

earlier slow down Benjamin's movements considerably. He still hasn't fully recovered!

At the same time, Buddha strikes at Gressil's weaker side. Like a slippery eel, he slithers around, using the enhanced strength his T-REX grants him to deliver blows no weaker than those fired by Benjamin. With Gressil distracted by the Vanguard, he can't quite put enough attention on Buddha to land a clean hit.

"Excellent." Gressil praises, while Benjamin sends a tricky punch into one of his kidneys, making him wince. "You've never fought together before, but your teamwork is exquisite."

Suddenly, as Buddha and Benjamin swing their fists, Gressil vanishes. He reappears behind Benjamin an instant later with his palm raised.

SLAP!

Gressil's hand crashes against the back of Benjamin's head, flinging him toward Buddha and causing them to crash together. Both men yelp as they stumble and fall to the ground, then quickly jump back up.

Benjamin rubs the back of his head. "Motherf- nice tricks, Gressil! Too afraid to fight me like a man?! Is the little Emperor scared?"

Gressil chuckles. "Childish. I'm not stupid, Benjamin Brown. You killed Emperor Laplace all by yourself. You might be an old dog, but who knows if you've taught yourself new tricks?"

"This old dog still has teeth!" Benjamin barks. "Come here, you bastard!"

Ben's eyes glow red. He lunges toward Gressil again, with Buddha slinking around behind him. Together, they charge Gressil, this time acting more warily toward his teleportation abilities. Without any magical powers of their own, neither man can afford to underestimate the Emperor of Chaos's metaphysical aspects.

Thump! Thump! Bang!

Buddha slides under Gressil's legs and leaps up, kicking him in the back. His attack makes Gressil stumble toward Benjamin, who follows up with a devastating uppercut to the demon's chin. Slightly jarred, Gressil stumbles backward again. He tries to grab the Hero behind him, but misses as Buddha adopts a completely different set of combat movements known as the Drunken Fist. He sways around, moving unpredictably to dodge Gressil while his faceless helmet gives no hints as to his thoughts.

Gressil snarls.

The Master of Combat. People once thought Buddha was a quiet fellow who only used Karma to execute his enemies, but he has mastered all forms of martial arts, and all combat styles. Benjamin Brown is the stronger enemy, but Buddha is much more versatile!

Not quite sure which human to focus on, Gressil opts to protect his vital organs while swinging his four arms at either human whenever they come close.

However, while two heads may be better than one, Gressil's second head does not offer him any assistance. He can only properly focus on one of the humans at a time, and whenever he does, the other closes in to deliver a gut-busting punch or kick to his exposed areas.

For five minutes, ten minutes, the fight continues.

Gressil's expression becomes more focused, more wary. He finds that even though the humans are weaker than him, and certainly not up to his strength levels, they are superior in their mastery of combat. Indeed, Gressil has never fought 'properly' nor been militarily trained to a professional level. His attacks are clumsy and slow, easily predicted by the two seasoned warriors hammering him.

Like a tree being worn down by the strikes of an axe, Gressil finds that even his innate resilience does not mean he holds the absolute advantage. Perhaps another Emperor, such as Ose, would easily cope with these two opponents thanks to her millennia of combat experience, but Gressil is simply unskilled in the way of battles to the death.

"Insects." Gressil growls. "You test my patience."

He vanishes again, this time reappearing beside Buddha to try and grab him, but Buddha's connection to Karma allows him to sense the disturbance. He instantly ducks Gressil's clumsy fingers, slides under the Emperor's arm, and fires a punch at Gressil's elbow.

SNAP!!

"Aargh!"

Gressil howls in pain as the decisive blow shatters his elbow and makes his entire body shudder. Before Buddha can follow up, Gressil quickly teleports to the other side of the crater, grimacing with hateful eyes as his lower right arm hangs uselessly at his side.

"Nice hit!" Benjamin exclaims.

"He's far from beaten." Buddha warns. "Beware!"

Gressil's expression turns nasty.

"Nobody hurts me. *I* hurt them."

Gressil lifts one leg. He violently kicks at the floor, blasting a cone of dirt and rock across the crater toward the humans. The bullet-like fragments of compacted dirt bite into Benjamin's flesh, but he ignores the pain. Likewise, Buddha's armored body doesn't take the slightest damage thanks to the T-REX protecting him.

However, a cloud of dust engulfs the area, making both men grimace.

"Heh heh heh..." Gressil chuckles evilly. "I've been so kind to you. You didn't have to come here. You didn't have to fight me. You could have gone about your lives and I'd never have bothered with your worthless existences. But you chose to come here and die. Such a tragedy. Such a *waste*."

Gressil vanishes. He reappears behind Benjamin, but the Vanguard isn't fooled. He quickly hops away from the Emperor of Chaos, turning his attention to the teleporting demon...

"Wait, it's a-" Buddha starts to say, half a second too slow.

He fails to warn Benjamin in time.

While Benjamin's attention locks onto Gressil, he fails to notice a second Gressil materializing behind him. This one grins menacingly.

His fist fires at Benjamin's spine. The Vanguard doesn't see it coming.

THUNK!!

The devastating strength behind Gressil's punch snaps Benjamin's body like a slingshot. His entire momentum reverses, launching him forward and down, where he *smashes* into the dirt, bounces off, and continues flying helplessly until he slams into the crater's wall.

Bang!

Benjamin Brown lands in a heap. One of his arms and one of his legs twitches, visibly broken and bent in ways they shouldn't be.

"Uhh... uhh..."

"Benjamin!" Buddha exclaims.

"One down. One to go." Gressil casually comments, turning his attention to Buddha. "What will you do now that you can't rely on that Vanguard to distract me?"

Buddha appears unmoved. "Come and find out, servant of Chaos."

"I am no servant." Gressil says, as he starts stomping toward his Karmic adversary. "I am Chaos's master!"

The Emperor of Chaos clears the gap in a second. He attacks Buddha with all three unbroken arms, no longer needing to hold back due to focusing on two foes.

Swish! Swish!

Gressil swings at Buddha. He grabs at him and tries to crush the Envoy of Karma in a single blow. While Buddha's strength and defense might be enhanced enough to injure Gressil, he will absolutely fall apart if the Emperor can just get hold of him one time.

But, despite his best efforts... Gressil repeatedly fails!

Buddha switches up his styles. He bobs and weaves, shifting between combat stances so fluidly that few of humanity's most legendary figures could even name all the stances he's capable of replicating.

Jujitsu. Taekwando. Mixed Martial Arts. Sumo Wrestling. The Drunken Fist. Muay Thai. Kickboxing. Kung Fu and Karate. Wing Chun and Shaolin. Judo and Aikido...

Like a stream comprised of a thousand different black belts from a thousand different schools, Buddha dances around Gressil's clumsy movements, absolutely embarrassing the Emperor of Chaos's efforts to crush him. Were Chaos's Envoy a more egotistical demon, he might have even been driven to rage and fury, but Gressil keeps his cool, maintaining his focus on defeating the annoying gnat.

"Such speed. Such skill." Gressil praises as he relentlessly assaults the former Hero. "I have heard tales spoken regarding your fighting capabilities, but they fell far short of the legends. How long will you be able to dodge, I wonder? All it will require is *one* slip up and you will die."

Gressil rushes at the human, trying to pin him down with three grabs in different directions. But to his surprise, Buddha doesn't dodge. Instead, he steps toward the Emperor's claws, slaps aside his nearest arm, and sends a kick flying straight up into Gressil's chin.

THUNK!

Gressil's head snaps backward. His eyes involuntarily water as the brutal blow jars his senses.

And in that moment, a figure sneaks up on him from behind. Stealthed through one of his hidden abilities, the entity catches Gressil unaware...

Benjamin Brown grins wickedly as he pounces at the momentarily stunned Emperor of Chaos. He leaps onto Gressil's back, ignoring the agony of his broken leg. He wraps his one good arm around Gressil's neck while pressing his injured palm against Gressil's spine.

"What?!" Gressil exclaims.

Benjamin's eyes curl up. "*Gotcha, motherfucker.*"

He activates his ultimate ability, the power of Mana Drain. Made from an exotic technology during the Energy Wars, it allows him to siphon the life force and magical energy of any other being, so long as he can maintain close contact with them.

Sluuuurp!

Gressil howls in shock as he begins to feel his abundant mana reserves deplete at an alarming rate. At the same time, all of Benjamin's formerly injured internal organs, his broken limbs, and any other ailments rapidly heal. He restores himself to full fighting condition within seconds, all while Gressil thrashes around and tries to yank him off.

"YOU!" Gressil roars, finally truly enraged. "YOU'LL PAY!"

He manages to grab Benjamin's leg, but so firm is the human's grip on his neck that Gressil can't quite get the leverage needed to pull him off.

Gressil tries to teleport away, but his ability fails! The interference from Benjamin's mana draining screws up his magic, allowing Buddha to rush in and deliver a full-power kick to the Emperor's stomach.

THUNK!!

"Guh-HUK!!" Gressil coughs, the wind driven from his lungs.

Horried, Chaos's Envoy realizes he has grossly underestimated the power of Humanity's Finest Soldier. But he can't be entirely blamed.

After all, his rise to Emperor came well after the Energy Wars. He never fought during those days. He never experienced the terror of battling the Vanguard, and he never paid much attention to Benjamin once the war ended.

Perhaps, if he had observed Beelzebub's battle in the Slithering Spire, he might be aware of Benjamin's hidden abilities, but sadly, he overlooked that moment in time...

And now, with Buddha so close and the power of Karma making his powers of foresight less reliable, Gressil can't even predict the immediate future! This causes him to fall into a terrible predicament as two seemingly weak humans overwhelm him through their coordinated efforts!

Gressil leaps backward. He flings his back against the crater wall to try and badly injure Benjamin, but the human's exoskeleton body is more than capable of taking a beating. And with his palm draining Gressil's mana at an increasingly alarming pace, Benjamin can easily heal any damage he does suffer.

"GET OFF ME, WORM!" Gressil roars.

"Hahaha!" Benjamin taunts his enemy. "You underestimated me! You didn't realize I was tailor-made to kill overconfident Emperors like you! Now, just like Laplace, you're going to die!"

With his body fully restored, Benjamin pulls his palm off Gressil's spine and balls his hand into a fist. He launches it forward like a cannonball, plunging it into Gressil's back, tearing out a huge wad of bloodied flesh!

"AAARGH!" Gressil screams, his eyes turning frantic. "GET OFF! GET OFF!"

At the same time, the second head on Gressil's body begins to stir...

Buddha's heart turns cold. "Benjamin! Lucifer is waking up! Watch out!"

Despite Benjamin currently being attached to Gressil's head, he hasn't a single grip on the other seemingly useless and dormant head.

But he knows the power it contains.

Benjamin's stomach metaphorically sinks into his boots as he sees Lucifer starting to awaken.

"Oh, fuck."

Her gaze turns sharp. She turns to look at the Vanguard, and her third eye brightens.

"...Just what do you think you're doing, human?" Lucifer asks casually, her gaze cold. "The only one with the right to beat this useless brat... is me."

A bolt of raw magical power fires from her third eye.

Benjamin opens his mouth to scream, but no words come out.

BOOOOOM!!

A thunderous blast rips him off Gressil's body and sends him flying backward. So terrifying is the power in Lucifer's attack that Benjamin's arm, which was wrapped around Gressil's throat, remains behind, torn from his shoulder as he's sent flying.

Benjamin crashes into the floor lifelessly. His body spasms and twitches, all of his former injuries far worse than before. Broken, beaten, and battered, he coughs weakly, his charred skin telling a horrifying tale of the power behind Lucifer's attack.

Lucifer glances at the robotic arm still wrapped around her son's neck. She snarls at the useless idiot for being unable to free himself, then directs her attention to Buddha. The Hero turns pale inside his armor as her third eye lights up once again.

"Sorry." Lucifer says 'apologetically.' "My son is so worthless. What an embarrassment. Can't even handle two little maggots by himself..."

BOOOM!!

Another horrifying blast detonates against Buddha's body, firing him into the ground and obliterating his T-REX armor. Burnt and charred, his condition is even more awful than Benjamin's due to his weaker constitution. Third degree burns rapidly settle in, turning his skin into a horror show.

Gressil gasps and wheezes. The painful hole in his back makes him grimace, but even more agonizing is the look his mother gives him.

"IDIOT! PATHETIC!" Lucifer roars. "YOU'RE A FAILURE! A WORTHLESS EXCUSE FOR A SON! You let your sister die! You can't even handle two humans! AHH! I hate you, Gressil! I hate that I ever chose to adopt such a miserable pile of shit into my lineage! You are a STAIN upon demonkind!!!"

Gressil's former rage instantly deflates. He withers under his mother's words, shrinking back as she spends the next several minutes brutally berating him.

Eventually though, Lucifer's rage cools. She tires, her mental energy spent.

"Worthless... worthless..." Lucifer mutters, her eyes slowly closing.

Ultimately, her head lolls forward. She falls into a deep sleep once more, leaving Gressil alone, shaken and broken.

The Emperor of Chaos grinds his teeth together. He trembles uncontrollably, trying desperately to recover not only from his mother's mental assault, but the pain he suffered at the hands of these two humans.

"You... well done..." Gressil whispers. "I didn't expect... two humans... tsk..."

He slowly rises to his feet. He grabs Benjamin's leftover arm and tosses it to the dirt, then stomps it under his foot. He directs a hateful glare at Buddha, then begins to walk toward the helpless, twitching human laying in a smoking heap.

"This is... all *your* fault." Gressil growls. "You brought them here to kill me. And you almost succeeded. Well played, Buddha..."

He eventually stands over the shivering, naked, burned body of his enemy. He leans down and wraps his fingers around Buddha's throat.

"Any last words? Come on. You can still speak. I want to *hear* you beg for mercy."

Buddha remains silent. He stares up at Gressil defiantly, saying nothing.

"Tight-lipped as always." Gressil chuckles. "You must think yourself so cunning. But look at you now. A broken lump of charcoal."

Gressil tightens his grip on Buddha's neck. He starts to squeeze with enough force to instantly snap the Hero's neck.

But, as he does, he frowns.

Gressil notices something. An anomaly.

Buddha... *smiles*.

The Envoy of Karma closes his eyes and accepts his fate without complaint.

Upon noticing this fact, Gressil pauses. He begins to think about everything that has transpired. He loosens his grip and nods to himself while looking off to the side.

"Oh... I see. So it's like that. Haha. Haha. You almost outplayed me again, Buddha. So clever, so very clever..."

Buddha's smile fades. He opens his eyes as he realizes Gressil has suddenly rethought the act of killing him.

"Y-you..."

"Hahahaha..." Gressil laughs, even more confidently than before. "It all makes sense now."

Without hesitation, he fully releases Buddha, flicking him back to the floor. Gressil stands straight up and looks down at the Hero with an appreciative gaze.

"You almost had me. It was a double-bind situation. One that would allow you to win no matter what. Either you defeated me and ended the threat of Chaos, or you would have died at my hand. And since my power is so much greater than yours, you would not have been able to revive. You would have *lost* your connection to Karma... hahaha."

Gressil's vicious grin turns Buddha's heart cold.

"You're... mistaken..." Buddha gasps, gritting his teeth through the pain.

Gressil taps the side of his head. "I'm not an idiot, Buddha. I know more than you think. You must have... a *successor*? Yes, I see. You've picked out a replacement. All this show, this charade... it was a trick to get me to kill you. Then you could finally die for good. Be with that wife of yours in the Great Beyond. Haha. Then your progeny would rise up to oppose me. Truly a brilliant plan! And you almost succeeded."

Buddha's breathing turns ragged. "Wait! A b-bargain. Please, Gressil. Please. I beg of you... just... kill me! Look. I've given you the Psion. She'll make for a fine agent..."

"You have no leverage." Gressil says, chuckling even more heartily than ever. "Hahaha... but I accept your gift. Truly wonderful, the ways of Karma are."

He walks over to Demila's unconscious form. He flips her onto her back, then presses his palm against her face.

After a few moments, Gressil pulls away. Then he walks over to Benjamin Brown and repeats the same action. The Vanguard struggles futilely, but with many of his critical systems in disrepair, he cannot stave off the Emperor of Chaos's grasp.

After holding onto Benjamin's face for a moment, Gressil stands up and stretches his arms. He glances at his bottom right limb, frowning at that injury he sustained.

"You could have defeated me, or you could have died. Either outcome would have been acceptable, Buddha. Haha. But what a shame. I choose... **neither**. This outcome seems so much more *fun*. Don't you think? So much more... chaotic. Who knows what will happen next? What hare-brained scheme you'll concoct. I won't let you die, Buddha. And now I

know to start looking for your chosen successor. Who knows? Perhaps I'll find him. Kill him. Or maybe I'll let him live?"

Gressil turns his back on the gasping Hero. As he walks away, Gressil offers one final line.

"It's so much more fun... not knowing the future. The Great Shattering is nearly here, Buddha. I hope you're ready! HAH! HAH! HAH!"

The Emperor of Chaos fades away, stepping through space to leave his three opponents laying like corpses in the dirt.

Buddha's heart sags. He slumps against the ground, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Tam...ael..."

Part 457: Wordsmith's New Ambition

Planet Earth. Deep underground, in a secret facility within the depths of the Remnant Oasis.

Inside Jason's Mind Realm, the Wordsmith and his spiritual wife, Fiona, sit at a small table across from the large and voluptuous Hero known as Mad Madam Mildred. Mildred leans back in her chair and swirls wine around in a glass while the low lighting gives the room an ambivalent atmosphere.

"Sad to say, boy, but you have not progressed well in the last few months!" Mildred proclaims. "Your growth as a Hero has been quite shoddy."

"Really?" Jason asks. "I thought I did pretty good, all things considered. I've created all sorts of unique new devices, including the Belial Booster, the Beauty Booster, the Body Booster-"

"Yes, yes, those are fine little toys." Mildred says dismissively, waving her hand flippantly. "I speak not of your wife's work, but yours. You as a Hero have not advanced even a single iota. How shameful!"

Jason and Fiona exchange puzzled glances.

"While I did construct the blueprint drafts for those devices on Jason's behalf," Fiona argues, "he still ultimately conjured them with his own power."

Mildred doesn't appear to give Fiona's rebuttal any weight. "Tell me! Why have you two come here today? What is your purpose?"

"You did call us here." Jason points out. "Though... I was hoping you would give the okay for me to use the relics in Marie's storage. My clone has obtained over a thousand relics of his own, so I'm going to be a lot weaker than him moving forward. In particular, he obtained Excalib-"

"I know plenty good and well what your clone has been up to! Harrumph!" Mildred exclaims, interrupting Jason. "The standards for Heroes have truly fallen since the Energy Wars, dear boy!"

Mildred leans forward in her chair, slaps her glass of wine on the table, and leans heavily on her elbows. She looks at Jason with a deep intent.

"You're lazy, Jason. You and Hope both. It's such a shame, considering your abilities!"

Jason winces. He nods along to her words while lowering his gaze to the table.

"Yeah. I've thought about that myself. I always take the easy way out. I'm always trying to cut corners... it's why my daughter is..."

He trails off. Fiona sighs along with his words.

"We don't have a choice, Mildred." Fiona adds. "Hope has Excalibur now. It's the most powerful Heroic Artifact in existence. We know he hates Jason. We know he has already slaughtered a Volgrim world to exact his vengeance. He probably won't target humanity as a whole, but if he goes after Jason..."

Mildred stares at the young man and woman. She snorts contemptuously.

"Hmph. And here I thought you were an intelligent woman, little white-hair. Your vision is so narrow, so confined. You even have the gall to claim you have 'no choice' but to meet artifacts with artifacts. Preposterous!"

She strums her fingers on the table while shaking her head in disappointment.

"Fiona! Jason! Tell me... what makes a Hero a 'Hero'?"

Jason pauses to think before answering.

"The power of the Heroic Aura? The abilities it grants?"

"The duty carried by its wielder?" Fiona adds.

"WRONG!" Mildred bellows, making both of them flinch slightly. "Imbeciles. Heroes do not call themselves Heroes. They earn that title! Until other humans acknowledge you as a Hero, you are not one at all! You are merely an ordinary human with a bit of extra power!"

She continues. "If merely possessing the Heroic Aura was enough to qualify one as a Hero, then Dracula would be a Hero too, and I dare you to state THAT claim out loud! Hah!"

Jason cocks his head. "But... Solomon referred to Dracula as a Hero. Not just him, but others too. And lots of people call me a Hero..."

"Oh? There are those who call you a Hero?" Mildred asks. "Who, exactly?"

"Well. Amelia was the first. Actually, Blaarjiim..." Jason says. "The angels did. Solomon did. Marie Becker, every single demon I've ever encountered..."

"I see. They are ignorant." Mildred says, her temper cooling somewhat. "Listen well, boy. The moniker of Hero did not come into existence for several generations. Even the first Hero, Jephthah, did not refer to himself as such. In his eyes, he was a Titanborn. He was a descendant of Hercules, a mixture of the power of angels and Titans and humans inside one body. It was only after the Heroic Aura had transferred several times that humanity began to call these figures the title you believe comes standard with the Heroic Aura's anointment."

For a brief moment, Mildred becomes quiet. She closes her eyes and sighs.

When she opens her eyes, a distant look takes hold, as if gazing past the vicissitudes of time.

"Through action, a Man becomes a Hero."

"Through death, a Hero becomes a Legend."

"Through time, a Legend becomes a Myth."

"By learning from the Myth, a Man takes action..."

After speaking this parable, Mildred turns her hawk-like gaze back toward Jason.

"Pharaoh Ramses spoke these words during the Second Age of humanity's rise. He, like many others, was a legendary Hero of yore. He looked to the figures of the past to guide his hand in the future. He built up his own Legend in the hopes of inspiring later generations. But what hidden meanings do you think the quote holds, Jason?"

For some reason, a faint feeling of shame wells up in Jason's chest. He looks at Mildred, and suddenly experiences the feeling of a puppy caught soiling the carpet. A deep sensation of inadequacy swallows his soul.

"...A Man can only become a Hero through action." Jason says quietly. "It is not the obtaining of power, or some sense of duty that makes them one. It is only the actions they undertake, and the struggles they fight which allow others to acknowledge them."

"Arthur was the greatest Hero who ever lived." Mildred says quietly. "Because of his feats, he became known as the Hero-King of Legend. His enemies whispered his name while cowering in fear. His comrades looked up to him with fervor and envy. His actions inspired those who came after, leading many later Heroes to rise past their limitations. But Arthur was not the most powerful of all Heroes. He did not necessarily possess the most spiritual potential, or some other god-blessed attribute."

"Who was the most powerful, then?" Jason asks.

The table becomes quiet.

Mildred stares at Jason.

She does not answer his question.

After a moment, Jason frowns.

"...*Me?*" He asks, slightly incredulous.

"Undoubtedly so." Mildred replies. "You should have recognized this before now. But subconsciously, you denigrate yourself. You look for easy solutions. All of this, despite possessing more than enough power to solve your problems. You even have the wits to realize your daughter's death was caused by your own failings, yet you did not think to solve the core issue."

Mildred sits up straight.

"Listen well, Jason. The Heroic Artifacts granted by Archangel Camael were certainly powerful. Every single one ultimately bestowed their original wielders with supreme authority over the people of their eras. But... did you know?"

She waggles her finger at the Wordsmith.

"No Hero has ever wielded the artifact of a fallen Hero. They may have consulted their predecessors for wisdom. They may have looked to those artifacts for inspiration. But no Hero, not even the fallen Hero known as Dracula, used an artifact from a previous generation to augment their abilities. This, despite the reality that all Heroes can interface with all artifacts to a perfect degree."

"... So why do you think that is?" Mildred asks after a slight pause.

"I... I don't know." Jason mutters. "I thought Heroes used artifacts all the time. Solomon told me that many Heroes would consult him for wisdom."

"They did. And they sought my counsel, as well as wisdom from others like us." Mildred says with a nod. "But none acted the way that you have, Jason. No Heroes took Arthur's Excalibur to smite Demon Emperors dead with it. None sought Jephthah's Dominion Rod to increase their influence over humanity. None used Ptah's Millennium Codex to build grand marvels in their image..."

"But why not?" Fiona asks. "Would this not make their power much greater? Their artifacts are tools. We should use them to augment humanity's potential."

"Not tools." Mildred says, slightly disappointed. "You think like a craftswoman, Fiona dearest. These artifacts are sacred objects. They are the homes each Hero resides within after their deaths. They are... our sanctuaries. Using them flippantly, is that not like desecrating the dead?"

Fiona blinks. Taken aback by Mildred's words, she has to spend a few moments thinking of a retort.

"Just because other Heroes didn't... that doesn't mean Jason shouldn't. And Hope already is doing so. If Jason doesn't fight fire with fire, Hope will become unstoppable."

Mildred sighs deeply. She shakes her head again, looking at the Hero and his wife as if they were simple-minded peasants from a farming village.

"You still do not understand. The powers of other Heroes should not be used like bludgeons or blades. You should not desecrate their legends by using them as tools to solve your problems. Even if they could solve your problems, you would still be doing your husband a disservice. As for the reason why..."

Mildred tilts her chin up.

"...do you *truly* believe you need those artifacts to match your clone's power?"

"What?" Jason asks. "Of... course? Excalibur alone- and the Dominion Rod, these and Solomon's Crown practically make Hope unstoppable. How am I supposed to compete with him?"

"Perhaps, if you had already mined out the full power of Wordsmithing, and if your clone had done so, you might be at a disadvantage." Mildred says mildly. "But dear boy... you have not tapped into the smallest portion of your abilities. You possess a god-like power, capable of *shattering* the balance of power. Yet you choose to use it in such painfully superficial and simplistic ways."

Mildred spreads her arms.

"Can you tell me to my face that you have reached the *absolute limits* of your understanding of Wordsmithing?"

"I..." Jason says awkwardly, frowning more and more by the second. "...I don't think I can make that claim, no."

Fiona's eyes sparkle with realization. "I see! We've been going about this all the wrong way, Jason."

"We have?" Jason asks. "I mean, I can definitely imagine improving my understanding of my limits, but I don't know where to start. I already received training from Solomon..."

"That training was useful, yes." Mildred says. "I have read your memories. I know of what you speak. Solomon trained you in a more general sense. He taught you what to look for when building an empire. He made you aware of combat information. But all of these things were framed on a 'general' scale. He did not teach you any useful information regarding your powers, because he *could not*. Solomon is not a Wordsmith. You are. It is up to YOU, dear boy, to push the limits of your powers."

"So." Jason says slowly. "I take it you don't think I should use the heroic artifacts to hold my own against Hope."

"You may do as you please." Mildred says. "Listen well, Jason. You are this generation's Hero. Hope is, too. We are your predecessors. We hold the same goals: To advance humanity's strength and stand up to the oppression we have endured from our so-called superiors. If you decide to use our powers, we will not oppose you unless you perform actions that cross our individual moral boundaries."

She pauses, then smiles kindly.

"I am your friend, Jason-boy. I have your best interests at heart. Solomon might be an arrogant old man with his own agenda, but he ultimately wants the same thing as me. I simply believe that he has done you and Hope a disservice by not allowing you to become fully self-actualized Heroes. He has made you rely on his wisdom. He has allowed Hope to become dependent on the power of others."

Fiona nods along to Mildred's words. "We came here to give Jason a fighting chance against Hope, Mildred. But I think... you might be right. Jason already has what he needs. He simply needs to become more proficient in his abilities than Hope ever could. I already know Jason can build his own artifacts, his own facilities to empower humanity, and his own self-improvement spells. He doesn't need the help of others."

Jason slowly closes his eyes.

He falls utterly silent, thinking about the exchange he's just had with Mildred.

He debates her points internally.

He thinks about his failings. His successes.

His strengths and weaknesses.

The Wordsmith takes a minute to recall his life after exiting the cryopod. He thinks about all the times he took the advice of others on their face without formulating his own thoughts.

Quietly, he realizes that he has always depended on others, never allowing himself to rise to his own heights.

The Wordsmith opens his eyes.

He sighs.

"Heroes are not born. They are made. They are not made through the efforts of others, but through themselves. They should not call themselves Heroes, because that is the height of arrogance. They should earn that title through their labors. They should strive to become the best humans humanity has to offer. They should serve as an example and forge their own legends. And when they pass away, their legends should become myths that others tell to uplift their spirits."

A pause.

"In this way, the next generation of Heroes will become inspired by those that came before. The cycle can thus start anew..."

"Finally." Mildred says softly. "You understand."

A strange feeling wells up at the base of Jason's spine. A sense of realization. Satisfaction. Contentment.

For the first time in his life, the Wordsmith does not feel the same doubts he always has in the past.

He does not hold the same shame toward his inadequacies.

He does not quietly hate himself for being pathetic, or weak, or inferior to those who came before him.

"Even Arthur came from humble beginnings." Jason says quietly. "He was a simple farmhand. A boy who obtained the Heroic Aura's blessing. A boy who caught the attention of the angels. He fought, he bled, and he died fighting for humanity's sake. In this way, he became the most powerful and respected Hero who ever lived."

"But he was not the only Hero who came from humble beginnings." Jason continues, speaking now to himself more than Mildred or even Fiona. "Joan of Arc was a simple village girl. She suffered. She fought for humanity's sake. She was burned alive by men who were tricked by the demons. Even so, she accepted her death with dignity, knowing that her sacrifice would inspire the next generation."

"So many Heroes have stood up for what was right. Some failed to reach their true potential. I cannot let myself become like the latter." Jason says, his tone becoming more determined by the second. "Everyone is depending on me. I need to earn the right to my title. I cannot cheat, or take shortcuts, or act lazily any longer. I have to become a myth capable of inspiring those who come after me!"

Fiona's heart swells with pride. She feels the passion in Jason's words from the bottom of her heart. The sudden lifting of fog from his vision. The slight decrease in guilt caused by Daisy's death.

At the same time, Jason's eyes become filled with vague visions of the future. He imagines the heights he could reach once he decides to stop borrowing the strength of others.

"You're right, Mildred. I will not attempt to borrow the strength of Marie's artifacts any longer. Thank you for enlightening me. I'm in your debt."

"HAH!" Mildred guffaws, lifting her hand to her mouth. "Silly boy, this temptress is always right! You're only stating the obvious, hah-hah-hah!"

Jason and Fiona continue to talk to Mildred for another hour. Mildred gives them hints and information regarding Jason's possible future progression without artifacts. Ultimately, she departs his Mind Realm, depositing him back in the material world.

Slightly dazed, it takes Jason a few moments to get back his bearings. As he blinks his eyes, Marie Becker walks up to him.

"Finally done yapping?" Marie asks.

"I am." Jason says.

Something about the firmness in his tone makes Marie stand up a little straighter.

"Did you have a good discussion?" She asks.

"I did." Jason says softly. "Thank you for allowing me to come here, Marie. I've decided... I will not ask to use any of your artifacts. Keep them here where they will be

secure."

"What?!" Marie exclaims, this time visibly shocked. "Have my auditory processors malfunctioned? You do NOT want to steal my precious artifacts?!"

"I don't. Not anymore." Jason says.

He looks around the room at the many different artifacts present. Their simple forms, their complex ones. The artifacts that would make kings envious, and the ones which reveal the humble origins of their previous owners.

His eyes fall on one particular alcove, where a simple steel fork rests. An eating utensil which once belonged to an utterly ordinary Hero who never achieved a single feat worth noting.

I won't let that be me. Jason thinks, his heart once again swelling with determination.

"From now on," Jason says slowly, "I'm going to create my own destiny. I will not compare myself to my predecessors. I will act in a manner befitting a Hero. I will march toward the future, unwavering... and I will forge a legend worth remembering. This, I vow."

Marie's expression relaxes. "Calm down, brat. You're going to make me vomit if you keep up all this weird talk. Now, are you done down here?"

Jason nods. "I am. Sorry for wasting your time."

"No, it wasn't a waste at all." Marie says. "Now that you've disabused yourself of the notion of stealing my artifacts, you won't bug me about them anymore. And that look in your eyes... I like it. Seems like Mildred finally knocked some sense into that thick male skull of yours."

"She did," Jason says with a nod. "She did."

He and Marie walk out of the artifact vault. As they leave, Jason turns toward Momo's room.

"See you later, Momo. Maybe we'll talk next time!"

Naturally, the Satyr doesn't reply, but stays out of sight, never once showing her face to the Wordsmith.

"Hah..." Jason chuckles softly. "Such a shy girl."

Part 458: Marie's Exotic Interests

Jason and Marie Becker reach the elevator that will take them back to the surface. As they enter and Marie presses the button to head up, she turns to the Wordsmith.

"Not that I'm not absolutely *thrilled* to have you leave my artifacts untouched, but I have to wonder how much wine Mildred subjected you to in order to make you decide you didn't want to use my Artifacts anymore."

The redheaded scientist crosses her arms and gazes at the Wordsmith with a faint smirk, waiting for a truly hilarious story to escape his lips.

Instead, Jason simply shrugs and offers a wry smile.

"She made me realize that I've been squandering my abilities all this time. I have so much power... so much possibility, but I keep wasting it due to my laziness and lack of resolve. I've known this for a long time, but... I don't know. Maybe she just spoke with enough authority to finally snap me out of my stupor."

Jason half-expects Marie to fire off a witty-one liner at him, but her expression becomes surprisingly sympathetic.

"You've screwed up a lot, Jason Hiro. That can't be denied. But... you never had a say in how you arrived in this situation. From the moment you exited that cryopod, you've been living life one day at a time. You were only an ordinary boy from the industrial era. You weren't a hunter-gatherer or some self-sufficient nomad. And... you've suffered a lot. Particularly with the death of your daughter."

Jason blinks. "Hello? Am I still talking to Marie Becker? Did a different AI take over your personality?"

Marie doesn't laugh. "I know what it means to lose a child. Before my ascension, I became pregnant one time. Unfortunately, I miscarried. It's not the same as losing a six-year old child with a personality, or anything like that... but it's still something. Sometimes I wonder whether it would have been a boy or a girl... or what sort of person they'd have become..."

A few seconds pass. Marie looks away and rubs her arm absentmindedly.

"Why didn't you try for another child?" Jason asks. "Did you feel... guilty?"

"It wasn't exactly the most opportune time." Marie says mildly. "Benjamin Brown was the father. We were in the middle of the Energy Wars. After the miscarriage, him and I drifted apart. We never got back together."

"That's too bad." Jason says mildly.

"Yes it was." Marie replies. "But that was a long time ago. Save your pity for someone who gives a damn."

"I just didn't believe a heartless bitch could have any feelings." Jason chuckles.

Marie blinks. She crosses her arms and stands up a little straighter.

"I am a Cybernite, Jason. An Ascended Human. I am not a robot lacking feelings. I have chosen to disengage from the most useless emotions that only ever stifled me. Nevertheless, the sense of loss I felt from my child's death has never faded. I hoped you would possess the maturity to understand that. Perhaps I overestimated you."

The Wordsmith's smile fades. "Sorry. I tend to make jokes at inappropriate times. Thanks for telling me about your past."

"Don't expect me to make that mistake again." Marie grumps.

The two fall silent. After ten minutes, the lift reaches the top, and Jason stops Marie before she can open the door.

"Wait. I have a present for you."

Marie frowns at him. "A present? What kind of present could you possibly have that would mean anything to me?"

Jason doesn't immediately answer. Instead, he hold out his hand palm-up, closes his eyes, knits his brow, and clears his throat.

"Position. Enhance. Direct. Form. Transcend. Create. Artifact. Link."

He fires off nearly a dozen Words of Power, and a small bean-sized object materializes in his grasp. Marie's internal sensors buzz with interest as she notes the mysterious magical energy circulating around inside of it, as well as the somewhat 'primitive' technology, at least by her standards.

"This..." Marie says, her eyes widening.

Jason opens his eyes and carefully holds out the tiny object for her to delicately grasp between her thumb and pointer fingers.

"When last we spoke, you asked me to help you find a way to communicate with your 'friends.' I'm sorry, but I've been busy with... stuff. Anyway, I had Fiona make a blueprint in her spare time a couple of weeks ago. Just integrate that into your neural pathways and you should be able to 'establish contact.'"

Jason keeps his words vague, but he and Marie know exactly what he means.

He has created a one-of-a-kind device that allows Marie to mentally link her bio-mechanical self with the heroic spirits inside her Artifact Vault.

If the Volgrim were to learn such a device existed, who knows what lengths they might go to in order to obtain it?

Marie examines the tiny module for several seconds. To Jason's surprise and mild horror, she suddenly pops out one of her eyeballs into her palm, making him jump back in disgust.

"Eugh!"

Jason releases a weird gurgly half-scream at the unexpected body horror. Marie ignores him. She slides the bean-sized Heroic Linker into the cavity where her eyeball was, then slaps her eyeball back into place. After pressing her finger against her eyeball to 'roll' it back into place, she looks at the Hero as if finally noticing the disgust on his face.

"What is it?" Marie asks innocently. "Did I upset you?"

"Y-you popped out your goddamn eye!" Jason exclaims. "Give a fella a little warning, will ya?!"

"Thank you for this module." Marie says, completely ignoring his squeamishness. "It will completely transform my planned future trajectories. Obviously, hunting down certain other items is no longer a major issue, but I have other ways I can make use of the services our 'friends' have on hand."

"Right, right, yeah." Jason says, looking away while still side-eyeing her with tingles of nausea in the pit of his stomach. "Anytime. Don't even mention it. We're on the same side, after all."

"Indeed." Marie says.

She and Jason exit the elevator. They head out into the main laboratory, where they pass by several different projects Jason saw during his last visit. This time, though, he

pays closer attention to them. Having spent a good deal of time with Unarin, Jason has become much more sensitive to the secrets contained within Marie's laboratory.

Jason walks up to a display case stacked with five sleek, fearsome-looking robots. These robots almost appear to be sculpted seamlessly out of metal, as not a single joint is present on their bodies. Singular red irises rest where a pair of human eyes might ordinarily be. Their bodies range in size from six to eight feet tall, with the shortest ones being a head shorter than Jason, and the biggest being a head taller.

The Wordsmith's heart thumps erratically. "The Volgrim know about your attempts to recreate the Sentinels, don't they?"

Marie stands beside him, a look of disappointment on her face at these five failed prototypes.

"Sentinels are all but impossible for me to replicate." Marie says, her tone bitter. "Even if I could mimic their body and anatomy, their artificial intellect, and their algorithms, they would never come within a thousand miles of the original Sentinels' battle strengths. That's because the first hundred Sentinels were built out of Living Moldanium."

"Living Moldanium." Jason repeats.

He pauses for several long seconds.

He hesitates, wondering if he should ask her...

Jason chews his lower lip. "Marie. Do you... know what Living Moldanium is?"

She nods. "It's an exceptionally rare, spiritually reactive exotic material. It's also the most durable exotic in the galaxy. The only places I can access it now are the Warp gates, but I dare not attempt to even chip off a fleck of the material, lest I draw the Founder's attention."

"But do you know where Living Moldanium comes from?" Jason asks. "As in, its origin?"

Marie starts to fire off a snide remark, but she pauses, then cocks her head. She turns sideways to look at Jason with suspicion.

"No. Do *you*?"

"I don't know if I should tell you." Jason says. "I had a talk with Unarin not long ago. He let me in on some important secrets. Raphael verified them as true."

"Well. I won't force you to tell me." Marie says. "Perhaps Unarin wanted to know if you could keep a secret. Blabbering sensitive topics to me would ensure you would always be on his blacklist. On the other hand, you and I are still at least tangentially humans. We are on the same side. Would you rather hold back alien knowledge from me for *Unarin's* sake? I doubt he gives a damn about you."

"But you do?" Jason counters.

"I give a damn about humanity's survival." Marie answers. "I think that's enough."

After a few moments of contemplation, Jason nods.

"Well, it's like this..."

He proceeds to tell Marie about the origins of Living Moldanium, how it obtained its special properties, and why it's so rare. As he does, Marie groans multiple times.

"Idiot Volgrim! Stupid, wasteful bastards! It was dragon-bone all along! And they WASTED it on Warpgates and deathbots!"

Jason blinks. "Wasted it?"

"Of course." Marie grouches. "I assumed the Volgrim were hoarding a secret supply of the exotic somewhere, but no, it's almost assuredly been depleted throughout all of the Milky Way! There are no more worlds left with dead dragon remains we can discover. They could have easily made Warpgates that didn't require Living Moldanium, but in their excess, they wasted the material on absolutely nothing!"

"The Warpgates don't require Living Moldanium to operate?" Jason asks.

"Warpgates operate under terrifying amounts of temporal flux. Microfractures are inevitable over time. A lesser exotic could weaken and eventually collapse if left unmaintained." Marie explains. "So Living Moldanium is the most 'permanent' solution to ensure 100% reliability for all eternity. But so what! Better to use a more abundant, slightly less durable exotic and save Living Moldanium for the cases where it is TRULY irreplaceable. Did you know that if a star ignites in a supernova, a Warpgate will still not be destroyed? Its inner components might be reduced to slag, but any parts comprised of Living Moldanium will remain in excellent condition, if they're even affected at all!"

"Huh..." Jason mumbles. "It almost sounds like you could make a probe capable of diving into stars and collecting data inside their interiors, so long as it was protected by Living Moldanium."

"That's exactly right! There are all sorts of terrifying phenomena out there in the universe, Jason. Never forget that. These Volgrim are so high and goddamned mighty, but they waste the Milky Way's most precious exotic on imbecilic vanity pursuits! I HATE aliens!"

She suddenly looks at Jason with interest. "While we're on this subject, I've been meaning to ask you. Have you tried replicating it yet?"

"Replicating what?" Jason asks. "Moldanium?!"

"Yes, obviously, stupid!" Marie snaps. "You're the Wordsmith. Don't tell me you've never even TRIED!"

Jason pauses for half a second.

"Well. I didn't try making Moldanium, no. But I did make... this. **Pocket.**"

Jason reaches into an unseen pocket dimension. He plucks out a small 1x1 metal plate, a good bit bigger than his hand.

"I simply took an ordinary piece of metal and reinforced it. Repeatedly. Like... like a LOT of times. I don't actually have any tools adept at testing it... maybe you could do the honors for me?"

Marie finally gives the young man a look of praise. "How long ago did you do this little experiment?"

"It was before I knew anything about Moldanium. I was working with Solomon back then. Maybe two years ago? It was just a side project. I spent a week saying 'reinforce' over and over again. I have no idea if my magic even had any effect past a certain point."

Marie snatches the metal plate out of Jason's hand. "Follow me, brat. Let's run some tests."

The head researcher guides the Hero to a room simply named 'blasting chamber.' When Jason directs a curious look to the name above the entrance, Marie chuckles.

"If your little scrap of metal can't last forever in here, it's definitely nowhere near comparable to demonstone, let alone Living Moldanium."

A minute later, Jason and Marie stand behind a thick wall of glass, one which offers unbelievable light and heat protection while a massive inner chamber houses a huge

downward-facing laser aimed at the ground. One of Marie's lower level researchers walks inside, places the scrap of metal directly below the inactive laser, then walks out.

"So you're going to blast it with energy." Jason guesses. "And if it's still intact at the end?"

"*Intact* is an overly generous qualifier." Marie says. "If that piece of metal shows even the slightest damage, it's nowhere in the ballpark of Living Moldanium. This laser can output one million degrees of concentrated heat onto a specific point. I use it to stress-test Demonstone."

"Oh?" Jason says. "Then my 'Wordsmithium' will definitely pass the first test. I know for a fact it's way stronger than Demonstone."

"And how did you test that out?" Marie asks idly.

"I made a blade that can cut through anything. Pseudo-Excalibur, I like to call it. It dices apart Demonstone like a hot knife through butter. But it couldn't make a dent in that little plate there."

Marie glances at Jason. She frowns slightly, then looks away.

"Something wrong?" Jason asks.

"Not exactly." Marie says. "But you know... your clone used 'Pseudo-Excalibur' to seize the genuine Excalibur."

"If Hope wanted such a blade, he could have easily forged his own. Would have taken him an afternoon, tops." Jason says dismissively. "I only made one, but I could make a hundred more if I wanted. I just think they're too dangerous to keep around en-masse. A sword that can cut anything is rather..."

He trails off.

"Can it cut Moldanium?" Marie asks.

"Haven't tried." Jason answers.

"Well. Take a swing at one of your less-important Warpgates sometime, Wordsmith." Marie says. "You can't keep overlooking such basic experiments. The scientific method is all about forming hypotheses and testing them out!"

"Didn't you just say if I damage the Warpgates the Volgrim will shit fire down my throat?" Jason points out.

"What?" Marie scoffs. "Are you too scared of Unarin to even try? Gonna pee your pants?"

Jason rolls his eyes. "Fuck off."

Marie chuckles, but doesn't push him further, having made her point.

Before long, a ten-second-countdown begins. A horrifying blast of energy fires down from the ceiling and smashes into the piece of metal on the ground. Warning symbols light up on several monitors as the laser rapidly reaches its maximum temperature. After ten full seconds of maintaining the beam's focus, the researchers turn it off, then wait for the room to cool. When they check the plate half an hour later, Jason is not surprised to see that it is entirely unharmed.

"Not bad..." Marie murmurs, looking at the piece of metal with a gleam of interest. "Jason, have you tried doing this on a larger scale? For armor systems? Spaceships? Other such things?"

"I... haven't." Jason says awkwardly. "But after the last hour of my life, I've been thinking about trying a lot of new things."

"Fine, but keep your college dabbling to yourself." Marie mutters.

After a brief pause, she adds, "that was a joke."

"Yeah. I got that." Jason replies.

Jason watches as Marie walks over to a group of her researchers. She chats with them for a minute, leaving the Wordsmith alone.

"What do you think?" Jason says softly, speaking to his mind-wife.

"I think Marie makes a good point. We could make incredibly useful armor systems far beyond what our troops use now." Fiona answers inside his head. "But it won't work with nanite-based technology. When you 'reinforce' something, you reduce its limberness and make it far stiffer."

"I can just Wordsmith 'flexible' afterward." Jason points out.

"That's true..." Fiona mutters.

Marie walks back over to them. "I'll need a few weeks to continue running tests on your 'Wordsmithium.' Mind if I keep it?"

"Go nuts." Jason says. "I can always make another one. Or another hundred."

"Mmm. It's too bad though." Marie says. "Even if this were to come close, match, or exceed the durability of Living Moldanium, it would still come up a little short..."

"In what way?" Jason asks.

"Spiritual conductivity." Marie explains. "I always knew Moldanium resonated well with artifacts and other magical objects, but I never knew why. Clearly, it's because of its draconic heritage."

"Oh!" Jason says. "I can just make it spiritually reactive. One sec. **Divine! Divine! Divine!**"

Jason utters three Words of Power, aimed at the slab of steel in Marie's hands. After a moment, her sensors pick up the increased spiritual frequency of the material.

She slowly looks at the Wordsmith with a dim expression.

"You... you DOLT! You can simply MAKE new exotics?! This is ridiculous! Why did the Creator bestow a moron like YOU with the power of Wordsmithing?! If I had your magic I'd have conquered the entire bloody Milky Way THREE years ago!"

Jason chuckles awkwardly. "I, uh... sorry?"

"Shut up! I don't want to hear an idiot apologize. Come with me! It's time to see if I can punch some sense into that thick skull of yours!"

Marie drops the plate on a desk and motions for one of her aides to continue running experiments on it. Then she grabs Jason by the arm and drags him out of the room.

"Men! Always, it's these dumb men thinking with their lower brain instead of their upper one! *Oh gee Marie, I had a talk with the fat lady and now I've come to my senses!* Piss off!"

Marie yaps out loud, talking to herself as if trapped in a terrible mental struggle over how stupid Jason is. Meanwhile, the Wordsmith gets dragged along behind her, not sure how much longer he should remain silent and endure her abuse or if speaking up will only make him sound even stupider.

"I feel like you're going a little overboard here, Marie." Jason says. "It's been a busy six years since I exited the cryopod, and-"

"Oh yes, so busy!" Marie snorts. "Going to town, having a baby and all the fun that comes with that. You were so busy playing out your fantasies with that white-haired

wondergirl of yours that you didn't even realize you had the ability to create *exotics*! How has humanity survived this long under your hands??"

Jason cocks his head. "Exotics? Like Demonstone and Moldanium? Are there others?"

"Are there others,' he asks." Marie groans. "Yes! Many others! Countless others! Have you not noticed the qualifier I spoke regarding Moldanium's existence? It is not the most durable exotic in the universe. Only in the *Milky Way*. I have zero doubt there are more exotics in other galaxies with much more unbelievable properties. We simply don't have access to them because we have not yet left the Milky Way."

Jason feels a strange sensation wash across his brain, an indescribable rush as he realizes what Marie is talking about. This is not a small matter, but something painfully obvious he has overlooked for the better half of a decade. Who knows what advances humanity might have made had he been just a bit more proactive?

Marie glances back at him, then sighs.

"I suppose I wasn't that much smarter than you when I was only 18. I even let a *man* lead me around by the nose for a full decade before I realized my mistake."

They arrive at the entrance to a large storage facility for exotic materials. As Marie releases Jason's arm to key in a passcode, Jason looks at the back of her head.

"That sounds like an interesting story. What happened?"

"It's my greatest embarrassment, that's what it is." Marie mutters. "I'd rather not speak about it. The first man I ever loved, my childhood sweetheart, and he was a *real* piece of work... tsk."

"Don't have to if you don't want to." Jason says casually.

"Then I won't."

Marie pushes open the doors to the Exotics Storage, and Jason inhales, readying himself for yet another jolt to his small worldview...

Part 459: Demila's Desire

Somewhere inside the Labyrinth, down a darkened hallway where three injured figures lay...

[Uhh... ohh... NO!]

Creator Demila awakens with a jolt. She sits upright and rapidly breathes through her nostrils, her eight eyes flicking around wildly as she scans the area.

[Where is Gressil? Where did he go?!]

Demila looks around, but she fails to find her quarry. What she does find are a pair of badly beaten and burned humans, their identities being Benjamin Brown and Siddhartha Gautama.

The Psion shakily stands up. Her head pounds with a terrible migraine, the sign of a concussion. She focuses her thoughts and quickly heals her cerebral injuries, restoring herself back to full by virtue of her abundant Psionic Energy reserves. Then she walks over to Buddha, laying crumpled in a heap. She nudges him with her foot and scowls.

[Undying Hero. Wake up! You have some explaining to do.]

Buddha groans in pain. He shakily lifts himself up with his burned arms, then presses his back against the wall. After a full minute of regaining his breath, the former Hero looks up at Demila.

"...We lost."

[I can see that.] Demila growls. [How is it possible that a single Demon Emperor was able to defeat me, let alone all three of us?!]

Buddha slowly blinks his eyes.

"I think you know the answer to that question already, Demila."

[What does *that* mean?] Demila snarls, leaning down to glare murderous daggers at the human. [Do you have a death wish?]

"Kill me if you want." Buddha says, unfazed. "The fact is, this operation failed because of you. You rushed in and arrogantly thought you could defeat the Emperor of Chaos all on your own. Now you've paid a price heavier than you can imagine."

[My pride will survive.] Demila says, not fully grasping the secret meaning behind Buddha's words. [For now, I'm calling this operation off. I'll need to gather another Psion, perhaps even two, if I hope to capture Gressil alive. He's too formidable.]

"More than you can ever know." Buddha grunts.

The Hero looks up at Demila with solemn eyes, as if silently evaluating her condition. He looks away.

"Before you go, would you mind transporting Benjamin Brown and I back to Tarus II? We're pretty banged-"

He pauses, then looks back up again.

Demila is nowhere in sight.

"...Psions. Nnn. Always leaving us lowly mud-dwellers out to dry."

Buddha taps the control module for his T-REX, causing the remaining nanites to half-form a broken helmet over his head. The helmet sputters to life, displaying some info for him to assess his physical condition.

Buddha sighs. He transmits a rescue request, one which will bring someone to his position within the hour. Then, he slumps forward and collapses from his injuries.

* * *

Meanwhile.

Demila doesn't give a damn about Buddha or Benjamin Brown's fates. She barely even gives them a cursory glance before flickering away.

As she begins racing down the Labyrinth's corridors, teleporting between hallways while traveling back to the Core to use its warpgates, a deep sense of shame swells within Demila's chest.

I failed. I lost to a mud-dweller. Demila thinks, her cheeks burning hot with anger. *A Demon Emperor, at that. Even a 5th-level Psion should have crushed him with ease. Did I lose because Gressil was too strong? NO! I lost because I am weak! Pathetic! I let myself get distracted by his insidious words!*

Demila stops running. She pauses in an empty hallways and begins pacing back and forth agitatedly.

[Damn mud-dwellers! They made a fool of me!] Demila roars. [How dare they?! I am a 7th-Level Psion. A pride of my Empire! An elite among elites!!]

Suddenly, Demila pauses. She spins on her heel and frowns while looking behind herself.

[Who's there?!]

The feeling of being watched unsettles her. Already, Buddha and Gressil have shown that her 'formidable' ability to scout any location is not as foolproof as she once thought. She focuses her vision and carefully sweeps the corridor, yet finds nothing to indicate anyone was ever there.

Just as she's sure nobody is watching her, Demila receives another intuitive warning. She whirls around again, this time facing the opposite direction.

[WHO'S THERE?! SHOW YOURSELF!]

Feeling weirdly paranoid, Demila's pupils shrink and expand over and over as her heart begins to race. Something deeply unsettles her, but she isn't sure what...

Then, from within her own mind, a voice speaks.

[Pitiful.]

[WHAT?! Who spoke? Another Psion?!]

[Not a Psion. Your own heart.]

[Who are you? How are you speaking to me?!]

The vaguely feminine voice chuckles softly.

[Hehehe... I spoke no lie, Demila. I am you. I have always been a part of you. I am your long-buried Desire.]

Demila's heart grows cold. A chill goes down her back, making her shiver.

[Lies. I am fully attuned to the sensations of my psionic seed. You are a foreign entity that has invaded my mind! I will PURGE you!]

Demila pours all of her power into her brain. She begins rapidly self-assessing herself, hunting like a ravenous predator for the 'thing' that has infected her.

However, after several minutes pass...

...she finds nothing!

The voice of Desire chuckles again. [Hehehe. Have you found me yet? Keep looking. I'm sure your search will soon bear fruit.]

Demila's expression turns ugly. She quickly puts the pieces together, then punches the wall in a fit of rage.

[GRESSIL. He did something to me! Infected me with a parasite...]

['Parasite' is such a harsh word for what I am.] Desire says smoothly. [I prefer... *companion*.]

[GET OUT OF MY HEAD.]

[Now, now. Don't be in such a rush to get rid of me, Demila.] Desire says playfully. [Where's that warrior spirit you Psions are so famous for? Especially when I have so much to offer you?]

[You have nothing to offer me, parasite.] Demila snaps. [I must return to Volgarius. Perhaps one of the Executors can help me purge this thing from my cerebral cortex...]

Demila starts flickering forward again, this time with increased urgency. She rushes toward the Warpgate nexus while feeling more worried than ever.

How in the hell did Gressil manage to infect her? Was it when she was unconscious?

And why can't she find the source of the infection to purge it herself?

As she moves, Desire chuckles sinisterly.

[Yes. Yes, what a wonderful idea. Return to Volgarius. Tell the Founders in great detail about what a pathetic failure you are... as if they don't already know.]

Demila's pace abruptly slows. A grimace spreads across her face.

[What... do you mean?]

[Hahahaha...] Desire chortles. [As if you don't know. Oh, I look forward to *that* conversation. I can already see the faces of the other 7th-Level Psions. They will look at you with even less fondness than they always have. Demila the Disgraced. That is what they will call you. A Psion so weak she couldn't even defeat one measly Demon Emperor.]

Demila slows to a stop. Her stomach twists in knots as she also imagines the piercing looks of mockery she will surely receive when she returns...

[I can't wait to see how it all plays out.] Desire continues, stabbing more pointed barbs into Demila's brain. [What will you tell them? That you had your face introduced to the

ground by a mere Demon Emperor? That he infected you with a parasite while you were laying there, unconscious, incapable of protecting yourself? *Some* 7th-Level Psion you are! Everyone already knows what a waste of space you are, especially compared to *superior* specimens like Vulpanix. You're an old, washed up codger who can't ever advance further. Your Psionic Seed has stagnated.]

Demila slowly hangs her head. A deep feeling of inferiority wells up in her chest.

[I...]

[Don't even try to defend yourself. Let me inform you of a secret, Demila dearest. There are several scenarios that will play out when you return. None of them will involve my removal from your body. But they *will* involve your immediate and swift removal from Volgrimkind's future.]

[What?!] Demila gasps. [You lie!]

[Hehehe. *Do I?*] Desire whispers in a sinister tone. [When the Volgrim learn there is a demon who has compromised the thoughts of a lauded 7th-Level Psion, do you think they will let you continue to serve the Founders? Or do you think they will put a swift end to you so as to limit Gressil's influence?]

Demila's expression sinks. [They... they wouldn't...]

[Two million years old, but just as stupid as any child of a mud-dweller.] Desire sneers. [If I die, so what? Do you think you are the only 'contingency' my master has put in place? Do you think Gressil is incapable of infecting other Psions of the same rank?]

A brief pause.

Desire lowers her voice. She adopts a more 'soothing' tone.

[There, there, Demila. It isn't all doom and gloom. You've been granted a unique opportunity. It would be such a shame if you wasted it.]

Demila frowns. [An opportunity? To what? Work for a mud-dweller?!]

[Hahaha. Master Gressil would never think to make you his pawn.] Desire answers. [But... what about a partner? A collaborator, if you will?]

[I will never betray the Volgrim Empire.] Demila immediately answers, standing up straight. [Do not think yourself capable of twisting this wizened Psion's thoughts!]

[Oh, pish. The Volgrim Empire is on its last legs already.] Desire retorts. [Master Gressil does not care about some trivial galaxy-level civilization. His vision extends far further, to the corners of all galaxies, all civilizations, and all... *futures*.]

Desire pauses for a half-second before continuing.

[Listen well, Demila. You are a pathetic excuse for a Psion. You needed a million years to reach the 6th Level, and another 400,000 to reach the 7th. But you know in your heart that you will never be capable of making the final leap to the 8th. Luckily for you, my master has given you a great gift, one that can help you bypass those pesky bottlenecks.]

[A gift?] Demila says suspiciously. [And what would that be?]

[Is it not obvious?] Desire asks. [*Me*.]

[You?] Demila asks. [Lies. How can a parasite help me to Ascend? You only speak the words I want to hear.]

[Indeed I do. I am not named 'Desire' for no reason, Demila. I am capable of helping you achieve the desire most dear to your heart. I, and I *alone*.]

Demila falls silent. With her psionic vision, she can easily peer hundreds of miles into the Labyrinth's distant confines, where the Warpgates rest.

By walking through and turning herself over to the Volgrim authorities, she might be able to expunge this parasite from her mind. Surely, the most advanced Technopaths and Psions would know how to solve her problem.

...But doing so would require her to tell her Empire about her pitiful, shameful loss. She would have to inform them of how Gressil handily crushed her.

She would become a laughingstock. They might even kill her and her True Body just to keep her from becoming a liability.

[I am a proud Volgrim citizen...] Demila murmurs.

[You do tell yourself that all the time.] Desire counters. [But don't try to lie to me, Demila. My master could read you like a book. You are not content with your lot in life. You have a substantial amount of resentment crushing your heart. You hate that you are too weak to affect your own future. My master promises that, if you follow my advice, you will be able to break the limiters that have held you back, all these eons.]

[But... how...?] Demila asks, her resolve to fight the parasite weakening by the minute.
[How do I know that I can trust you?]

[Trust is cheap.] Desire snarks. [You need only recall how Gressil introduced your eyes to the Labyrinth's floor to see the results he can give. Do you truly believe a 'mere' Demon Emperor could handily defeat a 7th-Level Psion?]

Demila slowly shakes her head. [I... do not.]

[Master Gressil has already ascended. Knowing this, do you doubt that he could assist you in your ascension as well?]

Demila stares at the wall in quiet contemplation for several long minutes.

She reflects on the last 500,000 years of her life.

The entire length of human history.

Far longer than any Demon can imagine.

She has existed for time immemorial, before the demons were even a blink in Angelkind's eyes.

Now, that same pathetic little mud-dwelling species has reached a point where one of its members can extend a secret invitation to her and her alone.

She hesitates...

[What does Gressil have to gain from my ascension?] Demila asks. [No gift is ever given freely.]

[He will gain another ally.] Desire answers. [Perhaps even a powerful one. But even more importantly, one who has opened her eyes to the stains of her people.]

[Our Empire is not perfect.] Demila says. [But it is better than what the mud-dwellers have ever achieved. And even with the Plague bearing down on us, we still manage to retain a shred of stability.]

[Excuses, excuses.] Desire snarks. [Your people have resisted Chaos's influence for too long. You lead boring, useless lives. You are uninventive. You are slow to react to new threats. That is why the Plague will defeat you, but why humanity will ultimately prevail. They possess the inventiveness you Volgrim lack.]

[We lack the touch of chaos?] Demila asks. [Buddha told me-]

[Buddha lied.] Desire interrupts. [He was happy to use and throw you aside. Let me tell you the truth: Buddha hoped Gressil would kill him. He wanted to provoke my master into doing so, because he wants nothing more than to perish for all eternity. If one Envoy kills another, the other will stay dead forever. He threw you to Gressil, and in doing so, accidentally granted you the opportunity to meet *me*. It would be such a shame if you were to waste this chance, wouldn't it?]

Somehow, hearing that a human betrayed her doesn't send Demila flying into a rage. She merely nods her head and sighs.

[So it's like that. And Gressil didn't kill Buddha because he recognized this plan. He is a sadistic monster.]

Demila absentmindedly lifts her head to look up through the Labyrinth's walls at nothing in particular.

[What do I do next, then?] Demila asks, ultimately resigning herself to go along with Desire's plans. [I told my superiors that I would bring them Gressil in chains...]

[Do whatever you want.] Desire says. [Do whatever you *desire*. I am not here to guide your hand. Only to assist you in attaining the things you want most. As for how to go about doing them, you do not require my guidance...]

Defeated mentally, Demila merely nods along to Desire's answer. As the parasitic organism goes quiet, she begins traveling toward the Core once more. But this time, she gathers her thoughts and begins to think up excuses suitable for her superiors.

It doesn't take Demila more than five minutes to travel all the way to the Labyrinth's Core. She easily hides herself from the primitive humans and demons, then travels toward one of the Warpgates.

The operators of that particular gate become utterly baffled when it abruptly shuts down, sealing the passage from the group of monsters that were about to head through it to their homeworld.

"Hey! What gives?!" One of the monsters, a minotaur, shouts. "We were about to use that, you jerks!"

"I-it wasn't my fault!" Caws the harpie assigned to lead that gate's function for the day. "W-what the heck? It's reconfiguring itself! I can't stop it!]

Suddenly, a deep and powerful voice booms in the minds of those present.

[Quiet.]

At once, half of the Core becomes eerily silent. Sensing the power of some unknown figure, the protesting monsters shut up. They look around, uncertain who spoke, while also feeling sure it must have been a powerful Demon Emperor...

When the gate opens, the monsters gasp in shock at the technologically-advanced facility on the other side. They spot dozens of aliens milling about and quickly realize the gate must have opened to a Volgrim world.

Demila steps through. She shuts the gate down psionically while deleting the spatial logs leading to this world. Then, she reveals herself to the Volgrim on the other side.

"Creator Demila." Says one of the head Technopaths for this particular receiving station. "How may I assist you?"

As a 7th-Level Psion, Demila enjoys incredible privileges that put her far above all but the absolute highest of Technopaths, let alone the manager of a facility like this one. Located on a certain remote world, its only function is to act as an in-between for transfers between various high and low-level Volgrim worlds.

[Transfer me to Volgarius Gate 3.] Demila commands. [I have business with the Founders.]

"Yes, ma'am. I contemplate, and I comprehend." The Technopath says, bowing subserviently.

He and the other Technopaths look up at Demila with appreciative gazes, admiring her powerful and resplendent figure. Naturally, they have seen other Psions of her rank and higher before, but it's still a rare treat for such a powerful envoy from the main Empire to appear before them.

A minute later, the Warpgate spins up again, opening a gate to Volgarius. Demila nods at the Technopaths, then flies through.

After taking care to verify her identity on the other side, Demila flies out into Volgarius's biosphere. She takes to space, where there is a bit less traffic around, then rushes at maximum speed toward the Founder's Fingers, some two thousand miles distant.

Before long, she drops out of the sky and flies down toward the Founder's Thumb. A powerful psionic sense locks onto her, making her feel a little unsettled.

Abruptly, the Second Founder steps out of a gap in space, startling Demila. Demila screeches to a halt in midair, finding herself face-to-face with the most powerful Volgrim in existence.

[Creator Demila.] Second Founder Dosea says, directing a critical eye toward her subordinate. [I sent you to capture the mud-dweller known as Demon Emperor Gressil. Yet I do not see his figure held tightly in your grasp...]

[I was unable to locate the Demon Emperor.] Demila quickly says, bowing her head apologetically. [I secured the services of a mud-dweller known as Buddha, but we were not able-]

[You are lying.] Dosea states.

All of the blood in Demila's body turns to ice. She continues to keep her head bowed, but the hostility in Dosea's tone leaves no room for misunderstanding.

She is *pissed*.

[Do not attempt to deceive me.] Dosea says, as calm and threatening as an approaching storm. [Speak the truth.]

Demila knits her brow.

[We... did find the Emperor. But... after a brief fight... he escaped. I am... sorry for lying to you, Second Founder. My shame... it is my deepest shame... that I was unable to capture a single Emperor alive.]

Dosea remains silent for a full minute. Demila doesn't dare to raise her head.

[Shameful indeed.] Dosea finally says, her tone as mild as ever. [Your Psionic Seed has stagnated. You have failed to produce results yet again. Have you any idea how poorly your performance reflects on the rest of us? How your equals speak of you?]

[I... I am aware...] Demila transmits, her mental voice somewhat strained. [I am a shameful, useless Psion...]

[Not useless. But less useful than you should be.] Dosea corrects. [I have casually followed your progression over the liminal cycles. Your results leave much to be desired. Why have you returned empty-handed?]

[I require assistance.] Demila says, finally lifting her head to look at her annoyed superior's face. [I... I require the help of one, no, perhaps two more Psions. Gressil is too

slippery for me to catch alone.]

[How tragic.] Dosena comments. [Two 7th-Level Psions, perhaps even three, all to grab a single Demon Emperor. Would you prefer that I moved on him myself, Demila? Are you truly this incapable?]

Demila's face burns red with shame. A deep inferiority wells up in her chest under the Second Founder's scathing remarks.

[You are required here, Second Founder. I would not dare to ask you to act personally.]

[And yet you expect others of your Level to assist you. Do you think we have the Psions necessary to toss them out like grains of sand on a beach? We are losing the war, *Creator*. Perhaps you should return to the Labyrinth and try, try again, until you have finally stopped making a mockery of our sub-species.]

[Yes... Second Founder...] Demila whispers, wishing with all her might that she could just crawl into a hole and die. [This junior contemplates, and she comprehends.]

[If only you did.] Dosena says, before turning her back and stepping through space.

After disappearing, Dosena leaves one final message. [Tell Founder Unarin what you've told me. I am not your messenger.]

[Of course, Second Founder.] Demila answers, quickly bowing her head again. [This humble junior will do as she is told.]

For a short while, Demila remains in place, evaluating the life-and-death situation she just survived.

Then, she flies toward the Founder's Thumb.

My desire... Demila thinks to herself. *...is to become capable of speaking back to the Second Founder as her equal.*

Part 460: A Galactic Secret

Marie Becker leads Jason into the Exotics Storage Facility. As he enters, Jason looks around to take in the sights.

Unlike the outer facility, there isn't even a single researcher inside. Only automated drones that buzz around the room, taking great care to delicately clean up and maintain the state of the facility's contents. This turns out to be forty long shelves standing twenty feet tall, each with various rocks, pieces of metal, or melted-down slag preserved inside miniature glass domes. Each shelf has multiple levels for storing their contents, with many of them high enough up that Jason would need to grow wings or levitate to reach them.

Each shelf contains at least 200 different rocks and ore deposits of various types. As Jason looks around, he begins to feel an odd tingling in the back of his mind.

Marie glances at him. Perhaps noticing the slight discomfort on his face, she chuckles.

"The contents of this room are a galactic secret. Consider yourself privileged to even step foot in here. I've had to take countless measures to ensure the facility's security, because if I hadn't, the Volgrim would never have let me build it."

"So... each of these rocks are exotics?" Jason asks. "Like my 'Wordsmithium'?"

"That's right," Marie says, leading Jason over to one of the many racks stacked with metallic plates of ore. She taps the glass on one of the mini-domes enveloping a blue-ish colored rock, one that seems somewhat crystalline to Jason's untrained eye. "But before I tell you about the contents of this room, let's have a bit of fun. What do *you* think exotics are?"

Jason also taps the glass dome, marveling at how firmly it resists his touch. It seems to be made out of a material a hundred times harder than 'bulletproof' glass, yet is also as thin as the panes on any ordinary apartment window.

"Contextually, my best guess is..." Jason says. "...an exotic must be some sort of raw material that has metaphysical properties."

"That's a fantastic guess." Marie praises. "Though a bit simplistic. Regarding that 'Wordsmithium' you made, how would you describe its basic properties?"

"Well. It's ultra hard. Ultra durable." Jason says. "Metallic... uh... guess that's about it."

Marie gestures to the blue rock sitting in front of Jason.

"This exotic is just one of many in my collection. Due to certain regulations given to me by the Volgrim, I am only allowed to possess small quantities of any exotic, no matter how valuable. Their scanners are *very* adept at detecting deposits, so I don't dare go over the limit."

Jason glances at a small nameplate attached to the shelf underneath the exotic mineral.

"Aquanite Quartz."

"That's right." Marie says. "All exotics have unique names. The overwhelming majority of them were discovered by the Volgrim hundreds of thousands of years before the Energy Wars, before the Ancient Era, and certainly before Humanity was a speck in the Creator's eye. As such, they've already been named and cataloged... sometimes by extremely boring people. Like this one over here, it's simply called 'Oxide-22.'"

"Wow. That IS boring." Jason snarks.

"Back to the Aquanite Quartz." Marie says, turning her head toward the first material. "There are four classifications for exotics, including Low Exotics, Mid Exotics, and High Exotics. There are also Special Exotics, but only a couple handfuls of materials have ever earned that label. If you look beside the name, you'll notice an alien mark. That is the Volgrim word for the exotic's classification level."

Jason does as Marie instructs. He looks at the odd symbol next to the Aquanite's name, where he sees a chicken-scratch marking he overlooked previously, due to it looking more like a defect on the nameplate rather than an alien symbol.

"**Translate.**" Jason says. "Mmm. So this is a Low-Exotic. I guess it's not very useful?"

"All exotics are useful. The classification tends to refer more to their abundance and value in high technology, though." Marie explains. "Aquanite Quartz is relatively common on certain types of aquatic worlds. Hence the name."

"That's fine and all..." Jason mutters, "but what exactly makes it special?"

"You can feel the tingling in the air, yes?" Marie asks rhetorically. "I cannot, because my body is more mechanical than biological. But when I still possessed a body, I could

feel an uncomfortable 'humming' in my bones. That sensation is something of a 'spiritual reaction.' Put another way... some of the exotics in this room possess immaterial properties."

Jason stands up a little straighter. "Wait, so this Aquanite, it has magical powers?"

"Some exotics do. But not Aquanite." Marie clarifies. "Let me put it this way. In addition to the Volgrim's classification of exotics by abundance and usefulness in High Technology, I also created a secondary classification for them. There are three primary types of exotics. Spiritual, Psionic, and Mundane."

She points at the nameplate once again. "Notice how Aquanite's name is blue. This indicates it is a Psionic Low-Exotic."

Jason blushes in embarrassment. "I assumed the name was blue because... Aquanite... water... blue..."

"Hahahaha!" Marie laughs, making Jason flinch from her unexpected emotional display. "I forgot how simple-minded you biological humans are! Yes of course, *aqua equals blue*! Hahahaha!"

"Come on..." Jason murmurs. "It was an honest mistake."

After Marie finishes laughing, she straightens out her expression again.

"Aquanite is an exotic that Psions can resonate with to improve their affinity to water. It also has certain useful purposes with high technology designed to submerge deep beneath planetary oceans. Simply put, it is extremely resistant to pressure caused by water and other forces, so long as the pressure is relatively constant."

"Wouldn't any other durable metal be just as useful?" Jason questions.

"Of course. But think about this: When processed carefully, you could make a glass dome out of Aquanite that would allow for an observation platform twenty miles beneath an ocean planet's surface. Additionally, Psions stationed there could improve their affinity with liquids much faster over time."

"I see." Jason says slowly. "So it has multiple useful purposes. And this is only a Low-Exotic. Surely, Mid and High Exotics will be much more ridiculous?"

"Let's take a look at this one." Marie says, gesturing to a simple grey-colored mineral, one that vaguely looks ashy and volcanic. Jason glances down at the nameplate.

"Rixite Voldust. Mid-Exotic. And the name is red..."

"Red indicates it is a magically aligned exotic." Marie explains. "As a magus, can you sense anything from this one?"

Jason focuses his attention on the ugly grey lump. As he does, he begins to feel the tingling in the back of his head become slightly more annoying. A smell like phosphorous slips into his nose, yet he realizes he does not actually smell a thing.

"Strange. Very strange..." Jason says quietly. "I'm guessing this is some sort of fire-aligned exotic."

Marie nods. "This particular mineral is always extremely hot. If you were to touch it, you would burn your hand badly. The dome sealing it prevents its heat from leaking out, but let me assure you right now, it is currently burning at over 500 degrees Celsius!"

"What? That's outrageous!" Jason exclaims. "So it never cools down?"

"If you draw the heat out of it, it will gradually begin to heat up again." Marie explains. "What you may find interesting is... Rixite Voldust can only be found on a single planet in the Milky Way. The world of Diabolus."

Jason blinks. "That's where the Fifth Hell of Calamity resides."

"Indeed." Marie says.

She suddenly falls completely silent. She stares at Jason expectantly, as if waiting for him to make a connection.

The Wordsmith recognizes this must be a test. As such, he purses his lips and furrows his brow. The gears turn in his head as he quietly converses with his mind-wife.

A moment later, Jason blinks twice.

"Wait a minute. This exotic only appears on the world of Diabolus. A world run by the demons. And you said it was spiritually reactive?"

Marie smiles, ever so slightly. "Mhm..."

"What about Aquanite Quartz?" Jason asks. "Don't tell me... it can only be found on aquatic worlds where Psions live?!"

"Not 'only' those worlds." Marie clarifies. "But much more abundantly, while other deposits found around the Milky Way have been sparse at best."

Jason realizes an important implication.

"So what you're saying is... exotics are formed naturally, over time, but they can be influenced by their ambient environment? Specifically, by the creatures that live on those worlds?"

"Now you understand." Marie says, crossing her arms and baring a toothy smile at the young man. "Didn't you ever wonder why the Volgrim would glibly hand away so many worlds to the Demons after the Energy Wars? Why they wouldn't just quietly eradicate the demons with their superior technology? This is one of the reasons."

Jason feels a deep pit open up in his stomach.

Suddenly, all those years of ponderings make sense. So many things align for him that he feels almost stupid for not realizing.

"Then... that means Demonstone..."

"Demonstone is a Mundane Mid-Exotic." Marie says. "It's plentiful, easy to find, and extremely durable. It is formed when ordinary rocks absorb a great deal of ambient demonic mana. Demonstone is one of the most abundant exotics in the Milky Way thanks to the proliferation of the demonic species."

"The evidence was right there. All this time." Jason says quietly, feeling his heart sink. "Then, does that mean Earth once housed lots of exotics?"

"More than any other planet in the Milky Way." Marie says, her voice softening. "The spread of so many conflicting sentient species caused brand new exotics to form all the time. Even humans leak ambient mana from their bodies. For example, Angelium was a Low-Exotic that could be found most abundantly in Heaven."

Jason takes a minute to collect himself. Then he begins walking around the room, glancing at each of the exotics on the shelves.

"How many have you collected?" He asks.

"In total, 1,744." Marie replies. "But I am not permitted to possess Special-grade Exotics. Not only are they extremely rare and extremely valuable to the Volgrim Empire, but Unarin doesn't trust me with them."

Jason glances at Marie. "Living Moldanium?"

"Spiritually Reactive Special Exotic." Marie immediately replies.

"Is Trifrancium an exotic?" Jason asks.

"Of course. It's one of the rare gaseous/liquid-based ones, too. It's classified as a Mundane Special Exotic. No magical or psionic properties, but plenty of scientific ones. I do possess a tenth of a kilogram of Trifrancium, but that's all I've been able to store without the Volgrim noticing."

For a full minute, Jason falls utterly silent. He thinks to himself about what he's learned, taking the time to mull over the consequences. He doesn't speak to his mind-wife, but instead just... thinks.

Eventually, he turns to Marie.

"You brought me here for a reason. You said I could create exotics. You've also demonstrated that exotics are the direct result of mana, psionic energy, and natural forces. Therefore..."

He trails off, leaving the implication to hang in the air.

Marie nods. She turns to a nearby shelf, then reaches for one of the exotics. Jason glances at the nameplate as she begins to lift the lid.

Temporal Celestite. Mundane Mid-Exotic.

She pulls the smooth black opal out, then holds it up between herself and Jason.

"This is a Mundane exotic, but don't let that moniker fool you. When combined with certain other exotics, it can unleash frightening abilities. In fact, every Volgrim military vessel uses Temporal Celestite to speed up their Hyperdrives. They can reduce time dilation by a small percentage when crossing vast distances of interstellar space. A journey that would ordinarily take a full year at Warp Seven might only take nine months."

Jason gazes at her evenly. "You want me to see if I can duplicate it."

His words are not a question, but a statement.

Marie maintains a cool expression, but Jason can practically taste the hunger coming out of her eyes.

"...If you'd be so kind." Marie says.

The Wordsmith decides to oblige. He plucks the Temporal Celestite out of her hands, then gazes at it for a moment.

"Examine. Scan. Inspect. Scrutinize. Catalog."

The Wordsmith downloads a perfect blueprint of the exotic. He copies it into the 'supercomputer' inside his Mind Realm, where Fiona gets to work analyzing the Celestite's properties.

"Fascinating!" Fiona exclaims, with only Jason able to hear her words. "Through some unknown process, this rock has managed to absorb the distant energy of a black hole's event horizon. It possesses time, space, and gravity-bending elements. I can't even fully understand how it retains these properties..."

Fiona spends another few minutes analyzing the exotic while Marie forcibly tamps down her excitement. Even so, her foot begins to tap impatiently.

"Well?" She finally asks. "Can you duplicate it?"

Jason smirks evilly, relishing this moment of weakness from the haughty researcher. For once, she's depending on him for a service, and that fact makes him feel *awfully smug*.

"Oh, just a minute..." Jason says slowly, drawing out each syllable. "I need to carefully analyze this exotic. Wouldn't want anything to go wrooong..."

"You little shithead." Marie snarks. "You're doing this to irritate me."

"Whaaat?" Jason asks innocently. "Perish the thought! I would *never*."

Marie bites her tongue. She grumbles deep in her throat, but stifles the urge to slap the little brat.

Finally, Jason straightens his posture. In his left hand, he holds the Celestite, while at the same time holding his right palm face-up.

"Duplicate!"

With a single Word of Power, Jason finally creates a copy of the exotic. Marie's eyes bolt open as a perfect replica of the original material phases into existence atop the Wordsmith's palm.

Before Jason can get so much as a single glance at the new material, Marie snatches it out of his grasp and quickly begins looking it over with her retinal sensors.

"Finally!" She exclaims. "Took you long enough!"

"Gee, Jason. Thanks, Jason." Jason says sarcastically. "Anytime, Marie. Always glad to help, Marie."

"Shut up! Let me have a good look at this..." Marie says, trailing off.

Jason watches as the Head Researcher's mechanical pupils shift and twist, zooming in on every corner of the newly formed exotic material.

After a full minute, she begins to frown.

"Hmm."

Jason's heart sinks. "Didn't work?"

"It did..." Marie says slowly. "But the copy is... let's say, flawed. It has perhaps two percent of the original exotic's ability to bend space. It's as if you intended to clone yourself, but instead accidentally made a baby-Wordsmith. They're the same physiologically, but completely different developmentally."

"Hmm..." Jason grunts. "In the past, I tried to duplicate Solomon's Crown for my wife. I failed, no matter what methods I tried. Maybe this is a similar situation? Copying the more esoteric elements might not be possible."

He pauses.

"But..."

"But?" Marie asks, looking from the exotic up to his face.

"This is a different situation." Jason says thoughtfully. "I'm not trying to duplicate a highly complex spiritual computer like Solomon's Crown. I'm trying to duplicate a rock with some metaphysical properties. Maybe if I..."

The Wordsmith once again holds up the original Celestite stone. Then, he utters the same Word of Power as before.

"Duplicate."

A second copy of the Celestite materializes atop his palm. But this time, the Wordsmith cocks his head. **"Modify. Adjust. Enhance. Examine. Inspect. Enhance. Undo. Inspect. Compare. Paradox. Examine. Undo. Space. Examine. Undo..."**

Marie remains silent. She carefully observes the rock in Jason's hands as its metaphysical properties change, shift, and reform over and over. Repeatedly, the Wordsmith makes a change, examines how the change affected the mineral's composition, then undoes the change to try something else.

Ten minutes pass.

Twenty.

Thirty...

Eventually, Jason stops his attempts to duplicate the mineral. Seeing the look on his face, Marie's expression becomes hesitant.

"You failed?"

"I can't duplicate it." Jason says. "I probably can't duplicate any of these exotics. But..."

For the second time, Marie's expression lights up. "But?! Quit keeping me in suspense, boy!"

"I can't duplicate exotics." Jason repeats. "But perhaps I can make my own."

Marie slowly nods. "I considered that possibility. But what sorts of exotics would you make?"

"I don't have enough experience with them to know what's even possible." Jason says. "Whatever wondrous effects the original Temporal Celestite has, I can't copy it exactly, but I think I could make a different type of exotic with similar effects. It might be better or worse, I can't say for sure."

"That is a more-than-acceptable compromise." Marie says. "How about this. Put a Waypoint down inside this storage facility. You may feel free to return here at any point in the future to study and draw inspiration from these exotics. Perhaps sooner rather than later you'll even be able to make your own."

"I want to do more than that..." Jason says, thinking back to his conversation with Mildred. "I want to create artifacts capable of empowering humanity."

Marie blinks. "Oh? That's... more ambitious than I expected from you."

"I only recently decided to try doing this." Jason says. "After I had a talk with a 'friend.'"

"Ah." Marie replies. "So it's like that. Hmm. Well, I will try to help you if I can."

Jason places down a Waypoint, then he and Marie start to exit the exotics storage. As they do, the Wordsmith frowns.

"You used to be so opposed to helping me. You always complained and got annoyed at the thought of me doing my own thing. What's changed?"

"Everything has changed." Marie says, her tone slightly glum. "I used to have everything under control. Humanity, the demons, and the Volgrim coexisted. You might think the humans got the short end of the stick, but aside from demonic raids on their colonies, your people lived in relative comfort. Sure, the Threat was starting to grow, but we had thousands more years before the Plague would become a major issue. Plenty of time for me to complete my work..."

Jason's frown deepens. He turns his head to glower at Marie as the two of them walk.

"Your work? What work? What are you not telling me?"

"It's better if you don't know." Marie answers. "You have your secrets. I have mine. Let's just say... the work I do will have huge ramifications if I succeed."

"The secrets I possess are nothing at all." Jason says. "Outside of reading my inner thoughts, you've already proven you know a frightening number of things about me that I'd rather you didn't. Meanwhile, I know barely anything about you. How can I consider this a fair and equitable trade?"

Marie pauses her stride. She turns to face the Wordsmith and crosses her arms.

"Have I screwed you?"

Jason pulls back, as if slapped across the face.

"E-excuse me?"

"You heard me." Marie says. "Have I screwed you? As of this moment, have I done anything to hurt you or your ambitions?"

"Oh. That's what you meant. Don't use such... ambiguous wording..." Jason grimaces. "As for screwing me... not that I know. But maybe you have in secret and I won't know for months, or even years."

"I haven't." Marie says, her tone firm. "I have secrets. Yes. But I'm not your enemy. You are a small fish in a big pond, but you think you are a shark. You're not. I could have sold you out to Unarin for some quick gains, but I didn't. I even *covered for you* when your dumb ass blundered around in front of Confessor Vulpanix. Our goals do not conflict, so you can rest easy regarding my motivations."

"You say that, yet you still won't tell me what those goals *even are*." Jason points out.

"They're bigger than you can imagine." Marie says, picking her words carefully. "Let's just say... the Volgrim are a threat, but they are not The Threat. Even the Kolvaxians... they are only the beginning."

Marie looks away. She shakes her head and silently exhales.

"It's so dangerous... out there... in the Void. The Volgrim aren't ready. You're not ready. Even *I'm* not ready. Once the monsters come out, daddy's shotgun won't scare them away. Not if it's loaded with birdshot. We need something bigger. We need an unbreachable defense..."

Marie chews her lower lip thoughtfully. She shakes her head again, then returns her gaze to Jason, as if remembering she was talking to him.

"I'd like to talk to your wife in private, Jason." Marie says. "While we talk, you should pay the Lizardmen a visit. You've never gone to see them, not even when Kar was alive."

A pang of guilt flickers through Jason's chest. "Yeah. Kar. I guess I owe that much to the big guy."

As Marie leads Jason toward the exit to her inner sanctum, Jason contacts Phoebe through magical means, telling her about Marie's request.

The Wordsmith ultimately closes the connection. He ponders the day's events to himself silently.

A better future for humanity. For the whole galaxy...

Part 461: The Secret Garden

Jason and Marie eventually reach the exit to her research facility. As they stand and wait for Rebecca and Phoebe to arrive, the two continue to talk about idle matters.

"Don't forget your promise." Jason says. "I'll be taking 300 Cybernites off your hands."

Marie waves her hand. "Yes, yes. I hope they'll help you accomplish at least some useful goals. They certainly aren't doing me any good here."

"I don't understand." Jason says. "Don't all Cybernites have access to Umi's mainframe? Aren't they all just as capable as you of inventing and doing other busywork?"

Marie snorts. "Jason, the Law of Individuality is always present. Not only in humans, but even in the Volgrim. Do you think the Volgrim are a hivemind where all are just as brilliant as Unarin? By no means. The same is true of my Cybernites. Even if you connect the entirety of humanity to some fancy thought-sharing device, you'll still have a gigantic portion who are much duller than the rest. Don't think you're getting some good deal taking 300 geniuses off my hands. While these Cybernites might be lightyears more advanced than the dullards on Tarus II, they're still the bottom of my metaphorical barrel."

"Maybe so," Jason replies, "but they will still help me make rapid advances. I hope you won't do something cruel like wipe their memories. I might really come back and steal all your artifacts."

"You little brat." Marie chuckles, lightly socking his arm. "Don't toss threats around so casually or I'll have to teach you a lesson."

They continue yapping for twenty minutes. Eventually, the door to the entry office opens, and Rebecca steps through, along with Phoebe.

"Jason!" Phoebe exclaims. "I had SO much fun here! You would not *believe* all the crazy gadgets Rebecca showed me- oh! Hello, you must be Marie Becker."

Phoebe pauses her explanation to quickly and politely greet the Head Scientist. For her part, Marie smiles warmly at the Hero's Wife.

"Miss Hiro. I've heard so much about you. I've also seen the rapid gains you've made over the last six years on Tarus II. Your learning speed is truly commendable."

Phoebe blushes. "No, no. I cheated, after all. I wore Solomon's Crown for quite some time. If I didn't have the Crown, I wouldn't have amounted to much."

Marie raises an eyebrow.

"You think wearing Solomon's Crown is what made you smart. Hmm. Perhaps you're right. But then, considering this husband of yours *also* wore the Crown..."

Marie directs a slow, smug glance over to Jason. He rolls his eyes.

"Oh, hah-hah. Laugh it up, Marie."

"It's like I said before," Marie replies, "give a thousand people equal access to information, and some will... rise ahead of the curve. Others won't."

Phoebe continues to smile, but the expression becomes strained and awkward as she looks from Jason to Marie and back to Jason again.

"Am I missing something, or...?"

"I'm gonna go ahead and leave now." Jason says, turning to his wife. He gives her a quick kiss, then turns to Rebecca. "Mind showing me to the Lizardmen's home? Phoebe and Marie are going to talk about *smart people stuff* so I wouldn't want to get in their way."

"Jason!" Phoebe exclaims.

"Kidding, honey." The Wordsmith laughs. "Contact me when you're all done looking at Marie's gadgets."

Jason leaves his wife behind and exits the facility with Rebecca. After a short while, Rebecca looks backward longingly.

"Miss Becker never did end up letting me assist her in the primary facility." She says, her tone forlorn. "I'm doomed to uselessness."

Jason smiles. "I wouldn't go that far. As it just so happens..."

Jason spends the next several minutes explaining the deal he made with Marie. Rebecca listens quietly while he explains. At the end, Jason frowns.

"...You don't have to come along if you don't want to." Jason says, noticing her sadness. "You're a free individual, not a slave."

"No. I'll go to help your people." Rebecca says. "It's just... now I feel worse than ever. I really am useless, aren't I?"

"No, no." Jason says. "You're really smart! You're a genius, especially compared to an idiot like me."

"Miss Becker thinks I'm trash." Rebecca mumbles. "Don't you see? We Cybernites are supposed to be Pinnacle Humans. But she decided 300 of us were so unable to contribute that we'd be better off discarded to some inferior-"

Rebecca pauses, suddenly realizing she was about to say something extremely rude.

Jason and the low-level researcher pause at the edge of a catwalk. He turns to face her and smiles.

"You know, Rebecca, you're one of the only links to my former humanity. My old existence. You were the last person I saw before I entered cryostasis. Would you rather stay here and work under Marie, scrimping and scratching to try and rise from the bottom to slightly-above-the-bottom? Or would you rather come with me and help make a real difference in the lives of others?"

Rebecca scratches her neck. She doesn't look Jason in the eyes.

"I don't know."

"Well, I do." Jason says. "I'm lucky enough to possess a godlike power known as Wordsmithing. But that's only a privilege granted to me by Fate. I used to call myself a Hero, but recently I've realized using that title was the height of arrogance. What defines us is not the titles we give ourselves, but the effects we have on the world around us."

He continues. "Think about Marie Becker for a minute. What makes her special?"

Rebecca pauses to think.

"Her intelligence. Her inventions. Her leadership during the Energy Wars."

"Wrong." Jason counters. "What makes her special is that she was born with high intelligence, but she didn't waste it. She put it to use making a difference. You might not be as intelligent as Marie, but you're still plenty smart yourself. Do you truly think Marie Becker was the smartest person on Earth, either during the Energy Wars, or today?"

"Well. Yes, I do." Rebecca says frowning. "I think you're underestimating the Head Researcher's brainpower, Wordsmith."

"I know for a fact Marie wasn't the smartest person on Earth." Jason counters. "Solomon was. Anyone who possessed his Crown, therefore, was smarter than Marie. But the thing is, those people wasted their intelligence. Marie possessed less knowledge than them, but figured out how to use her intellect to change humanity's course. You can do the same now."

Jason crosses his arms.

"I recently spoke to Founder Unarin. Between him and Marie, who do you think is more brilliant?"

Rebecca chews her lower lip. "I don't know."

"The answer is, intelligence isn't a matter of numbers." Jason explains. "IQ is only a relative indicator of genius. Marie might be a brilliant inventor, but I think you'd be hard-pressed to say Unarin is less intelligent when he has successfully guided the path of a galactic super-civilization for millions of years."

"And what about Emperor Ose?" Jason asks. "I think we can both agree she wasn't as smart as Marie. She didn't invent as many incredible things. But she still made a huge impact on demon civilization. She changed its future and charted a path that made it second only to the Volgrim Empire."

"But Ose is dead now." Rebecca hesitantly points out.

"So? Everyone dies eventually. Unarin will someday, if not to his people or some external enemy, he'll die during the universe's heat death. Marie will die. I'll die too. In the meantime, does that mean their achievements become useless?"

Rebecca seems to realize something. She nods along to Jason's words, and a faint light sparks in her eyes.

"I see. I could stay here, at the bottom of the Oasis's hierarchy. But... I could also leave and help make a real difference for humanity out there, where people need me."

Jason squeezes her shoulder affectionately and smiles. "Right. And I *think* that is exactly the choice you should make."

A moment later, Jason realizes his touch might be taken the wrong way, so he retracts his hand. He and Rebecca continue walking and talking, with Rebecca showing visibly more interest in helping humanity's future progress.

"Of course." Rebecca says in response to one of Jason's questions. "I know all fifty thousand Cybernites in the Oasis. I can help convince the other 299 to come along."

"That'll save me some trouble." Jason says. "I'm also going to put you in charge of the Cybernites on Tarus II."

Rebecca visibly flinches. "W-what? Me? No, I don't think that's right... I'm not much of a leader, Jason."

"And you think I am?" Jason jokes. "I was just Some Dude. Then I traveled to the future and found out I possessed some ridiculous magical power. I ended up becoming a Chosen One. But I didn't have any formal training for ages, and even now I still feel like a fish out of water half the time. You'll pick stuff up as you go along."

That seems to calm Rebecca down. The Cybernite woman continues leading Jason across catwalks and down hallways until they reach a large circular steel door. When Rebecca approaches, the door opens from the middle, splitting in half to reveal an interior filled with shelves, each of the shelves possessing thousands of plants of innumerable species. These plants often appear to have originated from Earth, but plenty of them appear totally exotic. Jason even spots one plant that appears to be perpetually on fire, yet doesn't burn the others nearby.

As he enters the room, Jason notes the presence of more than a dozen Cybernites. Some of them are men, and others are women. They glance at Jason and some of them even raise their eyebrows, but none bother talking to him. They go about their work, maintaining all the plants by watering and pruning them. In the case of plants like the fire-flower, they instead sprinkle some strange-smelling soil at its base, likely a fuel to keep it burning.

"This is the entrance to the Lizardmen's home." Rebecca explains. "They may seem like a cute little warrior species, but they play a very important role here at the Oasis. They help maintain its biodiversity."

Jason nods. He walks behind Rebecca, past half a dozen additional Cybernites he didn't see when he entered, toward a space located on the opposite side of the thick, foliage-covered shelves.

He looks down and finds to his mild surprise that the floor has disappeared and instead become replaced with dirt. He seemingly steps from a futuristic technological utopia into a lifelike jungle, complete with trees and sunlight beaming down from above.

Behind the shelves lays a hidden world, an underground jungle that opens up in a huge way, revealing a vast underground area Jason had no idea even existed!

"Whoa."

The Wordsmith's eyes widen. He walks through a curtain of vines and enters a lush tropical forest. The sounds of crickets and other alien-sounding bugs reaches his ears for the first time. As he looks around, Jason becomes entranced by the absolute beauty of this region.

Birds fly through the air. The 'sky' above appears no different than one he might expect on Earth itself. In the far distance, he even spots a massive oak tree, one that resembles something Uzziel herself might create in the image of Yggdrasil.

"Is this... am I in a hologram?" Jason asks.

"No." Rebecca says. "It's all real. But it is sort of a trick. This realm was not created with technology, but through magic."

It takes Jason a moment to think up an explanation.

"The fairies?"

"That's right. The fairies used their Formation Magic to create a world far bigger than the space underground would usually allow. It contains countless profundities of space and time. One hour in here is only about 15 minutes outside. It has a TDR of 1 to 4."

"TDR?" Jason asks. "Time Dilation Ratio?"

"Mhm. How'd you know?" Rebecca asks, slightly surprised Jason could make such a guess.

"Uh. My wife told me." Jason says. "My second wife. The one in my mind, I mean."

"Right..." Rebecca says, narrowing her eyes. "Your other wife."

"Come on, I already told you it's not what you think."

"Uh huh. Sure thing, stud." Rebecca says with a snort.

Jason resists the urge to facepalm. He and Rebecca continue walking deeper into the interior, and she takes the time to explain the region's other secrets.

"The truth is, there isn't only one formation here. There are dozens. They're all extremely high-level. Profound in a way that I don't think I could explain. As a magus, you should be able to decipher some of their intricacies with your Wordsmithing, but I

don't think you'd ever fully understand them. There are also invisible walls that will shift you to other regions scattered around the Oasis via silent teleportation gates."

"We have something like that on Tarus II." Jason says. "Leading to a certain artifact of mine."

"Mhm. Camael's Cube." Rebecca says.

"The hell?" Jason snaps. "How do you-?!"

"We always keep an eye on you, Wordsmith." Rebecca says. "I explained that much. What, do you think we're going to steal your big shiny toy? You can keep it."

Jason notes the pointed edge to her jabs. "You're more like Marie than I first thought. I wonder if it's normal for smart people to also be huge jerks."

"It does somewhat come with the territory. But sorry." Rebecca apologizes. "I don't intend to be rude. It simply... happens."

"Reassuring."

Jason and Rebecca stomp along until they reach a sparkling, beautiful stream of water. Rebecca steps past it, but Jason pauses at its edge. He kneels down and scoops up a handful of the water.

"Inspect."

Rebecca turns to look at him. She raises an eyebrow as he cups the liquid to his mouth and takes a sip.

"Wow!" Jason laughs. "Now that's some goddamn water! Freshest H₂O this side of the Milky Way!"

"Naturally the liquid inside this area contains no impurities." Rebecca says mildly. "Though... I am always surprised by the simple-minded joy you take in such mundane matters."

"It's not mundane at all." Jason retorts, while slurping another sip of the delicious water. "I grew up on Earth, the same as you. We lived during a time of great pollution. It's a real joy to enjoy some delicious, untainted water."

"Isn't Tarus II's water just as fresh?" Rebecca asks. "It's not like the planet has any major industrial activities going on..."

"Well. Yeah. It is." Jason says hesitantly. "But this still seems to taste better. Maybe because most of the plants and stuff around here are actually from Earth. I like Tarus II, but it's never truly felt like 'home' to me."

"You could just Wordsmith it to have a similar ecosystem to our former homeworld." Rebecca says, as Jason stands up. "It's not like you lack the mana, thanks to the Cube."

"Mmm... you're probably right." Jason mutters, as he falls into thought. "...You're probably right."

They venture further into the forest. At one point, they even pass a pair of vicious-looking wolves plucked straight out of Earth's biosphere, but the animals don't seem to smell or sense Jason and Rebecca's presence at all. The Wordsmith frowns as the animals walk right past them, sniffing the air to look for prey.

"Okay. That was weird." Jason says, looking at the Cybernite.

"We want the ecological balance to be maintained as pristinely as possible." Rebecca explains. "While we're here, various magical and technological systems will do their best to ensure the wildlife doesn't notice our presence. That way we can observe them without disturbing their natural cycles. This forest is a sacred place, after all."

After another hour of walking through the seemingly unending forest, the two reach a large palisade wall, one that appears decidedly artificial compared to the natural forest around it. Large logs stick up and outward, with spiked ends capable of repelling any wild creatures that might think about jumping over the barrier.

A single path leads through the wall, where two massive Lizardmen stand outside, guarding their village's entrance.

Jason peers past the guards. He spots tens, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of huts behind the wall, all safely protected from the native wildlife, but also kept away so they won't disturb the ecological balance.

As the duo approaches, one of the guards lifts up their chin. Resembling a bipedal salamander, the blue-scaled monster casually walks over to Jason and Rebecca while loosely holding a wooden spear in their hand. As they approach, Jason realizes this guard, and likely the other one, are both females.

"Greetings, Lady Rebecca." The salamander says. "You've brought the Wordsmith!"

Jason's eyes widen slightly. "You recognize me?"

"Of course!" The guard says. "We all partake in the Ancestral Memories. We all know of the lauded Wordsmith's appearance. Why, our former king, Kar, often spoke highly of you, though he did mention your mental acumen was..... underwhelming."

The long, slow pause before the final word makes Jason blush in embarrassment. "I'm, uh, still working on improving that. Is Ghidorah here?"

"Yes, yes. King Ghidorah has once again taken reign, though it saddened him to do so. I'm sure he will be pleased to see you once again, Jason Hiro."

"I don't know about 'pleased'..." Jason murmurs. "If I had been a better Wordsmith, perhaps Kar might still be with us."

"Lord Kar's soul still lives on." The guard says sagely. "From what I understand, there is a rescue operation currently underway to retrieve his soul!"

Jason's heart skips a beat. "What, really? The Lizardmen are planning to chase down Mephisto and recover Kar's soul? But how will you be able to find him? Not even my Wordsmithing has been able to dig out that bastard's position!"

The guard pauses for several long seconds.

She glances at Rebecca, then back at the other guard, who shrugs.

She returns her attention to the Wordsmith. "I do not understand. Was it not you who planned out the rescue operation, Wordsmith? We Lizardmen are not strong enough to rescue our former Lord. This weakness is our deepest shame, graugh! That is why we were elated to hear the news of humanity's movements!"

This time, it's Jason who is at a loss for words. "I had no idea there was any such rescue operation planned out. Do you know who's involved?"

"Of course! Monster Queen Blinker, the matriarch of our people! Not only her, but several other fairies, the Archangel Uriel... and even that Demon Emperor, Beelzebub!"

"WHAT?!" Jason shrieks. "Freaking BEELZEBUB?! Why does nobody tell me these things?!"

Rebecca clears her throat. "I didn't know you were unaware, Jason. From what I've heard, the rescue party finished forming only a few hours after we left. They should have left the Core by now and will be on their way to try and hunt Mephisto down. But you need not worry. They've assembled a terrifying strike force. I would be very surprised if they failed their mission."

"I should go!" Jason shouts. "I need to help them. **Locate!**"

Jason fires off a Word of Power to search for Blinker and the others, but Fiona stops him.

"Jason. Do you think Blinker is stupid?"

Taken aback, he shakes his head and turns his thoughts inward.

No, honey. Of course not. Why even ask?

"If Blinker needed your help, she would have requested your assistance." Fiona points out. "Even if this was a last-minute rush, do you think she'd be so stupid as to put her babies in harm's way? She must have significant assurance she'll be able to pulverize Mephisto's bones. Have some faith in her capabilities. She IS the Monster Queen."

Jason's expression darkens.

But... what if something happens to her? Kar already died because of my inadequacy. I would NEVER be able to forgive myself if the same thing happened to his wife!

"Like I said." Fiona repeats. "Have faith. Feel free to contact Blinker and ask if she wants help, but don't try to force your way in. She has her pride. She's not some helpless little girl. She's someone who already beat the crap out of Mephisto once and sent him scurrying away. If anyone should be fearful right now... it's *him*."

Alright. Jason thinks. I'll just contact her magically and ask if she wants my help. But I'll respect her wishes, whatever they might be.

He returns his attention to the salamander guard. Having finished his conversation with Fiona at the speed of thought, no time at all passed in the material realm.

"On second thought, I'd rather speak to Ghidorah first. Can you lead the way?"

The guard nods. "Most certainly. Lady Rebecca, Wordsmith, please follow me. Our king has been hoping you would drop by for a while now."

"Happy to oblige." Jason says with a smile.

Part 462: Unwanted Harem

Somewhere inside the depths of the Labyrinth, a hunting party comprised of over 500 individuals goes on the prowl.

Led by the Monster Queen, Blinker, its goal is to locate, hunt down, and kill Demon Emperors Mephisto and Yama, while hopefully killing Zamiel and attempting to rescue the former Monster King Kar's soul.

Blinker travels with powerful allies. Not only Fairy Princess Melia, but her retainers, Saria and Ruto. The newly ascended Emperor of Hellfire, Beelzebub, also joins this company, though the others appear hesitant at his accompanying them. His role is not only to assist them in killing their Emperor enemies, but more importantly, to use his demonic connections to actually locate the Emperor of Legions.

Newly added to their squad is a certain almighty being, the Archangel of Retribution, Uriel. This haughty woman lingers behind the others, walking with her arms crossed while idly glancing toward any distant patches of demonic energy to see if she can sense Mephisto's location. She fails, but that doesn't stop her from trying. Uriel continues to wear the rings of her three brothers, rings which cause her already impressive repertoire of abilities to vastly expand.

As for the other hundreds of individuals, these consist of heavily armed soldiers granted to Blinker by Neil Adams himself. To assist her in slaughtering one of humanity's enemies, Neil gives her access to a platoon of his finest soldiers. Many of them consist of humans, but a surprising number are monsters as well.

One final unexpected addition to Blinker's convoy turns out to be the cute and adorable Kiari, the Emperor of Pestilence. Unlike the others who wear somewhat gloomy expressions on their faces, Kiari walks along with a bit of a skip in her step. She manipulates her bugs, sending them down thousands of corridors to get an early jump on the search, fanning out to look for Mephisto's whereabouts.

"Sooooo, Beelzebub!" Kiari chirps. "How have you... been?"

Beelzebub forces a smile. "I'm doing well, Kiari."

"Mmm. It's a little weird, you know?" Kiari idly yaps. "I freed you from Rosalia's dungeon but had no idea you were... you! I didn't believe you even when you told me!"

Beelzebub gazes at the charming demoness. "That was a bit silly of you."

"Well, I just like to give people the benefit of the doubt." Kiari says, shrugging. "You ARE going to be a better person, right? Because what you did was... it was really bad, Beelzebub."

Beelzebub looks away.

"It was. I'm sorry."

"Apologies don't fix everything." Kiari says, a little more seriously. "But they're a good start! Once you acknowledge the problem, you can start fixing it! Though... we can't ever bring my friends back..."

Kiari's innate cheerful nature contrasts with her internal realizations. She struggles with how she should treat Beelzebub.

"I can't bring anyone back." Beelzebub replies. "But at the least, I can stop killing more. I can put my strength to use for humanity's sake. For demonkind's sake. I can ensure no others do what I did."

As the two of them talk, Fairy Princess Melia directs a subtle but scathing gaze at Beelzebub's back. She doesn't say anything, but her eyes tell a story regarding her inner thoughts. She lightly flaps her wings and flickers forward, instantly jumping ten feet to arrive at Blinker's side, not far behind the Emperor of Hellfire.

"I hope we can trust him." Melia says, twirling a finger idly around her long green hair. She doesn't bother worrying if Beelzebub's sharp hearing can pick up her words.

"I don't care." Blinker says idly. "I need my husband back. Revenge comes second."

"He could be leading us into a trap." Melia points out. "Though it is unlikely."

Blinker appears unimpressed. "We have one and three-half Archangels with us. If Beelzebub betrays us, he'll be paying the Great Beyond a visit REAL soon."

Behind Beelzebub and Kiari, as well as Blinker and Melia, Archangel Uriel blinks her eyes wearily. Two rather-annoying fairies metaphorically buzz around her, showering her with questions.

"I was born way after the Energy Wars, so I've never seen an Archangel before! Is it true you can summon weapons made of light?" Fairy Ruto asks, her blue hair bobbing around as she peppers Uriel with questions. "Can you call down Heaven's Judgment? Can you smite Demon Emperors dead with a wave of your hand?!"

"I heard angels can fly really fast! Can you fly faster than a fairy?" Saria asks, her own green-hair bouncing around her neck as she talks. "We should have a race! You versus me and Ruto!"

Uriel remains aloof, only shooting mildly disdainful looks at the two annoying brats.

"We Archangels are not known for our... patience." Uriel says quietly.

"Understandable!" Ruto exclaims. "That must be how the demons beat you during the Energon Wars!"

"What?!" Uriel snaps, glaring at Ruto. "Art thou attempting to enrage me?"

Realizing she's said something wrong, Ruto quickly backs away. "No no, haha! I misspoke! I'm sorry, Miss Uriel! I just really admire you! You're such a cool lady, a real badass!"

Uriel tampers down her anger. "Mmm. Well. To answer thy infinite questions... I can indeed summon blades of light. But generally, I prefer to wield spears."

With a quick flourish, she uncrosses her arms, flicks her wrists, and conjures two brilliantly shining spears of light, awing both girls.

"Wow! So pretty!" Ruto squeaks, stars dancing in her eyes. "Can... can I have one?"

"Verily, they shalt fall to pieces when they depart my grasp." Uriel says blandly, making another motion to desummon the weapons. "I once possessed two incredible artifact spears forged by my sister, Camael. But sadly, they were lost during the Ancient Era..."

"Oh... that's too bad." Ruto says.

She and Saria continue talking to Uriel for a while, but eventually they decide to move on to other things.

As the hunting party continues to follow Beelzebub and Kiari's guidance, Saria and Ruto playfully zip around, looking at all the humans wearing faceless T-REX's. Most of

the nanite armors look identical to the others, with minor variations in body size and shape, particularly between the men and women.

But as the girls fly from person to person, Saria's nose picks up a strange scent. She quickly snaps her eyes onto one of the human troopers, a slightly taller soldier than the ones in his immediate vicinity. The soldier wears a unique-looking Rhino suit, one built for melee battles and heavily armored for frontline combat. The fairy retainer flies up into the air, then descends and lands smack in the soldier's path.

"Hey! Hey you!" Ruto says, drawing the attention of several nearby troopers. "Can you take off your helmet for a second? I wanna get a look at you!"

Ruto glances over at her mischievous friend. Invisible question marks pop up over her head as she starts making her way over to Ruto's position. At the same time, seeing two gorgeous fairy girls descend upon one of their own, the other soldiers nearby heartily chuckle under their breaths.

The soldier in question crosses his arms. "Perhaps if you ask nicely."

"Pleeease!" Ruto whimpers, putting on her cutest puppy-dog eyes. "Show me your face, mister!"

With a shrug, the soldier deactivates his T-REX. The massive suit of armor melts away, its nanites flooding into the central control module on his chest. Within seconds, a dark-skinned fellow, Samuel Baker, crosses his arms and looks down at the admittedly attractive fairy.

"Happy?" He asks.

"Ohhh!" Ruto quietly exclaims, her breath catching in her throat. Samuel frowns slightly as her pupils strangely contract and expand. She starts sniffing the air, then leans toward him, standing on her tippy-toes to bring her nose closer to his face.

Samuel takes a small step back, but Saria presses the assault, matching his pace.

"Hey!" Samuel snaps. "You got a problem?"

His forceful tone does nothing to deter the fairy. Blood rushes to her cheeks and she blushes, swaying from side to side as she gazes at him in visible adoration.

"You.. you smell so nice..." Saria says. "What's your name, mister?"

"Lieutenant Samuel Baker." He says, glancing behind her as her friend Ruto lands not far away. "Can I ask why you're... smelling me? I'll admit I skipped my shower this morning, but I shouldn't smell THAT strange."

Ruto grabs Saria's shoulder and pulls her back. "Saria! Don't pester people! It's rude! You're acting like a lovestruck-"

Ruto suddenly pauses mid-sentence. She blinks as if sprayed in the face with water, then takes a good, long look at Samuel.

She starts sniffing the air and drawing closer to him as well!

Sniff, sniff. "Wow! Oh my goodness! You smell really nice, Samuel, was it? REALLY nice!"

"I know, right?" Saria chirps. "He's not just handsome, but he has that strange scent about him. Say, didn't mother tell me about this once...?"

Both fairies pause, making Samuel frown. Already, a dozen nearby male soldiers have given him silent thumbs-ups before turning and walking away to leave him alone to his 'fate.'

"Aha!" Saria exclaims. "Samuel! Are you a fairy? A male fairy?!"

"What? NO!" Samuel bellows. "I ain't no goddamn fairy!"

"Hmm..." Saria continues, not believing his words in the slightest. "I don't know. Mother said there were only five male fairies in the Milky Way, but they're impossible to miss. Each one has a... a strong, sweet scent about them. Are you suuure you're not a fairy? Do you have wings?"

Ruto blushes even harder than before. She bites her lower lip and starts to squeeze her clothes in vaguely lewd ways. "My mother said male fairies... they're supposed to be irresistible. I didn't realize the effect would be *this* potent."

"For the love of all that is holy." Samuel grumbles. "I'm not a- a goddamned fairy. I'm a normal human guy. Although..."

"Although?" Ruto repeats.

Samuel pauses for several long seconds. He looks away, then curses like a sailor under his breath.

"Motherfuckin' Phoebe. Did that damned hussy set me up? Shit. Goddammit. Ahh..."

After half a minute of deliberation, Samuel seemingly accepts his fate. He gestures to the large gauntlet affixed to his left hand.

"There's this, this new gadget Miss Hiro made. It's called a Power Glove. It can turn you into different creatures. I found out I have... man it's *so stupid* to say. I have a 'high compatibility' with the fairy transformation."

The two retainers don't seem to understand what he means, so after a bit of light prompting, they get him to demonstrate.

Samuel twists the Power Glove's activation module, setting the selector to fairy. A moment later, his body begins to imperceptibly shift and change. Dainty butterfly wings sprout from his back. His skin becomes noticeably cleaner, more pure, and even half a shade darker. His physique visibly improves, turning him from a well-toned muscular fellow into a scary looking supersoldier, but one who has clearly invested in excellent skincare. He becomes a strange but aesthetically pleasing cross between a pretty-boy and a muscular meathead.

The moment Samuel's transformation concludes, a dark cloud appears in his thoughts. The two fairies before him become much more agitated. They struggle to control themselves and have to actively step back, their legs shaking as they look at him with lustful gazes.

"Oh, oh mother, guide me..." Ruto whispers, her voice cracking. "He's so... so hot! Oh ancient fairies! I can't believe a man can look this incredible! He's *truly* a male fairy!"

"The legends didn't praise them highly enough..." Saria whispers. Tears stream from her eyes as she forcefully fights against her body's urges. "Mi-mister, Samuel, sir. Listen... You have to come with us. You have to go to the fairy homeworld! We'll treat you well! So well! You cannot imagine- fairy males are almost never born... we need more like you!"

Suddenly, another figure materializes beside Saria and Ruto.

Monster Queen Blinker!

She glances between them and Samuel, her eyes fluttering in surprise as she also notices the incredibly intoxicating scent wafting from his body. However, she appears far less moved. With a flick of her hands, she teleports the other two away, making them offer a faint yelp of protest before they vanish.

"Wai-!" Saria exclaims, before vanishing.

The Monster Queen clears her throat.

"Sorry about that, Samuel." Blinker says. "I wondered where those two naughty girls went. And... why are you a fairy? A male fairy, at that? Did I miss a memo?"

Samuel holds up his Power Glove, then adjusts the setting to revert himself back to human form. Blinker gets the idea and frowns.

"Hmm. So that gadget can turn men into male fairies? That's a bit concerning."

"I don't know." Samuel says, slightly exasperated. Why don't you seem affected? Those other two looked like they were about to jump my bones if you hadn't interfered."

Blinker snorts. "Oh, you poor thing! I'm sure that would have been a fate worse than death. But to answer your question! Male fairies are extremely rare. I barely know of half-a-dozen of them currently still alive. Male fairies are the only way to, *ahem*, continue the fairy bloodline. Fairies can mate with any species and give birth to that species' children. But we can only make more fairies through males of our own kind. So as you can imagine..."

"Your men must have quite a good time." Samuel says. "Well. I mean. Those girls aren't exactly... I wouldn't deny them... but it feels a little wrong, you know? It looked like they couldn't control themselves."

Blinker glances around, making sure there's nobody else in the immediate vicinity before turning her gaze back to Samuel.

"Fairy Retainers are..."

She pauses.

"...virgins. It's a cultural tradition for reasons I won't go into. And virgin fairies are extremely susceptible to the aphrodisiac-like scent of a male fairy. But once a girl has had some fun, she's won't go weak in the knees anymore. That's why we have a tradition of marrying off fairies to other species first. Though, there were a couple males in history who used their Scent to plunder their way into a harem. Pretty despicable fellows."

"Ah. So that's why you're not pouncing on me." Samuel nods, finally understanding. "Because of Kar. Well, I don't want to take advantage of some naive young girls. I'll keep my distance."

A brief pause follows. Blinker looks at Samuel seriously then lifts her chin.

With a flick of her wrist, she suddenly teleports another random trooper nearby.

"Eh?" The man grunts, his faceless helmet hiding his expression. "Why am I- huh?"

"I brought you here." Blinker says to the man. "You have a Power Glove, right? Retract your armor for a minute."

The man nods. "Yes, Blinker, ma'am. Why?"

"Just do it." She commands.

The man nods. He retracts his armor, then follows Blinker's command to turn himself into a fairy. As he does, he also takes on a beautiful and fair form, one that makes him look no different than any other fairy. He even obtains pretty butterfly wings.

But Blinker's expression visibly relaxes. "Okay. I see now. Thank you for your help. You can revert back and rejoin the group. Tell the others I'll catch up in a minute."

The trooper nods. Blinker teleports him back up ahead to the rest of the hunting party, which has now begun to draw a good distance further into the Labyrinth, leaving Blinker and Samuel alone.

"That's good." Blinker says, more to herself than to Samuel. "Boy, was I worried! That could have turned out a lot worse for us."

"I feel like I'm missing something." Samuel says.

"I was afraid that any man could become a male fairy." Blinker explains. "They can, but... he didn't have the Scent. You do."

"Supposedly, I have an S-class compatibility with the fairy transformation." Samuel groans. "That... probably has something to do with it."

"It would be a disaster for my species if all of humanity could become authentic male fairies." Blinker says, her expression grim. "We certainly need to keep our numbers up, but most of the Fairy Queens don't like the idea of male fairies using their pheromones to forcibly- well, you get the idea. Especially because if a female fairy's first Bond is with a male fairy, the effect becomes... permanent. Or at least it's very hard to break. Like I said, there were some bad boys who abused that ability in the past to build massive harems of mind-controlled concubines."

"Hmm. That's screwed up." Samuel says. "In any case, I'm not interested in that lovey-dovey crap anyway. If someone wants to go for a throw in the sheets, I won't turn 'em

down, but it's not my main goal."

"Well..." Blinker says, hesitating. "I think you should reconsider. Like I said, there are only half a dozen male fairies still alive. Most of them are already... preoccupied. They have their harems. But they're also getting on in years. It's not like they'll die of old age, but it wouldn't hurt to have another join their ranks."

Samuel glowers at her. "You want me to give up my revenge? To become some sort of harem king?"

"It's up to you." Blinker says with a shrug. "I wouldn't mind having a friend like you on the Fairy Council. You do get to become a member of the highest noble class, you know. And since you really want to take revenge on demonkind as a whole... you could build up an army of pretty girls who would help you..."

She pauses.

"...plus, you get to have LOTS of hot, steamy, raunchy-"

"I get the picture." Samuel interrupts. "I'll think about it. For right now, maybe just keep those girls away from me, alright?"

"Yeah. I can do that." Blinker says. "In the meantime, why don't we-"

She stops mid-sentence and frowns. Her eyes become slightly unfocused as she looks away from Samuel. After thirty full seconds of silence, Blinker shakes away the fog from her eyes.

"Oh. Jason contacted me just now. He wanted to know if we'd need any help taking down Mephisto."

"Do we?" Samuel asks.

"Nah!" Blinker shouts. "We'll beat that bastard, no matter what. I promise... his days are numbered!"

"That's what I like to hear." Samuel says, glad to finally leave the strange conversation about his fairy powers in the dust. "We should probably get moving. The others are way ahead of us, now."

Blinker sighs. "I just hope we're not doing this all for nothing. If Mephisto manages to hide from us..."

"He won't." Samuel replies, his tone confident. "We have the power of the Creator on our side. *And* we have an Archangel."

He smirks at Blinker.

"That walking corpse is *so* screwed."

Part 463: Gorgorath's Promise

Jason and Rebecca continue deeper into the Lizardmen's village, led by the female guard from earlier. She leads them around, showing off various sights and local communal areas.

"And what was your name?" Jason asks, as the guard leads him toward a wooden stall with a shopkeeper selling some hot food. "I didn't mean to be rude, I'm just a bit overwhelmed."

"It's Kumi, Sir Wordsmith." The guardswoman says. "But it's fine if you forget. I'm nobody important. Kyargh!"

"In my eyes, all people are important." Jason says with a smile.

Kumi's blue scales darken in color slightly, a sign of embarrassment. "That's very kind of you to say. Now, um, these are our local street vendors. We don't have a form of traditional currency here. But everyone is allowed a certain number of 'points' they can spend each day. These points are given automatically to each villager, and one can earn extra points through completion of meritorious deeds or through actions that assist the collective. Everyone gets ten points a day, and in my case, guarding the village gates gets me an extra two. Any unspent points are lost, which seems bad, but the rules apply to everyone. Even our great King, His Majesty Ghidorah!"

She shows Jason some of the neat little trinkets at the vendor, and Jason marvels how all of them hold trace amounts of spiritual energy inside.

"Even your king has to live within this limited point system, huh?" Jason asks. "Why is that?"

"These rules were passed down by the great Mother of all Lizards, Lady Becker." Kumi explains. "Her goal was to give us a fair and equitable society. We have eliminated the Profit Motive. Since even our King earns the same ten points as the rest of us, he has no incentive to grow corrupt over time. Of course, there are other factors, but those are a little complicated to explain."

Jason nods casually. Rebecca also does, though she already knows all of the details Kumi is alluding to, plus far more.

The interior of the Lizardman Village appears surprisingly uninspired. Jason admires the simple but efficient architecture of multi-story complexes where families of one to four live plain but pleasant lives. All around the streets, many lizards stroll about, performing their daily business while pausing to chat with their friends and neighbors.

But as Jason travels deeper into the village and the apartments start getting a bit bigger, he notices something interesting.

"It's not just Lizardmen here?"

"No, no," Kumi explains. "We have many different Friends who come to visit us. Our realm is actually a hub for many species. Even demons pop by on occasion! Although... after what those Battle Brothers did some centuries ago, we've heavily restricted the demons who can enter."

"What they did?" Jason asks, before remembering. "Oh. With the Crocodilians."

Kumi nods. "The Crocodiles were one of Marie Becker's favorite children. She was devastated when those evil demons came in here and butchered their entire lineage. Only Lord Kar remained among the living, because he was in the Labyrinth at the time. We never even found out why the Battle Brothers attacked, or what their motivations were. The brutal murder of the Crocodiles affected all of us deeply."

"Kar never talked about what happened. Not in any great detail." Jason says. "Not that I blamed him. It must have been a terribly traumatizing experience."

"We were all so proud when Kar was given the role of the Reptile King." Kumi says. "He was going to bring the Crocodiles back from extinction through his marriage to Lady Blinker. They can still return, of course. But their heritage, traditions, and customs have been lost. Those were locked within Lord Kar's memories. His hatchlings will have to start afresh. No Crocodiles remain that can pass down the Old Ways."

Jason walks past all manner of other species. Not only Lizardmen, but Salamanders, Newts, and even some Elemental Drakes walking about in their bipedal forms. These transformed monsters sneer and look down upon the 'lowly' monsters around them, feeling proud for the faint draconic lineage swirling within their blood. They stand several heads taller than even Kar himself would have stood, at over fifteen feet tall!

The Wordsmith finds himself surprised when they even pass a pair of red-haired fairy women!

"Fairies too?" Jason asks.

"Like I said. The Lizardmen Village is our species' primary hub. There is a Newt Village too, as well as a Salamander village. There was once a Crocodile Village too, but..."

"Yeah. That's too bad." Jason mumbles.

Jason's expression becomes more muted and a lot less interested in the goings-on as Kumi leads him around. He finds himself continually more and more saddened by the hole left upon this reptilian mini-society and how the deaths of the Crocodiles have deeply affected them. Just by how often Kumi refers to their extinction, Jason can tell the Crocodiles were highly revered and considered worthy of respect.

"Your people must have put a lot of hope in Blinker." He comments.

"Oh yes! Very much, kyargh!" Kumi says. "The Monster Queen is our last chance at bringing back the Crocodiles."

"What was it you liked, or appreciated, the most about the Crocodiles?" Jason asks.

Kumi stops in front of a small food station where they serve well-cooked birds of some sort. She deposits one point to grab herself a snack, then takes a half-minute to swallow the bird whole while pondering her answer.

"That is a difficult question, Wordsmith. You have to remember that we monsters often participate in intersex relations. I had two cousins who were Crocodiles! But even beyond the familial relations, the Crocodiles were the biggest and strongest of all the Biped Reptiles. They shielded us and made us feel protected. Their deaths were not only a loss to us culturally and emotionally, but a sign we are not at all safe from the demons. Now we know that we are incapable of standing up to even a pair of Demon Barons!"

"Have you heard that Mephisto was actually the one leading the Battle Brothers?" Jason asks. "I bet he used his undead to help corral and sweep away the Crocodiles' defenses."

"Whatever the method, that attack left us shaken." Kumi mutters. "Perhaps King Ghidorah will even speak to you regarding... mm. It would be best if I allow him to say what he wishes."

Invisible question marks pop up above Jason's head, but he doesn't press the issue.

Kumi leads him down winding streets and into an increasingly more developed area. Before long, Jason gets the impression he's stepped into a 20th century city from Earth!

While there aren't any vehicles on the road, the foot traffic increases substantially, as does the diversity of the species present. Despite the Lizardmen outnumbering the other species, it becomes a ratio of about half the residents being lizards while the other half are a mixture of any other magical species.

Jason spots a large but humble-looking palace up ahead. Large due to its size, but humble due to its fairly simple appearance, lacking gold ornaments or any fancy architectural traits. It appears almost Roman in design, with a mixture of some Greek elements, but beyond that, it stands out due to the intricate carvings of Lizardmen kings on its exterior walls.

"Every Lizard Liege rules for one thousand years." Kumi explains, gesturing at the wall. "Some of them are male, and some female. King Ghidorah has already ruled for nearly a thousand years, so he has been looking for a successor for quite a while. With Kar gone, he has started looking elsewhere, but it will take time to find someone of appropriate status for the title."

"What are the requirements to become a Lizard Liege?" Jason asks respectfully.

"The requirements are loose." Kumi answers. "But traditionally, one must be deeply respected by their people. We don't hold elections or any of that human nonsense, but we do like to choose rulers who will be wise and fair."

"Why was Kar chosen?" Jason asks. "He was a Crocodile, so...?"

"The Lizard Liege is almost always a lizard, but there have been exceptions." Kumi says with deep reverence in her eyes. "Kar was the last of the Crocodiles. He was blessed with the Sphinx's power. We thought he would become the first true Monster Deity. An entity capable of besting even the most fearsome Demon Emperors. But... alas."

"Kar *was* that strong." Jason murmurs. "It wasn't his fault he lost the battle. His enemies used cheap tricks to weaken him. Mephisto was a coward. He *is* a coward."

"Hopefully he will soon die." Rebecca says, chiming in for the first time in a while. "Monster Queen Blinker is well equipped to obliterate his existence, so long as she can find him."

After arriving at the Lizard Liege's palace, Kumi pauses outside.

"This is far as I can take you, Wordsmith. It would be inappropriate for me to continue any further. Lady Rebecca will know the rest of the way."

Rebecca nods. "Thank you for walking us this far, Miss Kumi."

"Have a great day!" Jason says.

Kumi departs, leaving Jason and Rebecca alone outside the modest Lizard Palace. Jason admires the inner gardens, as well as the detailed carvings of previous Lizard Lieges. Some of them appear quite ostentatious. To his surprise, there appears to be slightly more female Lieges than males.

"Lizards are actually matriarchal or patriarchal depending on who their current Liege is." Rebecca explains. "They're extremely flexible on matters of sexuality. In fact, they can even undergo Sequential Hermaphroditism under certain conditions if their population has begun leaning too heavily in the direction of one gender or the other."

"Huh. Neat." Jason mutters.

Jason and Rebecca head past several layers of Lizard Guards, all of whom immediately recognize Rebecca and Jason, then flag them through. It doesn't take long before they enter the Royal Palace, where a beautiful lizard woman walks up to the two. Wearing a delicate pink sundress to accentuate her curves, the pretty pink lizard lady sashays over and winks at Jason.

"You must be the Wordsmith! How lovely to meet you, kyargh! I am Queen Mythra, wife to King Ghidorah. I'll bet you're here to say hello to my husband!"

Jason nods. "Nice to meet you, Lady Mythra. I didn't expect to run into such a beautiful lizard-woman while I was visiting, but this is a pleasant surprise!"

"Aww! So polite, but I'm getting on in years!" Mythra lightly laughs. "Of course, if you have free time, I wouldn't mind sitting down and having a lovely chat with a handsome young boy like you."

She turns her attention to Rebecca.

"Ah, and so good to see you as well, Rebecca! Thank you for guiding the Wordsmith here."

"You should thank your guards. That Kumi is well-trained, especially in etiquette." Rebecca praises.

"I'll have to thank her myself." Mythra says. "Now, come along. Follow me and I'll take you to see my husband. He's not been doing so well these days..."

The human and Cybernite fall into step on Mythra's right and left as she leads them into the palace, past dozens of servants and other personnel, all stationed for the purpose of assisting the Lizard Lieges.

Jason blinks. "Ghidorah isn't doing well? Is he sick?"

Mythra's smile slips. "Well. Sick, yes. But not of a disease or old age. It's a sickness of the heart. You will see."

After walking for a quarter of a mile down various functional and prettily decorated hallways, the group of three finally reach a quiet, private inner chamber. Mythra hesitates at the door, causing Jason to notice a pang of distress on her face. She eventually pushes the door open to reveal a darkened bedroom.

"Love? I've brought some guests." Mythra says. "It's the Wordsmith and Lady Rebecca."

Jason glances around the dim room. With the blinds closed, only a smidgen of light illuminates the interior, much of it coming from the hallway. Mythra flicks a switch, causing some candles to ignite through a magical means. When the room brightens, Jason makes out a figure laying on his back in a bed.

The once dominating King Ghidorah slowly blinks his eyes open. As the trio approaches, Jason's thoughts turn to shock as he realizes the Lizard Liege appears quite frail!

Ghidorah takes small, shallow breaths. His scales drip with moisture, though for what reason, Jason's can't exactly fathom. Lizards don't sweat, after all...

"Ohh... the Wordsmith, yes... that Jason boy..." King Ghidorah says, his voice weak and faint.

Jason glances at Rebecca. Unlike him, she doesn't appear surprised by this situation.

Mythra walks over to her husband's side. She gently takes his claws in hers and smiles sweetly. "Do you have the energy to talk with our guests a bit?"

"Of... of course..." Ghidorah says hesitantly, though his frail appearance says otherwise. "It's good you came, Jason Hiro. Graugh! I was... beginning... to think you never would."

Humanity's Hero pales at Ghidorah's words. "What's wrong? Why are you so ill? **Inspect.**"

Jason fires off a Word of Power. He searches the king for abnormalities, but he finds that Ghidorah's body is in perfectly fine condition.

Instead, it's his soul that appears weak and intangible!

"Don't... worry about me..." Ghidorah says slowly. "There's nothing you can do. This... this condition... oh, it is because of my guilt. My failure..."

Jason walks over to the opposite side of Ghidorah's bed while Rebecca remains at the doorway.

"What failure?" Jason asks.

"The promise." Ghidorah says, slowly blinking his sagging eyes. "My brother. I promised him... in his final breath. I promised him I would bring back the Crocodiles. I promised him... I promised him! But I failed. Now, they are all dead. All dead! Aaaooo..."

Mythra looks at the Wordsmith with saddened eyes.

"Ghidorah's blood-brother was Lord Gorgorath of the Crocodiles. Second in line to the Crocodile Throne. When the Battle Brothers came and butchered his people, Gorgorath escaped and crawled thirty miles to our lands. He dragged his half-paralyzed body along while fighting off the creatures attracted to his blood. The trail of red behind him seemed unending..."

She pauses.

"When we discovered Gorgorath, we learned of the tragedy that had befallen the Crocodiles. But it was too late to save anyone. As he hung at death's door, Gorgorath begged my husband, his brother, to make a promise, to swear a vow."

"But what... a failure... I was..." Ghidorah whispers, with tears welling up in his eyes. "I could not bring them back. I was not there for Kar's final moments! He died alone, without me! Now the Crocodiles are all extinct... so... I deserve death!"

Jason's chest tightens. His own guilt over Kar's death, coupled with the emotions radiating from King Ghidorah, amplify tenfold.

"It wasn't your fault." Jason says through gritted teeth. "It was mine! You can't blame yourself! I am the Wordsmith! I should have been there to protect my best friend!"

"You have... so much on your plate." Ghidorah says, reaching out to touch Jason's hand. "Saving humanity. Building up defenses. You cannot be everywhere at once. But

me... my duties are few. I should have been there. I knew the demons would attack. I should have brought my people to fight! But I didn't... and now the Crocodile Heritage has been lost..."

The Wordsmith's brow knots itself in consternation. He frowns at the Lizard King.

"Is... is there some way I can help? The Crocodiles can still live on through Kar's children!"

Ghidorah's eyes slowly close and open. He blinks wearily, as if trying to think.

"Ohh... I do not know. What does it matter anymore? The Crocodilian Ancestral Memories are gone. Only Kar alone possessed them. But... if I could make... one last request... in my final hours..."

"One last request?" Jason asks. "Nonsense. I can heal you. I can bring you back! Don't give up while your people still need you!"

Ghidorah seems not to hear Jason's words. His eyes blink more slowly than ever.

"The hatchlings. Lord Kar's hatchlings. Raise them... well. Protect them. Let them multiply. Flourish. Bring back the Crocodiles... they will not be as they were. But perhaps... in time... they can become something new. Alas, I do not... deserve the right... to watch their return."

Jason, sensing Ghidorah's imminent death and weakening spirit, quickly speaks several Words of Power.

"Heal! Restore! Rejuvenate! Revitalize!"

He senses the flow of his magic entering Ghidorah's form, but to his despair, the old reptile does not strengthen in the slightest.

"I don't understand!" Jason exclaims. "Why can't I save you?"

"As I told you before." Mythra says quietly. "My husband suffers from a loss of spirit. His heart is broken. He no longer has the will to live. We're lucky he has held on this long."

Ghidorah faintly smiles at Jason.

"Wordsmith. Promise... me. Promise me. Promise me that you will protect Kar's children. Promise me that... you will raise them... to become fine Crocodiles... that you will help them flourish once again."

Jason clenches his teeth. "I..."

"Please." Ghidorah whispers, leaning toward Jason. "I beg of you. Do for the Crocodiles what I could not. Bring... bring them back! Give them the respect they deserve!"

Jason still hesitates. He wishes to save Ghidorah, to rejuvenate his soul. But, after seeing the look of pleading on Ghidorah's face, he relents. Jason relaxes his posture and nods.

"...Alright. I promise. I'll bring back the Crocodiles. I'll restore them to their former numbers and beyond. I'll fulfill the promise you made to your brother."

Ghidorah smiles, though the expression appears strained.

"Good. Good lad. Thank... thank you. From... the bottom of... of my heart... thank..."

Ghidorah blinks his weary eyes.

He blinks them again.

Then, they close for the final time. His body goes still.

Jason stares silently at the Lizard King, a figure he never particularly knew well, yet one who he shared a bond through their close friend, Kar.

When Jason looks up at Lady Mythra, he sees no tears in her eyes. Only a calm, quiet acceptance.

"I knew this day would come soon." Mythra says softly, reaching down to caress her husband's eternally sleeping face. "Thank you. He held on as long as he could for your arrival. You gave him the closure he needed. Now he can rest peacefully in the Great Beyond."

Jason looks at Rebecca.

"You knew this would happen?"

Rebecca shrugs. "I knew Ghidorah's condition was poor. I did not imagine it had declined to this level. It is a stroke of Luck that you came here in time. Or perhaps it was Fate."

"Luck. Fate." Jason mutters, as he touches Ghidorah's unmoving claw. "Whatever the case, I've made a promise. And unlike with Kar... I won't fail this time."

Jason says his goodbyes to Lady Mythra. He and Rebecca depart.

As they leave, Rebecca touches Jason's arm.

"Don't blame yourself. It's your job now to revive the Crocodiles, but it wasn't before. Like Ghidorah said, you cannot be everywhere at all times. You must prioritize the things that matter most."

Jason nods. But at the same time, his expression steels.

"I can't be everywhere at once, huh?"

A strange glint appears in his eyes.

"I wonder if... that's *truly* the case."

Part 464: Marie's Grand Plan

Back inside the Remnant Oasis's primary research facility.

Marie Becker and Phoebe Hiro wait until Jason has left with Rebecca. After the other two depart, Phoebe turns to look at the eccentric scientist-lady.

"So! Miss Becker. Kar used to talk about you all the time. Sorry it took us so long to meet."

"It's fine." Marie says, smiling warmly. "I have been keeping an eye on you for quite a while, Miss Hiro. You have quite the impressive list of accomplishments. Certainly more than that husband of yours."

Phoebe's eye twitches. "No offense, but I would prefer if you didn't insult Jason. Especially when he's not around."

"It's not an insult to him, but a compliment to you." Marie counters. "Imagine a normal human woman of no noteworthy background outperforming her Hero husband. It's quite praiseworthy, don't you think?"

"I... I don't think so at all." Phoebe says, shifting on her feet uncomfortably. "Besides. I possessed Solomon's Crown for a long time. I'm not like you, a self-taught genius. I cheated."

"Jason also had the Crown. And for longer than you!" Marie points out. "Yet he still comes up... lacking. It's not the access to knowledge that forms a genius, but how they use that information. Why, even when I was a teenager, I had many classmates who sat around, lazily wasting their time in school, college, and eventually university. Perhaps they couldn't download the entire summary of human knowledge into their brains, but even if they could, I believe they would have wasted their potential."

A momentary pause follows as Phoebe rubs her arm.

"Do you regret it? Not having access to Solomon's Crown, I mean?"

"It would have assisted me greatly." Marie acknowledges. "But at this point in my life, donning that Crown would be a slap across my face. Look at what I accomplished without it! Perhaps I might even be more intelligent than the Knowledge Seeker himself... who can say?"

"From what I gather, you were Humanity's Greatest Inventor." Phoebe says. "You singlehandedly kept the Volgrim at bay for decades and decades."

"I did. And it still wasn't enough." Marie says, sighing to herself. "Sometimes, no matter how incredible you are, an obstacle will eventually appear that you cannot overcome..."

The two nod together about their shared thoughts. Then Marie gestures toward the hallway leading into her primary facility.

"Walk with me."

She and Phoebe head out of the entryway. Phoebe gets the shock of her life as she enters the deeper, more secure areas, causing her eyes to sparkle with glee. While Jason may have been visibly shocked by the level of technology on display, Phoebe becomes a little overwhelmed. Her eyes jump erratically from one pane-glass room to another. She gazes with excitement at various weapons, tools, gadgets, and other pieces of High Technology far beyond the ones she's made in her free time.

"Incredible! Wow!" Phoebe squeals like a little girl. "You can use Dilithium in that way?! And what sorts of Transducers are those?"

Marie smiles again. She doesn't look down on Phoebe like she did with Jason, but instead enjoys a slight feeling of superiority while also getting to treat Phoebe in the way an old mentor might treat a potential protege.

"Your husband isn't capable of appreciating the full extent of what the Remnant Oasis can offer. But then again, he grew up in an era where he watched thousands of science fiction movies. You, on the other hand, lived during an era well before technology became widespread. It isn't even in your mental space to imagine some of the potential technology can have on a mass scale."

Phoebe nods along absentmindedly to Marie's words. "It's shocking how... how comprehensive the technology in the Oasis is! Rebecca was showing me the various biospheres you maintained to continue breeding indigenous Earth species, as well as some advanced shielding and stealth technology you use to suppress the Oasis's presence from space."

"Currently, the Volgrim are the only space-dwelling people in the Milky Way, but that could change at any point in the future." Marie says, her smile fading ever so slightly.

Phoebe doesn't notice due to her preoccupation with the research facility's sights and wonders. "The protections I've placed on this facility are simply my attempt to anticipate future threats and make myself less visible to them."

Phoebe turns back to the Head Scientist. "So what exactly is your goal here, then? Are you working for the Volgrim? For yourself? I've always wondered why you let humanity rot under demonkind's thumb. Surely you must have a bigger purpose..."

"It's complicated." Marie says flatly. "But also simpler than you think. My ultimate goal is to protect our existence. Not just mine, or my Cybernites. Not just humanity... but the Volgrim, the Demons, and the others too. Because the Threat is always out there. Our petty wars mean little in the Cosmic Scale. If we don't sort out our differences, we'll become fodder for the biggest fish in the pond."

Phoebe blinks twice, not quite understanding Marie, yet getting the distinct impression Marie won't be holding much back in their conversation.

"What is the Threat, then?" Phoebe asks.

Marie doesn't directly answer her question. Instead, the scientist responds with a question of her own.

"Do you know what my technological specialty is, Miss Hiro?"

"I... don't know you well at all." Phoebe says hesitantly. "And frankly, I don't know what you're asking. Specialty? As in...?"

"I was fairly certain you hadn't spoken with Technopaths on any deep level." Marie remarks. "Guess that confirms my suspicions. You see, in Technopath culture, every individual has a Technological Specialty. Most Technopaths have plenty of general knowledge, but 'technology' as a whole is an extremely broad topic, and a society of generalists will not be able to improve as quickly as a society with lots of specialists. So, the vast majority of Technopaths choose to specialize in one or two specific fields. For example, Warp Drive Physics, Quantum Mechanics, Modularity, Armor Improvement, Battery Efficiency, and so on."

She pauses.

"Now, given this information, what field do you think I specialize in?"

Phoebe glances around the lab for a moment.

"Robotics?"

"Nope. Well, I certainly have accomplishments in that field, but in fact, my technological specialty is... Miniaturization."

"Oh?" Phoebe replies. "You shrink things down?"

"That's right. Take a look over here." Marie says, walking Phoebe to a nearby storage room. A label rests on its heavy metal door, one which reads 'Head Researcher's Storage Unit 001.'

Marie opens the door to the seemingly nondescript storage unit, revealing a wall of neatly organized tools, gadgets, and goodies, all made from exotic technology. Phoebe finds it hard to focus on any one specific item, since they all appear so futuristic and dazzling. Not only are there rows of highly advanced power armor stretching off half a mile into the distance, but an entire shelf of electronic eyeballs that look like they were made to replace human eyes. The room continues for so long that it almost seems as if it might wrap all the way around the planet.

The Head Scientist picks up a small wristwatch-looking device and holds it up in front of Phoebe's face to grab her attention.

"You see this? This is a warp drive, shrunk down to grant a human the power of traveling through space at post-relativistic speeds."

"A warp drive?!" Phoebe exclaims. "But... but how?"

"You cannot use it. No human can." Marie explains. "Only an enhanced human. A Cybernite. Your body would explode the instant you activated it. I created it and a few other devices to ensure that if I ever left Earth, but my ship was destroyed, I wouldn't be trapped in interstellar space for the rest of eternity. Trust me. There are fates worse than death, and that would be one of them."

Marie gently places the Compact Warp Drive back on the table, then holds up a seemingly ordinary ring with a green emerald nestled in its top.

"What trick do you suppose this ring holds?" Marie asks.

Phoebe raises her eyebrow. After a few seconds of deliberation, she shrugs.

"Does it shoot a laser?"

Marie slowly blinks. "Lucky guess. Yes. This is a self-defense device I created to increase my arsenal whenever I leave the Remnant Oasis. I don't leave often, but when I do, I take care to make sure I'm always prepared for anything. This ring can fire a bolt of

energy capable of demolecularizing even a 6th-Level Psion instantly. The rate of fire isn't high, but it's intended to be a quick surprise, not a weapon for extended engagements."

Marie places the ring back on the table. She continues showing off a few more gadgets, each of which surprises Phoebe just as much as the one before it.

After concluding, Marie stands up straight and crosses her arms.

"My specialization is Miniaturization. Why do you suppose I chose this field in particular to focus on?"

"I can think of a few reasons." Phoebe says. "You seem to value self-preservation and your own life a great deal. Smaller devices don't take as many resources to create, and since you live underneath a dead planet's crust, that probably matters a lot to you. Aside from that, you seem to like the aesthetics of tiny devices too...?"

"Aesthetics are hardly a reason." Marie snorts. "Simply put, miniaturization has a tremendous number of upsides, as well as an equal number of limitations. Physics is a field of science with extremely strict rules, rules which cannot easily be bent. In order to miniaturize large tech and compress it into a human-sized form factor, I have to make an incalculable number of compromises. The biggest net benefit is a near-100% reduction in energy costs. A wrist-worn Warp Drive barely requires a single gram of Trifrancium to fling me across the cosmos. But the downside is, it takes decades, even centuries of research to successfully miniaturize existing tech. Even then, it's often only partially workable and still requires many iterations to become cost effective. That's why miniaturization is one of the least-studied fields of technology by the Volgrim."

Phoebe gazes at Marie in surprise. "The Technopaths don't focus on miniaturization? Surely, in an empire of trillions..."

"There are a few. But miniaturization is not a field one can 'dabble' in. There are two, perhaps three 'High Technopaths' who can miniaturize as effectively as me. Even then, there are so many untouched fields of technology that have yet to be studied that I have many unique paths I can 'branch off' into. For example, I am the *only* person who has properly miniaturized warp drive travel. I've sold a few of my wristbands to certain high-ranking Volgrim, but it would take their Technopath specialists tens of millennia before they reverse engineered the devices. Not that they have the time to bother, what with the Plague bearing down on them..."

Marie chuckles.

"Heh. In any case, I'm making a point here. I specialize in a certain field and I am *very* good at what I do. But how about you, Miss Hiro? Do you have a specialty?"

Phoebe squeezes her hands together. "I... I hadn't given it much thought until now, Miss Becker. I guess I simply... dabble."

"You dabble." Marie repeats, her tone dry. "I guessed as much. It's not your fault. You've never thought much about these things because you only invent things to try and help out humanity's ever-changing political and military situation. You haven't had time to sit and think about your future plans. It's fine for now, while you're just starting out, but it will come back to haunt you in the future."

Phoebe knits her brow. She chews her lower lip thoughtfully while her eyes become slightly glazed.

"Do... do you have any idea what I should focus on?"

"You're a smart woman." Marie says. "Not as brilliant as me, but nobody is. If I tell you what to do, I'll only hurt your future potential. It's much better if you think about what sort of technology 'calls' out to you. But I do have a few... recommendations."

Marie waves her hand. Suddenly, as if by magic, a familiar device appears in her palm, a circular gadget with long straps hanging out of its sides and dangling between her fingers.

Phoebe's eyes pop open. "A T-REX! How did you...?"

"How did I get access to one of your piddly little nano-armor modules?" Marie asks. "Tarus II's security is shoddy. I could stroll into your midst and kill the lot of you without ever being detected. You *really* need to upgrade your detection capabilities. Even for primitives, it's embarrassing."

She rolls her eyes.

"Anyway. This cute little gadget is an adequate, if imperfect, nano-armor conjuration module. I particularly appreciate how you chose to 'link' the nanites together to harden the armor's composition. Simple and effective, if a bit clumsy. Going by the detail you put into this 'T-REX,' have you considered investing yourself into the field of nanotechnology?"

"Isn't that the same as what you do?" Phoebe asks.

"By no means. I miniaturize existing technology. Nanotechnology is entirely different. You would build *new* devices using nanites. You could make configurable devices that change their shape at will. Armor capable of shifting between multiple viable forms. Nanite-based technology is inherently less powerful at specific tasks, but it makes up for this flaw through customization and versatility. You won't be able to make a Compact Warp Drive with nanites, but you could create a surprisingly robust military loadout for all your soldiers at an individual level. There are plenty of specialists in nanotechnology among my Cybernites, as well as among the Volgrim Empire. I could refer you to them, if this field interests you."

Phoebe frowns even more deeply than before.

"It does interest me. But... I don't know. I'd want to talk to Jason before committing to something as important as this."

Marie scoffs. "Your dependency on a man is your greatest limitation. Take it from me. Men are *stupid idiot pigs*. They'll cheat on you and leave you behind without a moment's warning. I certainly wouldn't entrust my future plans to a foolish-"

"I talk to my husband about everything." Phoebe interrupts politely. "I'm sorry you've had bad luck with men, Miss Becker. But I cherish my time with Jason, and I adore him. Even when we disagree, we respect each other. I would never throw that away willingly."

Marie bites back the rest of what she was going to say. "Fine. Suit yourself. Another field you might consider is Mechanized Warfare. I saw the 'spider-mechs' you wielded during Stormbringer. Slow, clumsy, and ultimately ineffective, but they did provide you with certain useful moments of contact with the enemy forces. And your 'Planetwalkers,' they were extremely effective in dealing with the demons... though I fear that if you were to face a more *competent* enemy they would not last long."

"Mechs are indeed quite useful..." Phoebe says noncommittally. "I'm just not sure, though."

"There are plenty of other options available to you." Marie says. "You've dabbled in dozens of fields. Now, you need only narrow your interest to one or two fields to start your journey on the path of mastering them. Even better, those two fields should complement each other. For example, Miniaturization and Nanotechnology can go hand in hand. Mechanized Warfare and Long Ranged Firepower are also wonderful companions. Warp Travel and Starship design..."

Phoebe suddenly looks at Marie.

"Well, actually, while we're on that subject, I had an idea I wanted to run past you. I've been looking for someone to talk to about this, but..."

"But nobody can keep up with you?" Marie asks.

"Yes! Exactly." Phoebe answers. "Anyway, so I had this idea for a new type of Warp technology. I've been thinking that the Volgrim's dependence on Dilithium and Trifrancium is incredibly unfortunate. Especially the latter, as it's so rare. Wouldn't it be nice if we could travel from star to star at post-relativistic speeds without requiring exotic fuels?"

Marie snorts. "Of course. But how would you accomplish such a feat? Synthesizing an exotic fuel would require putting in more energy than you'd gain. It's a basic law of thermodynamics."

"Oh, I know that much!" Phoebe laughs. "But, well, do you have something I can draw on? I'll whip you up a model real quick."

Marie shrugs. She pulls out a brain-scanning device that causes Phoebe's eyes to light up in delight. The Wordsmith's Wife quickly puts it on and learns how to funnel her thoughts actively inside of it, then she proceeds to summon a hazy projection of a strange starship design Marie has never seen before.

A small, long, slender ship levitates in front of a supermassive Yellow Giant star. As it hovers there, its front 'opens up' and giant golen sails begin to unfurl.

"I call this a Solar Sail Craft." Phoebe explains. "It functions by absorbing the energy from a star until it reaches a critical saturation of energy, then it ignites all of its fuel and instantly travels to its destination in a single second! Any distance, just one second! It can cross ten lightyears or ten thousand!"

Marie doesn't look impressed. "It's... it's an alternative. But this craft would require years to fill up its reserves. Decades, centuries, even."

"Possibly thousands of years. And the greater the distance you want to travel, the more solar energy it would need to accumulate before it launched." Phoebe acknowledges.

"There's another problem." Marie says. "Anything biological inside the Solar Sail Craft would be instantly obliterated when the vessel launched. It doesn't travel at post-

relativistic speeds, but post-temporal speeds. Any humans, Volgrim, or whatever that were inside would instantaneously vaporize and vanish. It's useless as a travel method."

Phoebe's eyes twinkle. "But Marie, who said these would be used to transport passengers?"

"Huh?"

Marie blinks twice. For once, she appears visibly stumped.

"What do you mean? This vessel would be... cargo only?"

Phoebe nods. "That's right. And as for having to wait tens of years or thousands... what if you simply built a lot of them? Hundreds of thousands? All pointed at different areas, orbiting around different stars, each launching at set intervals? You could make an extremely fast and efficient goods-transportation system that didn't require any exotic materials to build or maintain."

Several seconds pass.

Marie stares at the young woman with a sudden look of interest.

"That is... a novel concept. It seems I had a blind spot in my own base of knowledge. I've always fixated on needing to send *people* around. I would have immediately rejected the idea of Solar Sails if they came to me, but you... you simply came up with a way to make them useful in a specific niche. If the Volgrim had access to Solar Sails, they wouldn't need to spent a hundredth the amount of Dilithium and Trifrancium they currently do on non-personnel transfers. This would allow them to divert all that energy to much more broadly useful areas!"

For the first time in ages, Marie does not force a smile, or squeeze out a polite smile, but instead grins giddily. She exposes her teeth and smiles with the force of a child who has just devoured an entire jar of cookies while her parents weren't looking!

She becomes so happy that starlight practically radiates from her eyes.

"Truly impressive! I take back everything I told you before, Phoebe Hiro. Perhaps you should NOT specialize at all! You keep dabbling and jumping to whatever field you want. You've just imagined an invention that could upend our galactic society as we know it, and you've only been at this work for six years! I cannot wait to see what you will accomplish next!"

The sudden praise from her 'superior' makes Phoebe blush. "It- it wasn't much at all, Miss Becker."

"Come with me!" Marie snaps. "I need to show you something important."

Phoebe pauses. Her happy embarrassment quickly fades as she sees the seriousness in Marie's eyes.

"Something important? Well..."

She hardly gets a moment to think. Marie roughly grabs her by the wrist and drags her deeper, deeper into the Head Researcher's Storage Unit.

Phoebe stumbles along behind Marie, shocked by her overwhelming strength. Phoebe feels as if she were a toddler being yanked around by a gorilla. Marie drags her past so many exotic miniaturized technologies that her head begins to spin.

"Miss Becker, I-"

"We're here." Marie says, stopping abruptly.

She releases Phoebe, then points to a gigantic table standing in the center of a large, open area of the storage. On this table, a huge glass dome rests atop a beautiful, shining city made of pure-white tiles and bricks. Towers and spires stick up at random, while smaller apartments only stand ten and twenty stories tall, but each clearly possesses room for hundreds of people to live.

"Wow." Phoebe says, perhaps involuntarily. "This is a beautiful model city."

"It's a to-scale replica of a planned project of mine." Marie says, crossing her arms. "The Milky Way's ultimate defensive grid. A temporal paradox made manifest in the physical realm. Accessible through any quantum node in any anomalous temporal region. I call it... the Exterior."

Phoebe frowns. "The Exterior? So it sits 'outside' something?"

"Outside our concept of Normalspace." Marie explains. Think of it like a protective membrane which wraps around the Milky Way. The Kolvaxians likely arrived from another galaxy. They were easily able to enter our 'airspace' because we had no way to detect or stop them."

Phoebe stares at the beautiful miniature city with a look of interest.

"How big... exactly... would a 'membrane' which wraps around the entire galaxy even *be*? I feel like I'm missing something important."

"It would be more of a figurative Membrane." Marie explains. Like an invisible detection field that would alert us to any and all intrusions. But it doesn't matter. I cannot see how to break the Temporal Wall. It's too sturdy. I've tried for over 50,000 years and never succeeded. I am even beginning to think it might not be possible."

"Why did you want to show me this, then?" Phoebe asks.

Marie glances at her. Then, she looks away.

A few moments pass.

"...Never mind." Marie says quietly. "I thought you'd understand if I explained. I can't go into specifics. Maybe in the future, I will. For now, rest assured... I am doing everything in my power to protect our fragile galaxy. But even I may fail. I am not a God. I am far from omnipotent."

"Nobody has that power. Nor should they." Phoebe says quietly.

The two women leave the funny table behind and resume their tour of Marie's facility.

All the while, the beautiful, shimmering, miniature city remains in the same place as ever...

Part 465: Wordsmith's Ascension

After Phoebe and Marie chat for a few hours, she eventually departs the Head Researcher's research facility. Phoebe meets up with Jason and Rebecca, only to find that her husband appears... a little glum.

"Jason? Is everything okay?" Phoebe asks.

The Wordsmith hugs his wife and offers a weak smile.

"I want to see the Monster King. Ghidorah. He... died. While I was visiting him. I think he held on only long enough for me to say my goodbyes..."

Rebecca stands silently while Jason takes a few minutes to fill his wife in on what happened. After he concludes, she nods.

"I see. That's a shame. He seemed like a good ruler. What will the Lizardmen do now that their King has fallen?"

"For now, Queen Mythra will act as the temporary ruler of her people." Rebecca explains. "Ghidorah's passing was not entirely unexpected, but its abruptness will surely catch his people off their guard. From what I understand, there are a few Lizard Nobles in a position to assume power, but they will need to compete to show they are the proper candidates for the role."

Jason nods, but mostly stops caring about the details of who the Lizards appoint their future ruler. "I see. Well, in any case, I made a promise to Ghidorah. I promised to restore the Crocodiles to power. To bring back their numbers and make them prolific once more. I'll need to think about that once I have some free time."

"You and Phoebe can return to Tarus II at your leisure." Rebecca says. "I will join you there in a few days. I have already sent a summons to the other 299 designated Cybernites who will be working with you on your world. We do need to deal with some miscellaneous matters first. Of course, if you want, you can continue sightseeing at our Oasis."

Jason shakes his head. "I don't think we will. I need to get back home."

"Yeah." Phoebe agrees. "I have a lot on my mind..."

"Well alright then!" Rebecca says. "I'll meet up with you two later. Do you need me to show you back to the Teleportation Transmitter, or...?"

"We can return through our own means." Jason answers.

He and Phoebe wave politely to Rebecca. She waves back, then turns on her heel and strides away.

After she departs, Jason glances at his wife. "Everything go well with Marie? I hope she didn't bully you."

Phoebe looks away. She chews on her lower lip for a moment, then hesitantly reaches into her pocket to pull out a small marble-sized cube.

"Marie gave me a parting gift." Phoebe says slowly. "It's... a Datacube. According to her, it's a special backup of all but her most highly classified research. She said she wanted me to have it... just in case."

"Just in case *what*?" Jason asks, feeling some suspicion.

"In case the 'worst' comes to pass." Phoebe says with a shrug. "Marie explained that she views me as a... a contingency plan, I guess. I think I impressed her?"

Phoebe pockets the small cube. As she does, Jason wraps his arm over her shoulder.

"Yeah. You ARE pretty brilliant, honey. That's just one of the reasons I love you."

"Among what other ones?" Phoebe probes.

"Your hot body and cute ass."

"Mhm."

Jason clears his throat. "**Return.**"

He and Phoebe vanish from the spot.

When they reappear, Phoebe blinks, slightly confused.

"Hm? Did you run out of mana? Why didn't you bring us back to Tarus II?"

She and Jason find themselves standing inside a barren, nondescript, utterly desolate hallway in the Labyrinth. With Hell being as completely nonsensical in its layout as ever, she hasn't a clue how near or far from the Core they are.

"I'm not in a rush." Jason says quietly. "Let's walk and talk. I have a... a lot on my mind."

"That's a first." Phoebe jokes, elbowing his ribs.

Jason doesn't smile.

"I've screwed up so much, honey. So much. Our daughter died because of me. What if our son does too? I can't keep being so flippant and lazy."

Phoebe sobers up her expression. She realizes Jason isn't kidding around like he usually does.

"You can't blame yourself like that. Daisy's death-"

"It was entirely my fault." Jason says. "Entirely. Without question. I could have prevented it. I wasted six years. I sat around, resting on my laurels, while the demons planned Operation Stormbringer. Hope was... he wasn't exactly doing *good* things in the Labyrinth. He was out killing demons, antagonizing them, making them fear us enough to want to launch an attack... but at least he was doing *something*. I was useless."

For once, Phoebe doesn't rush to comfort Jason's worries. She falls silent for a moment, then nods.

"Yeah. I suppose you could have worked harder. Especially as you had Solomon's Crown at the time."

"Exactly." Jason says, steeling his voice. "I could have done more. I *should have* done more. And from now on... I will not sit back and let others use me as they want. I have to be more proactive in dealing with my enemies... as well as my friends."

Jason starts walking down the hallway. He takes Phoebe's hand in his, and the two of them walk side by side. Their pace is slow, casual. They don't rush to head back to the Core. If they were in a hurry, they could simply teleport back to Tarus II and skip the whole journey.

For them, this walk is about privacy. Nothing more, and nothing else.

"So what are you planning to do?" Phoebe asks. "You sound as if you have a plan."

"Well. I've been talking to Fiona about some things." Jason says. "And... I think... I think I'm going to leave for a while."

"Huh?" Phoebe grunts, glancing at him in bewilderment. "What? Leave?! Where are you going?"

"Not far." Jason says. "You'll be able to contact me at any point. In fact, I'll still sort of be 'around' Tarus II."

Jason's cryptic words cause several invisible question marks to pop up over Phoebe's head.

"I... I'm so confused." Phoebe grunts.

Jason nods. "**Materialize.**"

With a Word of Power, he summons Fiona's projection to the physical realm. The Wordsmith's 'second wife' materializes on his left, while Phoebe remains on his right.

"We're going to make a new realm." Fiona says, immediately launching into an explanation. "A Special Environment, if you will. A Folded Space between realities. Like Heaven, Hell, and the Cosmic Realm."

"Oh!" Phoebe says, mildly surprised. "So a new dimension adjacent to Tarus II?"

"Perhaps..." Jason says hesitantly. "I am worried though. Psions seem more than a little capable of detecting Folded Spaces. I think I'll anchor it somewhere else. Somewhere they won't be able to easily detect it. But I'll put a secret entrance to it on Tarus II. As long as the entrance remains intact, anyone can come and go easily."

"This realm will be a special one, for sure." Fiona continues. "Jason's going to use it himself for a while. It will feature a TDR that might surprise you."

"A Time Dilation Ratio... of what level?" Phoebe asks.

"I don't know what my Wordsmithing is capable of." Jason says flatly. "But the higher, the better. I intend to go in there for quite a while. *Quite* a long time."

Phoebe falls silent for several seconds, digesting her husband's words.

"How long exactly?"

"I don't know." Jason says. "Years, if I can help it. And I intend to enter as soon as possible."

"This is all so sudden." Phoebe retorts. "What about that big public speech?! You and Neil are supposed to have a public forum where you try convincing people to follow you!"

"I'm not good at speeches." Jason says. "I'm going to leave that up to you."

"Jason..." Phoebe says, her voice quiet. "Don't you think this is a bit irresponsible? I don't want to be rude, but, Hope and Neil are going to have a massive advantage over you."

Hope has, what, a thousand artifacts now? How many did you even get from Marie?"

"None." Jason says. "I spoke to one of the Heroes. Madam Mildred. She made me realize that I've completely forsaken my own strengths as a Hero. I can do better. I *must* do better. Relying on artifacts to enhance my strength is shameful. I won't walk the same path as Hope."

He smiles at Phoebe.

"Besides. Everyone loves you. If it's you giving that speech, I know you'll convince plenty of people to stay on our side."

Phoebe sighs. She shakes her head and looks away.

"They need you, Jason. I'm a friend to everyone, yes. But people don't need a 'friend' in these times. They need a source of security and stability. They need a leader. They need you."

"They won't have me." Jason says quietly. "Not for a while. I'll say this much... Hope is a psychopath who killed forty-five billion Volgrim. But he's also competent. He has the right to be respected. It wasn't Hope who screwed humanity over during Stormbringer. He had been captured by Gressil and was suffering terrible torture. You saw the state he was in when we found him. Gressil amputated all of his limbs. *All of them*. I should have been the one to protect humanity, but I was incompetent, and I failed. If everyone chooses Hope, maybe they're right to do so. He does have Excalibur, the Dominion Rod, and Solomon's Crown. He'll surely do a good job."

"Hope and Neil are both warmongers." Fiona warns. "I know for a fact Neil will exclude demons from entering Maiura. He isn't only going to try and empower humanity, but will also try to make a move on his enemies. Jason, if you don't figure out a solution, the Milky Way is going to have a second war, one that will weaken us all and make us more susceptible to the Plague."

"Not to mention kill a lot of demons." Jason says with a nod. "I know. I'm aware. But right now, I am not capable of solving this problem. Not perfectly, not properly, and not in a way that will satisfy all parties."

Jason squeezes Fiona's ethereal neck, making light contact with her half-physical form. He smiles at her warmly.

"It's going to be a bit tricky. But you and me, we'll figure this out."

Then he turns to Phoebe.

"You'll be in charge of Tarus II during my absence. But don't worry. I'll be gone, yet still available. I'll be distant, yet near. We won't have a repeat of what happened when I recovered the Cube. If Neil or Hope does anything *vile*, I'll be on call. And I don't think they would hurt you, Phoebe. Hope still... he still cares for you. And Neil knows better than to fuck with Humanity's Best Girl."

Phoebe snorts. "I'm not worried about me, Jason. I'm worried about other people, like Samantha, or Kiari. They're demons, yes, but they're on 'our side.' Neil would like nothing more than to, well... demonize them."

"Demonize the demons." Fiona chuckles. "I forgot how good my jokes were."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "So this is how it felt when Hope and I laughed at each other's jokes."

* * *

The Wordsmith and his two wives continue walking and talking. They hash out a plan with one another, then Jason utters a Word of Power.

"Return."

Fiona reappears inside the Wordsmith's Mind Realm. Jason and Phoebe materialize inside an established safe space on Tarus II, not far from the western edge of the city's plateau.

Phoebe looks at Jason longingly. "Don't be gone long, Jason."

"I won't be." Jason smiles. "Not from your point of view, anyway."

"Somehow, that feels a little... ominous." Phoebe whispers.

She stands up on her tippy-toes, and the two of them share a deep, passionate kiss. Jason pulls his wife in close for one last time before his departure, enjoying the warm, comfortable feeling of her presence.

After they finish, Phoebe walks away, and Jason finds himself alone with only Fiona in his thoughts.

"...Alright." Jason says quietly. "Let's do this."

The Wordsmith closes his eyes. Then he utters a Word of Power.

"Return."

He vanishes from the spot, then reappears somewhere inside the Labyrinth. He turns himself invisible, immaterial, and imperceptible to all but the most outrageously powerful beings in the cosmos.

Then he teleports into the Labyrinth Core, at a spot high up where nobody will see or sense his presence.

The Wordsmith's eyes lock onto one of the Warpgates, one from which several thousand demons stream inside.

Seems to lead to the world of Harpsichore. Jason thinks. It'll do. A fairly low-level world nobody will care about, yet one where there's a Warpgate.

Jason teleports forward and arrives at the Warpgate's entryway. He slips through it, and his ears pop as he arrives on a random jungle world, somewhere tens of thousands of lightyears distant from Tarus II.

The Wordsmith nearly bumps into a demon standing on the opposite side, but he quickly teleports to a spot a thousand feet away, where he finds himself standing atop a temple to some unknown mythological figure. Statues of giant demi-birds dot the nearby landscape, their powerful, primal eyes looking up at the skies as if unsatisfied by their lots in life...

"Harpsichore is run and controlled by the Harpies." Fiona explains, her words reaching only her husband. "It's a jungle world, and is only one grade shy of being classified as a Paradise-Class planet like Tarus II. It's rich, lush, and full of life..."

"It'll do." Jason says, his words muffled by the magical field surrounding him. Much like when Hope turned himself invisible, not one monster, demon, or even a Psion can hear him speak. "We need a world rich in life energy to start the 'initial push.'"

The Wordsmith magically empowers his body. He gives himself the power of flight, space-faring abilities, and a barrier to protect himself from the Void's Vacuum...

Then he launches himself into the sky!

Jason races into the upper atmosphere, smiling at the godlike feeling of being able to travel wherever he wants without limits.

"Man once wished for the ability to fly, and I can do it on demand," Jason muses out loud. "The pressure of being a Wordsmith sucks, but the perks aren't half-bad."

He races out into space, then travels a good distance away from Harpsichore. Once he gets far enough away, he fires off more Words of Power.

"Atlas. Atlas. Atlas."

Jason maps out the entire star system Harpsichore resides in, only to be a little surprised when he finds a second populated planet perhaps a hundred million miles away.

"A dual-planet system? Bit rare." Jason mutters. "The other world isn't populated by sentient life, though. Seems it's still in the primitive stage. Maybe I'll visit it sometime."

Shaking his head, Jason returns his thoughts to the task at hand.

"TEAR! Reform! Stabilize! Entry! Expand!"

Jason begins ripping holes in space. He tears apart the void around him, opening a spatial tunnel into a fold in the Void.

After spending a full ten minutes uttering over a hundred Words of Power, Jason completes his task. He successfully creates a Folded Space adjacent to the world of Harpsichore, one that fades away and becomes undetectable to all but the most skilled of Psions or other space-bending entities.

"Transfer." Jason says.

His body slips through the gap in space. He arrives inside a pitch-black void lacking starlight and sunlight both.

Unlike the Void that the Physical Realm resides within, Harpsichore's newly created Folded Space does not have the slightest contact with the outside world. A thin but robust wall of Entropy resides between the space's inner area and the physical realm outside.

"Sure is dark in here." Jason complains, waving his hand an inch in front of his face.
"Light."

He creates a ball of light that hovers in front of himself. But as he sends it away, he finds that without anything to reflect off, the void appears as pitch-black as ever. He can see his own body, but nothing else.

"Hmm..." The Wordsmith says. "I don't know why, but I didn't realize it would be so barren. How should I start reforming this space?"

"Well, upping the time dilation should be your first step." Fiona suggests. "We'll also need a way to measure the speed inside against the speed outside."

"I can do that." Jason replies. "**Expedite! Expedite! Expedite! Expedite! Expedite! Expedite! Expedite!**"

Over and over, Jason speaks the same Word of Power.

He repeats it ten times.

A hundred times.

Perhaps even a thousand times.

As he does, the Entropy surrounding his newly created Folded Space begins to spin and revolve, faster and faster.

Soon, it becomes a raging maelstrom. A deep, painful hum vibrates Jason's bones. His muscles tremble as the force of Entropy presses upon him, battling the vastly increased rate of time at the folded space's edges.

"**Silence!**" Jason shouts.

An instant later, the pressure disappears.

The Entropy continues to race around at the space's edges. It revolves frighteningly fast, giving Jason the impression that if he were to stab at the borders with an object, Entropy would shred that item to nothingness without a hint of mercy.

"**Estimate.**" Jason says. "Hmm... it seems the TDR in here is... one to forty-five? So one minute in the outside world is forty five minutes in here?"

"One month outside would be forty-five months inside here." Fiona helpfully adds. "That's almost four years."

The Wordsmith appears unmoved.

"It's not enough..." He says quietly. "**Expedite! Expedite! Expedite!**"

Jason repeats the Word of Power a dozen times.

Then, a dozen more times.

Again.

Again...

He continues strengthening the speed of the time dilation. Each repeated Word of Power has less and less effect, but even if the effects are minimal, they do continue to increase the rate of speed by some small amount.

Eventually, his mana begins to run dry. He finally gives up and sighs.

"Estimate."

Jason receives word of the final result.

"Two hundred and fifty." Fiona says. "Roughly."

"One month in the outer galaxy. Two hundred and fifty months in here." Jason says quietly. "A bit over twenty years..."

"If you're serious about doing this," Fiona says, "then 1:250 is a good ratio. But... are you really going to stay in here for-"

"I've failed too many people over the years." Jason says quietly. "Too many. I'll stay in here for as long as it takes. Just you and me. I'll start mastering the power the Creator gave me. I'll learn all of Wordsmithing's intricacies. No more bullshit. No more weakness."

Jason touches a medallion on his chest, a necklace he made for Phoebe to communicate with him no matter the distance separating the two.

"I don't know what sort of Wordsmith Hope is going to become." Jason says. "And I don't know what sort I will, either. But I know what I *want* to be. I want to be a symbol of safety. Not just for humanity, but for all the species in the Milky Way."

Jason activates one of the remaining Mana Beads inside his body, refueling his reserves back to full. He aims his mind at the folded space around him.

"REFORM!"

He begins working to create a realm where he can spend a long, long time perfecting his skills.

Who can say how long the First Wordsmith will ultimately spend inside...

Part 466: Where's Mephisto?

Somewhere inside the Labyrinth, at a distant, far corner where few wretched creatures live, and even fewer monsters...

Several hundred human soldiers follow along behind Beelzebub, Blinker, Princess Melia, and Archangel Uriel. These soldiers keep quiet. They don't casually chat, and maintain a calm, military-like demeanor as they continue diving into the Labyrinth's depths.

This deep into the Labyrinth, they are days away from a swift return to human-controlled areas. While the Demon Emperors ostensibly don't dare to go against the Wordsmiths, who can say if every psychotic monster feels the same? Perhaps, this far from the Labyrinth's center, at the very edges of the three-dimensional cube known as Hell, there may be suicidal beings of unknown power just waiting to pick off a tasty human.

Samuel Baker is just one among many of his fellow soldiers. As a mere human, his body is frail. A single Demon Lord could crush him into meat paste, let alone a Baron or a Duke. It is only through the power of technology that he stands a chance against these frightening enemies. He keeps his guard up and proceeds slowly, looking from side to side at the blank, bland, nondescript walls that seem to stretch on forever.

Private Ashley, a woman who traveled with Samuel to the world of Volgarius, walks beside her commander. Her blank-faced T-REX gives no hint as to her expression, but the way she twitches while she walks says more than a little about her mental state.

"It's so quiet..." Ashley mutters, her voice transmitting into Samuel's helmet. "Haven't seen a monster or demon in hours."

"News of our approach has scared away the critters." Samuel transmits back. "It's the ones that *aren't* afraid who should make *us* afraid."

At the front of the pack, Beelzebub pauses, causing everyone behind him to slow to a stop.

"Hmm..."

The Emperor of Hellfire glances around, seemingly peering through the rock and dirt that forms the Labyrinth to search for its secrets.

"Are we getting closer?" Blinker asks.

"It's hard to say." Beelzebub says. "I've been able to faintly 'feel' Maphisto's presence for hours now. But it's so distant that I can't tell if we're drawing closer or moving away."

"He's almost certainly hidden himself within a Demonic Formation." Melia says, volunteering her opinion. "While inferior to the formations a fairy can make, demonic formations are especially adept at concealing souls and magical auras."

Beelzebub snorts. "There's one way I could find him. But you wouldn't like it."

"And what would that be?" Blinker asks.

"Simple. I would start blasting the Labyrinth around us to smithereens. I could destabilize the magic in the air until I can finally pinpoint a specific direction toward Mephisto's hidey-hole."

Uriel steps forward. "That would requireth thee to go off alone. I do not trust thy intentions, bloodskin."

"Yeah. I got that impression." Beelzebub says blandly, not even bothering to look at Uriel. "The feeling is mutual."

Uriel and Beelzebub exchange glares. Then, she steps forward.

"Stay here. Verily, I shalt use my own methods."

Uriel flaps her wings, then rockets down the corridor, disappearing into the distance. Once she rounds a corner and vanishes from sight, Blinker scratches her head.

"Err... what's the Archangel going to-"

BOOM! BOOOM!!

The Labyrinth violently shudders. A backdraft of heat washes down the corridor from the direction Uriel went, instantly raising the temperature ten degrees, then twenty.

"That woman!" Beelzebub barks. "She's just doing what I was going to do! Stupid, arrogant, angel-shithead!"

The Labyrinth rumbles and rattles. Uriel continues bombarding the area out of everyone's sight, forcing the humans and those with weaker constitutions to retreat a bit simply due to the rising temperatures. Not only does Uriel unleash fire magic, but holy

magic and darkness as well. As the Archangel most adept in all of the elements, she becomes an avatar of destruction, unleashing hell upon Hell.

While the others wince and grimace at Uriel's somewhat barbaric method of blasting apart Hell, Beelzebub's gaze strays in a completely different direction.

"There! I felt a distinct fluctuation." Beelzebub says, pointing to his left, as if seeing through the wall directly in front of himself. "That's where Mephisto is hiding."

"You're sure?" Blinker asks.

"Positive." Beelzebub answers. "If it had been me flinging fireballs, I might have been too distracted by my own rampaging magic to be confident in my assessment, but luckily that dim-headed Archangel chose to do the deed. Mephisto's hiding place is that way."

A human trooper walks forward and activates a three dimensional map of the Labyrinth. Created years ago through Hope's Wordsmithing, this special map is one of a large number of copies that mostly maps out Hell's extremities.

Beelzebub jots down his best guess as to the general area, then everyone waits for Uriel to return.

Twenty minutes later, she does. The Archangel saunters down the corridor and gestures in the same direction Beelzebub did.

"I have uncovered Mephisto's hiding place." She says. "Follow me."

"Great work, Uriel!" Blinker exclaims.

Beelzebub scowls. "Hey! Don't forget whose idea it was to- *never mind!* Bloody Archangel, taking all the credit, grumble grumble..."

Uriel smiles wickedly. "How unfortunate. It seems the bloodskin is offended this Divine did a better job than him at finding our foe."

She turns on her heel and starts walking down the corridor while everyone else follows. As for Beelzebub, he continues to curse under his breath at the *nerve* she has in stealing his ideas.

The small army of people follows after Uriel. She expertly navigates the Labyrinth thanks to a hundred thousand years of residing within Barbatos's soul. The fact that she still continues to possess his body seems to have been largely forgotten by many, thanks

to the fact she now perfectly resembles her original self. But, slumbering deep within her is still that same Duke of Steel.

Sometimes Uriel even chats with Artorias. The former Duke of Earthquakes has largely fallen silent after the events of Stormbringer. He doesn't say much, but he does share the same Mind Realm space as the other Archangels. When they talk, their words are usually strained, lacking in warmth, often holding a smoldering undercurrent of ancient hatred.

Uriel's beautiful crystal-blue eyes flick around seemingly at random as she attempts to trace the path to that fluctuation she felt before. She seeks to find Mephisto's lair, but his aura eventually fades away, leaving her with only the knowledge of its general direction.

"This Emperor of Legions is a slippery foe." Uriel comments idly. "He is quite adept at hiding his movements."

"Mephisto isn't the sort to fight on the frontlines." Beelzebub says from behind her, content with letting the Archangel lead the way. "He likes to backstab and prod people. He'd rather have others do his dirty work. Even during Stormbringer, he hid underground the whole time and let others fight."

"Pathetic." Uriel says. "Such an existence should not continue. I detest cowards."

She glances at Beelzebub.

"Thou art a vile murderer. A killer of many. But at least thou hath the guts to stand and face thy enemies like a true warrior. I respect that."

"Didn't expect words of praise from a *pigeon*." Beelzebub snarks.

"What few I give art well deserved." Uriel retorts, looking away. "Though thou art still an imbecilic lout."

The company proceeds forward. For three hours they walk.

At some point, the humans in the group begin to feel antsy. Spooked.

Private Ashley continuously glances around, as does Samuel. Eventually, Samuel raises his fist, causing all of the soldiers to stop. Sensing the change behind them, Uriel turns to look curiously at the humans.

"Is something the matter?" The Archangel asks.

"Yeah. Something is. I'm just not sure *what*, exactly." Samuel says, walking toward the front. "I keep getting this feeling we're being watched. I can practically feel a pair of eyes boring holes into my back."

A nearby soldier nods. "Me too."

"Same," says another.

Uriel frowns. "I sense nothing of the sort. Beelzebub?"

"Nothing." Beelzebub answers. "This must be some odd human quirk. Maybe you're all imagining the feeling?"

Blinker shakes her head. "I don't think so. Don't underestimate humans, Beelzebub. They all seem to have a sort of ESP that tells them when they're being spied on. It's an underappreciated ability."

"Then it must be Mephisto." Beelzebub concludes, looking around the hallway. "Come out, Mephisto! You're not as sneaky as you think!"

Beelzebub's shout fades away, swallowed by that same, ominous silence that has been dogging the hunting force for over a day now. That oppressive, cloying feeling that leaves them feeling stifled and smothered.

Abruptly, a voice cries out in fright from the backlines. The noise, like a gunshot in the dead of night, startles everyone. They quickly spin to look in the direction of the woman who screamed, only for the people closest to the backlines to also cry out in alarm.

"What in the hell?!"

"How'd they sneak up on us?!"

"OPEN FIRE!"

Without warning, the soldiers in the back level their guns at a massive army of undead monsters lurking behind them, previously unnoticed due to a secret magical spell placed upon them. These concealed monsters include not only skeletons and zombies, but undead Hellhounds, harpies, and other creatures native and non-native to Hell.

Bullets blast out of carbines. The monsters roar at a deafening volume, sending soundwaves racing down the tight and narrow hallway. Then they rush forward! One particularly large undead Ogre soaks up a majority of the bullets, its massive frame shielding the crowd of skeletons behind it.

"What!" Uriel exclaims, gasping in shock. "Mephisto must have- how did I not sense his army's approach?!"

Beelzebub ignites flames under his feet. He propels himself into the air and races down the hallway toward the incoming horde, punching his fists as he flies to launch fireballs at the attackers.

Beelzebub's flames, lethal against the undead, do not have the intended effect. He expects his magic to obliterate their rotting flesh and bones, but instead, his flames crash against an invisible barrier tailor-made to counter high heat!

"How in the devil?!" Beelzebub howls, bewildered. "Mephisto! It seems you came prepared!"

The ogre in the front reaches the backline troopers. It raises a massive club overhead, one which scrapes the ceiling twenty feet above. The humans in the rear guard turn pale as they see the half-ton weapon come falling toward their heads.

"SHIT!"

Just before the club can splatter them into puddles of gore...

Foop!

The five troopers in the ogre's path vanish!

Teleported via Blinker's magic, they reappear at the front, safe from the enemy that would surely have killed them on the spot.

At the same time, Beelzebub arrives at the back. He suicidally rushes toward the ogre at full speed, turning his body into a living battering ram as he rockets down from above.

Crash!

Beelzebub slams his shoulder into the ogre, bypassing the fire resistant barrier. The Duke of Hellfire breaks two dozen bones on impact, but successfully knocks the giant monster backward and makes it fall ass-backward onto the skeletons behind it. It crushes those undead creatures into bonemeal, and Beelzebub bounces off to land in a heap on the floor.

"Ugh!"

The Emperor of Hellfire groans pitifully. With his previous immunity to pain gone, he now feels the full and complete agony of all his broken bones while his body quickly

begins to heal itself.

By the time the next wave of undead have crawled over the knocked-down ogre to rush at the demon laying prone on the floor, Beelzebub has already fully regenerated!

He jumps to his feet and winces, still feeling the phantom pain of that impact.

"Tsssssk. Damn, that stings."

As a dozen monsters pounce at Beelzebub, he idly waves his hand and sends two-thousand-degree flames crashing into their bodies. He explodes Mephisto's minions to ash, shredding them at the atomic level in an instant!

More annoyed than anything, Beelzebub now stands inside the fire-resistant barrier that previously stopped him. Mephisto's remaining undead retreat a short distance, staring at him warily.

"Beelzebub." A voice says, drifting on the air. "How good to sssee you again... it ssseemsss you're with the flessshbagsss now."

"As if you didn't already know." Beelzebub says blandly. "Come out, Mephisto. I know we're getting close. We'll find you before long. Sending some measly dregs at us won't save you."

Mephisto doesn't appear. But he does continue talking to Beelzebub.

"How troublsss some. The Wordsssmith hasss placcced you in bondage. The arrogant Beelzebub, now an attack dog for a ssstupid human! What a laughable fate..."

A momentary pause.

"That Word of Power limitsss you greatly, brother. But what if I could remove thossse bindingsss? Let you walk free again?"

Beelzebub gazes at the undead down the hallway, the ones keeping their distance. "You can't."

"No. I cannot." Mephisto says. "But I know who can. *Emperor Glinch*."

"Who?" Beelzebub asks, frowning slightly.

"Heh heh heh..." Mephisto chuckles softly. "You don't know hisss name? He isss the Ssstitched Emperor. A massster of sssoulcrafting. A body manipulating geniusss. And more than a little crazzy... but he can sssolve your problem."

By now, Uriel and Blinker have made their way to the backlines. Both of them glare daggers at Beelzebub as they listen to his conversation with Mephisto.

"I see." Beelzebub says, ignoring the Archangel and Fairy approaching him from behind. "So this Glinch fellow can remove the Wordsmith's control over me. Make it possible for me to once again rampage unstoppably."

"Exactly..." Mephisto answers.

"Well. That's a kind offer." Beelzebub continues. "But clearly you don't know anything about me, Mephisto. I have my pride. Do you think I'm doing all of this due to some magic that compels my thoughts? Not long ago, I had a bit of an epiphany. I realized the Wordsmith and I have the same goals. So now I'm trying to make amends to him and humanity for my own reasons. His Word of Power is only a safeguard to ensure I don't betray him and murder a million people. A fair compromise, given how I've acted in the past."

Mephisto hesitates.

"...You are not being compelled to follow Jassson Hiro'sss ordersss?"

"Nope." Beelzebub says blandly. "I am my own demon. But I wouldn't expect a necromancer to understand. You assume others only act because they have no choice, as if all other entities are undead puppets you can ultimately control."

It takes Mephisto a moment to respond. As he does, Beelzebub frowns deeply.

"You ssshould join me, Beelzebub. We are both demonsss. No ssself-ressspecting Emperor ssshould work alongssside an Archangel..."

Beelzebub's heart begins to beat rapidly. Something alarms him, though he isn't sure what. He continues to stare at the monsters at the end of the hallway, all while debating what he should say next.

Just as he is about to respond, Beelzebub's heart skips a beat. It metaphorically falls into the soles of his feet, along with his stomach.

"YOU BASTARD!!" Beelzebub roars, while rapidly conjuring an Emperor level flame in his hands. "EVERYONE! It's a trap! We're already inside-"

A massive head materializes in the air above Uriel, Blinker, and the humans. The hunting party's members reflexively jerk their gazes upward, where they see the image of a gigantic, 200-foot-tall undead monster towering above them.

A Brute!!

The same as the undead behemoth Mephisto conjured to battle the Cherubiim, this monster punches down at the creatures below it, its strength more than enough to reduce a small town to rubble!

"NO!" Uriel howls, quickly summoning a barrier above herself.

Blinker acts on instinct, firing a wave of telekinetic energy at the fist racing toward the army of humans she brought along.

With no time to react, nobody has a chance at stopping the undead monster before it can-

Foop!

Beelzebub suddenly fireports above the humans.

He releases the tiny, rapidly spiraling fireball in his palm.

He fires it straight upward at the fist rushing toward himself and the others!

BOOOOM!!

A titanic explosion of fire and brimstone ignites in the space above the hunting party! The Labyrinth's 'ceiling,' which everyone thought to be real, vanishes, replaced instead with a massive, open sky! Beelzebub's fireball explodes up and away from the humans beneath him, knocking the Brute's fist backward as if it had impacted a solid wall of titanium!

At the same time as Beelzebub's mighty fireblast blows away the supposed 'ceiling,' the walls around the humans also melt away. The party quickly looks in every direction, only to find to their horror that they have actually been standing inside an illusory world! A demonic projection made from magic not dissimilar to that of the fairies!

Tens of thousands of hungry, vicious-looking monsters and undead surround the humans and their allies. The scary creatures they faced in the 'hallway' from before look truly pitiful compared to these innumerable newcomers.

"It was a trick!" Samuel shouts, turning to face the nearest monsters. "Fucking demons!"

Now, the hunting party finds that they have become the Hunted. They have unwittingly stepped into a massive demonic arena covered in pentagrams and sigils, all

written in human blood.

A dozen Demon Baron necromancers levitate in the distance, chanting ominous words as they attempt to recreate a new illusion, one which will hide them from prying eyes. Below these hovering Barons, humans lay dead on the ground, their lifeless eyes revealing a recent tale of torture and pain. Even as Samuel and the others inadvertently identify them through their T-REX targeting modules, they quickly realize these people were denizens of Tarus II.

Mephisto captured and slaughtered them for his dark rituals!

"Heh heh heh! Fassst thinking, Beelzebub!" Mephisto 'praises,' his body now visible in the center of his Baron-level subjects. The Emperor of Legions stands proudly, clutching Valac's Lantern in his free hand. "I've known you were coming for daysss. You are not ass ssswift of mind ass you think. You even blundered right into my clutchesss..."

Mephisto's Brute raises its fist high overhead. It swings at its enemies like a Hammer of God, hellbent on smiting the humans dead!

This time, Beelzebub is the one who finds himself surprised. Uriel leaps skyward, flapping her wings to rush directly at the falling fist.

CRASH!

The Archangel of Retribution punts the gigantic limb backward with shocking ease, making even Mephisto's smile disappear. He reveals an ugly scowl as the Archangel smites the Brute's chest and knocks it off-balance, causing the 200-foot-tall monster to stumble backward and lose its footing. It falls backward and crashes onto its ass, momentarily losing its combat effectiveness.

For a brief moment, the battlefield goes quiet.

Then Mephisto waves his hand.

"Go, now. Kill thessse interlopersss. My plan musst sssucceed."

A massive Death Gate opens up beneath Mephisto, the same type that he used when he attacked Tarus II during the beginning of Stormbringer.

But then, a second Gate opens.

And a third...

Five in total. Five Death Gates materialize, each one possessing far more Death Energy than the ones Mephisto could summon when he was a Duke.

Hardly have they appeared before undead creatures large and small begin to pour through. The chanting necromancers under Mephisto work their magic to manipulate and control the minds of these new arrivals, sending them at the humans.

Blinker turns pale.

"So many..." She whispers. "And we don't have a thousandth the forces we did during Stormbringer!"

"NAY." Uriel says, as her body begins to glow with divine light. "THOU HATH *ME*."

Part 467: Five Field Fight

Five Death Gates stand between Blinker, Beelzebub, Uriel, and their enemy, Mephisto. Five gates surely much mightier than the ones he unleashed upon Tarus II. At the same time, these archways emit a terrifying amount of Death Energy, and their frames appear much 'sturdier,' making them feel like unassailable walls leading to five undead castles.

Archangel Uriel soars into the sky. Her body ignites with fire and light as she faces down the Brute she's just knocked on its ass. But before she can finish it off with a single lethal blow, the ground rumbles.

Another Brute bursts out of the dirt!

Uriel's heart doesn't waver. In the instant between instants, she registers this second threat with calm, ruthless efficiency. She zips to the side, using the agility of her Archangel wings to dodge the Brute's hand as it tries to slap her out of the sky. Unfortunately, that hand is actually a feint! Mephisto manipulates the Brute from afar, causing it to slap down at the humans and Blinker!

"DASTARD!" Uriel roars, snapping downward to violently kick the Brute's hand aside!

As Uriel does battle with two of Mephisto's strongest minions, additional threats emerge.

The several hundred human commandos, elites who fought in Stormbringer and who have battled alongside Neil for six years, are no strangers to demon ambushes. Their hearts barely tremble as a pair of Upper Demons burst out of the dirt, along with a small army of elite undead.

Raven, the Duke of Feathers, is joined by Xena, the Baron of Trading. However, while Raven boasts the full and unmitigated strength of a Demon Duke, Xena is much more pitiful.

She has no magical abilities whatsoever!

Trained and raised by Yumagi from her days as an Imp, all Xena possesses is the atypically powerful body of a Demon Baron. But her strength is not insignificant!

Every Demon Baron, even without magic, can easily pulverize boulders and shrug off low-caliber gunfire with ease. Not only are they strong, but fast too!

Xena, no longer a card-carrying Tarot Sect member, now instead dons a formidable suit of demonstone armor. She wields a sword and shield, involuntarily becoming a melee combatant! She doesn't have much choice, given her lack of abilities that can suit her new master well.

Neither Xena nor Raven appear pleased at their new lots in life. Raven in particular, once a high ranking member of his Hell, has now been reduced to a sacrificial pawn for an evil necromancer. His days of bedding beautiful men and women are over.

"Even if Emperor Crow wants to save me, she can't!" Raven laments. "Maybe if I go all-out here, I can at least piss these humans off enough to kill me! Nothing worse than living life enslaved to my own body! Ca-caw!!"

Long ago, when Emperor Valac reigned as the Highest Necromancer, he controlled every single minion directly, with rare exception. He forced them against their will to battle his foes.

But Mephisto is not the same. He instead places simple overriding commands in their minds while granting them autonomy to do as they otherwise please.

In the case of his two newest minions, they are consumed with the desire to protect Mephisto and ensure his secret plan materializes in full.

As for what that plan is, none of them know the details...

"Bogeys!" Samuel Baker barks into his suit's comm. "Duke and a Baron, three-o'clock!"

Dozens of soldiers swivel to face Xena and Raven. The lower-ranking demoness leaps forward as powerful bullets and energy beams bombard her position. She stands like an oak tree in a storm as brutally powerful attacks ricochet off her armor, none of them making a dent in the Demonstone protecting her.

"I'll take point!" Xena shouts to Raven. "Help me clean these humans up!"

"Yes, yes," Raven grouches, his armored feathers proving nearly as durable as her armor. Many bullets bounce off him, as if striking plates of solid steel. "Don't get TOO excited to do that bastard *Mephisto's* dirty work."

Hundreds of undead rush toward the humans, along with Xena and Raven. At the same time, Samuel Baker makes a split-second decision. He activates his Power Glove, switching it to Fairy Mode and quietly altering his body's internal composition.

Then, he flickers forward.

Still wearing his Rhino T-REX, the fairy-empowered human bashes his fist against Xena's helmet, jarring her senses and sending her flying backward!

BANG!

She crashes into Raven, and both of them tumble backward, startled by this one random trooper's act of teleportation.

"The hell? Fairy magic?! Those humans pulled a fast one!" Raven grouches.

While Uriel has to deal with a pair of Brutes and Samuel's company has to fend off a Baron and a Duke, Blinker and Beelzebub aren't standing idly.

Two more threats appear!

Zamiel, no longer a mere Duke, has been empowered to the true rank of Emperor! Through a means Blinker can only imagine to be her worst nightmare, the crocodile-body-stealing undead bastard who killed her husband bursts out of the ground to pounce at her!

"C'mere, you little fairy bitch!" Zamiel laughs. "Gimme those babies in your belly!"

Blinker unleashes a violent telekinetic punch that strikes Zamiel in the face and pounds him into the dirt. "Give me Kar's body back!!"

Beelzebub starts to move toward Blinker to help, but at that moment, Mephisto unleashes the power of Dark Mist! A massive wave of pure darkness shrouds the entire field.

And in that darkness, one particular entity reaches a level of power unimaginable to other Emperors...

Yama, the Emperor of Shadows!

Beelzebub instinctively jumps backward as multiple shadow-lances spear at his position. He retaliates with half a dozen fireballs, but their brightness and power dims considerably inside Mephisto's Dark Mist.

"Heh heh heh. Beelzebub!" Yama cackles evilly. **"We won't be much use against the women here, but you will do just fine for our first meal!"**

A pulling sensation grabs Beelzebub and yanks him away from the others to a more isolated corner of the battlefield. He grimaces at this unexpected move, but otherwise doesn't pay much attention to it.

"You want to fight me, Yama? Light is your enemy. And fire shines brightest in the dark."

"**Not today, it doesn't.**" Yama taunts, as dozens of Shades fly toward Beelzebub and fling spears of shadow at him. "**Inside the darkness, our reign is ABSOLUTE!**"

Blinker's hunting force ultimately ends up split into four groups by Mephisto's careful machinations.

Uriel and the Brutes.

The humans versus Xena and Raven.

Blinker battles Zamiel.

And Beelzebub fights against Yama.

Their war begins in earnest!

Recommended Listening

Archangel Uriel fights with all her might. She conjures a greathammer of light and begins racing around, bashing it against the weak points of the 200-foot tall Brutes threatening to kill the entire party she has come here with. Mephisto cleverly does not attempt to strike Uriel directly, but instead forces her into a passive position while relying on the durability of his mightiest summons to buy time...

Uriel slams her entire body into one of the Brutes, using the full power of an Archangel to make it stumble and trip. An instant later, she uses Raphael's portal magic to appear above the other Brute and crash upon its head like a falling star!

Uriel smites the second Brute with all her strength, making it tumble to its knees and land in a sprawling heap, killing dozens of undead in the area.

But she fails to kill or even severely injure either one of the monsters. As undead formed from the bodies of hundreds, even thousands of other minions, they are terribly durable and insanely hard to put down.

"Sister!" Raphael calls out. "Beware! The necromancer's ploy is vile indeed! Look to the five Death Gates!"

Uriel snaps her head in Mephisto's general direction. Despite the cloying Dark Mist that has filled the field with an impenetrable gloom, her keen Divinity allows her to pick

through its haze to see that which would otherwise remain unseen. Her heart turns cold, as amidst the sea of undead orcs, harpies, demons, and other malfeasants streaming through, two pairs of giant hands grab onto the Gates from the inside.

Two giant heads duck down and begin to climb through.

"Frost giants." Uriel breathes.

She does not fear these creatures. They pose her no threat. Even the Brutes are too slow and clumsy to have a chance of wounding the Archangel of Retribution, let alone killing her.

But the same can not be said for Blinker, Beelzebub, or the others that have come with her!

While Uriel does not particularly give a damn about the peon-like humans below, she does owe the Wordsmith a begrudging favor, and more than a little respect. These people are her allies, and as someone bearing a sense of responsibility for angelkind's fall tens of millennia earlier...

She has to protect these fragile, insignificant beings. Even if only to maintain good relations with the Wordsmith so that he might keep to his end of the deal and find a way to revive Angelkind.

Uriel hesitates for a split-second. She conjures images of her brothers, Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael, to deal with the Death Gates. But they alone are far too weak to handle such a vast and innumerable threat...

At least, until a small group of allies rushes toward the Death Gates from below.

Princess Melia, along with her two retainers, Ruto and Saria!

"Good, good!" Raphael exclaims. "Keep holding these Brutes back, sister. Verily, I shalt think of a way to deliver a killing blow to the Necromancer!"

"I shalt be relying on thee as usual, brother." Uriel says, quickly returning her attention to the Brutes as they start to get back up.

Her three brothers waste no time. They chase after the three fairies, shoring up their flanks and unleashing the power of Heaven.

"Who the heck are you?" Ruto quickly asks, directing a suspicious glance at the trio of men chasing after her and her sisters.

"Archangels!" Raphael explains. "Brothers to Uriel!"

"Oh, great! Help us kick these boney bastards back to the Dead Realm!" Ruto says.

"That is why we art here." Michael answers, unsheathing his sword...

The Archangel of Courage travels down into the center of the undead horde. Monsters large and small turn their attention on the dimly glowing light in the darkness, the single shining beacon they can most easily make out.

As these creatures rush toward Michael, his right arm begins to dance.

At a speed far too swift for any human to follow, Michael cuts apart tens of mooks in an instant. His blade, nowhere near as powerful as a physical weapon, is still more than potent enough to tear Mephisto's undead to shreds.

Michael swims through the army, unassailable. Any enemy that steps within arm's reach enters the Death Zone. They perish, their bodies exploding into bonemeal as the Archangel of Courage's blade rips them apart.

At the same time, Raphael uses his own bag of tricks. With illusions having little effect on the undead, he sticks to making small portals, creating them at seemingly random places to sow chaos and disorder among the enemy forces.

Time after time, one undead entity will trip and fall into a portal, only to fall out of the air and land atop another undead. Both of them collapse in a heap while looking mighty confused.

But that isn't the extent of Raphael's manipulation of the battlefield.

The cunning old fox grins slightly. A light glints in his eyes.

He opens more portals, but these portals don't take the undead to places on the battlefield. Instead, they open up on far distant worlds! Specifically, the worlds of Diabolus and Numaria, where Emperors Gorn and Auger reign supreme.

These powerful demons gasp in surprise when they find undead creatures unceremoniously dumped on their metaphorical front lawns. Their subordinates rush at the disoriented bone-based minions and crush them into dust while roaring to the skies about Mephisto's 'sneaky attack.'

The demons' actions do not escape Raphael's notice. He cleverly begins dropping more and more of Mephisto's undead amidst their strongholds, allowing the demons

themselves to destroy Mephisto's minions. As for Raphael, the amount of damage he can deal is far less than that of his siblings, so he decides to conserve Uriel's mana reserves by tricking the demons into thinking Mephisto is attacking.

But Raphael does not go too far. Who can say what would happen if he were to bring another Emperor here? Perhaps they would assist him and the rest in fighting Mephisto, but then again, perhaps they might strike a deal with the Necromancer and betray their 'human allies.'

Especially if it meant they could finally eliminate all of the Archangels in one fell swoop...

As Michael and Raphael do their thing, the third Archangel, Gabriel, casually saunters around. The oversized Archangel sweeps a massive golden greatsword from side to side, killing three to five undead with each swing! While Michael's killing prowess comes from speed and sharpness, Gabriel's comes from sheer brute force.

The Archangel of Power stays true to his name by turning every undead in his path into a shrieking, terror-filled mess. As each one does indeed possess the soul of a demon or monster Mephisto captured at some point in the last 100,000 years, they can all feel moments of terror before their second lives snuff out at Gabriel's hands, forever.

The three Archangels rampage around or work their trickery. But at the same time, the three fairies don't hold back either.

Ruto, a master of water and ice magic, flash freezes the ground to slow down the undead hordes. She spikes their heads with imbued icicles. She detonates ice grenades in the center of large groups to send them flying!

Saria, a master of the woodlands, conjures vines to wrap around and ensnare the undead. She suffocates and tangles them with such force that many of them end up laying on the ground, barely able to twitch as the vines wrap around and snare them in place.

But Princess Melia has the hardest task.

She pauses for half a breath, gazing up in trepidation as two, then four Frost Giants emerge from the depths of the Dead Realm. These monsters tower half as tall as the Brutes, at 100 feet tall, but their bodies are much swifter, and their minds, much keener.

"Damn..." Melia grouches. "I gotta fight these things all on my own."

With her two friends and the Archangel Constructs otherwise occupied, Melia searches deep within herself for the strength to defeat four monstrously powerful enemies.

Guided by Mephisto and his twelve Baron-minions, the Frost Giants perceive Melia's threat and choose to attack her. One of the giants exhales a wave of frosty breath at the fairy princess. Two others raise their warclubs high to smash them down on her tiny, levitating body. Another one grabs at her to try and crush her in midair.

Abruptly, Melia flicks her hands. Dozens of magical seals fly from her grasp to the right and left, up and down, in front of and behind her. These seals attach to any surface they can find, or any enemy, and activate to create a complex magical formation.

But none of the necromancers have the faintest comprehension of fairy magic. Therefore, neither do the Frost Giants.

As their attacks rush at Melia, images of four more frost giant suddenly appear behind Melia. These apparitions rush toward the other four, startling them.

"MIRROR FORCE!" Melia shouts, as she activates the full power of her formation.

Perfect replications of the Frost Giants fly out of the formation's center and rush at the necromancers' slaves, pouncing at them like tigers on the hunt. The enemy Frost Giants try to fight back, but their apparitions crush their skulls, flatten their bodies, and rip them limb from limb. Like far more psychotic, violent counterparts from a mirror dimension, Melia's Giant-copies easily destroy their physical selves, only to fade away a few moments later, returning to dust.

The Fairy Princess does not look particularly happy about easily besting the four enemy giants. She grimaces painfully.

"Damn. I had to use two tassels of Spirit Mimicking Crystals to beat those giants. Mother's going to kill me when I get back."

The brutalized remains of her opponents lay on the ground, twitching for a few moments, before falling still. As for what method Melia used to overpower the giants, perhaps only her fellow fairies would fully understand.

Melia turns her attention to the five Death Gates, but in that moment, her heart grows cold.

Two more pairs of gigantic hands grab onto the gates.

Two more Frost Giants begin to emerge.

"Dammit! Even more?! Frost Giants are supposed to be rare! Just how many does that Mephisto have stashed away?!"

While yet another monstrous duo emerges, back at the place where the battle started, Blinker faces down the opponent she wants to fight most after Mephisto himself.

"Zamiel!!" Blinker howls. "Body-thief!"

No longer does Zamiel cower from the Monster Queen's wrath. With his soul having been elevated to the rank of Emperor, his mind and body have now reached perfect attunement.

He has become a true Emperor-level powerhouse.

He has the capital to stand against her with confidence.

Blinker wraps herself and Zamiel inside a world of illusions. She pulls herself and him into a void where the other combatants won't be able to interfere, but this doesn't bother Zamiel in the slightest.

"Stupid bitch." Zamiel says confidently. "You and that croc-fella killed my little bro. I already gutted your boyfriend. Now I'll gut you too! REVENGE!"

He leaps toward her, but the move is only a feint! He abruptly stops in midair and torpedoes himself straight downward, diving into the dirt as if it were a swimming pool. With the powers he stole from Kar, he summons half a dozen Earthen Constructs to attack Blinker from all directions.

But the Blinker he fought in the past is not the same one who stands before him now. Empowered by the Sphinx, Blinker is the Monster Queen in all forms. Her magical reserves, and her physical body, have reached near-perfection.

Blinker pirouettes in midair. She sweeps her leg out in a wide arc, sending a telekinetic kick toward the dirt and rock constructs Zamiel summoned. With ease, she shatters them into fragments, snorting at their fragility.

"If those had been Kar's constructs, I'd have actually had to try if I wanted to break them!" Blinker shouts. "Now get out here and fight me like- ah!"

A weird cry of surprise catches in Blinker's throat as Zamiel bursts out of the ground. In his hand he holds...

A railgun?!

Pff-WHIFF!! Pff-WHIFF!!

Zamiel fires two shots at Blinker. The Monster Queen barely half-flickers to the side to evade the shots, even as the railgun bullets travel at nearly the speed of light and tear through the ceiling of her illusory world above.

"What?!" Blinker cries. "Where did you get that weapon?!"

"I'm not the Duke of Weaponry anymore, sweetheart!" Zamiel cackles, firing more terrifyingly powerful rounds at her. Blinker hastily teleports to the left and right, causing the shots to only hit her afterimages. "I'm the EMPEROR OF WAR! All technology is mine to control! It won't be long before ol' Ose starts getting jealous of me, bahahaha!!"

All the while, as the battles rage across Mephisto's secret domain, the Emperor of Legions himself remains strangely composed.

"Hehehe..." Mephisto chuckles softly. "It'sss all going to plan."

"Master." One of his loyal Barons, Ozzar, says. "Are you sure we have enough souls for the ritual?"

"We will." Mephisto says confidently. "Even if we don't... my Assscensssion will proccceed ass planned. It is only a matter of degree. How much more powerful will I become...?"

Ozzar nods. "Glinch, though... I trust he won't betray you?"

"I have a... working relationssship with the Ssstitched Emperor." Mephisto says. "He will ssstick to the deal. He isss quite funny, in that way."

"It is as you say, then." Ozzar replies, returning his attention to the unfolding battles.

Mephisto struggles to keep down the most evil smile of his entire life as he gazes at his unwitting pawns.

Sssoon... they will all become food for thisss Deity...

Part 468: Beelzebub's Secret

"You know, it wasn't your smartest idea to bring me here by my lonesome." Beelzebub says, as Yama's Shadow Realm swallows him, cutting him off from the outside world. "I can't take risks that would endanger those humans, or I'll suffer a painful backlash."

"What a coincidence! We have a similar problem!" Yama chortles, as vague images of his face flicker in the shadows. "We cannot attack women or we will suffer terrible pain! It seems the two of us are both being shackled by higher powers!"

"I accepted my shackles willingly." Beelzebub says while flicking a piece of lint off his shoulder. "But for you to give up your predation of women? I doubt you accepted that restriction willingly."

Beelzebub smirks.

"So who made you their *bitch*, Yama? Was it Mephisto? Is that why you're slaving underneath him?"

"Not Mephisto." Yama says. "Satan the Devil."

Beelzebub cocks his head.

"Satan? That's not right. He died six years ago."

"Hehehe... we have told you enough." Yama gurgles, while amassing dark power in his unseen palms. "Figure it out yourself!"

The moment Yama starts to attack, Beelzebub exhales. Flames fire out of his nostrils and spray all over the pitch-black ground, momentarily illuminating the darkness. He catches a glimpse of Yama's indistinct figure right before ten shadow lances spike out of the ground, walls, and ceiling toward him, striking from tricky angles.

But Beelzebub *fireports* through the field of flames, dodging those attacks. He motions with his hands to conjure a swirling firebomb, then viciously chucks it in Yama's direction. The moment the fiery explosive leaves his grasp, it begins to weaken under the effect of Yama's complete control over the shadows!

Boom!

The firebomb explodes, but it doesn't catch Yama in its radius, nor anything else of note.

Beelzebub frowns. *This domain of darkness is trickier than it looks...*

Yama fires off a dozen more Shadow Lances. Beelzebub repeatedly dodges them through his fireportation ability, then detonates an aura of fire from within his core to try and push away the darkness!

"Break for me!"

Beelzebub roars angrily as he tries to shatter Yama's domain, but the darkness quickly swallows the light and heat, suppressing Beelzebub's power to a fraction of its former might.

Hardly has Beelzebub finished unleashing this blast before shadows swirl at his feet.

He starts to fireport, but before he can finish the action, a horde of Shadow-walkers and Shades bursts out from underneath him!

The male and female shadow demons grab onto Beelzebub's legs and arms, holding him taut and preventing him from forming any hand-signs. At the same time, Yama himself suddenly materializes in front of Beelzebub with his fist reared back.

THUNK!

Beelzebub's head snaps backward as Yama's fist batters his face, making him stumble and fall into the crowd of Yama's minions.

"Argh! Get off- GARGH?!"

Beelzebub chokes involuntarily as Yama suddenly spears a shadow lance straight into his mouth, tearing out the back of his head and 'killing' him on the spot.

In that brief moment during Beelzebub's unconsciousness, Yama fires off even more shadow-spears. He impales Beelzebub's hands and feet, his elbows and knees. He spears the Emperor of Hellfire to the floor, but does not appear happy about his success.

"Hold him! HOLD HIM, you idiots! He will regenerate soon! We only have to keep him here until Mephisto completes his ritual! Then, we will join Mephisto in attaining ultimate power! Ehehehe! The other Emperors only wish they could partake in this ritual, but they are unworthy!"

Yama flicks his eyes around, carefully monitoring Beelzebub's body as the fire-powered Emperor rapidly regenerates all of his injuries, even while unconscious. Yama repeatedly punches Beelzebub's head to shatter his skull, killing him over and over again!

But the frightening thing is, each time Yama hurts Beelzebub, the damage heals back a little faster than before! He shatters the Emperor of Hellfire's skull, spraying Beelzebub's brains out all over the shadowy floor. But within five seconds, Beelzebub's head rapidly reforms!

And when Yama shatters his skull again, the time needed to regenerate shortens just a little bit more...

"Damn, damn, damn!" Yama curses. "Is this what the evolution to Emperor did for him? How is Beelze-bastard regenerating so quickly?! Even Satan couldn't return at this speed! This is ridiculous!"

Yama launches another vicious punch at Beelzebub's head, but before it can connect, Beelzebub's hand abruptly tears away from the shadow-lance impaling it, regenerates instantly, and grabs onto Yama's wrist.

BOOM!!!

Beelzebub's body explodes with fiery power, shredding all of the shadow-lances impaling him and burning over a hundred Shadow-walkers and Shades to ash.

An instant afterward, he flickers to Yama's side with his palm aimed at the Emperor of Shadow's face.

FWOOSH!

Beelzebub unleashes a torrent of flames, burning Yama badly and forcing him to retreat.

"Aaah! You bastard!" Yama screams. "You burned us! Gah!!"

"And you crushed my head repeatedly." Beelzebub says, his voice betraying no emotion beyond boredom. "Do you understand how pointless this battle is? You can't beat me. I'm invincible now."

Yama grimaces, but doesn't answer Beelzebub's taunt. To him, delaying for time is all that matters.

"Hehehe. Little Beelzebub." Yama snarks. "You really think you're hot stuff, don't you? But you don't even know the *truth* about your powers. You probably think you're divinely 'gifted' or something. But you're not."

As Yama talks, he keeps his distance, extinguishing the stubborn flames clinging to his body while teasing Beelzebub with hints about... *something previously unspoken*...

Beelzebub frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Hehehehe..." Yama chuckles evilly. "I knew it. Agares never told you the truth, did he?"

"What truth?" Beelzebub asks. "What are you talking about?"

"Stupid bastard. Even after ten thousand years, you're still that same little naive Imp at heart." Yama says. "Think about it! Use your head. Why would a lauded Demon Duke randomly choose you, some no-name Imp, to become his apprentice? Didn't you find that odd?"

Beelzebub glares coldly at Yama's shadowy figure. "Don't slander my teacher, you rapist wretch."

"Slander? By no means..." Yama chuckles. "Agares never chose you, Beelzebub. You were assigned to him by his superiors... by Diablo, specifically. And it wasn't because you were special. No... it was because of the *thing* they found inside of you."

"What 'thing'?" Beelzebub asks, suddenly feeling discomforted by this line of discussion. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Yama continues, drawing out his words to stall for time. "A Phoenix's Feather, of course. Somehow, that special item ended up inside of you through a means not one high-level demon could fathom. That's why you had such an *easy* path to the rank of Lord. Agares supported you because it was his duty."

"That's not true." Beelzebub growls. "Agares would have told me if it was! He and I were close!"

"Were you?" Yama asks. "You and him had to fight during the Black Witch's return. Why, on his deathbed, did he not tell you of this secret? Perhaps he didn't want you to know..."

"Or perhaps you're making this up." Beelzebub says. "I have no way to know if what you're telling me is the truth or not."

"Ah, but you *do*..." Yama coos softly. "When you were to be executed by the Wordsmith, did you not see that fiery apparition fly inside of your body? Every Emperor on-site witnessed it. Even we, who were not present, have heard of this news. It was clearly another fragment of the Phoenix, drawn to you by that feather inside your body!"

Yama chuckles.

"Hehehe... you're not special at all, Beelzebub. That ego of yours, so inflated. You're just a lucky bastard who got juiced-up by some ancient monster. The last time demonkind had to face the power of the Phoenix was during the War in Heaven, when the Valkyrie named Catherine smote dead the ancient Emperor, Valac. How you inherited her power is anyone's guess, but without it, you would still be a nobody. A useless, worthless Imp, wallowing in the mud."

Yama rises to his full height, which is only about four-feet tall.

"You're just lucky, Beelzebub. You were in the right place at the right time. Any other demon would have accomplished the feats that you have!"

For a brief moment, Beelzebub falls silent.

He ruminates on Yama's words.

Then he shrugs.

"Was that it? You hoped to shatter my ego and break my spirit with that little speech?"

Beelzebub also stands up straight, his height making him appear much more imposing than Yama.

"So *what* if I lucked out? I'm still amazing, and you won't convince me otherwise. Plenty of other demons got lucky with their access to powers and ended up becoming nobodies. Just look at you! You've become Satan and Mephisto's little bitch. As for me, I have grand aspirations. I don't think Emperor will be my final limit."

"What?" Yama asks. "You think you can ascend to Demon Deity? Laughable!"

"Maybe I can, and maybe I can't." Beelzebub replies. "But I'm still going to try. And even if I never go any further, I'll still continue with my ultimate goal of empowering demonkind. As for you, a small-minded worm who preys on women, how can you possibly comprehend my goals? You're so pathetic I can't even put my disgust into words. A shallow-minded, limp-wristed loser like you has no right to talk down to me."

Yama glowers at Beelzebub.

"Little brat. We have been around since the War in Heaven. We have observed countless battles among Titans and Angels, while you are still only a whelp who has barely exited the cradle."

Yama motions with his hands. He begins absorbing the darkness around himself to empower his body.

"You want to talk to this Emperor about goals, Beelze-brat? We have our own goals! And you will not stop us from accomplishing them today!"

Yama's body increases in size. He jumps to five feet tall, then, six, and finally seven! His form becomes less misty and more corporeal. His muscles increase drastically, while amidst the darkness, strangely colored 'beads' materialize on his forehead.

He faces down Beelzebub with a grin on his face, relishing the beatdown he is about to unleash.

"You're unlucky, Beelzebub. We have not used our other powers for tens of thousands of years. But that does not mean we have turned rusty!"

While Yama and Beelzebub fight, so do the other forces arrayed against Mephisto. Blinker battles Zamiel, Uriel staves off the pair of Brutes, and the fairies work together with the Archangel Constructs to push back the terrifying horde of monsters coming from the Death Gate.

But while those groups battle the strongest enemies, their human allies find themselves facing their own troubles!

Samuel Baker morphs into his Fairy Form while wearing his Rhino T-REX. He, Private Ashley, and the other soldiers bravely stand against Duke Raven and Baron Xena.

Xena, a trueblooded Baron lacking any magical powers, acts as the tank of her party. While Mephisto's undead swarm the humans, she does battle with Samuel Baker, frowning as her demonstone armor clashes against his Rhino armor.

"Who are you?!" Xena demands to know. "Another fairy, hiding among these humans?! You should have gone with the other three and stayed out of my way!"

Xena jumps into the air, lifts her leg up high, and slams it down on Samuel's arms, who resists her with the defense of his Rhino! His enhanced armor is more than capable of taking heavy abuse, though it isn't up to the task of dealing with Dukes and Emperors.

"I'm not a goddamned fairy!" Samuel barks, countering with a punch aimed at Xena's chest. She lithely dodges the attack, narrowly slithering out of the way. "I'm a human!"

"The hell you are! You're a fairy! And a MALE fairy at that! Which one are you?! I heard only a handful of you existed, and you're supposed to all be playing with your harems! Identify yourself!"

"My identity is Samuel Baker!" Samuel fires back. "And I'm not lying! I'm a human! I ain't no god-damn twinkle-toes fairy!"

He says this before flickering behind Xena and violently kicking her in the back, sending her sprawling onto her face. She immediately recovers with an improvised frontflip to face him again.

"I don't know what kind of games you're playing, fairy-boy, but if you want to drag your species into this conflict, be my guest! I bet those fairies over there are your personal playthings, eh?"

Samuel and Xena exchange several blows, with him flickering around and striking her with telekinetic attacks, while she relies on the raw power of her demonstone armor and Baron-level body to tank the blows with ease. Occasionally, a high-caliber sniper round fired by one of Samuel's allies will glance off Xena's armor, but she ignores the mice in favor of the more interesting opponent.

"Believe what you want, you arrogant bloodskin bitch." Samuel snarls. "I hate your kind. I hate all of you! Demons like you killed my brother! And I will NOT stand here and listen to you call me a god-damned fairy!"

Seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is, indeed, flickering around via fairy magic, Samuel confuses Xena with his resistance to the label. She eventually shakes her head, attributing his denial to some need for secrecy. Perhaps he's come here to assist the humans without the other fairies knowing. This might even be a conspiracy that goes right to the top!

But Xena doesn't care. Her days of scheming are over. Now, she is only a pawn working for Mephisto, lacking all agency.

She'd rather take out her rage on the annoying fairy-boy buzzing around her head!

Xena kicks the Labyrinth's floor, sending a spray of debris not only at Samuel, but the troopers behind him. These pebbles and rocks fly like high-caliber bullets, glancing off their armor, but also chipping the T-REX's in various places. The sheer strength behind even a mid-level demon's kick allows them to weaponize their environment with ease!

"Knock it off!" Samuel says, lunging toward Xena. Just before he can punch her head into the ground, an attack strikes him from the side.

A burst of... feathers?!

Indeed, feathers harder than steel rush at Samuel, stabbing into his Rhino and causing it serious damage. The armor system rapidly repairs the damage through its internal nanite storage, and Samuel jerks his head toward the attacker.

Raven, the Duke of Feathers, taunts Samuel. "Xena! Take care of those small fry! I'll handle this little fairy myself!"

"Hey!" Xena snaps. "You're not my boss! I wanna fight the fairy!"

"Do you? Then fight me first, idiot. Ca-caw!! I'm a Duke, so my word goes! Don't like it, I'll beat you down and embarrass you right in front of these humans!"

Xena grimaces. She realizes that as a Baron, and one lacking any magic, she hasn't a chance of defeating her Duke-level 'ally.' Raven would mop the floor with her face!

"Y-you! Fine! I'll kill the stupid humans! But after I'm done, I'm coming back to take down this fairy!"

Samuel grits his teeth. He wants to stop Xena, but compared to the terrifying threat of a Demon Duke, Xena isn't anything at all! Not only is Raven a Duke, but a long-lived, fully matured entity who fought during the Energy Wars!

He's a terrifying foe!

Raven flaps his wings. He leaps into the sky, then dive-bombs Samuel to try and kill him in one overbearing attack.

"Never should have come here, mystery fairy-man!"

Samuel flickers to the side, narrowly evading the attack as Raven crashes into the floor. Samuel fires off multiple telekinetic blasts, trying to knock his enemy away or slow him down, but Raven shrugs them off with ease.

"Hahaha! So you're a male fairy?" Raven laughs, relishing in the moment. "Maybe you weren't lying after all! Maybe you really are just a human! This magic is pathetic! The male fairies I know are peak powerhouses! They can go toe-to-toe with Dukes, let alone Emperors! But you're more like a baby waving around a magic wand! Did the Fairy Queens send you here to temper you? Hmm! I wonder what will happen if I pluck your little wings! What are they going to do? KILL ME? HAHAHA! I'M ALREADY DEAD!"

Raven flaps his wings. He rushes toward Samuel at a frightening speed, using his armored chest as a battering ram. Samuel hastily conjures a force field, but Raven breaks it with ease, slams into him, and sends him flying backward!

Samuel crashes into the dirt. He bounces off the ground twice before grinding to a halt. Protected by his Rhino, he doesn't suffer any injuries, but his T-REX shudders under the impact of that blow.

Samuel flickers to his feet, but his heart turns cold as he sees Xena casually marching into the battle lines of his fellow soldiers.

Humanity's Finest unload bullets into the undead rushing their position. Burner demons mix with undead Warpers as well as Burrowers. The Burners fling fireballs into their midst to try and smoke the human's vision, as well as heat up their suits. The Burrowers crush several people under falling rocks and boulders, killing them on the spot, while the Warpers continuously summon more grunts of different types to charge these people.

At the same time, the humans don't fail to notice Xena's approach. The problem is, none of them are nearly as equipped to deal with a Baron as Samuel is!

At least, with the sole exception of one human.

Private Ashley McCarthy!

Unlike the other people around her, Ashley is the sole person besides Samuel to have an S-rank species compatibility through her Power Glove.

And like Samuel, she finds her species to be... undesirable.

"Dammit! Nobody's ever going to want to date me if I pop this... but I don't have a choice!"

Seeing the imminent catastrophe of a Demon Baron marching toward her comrades, Ashley no longer hesitates. She activates her Power Glove and begins to morph inside her

armor.

Her muscles triple in size. Her height increases. Her T-REX adjusts itself to conform to her new parameters.

Her comrades gasp in shock as Ashley jumps from five feet tall to nearly eight!

She towers above everyone, easily drawing Xena's gaze.

"What the- another aberrant? These humans are weird!"

Hardly has Xena registered this random new threat before Ashley begins to thunder toward her. Her feet slam into the dirt! Her stride allows her to wade through the undead without even flinching!

Ashley lifts up her service rifle, transforms it into a specially customized Greathammer Mode made just for her, and brings it down on her enemy's heads.

Splatter!!

She kills five undead at a time while swimming through their ranks toward her opponent. Xena jumps toward her, not sensing any particular magic flow, and lunges her fist toward Ashley's chest.

But Ashley's hammer moves at a speed far faster than its size would imply. She swings it in an upward arc toward the incoming Baron of Collection.

BOOM!

The hammer crashes into Xena's stomach and sends her flying high into the air. Xena screams involuntarily under the power of that strike, before crashing into the ceiling five hundred feet above. She tumbles away and falls to the ground, halfway across the entire battlefield, ultimately landing in a heap.

Ashley doesn't revel in this victory, however.

Instead, she grumbles under her breath.

"...that damn demon bitch, can't believe she made me use the *Orc transformation!* God, I hope nobody sees me like this. I'll die of embarrassment!"

Part 469: Humans Are Insects!

Samuel Baker breathes a momentary sigh of relief as he sees Ashley's transformation. As her superior officer, he's well-aware of her abilities and her S-Rank Power Glove status. Among humanity's military, fewer than twenty people have such a high aptitude for non-human species, and none of them have dual S-Rank compatibilities.

He knows well the power such a high ranking can unleash. She might actually be able to push back the Baron of Collection... at least for a time.

But unfortunately, Samuel doesn't have the ability to focus on how Ashley is handling herself. He has his own problems!

The Duke of Feathers chuckles evilly. "Whether you're a fairy or a human doesn't matter to me. You've thrown your lot in with the Wordsmith, so I'll crush you all the same!"

Raven *ca-caws* at Samuel, then flaps his wings to rush toward him. Samuel flickers to the side and tries to avoid Raven's attack, but the Duke's movements are frighteningly fast! He follows Samuel's mana-trail to perceive where he'll reappear, then switches gears to launch steel-like feathers from his body at the pseudo-fairy!

"Damn!" Samuel curses.

Lacking a ranged weapon, he can't unleash attacks on the Duke of Feathers from afar, and while his Rhino Exosuit is the strongest model Phoebe Hiro has ever made, it's nowhere near capable of tanking attacks from High Demons!

This puts Samuel in quite a predicament.

With only his fairy abilities keeping him alive, but lacking any sort of formal training in what fairies can actually do, he repeatedly has to rely on his instincts to stay half a step ahead of Duke Raven. If he lands a successful claw swipe, he could rip Samuel's armor and body to shreds!

Quickly, Samuel summons a hasty illusion. He waves his hand, causing two more apparitions of himself to appear, then one of them flies to the right while the other flies to the left. Raven continues charging at his main body, but he instantly swaps positions with the one fleeing to the right.

"Nice try!" Raven cackles, instantly locking onto his new position. "Do you think a cheap little trick like that can keep me from finding you? Your magic's so sloppy an Imp could follow your trail!"

"DAMN!" Samuel curses again! Raven doggedly locks onto him, firing even more feathers from his arms while new ones grow to replace the old.

Despite 'only' being feathers, each one is individually the size of a dagger, and they somehow weigh almost 500 pounds! When the feathers *whiff* past Samuel, they crash into the ground, or other random undead in the area, smiting those monsters dead by crushing them under the weight of an anvil!

Samuel tries not to think about what would happen if these sharpened cannonballs were to strike any part of his body.

But still, while the feathers are fast and dangerous, he can still manage to keep his distance from Raven by relying on his fairy magic, and even when torrents of feathers fly at him, they only ever strike his afterimage.

God, I hope this is the limit of Raven's abilities... Samuel thinks.

But how can a Demon Duke be so simple?

As Ashley battles against Xena, Samuel also tries to keep Raven busy by holding her attention.

"You're not so scary, bird-brain!" Samuel taunts, while continuously monitoring his surroundings for danger. "I can do this all day!"

"What an arrogant little moth." Raven taunts right back, firing another wave of feathers for Samuel to dodge. "Do you think I'm taking you the slightest bit seriously? The mightiest Fairy is nothing before a Demon Emperor, and you are *far* from capable of matching up to your peers. I've yet to see a single Formation from you, or any interesting tricks, or traps... what is your element, I wonder? What field do you specialize in? I'm betting you don't even know!"

Samuel winces. He realizes his opponent right. He's only chatted with Blinker on a surface-level and the two of them have never been particularly close. Samuel doesn't know how fairy magic works, but instinctively feels he could be doing so much more with it... if only he knew what he didn't know!

The lack of information stifles his magic! He can only fire off halfhearted bursts of telekinesis, or teleport around in a way that Raven can easily follow with her eyes. Any other decent fairy would easily be able to befuddle her senses, but his usage of mana is so crude and childlike that Raven easily identifies his lack of combat experience.

"I have an idea!" Raven suddenly says. "Let's make this a little more fun."

At once, all of the feathers Raven fired at Samuel but 'missed' suddenly explode! Five hundred feathers, previously littered around the area seemingly at 'random,' detonate like grenades, spraying metallic feather-down all over the battlefield!

An instant later, the down spreads across the entire area, covering the undead and Samuel both in fine, hair-like metallic strings that gently float on the breeze.

Samuel comes under immense pressure!

Each individual thread of down doesn't seem the slightest bit frightening, but as it collects and attaches to his T-REX, Samuel's speed rapidly begins to drop. His Rhino's weight increases by 20%, then 50%...

Soon, its weight doubles!

"What the hell?!" Samuel cries in frustration, as even his fairy magic starts having trouble keeping him aloft. "What did you do to me?!"

Raven sneers contemptuously at the struggling human. He doesn't even launch more attacks, merely laughing to himself as Samuel's flight speed drops more and more by the second, along with his elevation. Raven's fellow undead also start to slow down, as if trapped in molasses. Their bodies struggle to remain upright while the weight of multiple anvils clings to their skin and bones.

"If you were a genuine fairy powerhouse, that little trick wouldn't have worked. But you're clearly some fledgling prince they sent out to help the humans, so you're greener than a fish's gills. You don't even have a weak Fairy Barrier surrounding that fancy combat armor, so you can't ward away my Feather Snow. I'm afraid if I bully you any more, our fun will be over and I'll have to go back to killing those weak little piss-ant humans. And that would sure be boring!"

Samuel grimaces at Raven's description of the 'battle.' So far, he's been fighting to stay alive, while his enemy has only leisurely launched attacks from a distance to scare the piss out of him. Not once has he come even the slightest bit closer to beating the Duke, let

alone injuring him. Raven's feathers are at least ten times more durable than his own nanite-based armor. It's as if she wears a set of full armor that perfectly adheres to her skin!

"So you're just toying with me, huh?" Samuel grimaces, directing a hateful glare at his enemy. "Like all demons... you only look down on us humans!"

"And why shouldn't I?" Raven posits. "If you truly are some human borrowing the power of a fairy, it would explain why you're so pathetic at using it. You'll never compare to the majesty of a High Demon. Humans are worthless, weak little insects!"

* * *

At the same time as Raven bullies Samuel, Private Ashley McCarthy finds herself locked in deadly combat with Xena, the Baron of Collection. However, with her opponent only being a Baron, Ashley has a much more manageable time fighting her.

That's because Ashley possesses an S-rank compatibility with the Orc species. And unlike fairies, Orcs are all about brute strength. Ashley's combat training translates perfectly into her body's physical transformation!

After smashing Xena up into the ceiling with her greathammer, Ashley chases after the Baron, and the two of them engage in direct physical combat!

Ashley's greathammer swings toward Xena, but the Baron doesn't stupidly try to block the terrifying attack. She dodges it, then pulls out a longsword made out of Demonstone and stabs at an opening in Ashley's defenses.

But that opening is a fake-out! Ashley deliberately leaves her kidney open to a stab so that when Xena moves in for the attack, she can release her grip on the hammer with one hand, then bring the side of her fist down on Xena's head.

BANG!!

Ashley slams Xena's helmet and sends her sprawling into the dirt. She instantly recovers, but still appears pissed at the trickery on display.

"So you humans can transform into other species! Must be one of your Wordsmith's new abilities, huh?" Xena grimaces, easily identifying the truth much more easily than Raven did. "And you've become an orc! I wonder what sort of ugly guy you are under that armor, eh? You should take it off so we can have a fair fight!"

"I'm NOT ugly!" Ashley roars. "I'm a FAIR and DAINTY girl! I'm BEAUTIFUL, you undead witch!"

Contrasting with her eight-foot-tall height and somewhat guttural-sounding voice, Ashley's screams of anger sound more like a flummoxed denial to Xena's ears than a declaration of truth.

When Ashley starts swinging her Greathammer around again, Xena still has to continuously dodge and evade, lest what remains of her life be snuffed out on the spot!

Time after time, Ashley's hammer barely misses Xena, making her hair stand on end.

Even as a Baron protected by Demonstone and wrapped in the magic of undeath, she can still feel pain!

At the same time, despite 'only' being a Baron, she is still far superior to any average Orc. It's not that Ashley's Orc transformation has made her capable of contesting Barons, but that her default T-REX model has also improved her strength and speed. She can just barely rival Xena's physical parameters while also standing several heads taller than her.

But, despite matching up to a Demon Baron in many ways, Ashley still has one severely lacking parameter...

Her defense.

Xena slashes her sword and manages to tear apart a strip of armor across Ashley's chest, biting into the woman's orc-body and spraying blood. Ashley's new species allows her to mostly ignore the pain and continue fighting while her injuries rapidly heal, but unfortunately, Orcs, Trolls, and Ogres are very different monster species. Trolls are the ones with enhanced cellular regeneration, while Orcs are only a bit above average.

Ashley manages to land a glancing blow on Xena with her excellent combat training, but Xena is no slouch. She's a long-lived demon who has survived since the end of the Energy Wars. She's fought in countless mock battles, as well as battles for her survival. She even fought in the Final Battle against angelkind!

Even if Ashley manages to land a full-impact blow with her hammer, Xena's demonic body is much hardier than her own, and the Demonstone Armor only reinforces that defense to ludicrous levels! The worst impact will only cause her a few moments of dizziness and pain before she recovers!

Ashley lands three mighty blows on her opponent over the next few minutes, while Xena carves across Ashley's chest and legs ten times. The damage starts to add up, weakening Ashley further!

"Hahaha!" Xena laughs. "You're getting slower, little human! Orcs are indeed fearsome enemies, but that's not because of their bodies! It's because they are warriors bred from birth and bathed in blood! By contrast, you're just a little human girl harnessing the strength of another species!"

Xena lunges forward and rears her fist back. Ashley tries to punch her away, but Xena dodges that attack and brings her armored fist crashing into Ashley's thigh-bone, making the woman scream in pain and collapse into the dirt. Then Xena snaps her leg up into Ashley's lowered head, blasting apart the armor protecting her face and snapping her whole body into an inverted U-shape! Ashley falls unconscious as Xena brutally beats her with this two-hit combo, showing off the full prowess of a Demon Baron!

"Hah! And just like that, my opponent's out like a light!" Xena cackles at Ashley's collapsed figure. "Nice try, humans! But you'll never compare to a glorious demon! You're nothing but an insect to me!"

Xena hops over Ashley's unconscious figure. She stands next to the human's head, with its slowly-regrowing nanites that attempt to protect her most vulnerable body part. Still in her Orc form, Ashley doesn't look at all like a human, but Xena isn't fooled.

She raises her foot up to stomp Ashley's head into paste, but... at that moment...

A swarm of bugs skitters across the ground and starts climbing up Xena's armor!

"Ahh! What the hell?!" Xena exclaims. "Ew! EWW! Bugs, yuck! Why are there so many?!"

These bugs consist almost entirely of ants, but among them are scattered numbers of cockroaches. They quickly find the small gaps in Xena's armor and crawl inside, making her shiver and jump around in disgust.

"No, no, eww, gross! Get out of my armor! Aaah!! I hate bugs!!"

At the same time, while Xena shrieks at her unexpected predicament, Raven starts to move toward Samuel.

"You'll never compare to the majesty of a High Demon. Humans are worthless, weak little insects!"

She unleashes her full power, racing toward the little human while her Iron Down cripples his movement and makes his speed plummet. Even motioning with his hands comes more slowly due to their increased weight.

But before Raven can land the expected, casual blow...

A bee flies into the airspace between her and her opponent.

A simple little buzzy-bee... a Yellow Jacket from the remains of Earth.

An instant later, the bee suddenly explodes in size, transforming from the size of a grape to a bowling ball, and then to a beach ball.

As its size explodes, it begins to reshape itself, turning into a female demon. A Demon Emperor, none other than Kiari, the Emperor of Pestilence!

Kiari transforms out of her Bug Form directly in the path of Raven's charge!

"Shit!" Raven screams, an instant before the back of Kiari's palm casually smashes into her head.

BOOM!!

Raven goes flying!

She hurtles to the side, bounces off the ground, skids and flips until crashing into a heap of other undead, breaking their bones from the force of her heavy body.

Kiari casually shakes off the numbness in her hand and scowls at the fallen Duke.

"I don't like your insults toward insects. They are my friends!"

Kiari grins at her fallen opponent. But, after several long seconds of Raven laying motionless on the ground, Kiari's heart skips a beat.

"Oh... oh my GOSH! Did I kill her?! I didn't mean to! I must have used too much strength!"

Kiari quickly runs over to Raven's prone body. As she draws closer, she senses the weak emanations of life bubbling within Raven's consciousness.

"Wait! Don't die!" Kiari cries. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I just wanted to look cool for a moment! I didn't mean to hit you so hard! Maybe I can get you back to Samantha and she can heal you!"

Raven lies on the ground, her brain utterly dazed by that one accidental, casual tap from the Emperor of Pestilence. As Kiari sobs uncontrollably about accidentally beating

the shit out of her by pure reflex, Raven can only think one thing...

Life is so unfair.

At the same time, Kiari's swarm of insects drives Xena insane. Her entire body becomes itchy as the insects crawl all over her skin, biting and nibbling at her in a way that finally forces her to start yanking the demonstone off and throwing it aside so she can slap herself silly.

"Gross! GROSS! Disgusting!!" Xena cries, her long red hair now infested with thousands of ants. Without any access to magic, she doesn't have a way to kill the bugs faster than they can arrive.

Suddenly, a praying mantis mixed amidst the thousands of other bugs increases in size until it becomes as big as Xena herself. Xena notices the newcomer, but before she can react, the insect swats downward with one of its powerful forelimbs.

Snap! THUNK!

It grabs Xena's head and slams her against the dirt, knocking her out and ending her threat.

At the same time, many other bugs grow in size and charge into the undead hordes, ripping apart the monsters and demons under Mephisto's employ, finally clearing up the threat they've faced valiantly for so long!

Samuel, seeing that the situation has been resolved, breathes a sigh of relief. He teleports to Kiari's side and frowns at the defeated figure of Duke Raven, feeling a bit stifled in his chest at how easily Kiari dealt with the demoness who was toying with him before.

"What are you crying about?" Samuel asks, his tone slightly angry. "And where have you been? We lost track of you right before the fight began! A lot of people died because you weren't here!"

Kiari winces. "I'm sorry, Samuel. I was there with you one second, but then suddenly I wasn't. I found myself in a totally different part of the Labyrinth, miles away. I had to make my way back here. I think Mephisto teleported me."

"Well, at least you're here now." Samuel says. "Thanks for the save. If you'd come a few minutes later... I'd probably be dead."

He glances in Ashley's direction.

"And the Private certainly WOULD be."

Kiari glances around the battlefield.

In the sky above, Uriel does battle against the Brutes.

In the distance, the fairies try to fight against the horde of monsters streaming out of the Death Gates.

Somewhere unseen, Blinker battles Zamiel.

And, in a secluded and dark section at a distant corner of the battlefield, rumblings of fire and brimstone occasionally shake the Labyrinth.

Kiari cracks her neck.

"We're dealing with a Necromancer. All he does is send his minions out to fight for him."

She smiles.

"Two can play at that game."

Part 470: Soul Stealer Strikes!

Inside Emperor Yama's Shadow Realm, Beelzebub fights a battle even more difficult than when he was only a Baron battling his master, the Duke of Reptiles. Yama does not hold back, and instead unleashes the full power of darkness on the Emperor of Hellfire!

Yama's body becomes 15 feet tall. He assumes the figure of a massive troll-like beast with talons for claws. At the same time, his Shades and Shadow-walkers all become temporarily empowered to the level of Demon Duke and higher!

Multiple beads of light glow on Yama's forehead. He charges at Beelzebub and slashes his claws, forcing Beelzebub to fireport backward. But when he does, the flames get snuffed out, forcing him to start even more fires in the swirling maelstrom of darkness.

Yama's domain is truly terrifying. Any source of light rapidly fades, ultimately vanishing mere seconds afterward and making it hard for his opponent to track Yama's movement. Even Beelzebub's demonic vision has trouble tracking the Dark Giant as Yama chases after him.

"Hehehehe!" Yama cackles. "We have not unleashed this power in at least an eon! How unfortunate that you will be the first demon to fall victim to our machinations, Beelzebub!"

Beelzebub retorts by launching a fireball at Yama's face.

"You talk too much!"

As the fireball races toward Yama, it suddenly slows down, shudders, and reverses direction!

Beelzebub jumps to the side, slightly shocked by the reversal of his magic. The fireball explodes harmlessly against the floor, igniting a momentary fire before quickly fading away.

"The hell?!" Beelzebub asks. "You can manipulate flames? Since when?!"

"We are an ancient Emperor." Yama says, taking a menacing step toward Beelzebub. "We were once a master of all magic. As it turned out, shadows were the thing we enjoyed playing with the most! But for now, we can temporarily dip into our old abilities so long as it means defeating the likes of you!"

Iron chains burst out of the ground. They snap onto Beelzebub's right leg, causing him to stumble and fall! He quickly blasts the chains apart and fireports a distance away, but in that brief moment, he catches a glimpse of Yama doing something odd.

Yama holds a red ruby in his blackened hands, then snaps his fingers, causing the gem to burst into dust. At once, his affinity to fire magic increases ever further, allowing him to snuff out all the lingering flames in the area.

Beelzebub tries to fling a fireball at Yama, but hardly has it left his hand before it extinguishes.

His eyes narrow. *I know what I saw. Yama has an ability similar to Orias!*

Indeed, Beelzebub knows about Orias's 'unique' ability to turn gems into elemental magic, albeit on a temporary basis. However, never would he have imagined Yama also possessed such a power!

Was Yama the originator of this power? Did he bestow it upon Orias for some unknown reason? Or is the truth the opposite? Perhaps Yama somehow obtained the power from Orias!

Vines and chains continue erupting from the floor to try and bind Beelzebub. He wises up to this tactic and starts dancing around to avoid ensnarement, but just when he starts to match Yama's beat, the Emperor of Shadows fires off two lightning blasts!

Kzzat!

The two beams of electrified light lance into Beelzebub's chest, badly injure him, and cause him to momentarily lose motor control. Beelzebub barely gasps out a cry of pain before the chains and vines pursuing him finally manage to wrap around his arms and legs. He tries to fight back, but Yama reaches him, then rears back his huge claws and rakes them down across Beelzebub's ensnared form.

RIIIIP!

Yama cleaves Beelzebub's body with a brutal claw attack! He severs the Emperor of Hellfire into half a dozen pieces, killing Beelzebub on the spot.

Naturally, this 'death' won't stop Beelzebub for long. Yama summons two explosive orbs of electrical energy, then blasts Beelzebub's remains, causing the Labyrinth to rumble and shake, even outside of his shadow domain!

For a brief moment, Beelzebub appears to have been entirely erased from reality. But it doesn't take long before some unseen clump of cells begins rapidly regrowing a short distance away.

"Gah!" Yama growls. "Why does Beelzebub get the most useful power?! Infinite life should be OUR domain, not his!"

Yama suddenly pauses, as if realizing something.

"...Wait."

While Beelzebub's body rapidly regenerates, Yama's heart turns cold. He gazes at the Emperor of Hellfire with a completely different expression, as if realizing something he should have realized before.

Beelzebub completes his regeneration. When he opens his eyes, he finds himself bound even more tightly by Yama's chains and vines, all manipulated through the same powers Orias uses.

The Emperor of Hellfire quickly begins to bubble up the flame energy within himself to break free, but before he can complete his great escape, Yama pounces on him!

The Emperor of Shadows grabs onto Beelzebub's face with his huge claws, confusing and startling Beelzebub. As he thrashes around and tries to escape, Beelzebub suddenly feels a strange 'tugging' sensation attaching to his soul. It begins pulling away a portion of his core energy, making Beelzebub cry out in muffled screams through Yama's palm as the excruciating agony of his soul being pulled apart makes him long for death.

Moments later, that small but significant portion of Beelzebub's soul tears away and flies into Yama's palm, instantly knocking Beelzebub unconscious!

When he awakens, Beelzebub finds that the bindings holding him have drastically lessened. He quickly burns and melts them away, then staggers to his feet, only to see Yama laying facedown on the ground in the distance, his whole body violently twitching.

"Aaah! Aaargh! Aaah! So... good!" Yama cries. "This pain... this pleasure! What a treat your soul was, Beelzebub! Aahahaha!"

Beelzebub shivers. He doesn't feel any different from before, aside from a slight hint of disorientation, but Yama feels monstrously more powerful. As Yama rises to his feet, Beelzebub realizes that he can feel the connection to his severed soul inside of Yama!

"What have you done?!" Beelzebub snaps. "You thief! Give me back my soul!"

"Hehehe. Don't be so greedy, Beelzebub." Yama taunts. "We only took a little nibble. You'll be just fine! Now come and attack us, if you dare! We'd like to play with our new magic, if you don't mind!"

Beelzebub hesitates. He glowers at the Emperor of Shadows while fighting off a maddening headache.

I can't keep letting Yama toy with me. Beelzebub thinks. I have to go on the offense!

Beelzebub blasts fire from his feet. He rockets upward, while Yama remains standing in the same place, watching as the Emperor of Hellfire races a hundred feet into the air. Beelzebub begins conjuring a powerful orb of fire, rapidly cycling and spinning it between his palms to increase its heat and ferocity.

But all the while, Yama's monstrous body remains in place, grinning up at Beelzebub with a strange eagerness in his eyes.

Finally, Beelzebub launches the concentrated orb of nuclear hellfire at his foe below. It races toward Yama at the speed of sound, clearing the gap in a split-second!

But just before it can explode, Yama's giant hand snaps toward it.

He grabs the ball of fire, catches it, and suspends its spinning form in his grasp!

"Hahaha! The permanent ability to manipulate hellfire! You've truly given us a wonderful gift, Beelzebub!" Yama laughs.

Beelzebub's blood runs cold. He already suspected this might happen, but seeing it in action makes him feel ashamed for allowing Yama to take advantage of him.

"You stole my power..." Beelzebub mutters.

"Copied it, actually! But who cares about such a small detail? You and I are pretty much the same now! Except you only have one elemental ability, while we have countless more! You've lost the ability to hurt us, Beelzebrat, while we have reaped a terrific bounty!"

Beelzebub narrows his eyes.

"No ability can be that convenient. If you truly had the power to copy other demon's powers, you'd long have laid waste to all of the Seven Hells. Yet, all this time, you've stuck to only wielding the power of shadow."

Beelzebub cocks his head.

"I wonder why *that* is?"

"Believe what you want." Yama chortles. "We simply like to live a quiet life, playing with our wenches. Ruling over a bunch of Hells? Boring! A waste of time! Power means nothing if you have no way to enjoy it! Only the pursuit of pleasure is capable of making eternity worth living!"

Saying so, Yama fires the concentrated flame back at Beelzebub. Beelzebub easily catches the fireball and prevents it from blowing up in his face, not that the heat would have hurt him anyway.

For a brief moment, the two remain poised to attack, each one wondering who will make the first move.

Beelzebub continues spiraling the flame in his hand.

Then, he nods.

He launches toward Yama, this time with the flame kept close to his chest.

"Let's see if you're as mighty of a demon as you claim!"

Beelzebub holds out the flame in front of himself. But just before he crashes into Yama, he detonates that concentrated energy with a terrific BANG, exploding it in a massive sphere of fire that blasts away several Shades who were too close nearby, while also spreading fire and fury in a wide berth.

An instant later, Beelzebub begins fireporting around, all across the burning landscape, appearing here and there so fast that Yama quickly loses track of his real body and his after-images.

Foop! Foop! Foop!

Suddenly, Beelzebub starts launching hastily-crafted fireballs as he teleports around. Some of them he flings at Yama's front, back, and sides. Others he throws out into the darkness.

Yama easily catches and deflects most of the flames Beelzebub sends his way, while the others strike his body but are so weak they can't do any damage.

As Yama tries to keep track of Beelzebub's rapid fireportation, he finds himself metaphorically scratching his head.

The heck is this idiot doing? Yama thinks. Beelzy's just wasting a bunch of mana! He isn't accomplishing anything at all!

Then, amidst the barrage of weak and ineffective fiery projectiles, Yama notices a strange object flying at him.

The heck? Is that Beelzebub's arm? Why would he-

BOOOM!!!

At some point, Beelzebub tore his own goddamned arm off and flung it at Yama! By the time Yama noticed, it was already too late!

The arm detonates in a terrific explosion of nuclear energy, blasting and irradiating Yama's body with nuclear hellfire, sending him flying backward while screaming bloody murder.

As Yama hurtles away from the explosion point, Beelzebub fireports into his path. While one of his arms rapidly regrows, he grins wickedly.

"You're not as clever as you think, Yama."

Yama's pupils shrink to pinpricks as Beelzebub reveals a charging blast of atomic energy held inside the palm of his unsevered hand. The Emperor of Shadows tries to activate his powers to escape his doom, but he's too slow!

BOOOM!!

Beelzebub smashes the explosive nuclear magic into Yama's monstrous spine, driving the wind out of his chest and obliterating half his body.

Yama sails away, slams into the ground, spins, flips, and crashes to a stop!

He skids to a halt and lays unmoving for several seconds. Half his back appears disintegrated, though it does begin to slowly regenerate at a pace far slower than what Beelzebub can accomplish. His sizzled, charred black flesh smokes ruinously, betraying the agony he must feel.

After reeling for a few moments, Yama shudders, then starts to pick himself up. He coughs up huge wads of blood and glowers at Beelzebub.

The Emperor of Hellfire, meanwhile, pants heavily. Beelzebub wipes his sweaty forehead, having expended a vast amount of mana to concentrate as much nuclear energy

as he could into that attack. Despite his temporary exhaustion, he can't help but grin at Yama's mangled form.

"What good is mimicking a fraction of someone else's power?" Beelzebub asks. "Idiot. You should stick to the shadows, where you belong."

Yama can't offer a witty retort. His monstrous form is so badly injured that he can barely even move. His regenerative abilities, stolen from Beelzebub, aren't nearly as potent as his opponent's. They simply work too slowly to allow him to quickly return to a combat-ready state.

Beelzebub notices Yama's pained silence. He smiles.

"While you're recovering, I have a few questions I'd like to ask." Beelzebub says. While he is aware of Yama's recovery, he doesn't pay the Emperor of Shadows much attention, clearly not giving a damn about his supposed threat level.

"Pah!" Yama coughs, spitting blood on the ground. "And they would be?"

"How did I obtain the Phoenix's Feather?" Beelzebub asks. "I've known I possessed the power of Nirvana for a while now, but I wasn't aware *other* demons knew. So how did all of you find out?"

Yama takes this opportunity to answer Beelzebub's questions, if only to stall for time so that he can heal himself.

"You were only an ordinary imp..." Yama says slowly. "Then one day, a strange entity appeared in the Labyrinth. The First Hell tracked its position as it rushed toward you, then entered your soul. You were too spiritually dull to notice its arrival, but the rest of us were not so foolish."

Beelzebub frowns. "You're saying... the Phoenix Feather chose me at random? But where did it come from?"

"How should we know?" Yama asks helplessly. "You lucked out, brat! There's nothing more to it! What, do you think you were chosen because you were special? Like we said, you're not special at all! You're just one fortunate little imp-bastard!"

Yama repeats his taunts from earlier, but this has no effect on Beelzebub at all. He ignores Yama's goading to focus on some underlying hints behind his words.

"You don't find that even a little odd?" Beelzebub asks. "That I simply obtained the Phoenix Feather at random? Is it not possible... this could be someone's plot? Perhaps

they gave it to me for some ulterior motive?"

Yama grimaces. "Still trying to build up a conspiracy? Think what you like. We've told you all we know. We don't give a damn if you believe us or not..."

The Shadow Emperor's body finally reaches the end of its healing. He stealthily begins to build up his power while hiding a sneaky smile from Beelzebub.

As for the Emperor of Hellfire, Beelzebub lazily blinks his eyes. Already, his mana has regenerated due to some 'unknown' influence, restoring him to full. He easily detects Yama's power amassing in a secret place and rolls his eyes.

"Don't try it, Yama. You've already lost."

"Lost, have we?!" Yama snarls, as a hungry look appears in his eyes.

Suddenly, Yama snaps his fingers behind his back, consuming the power of an unseen gemstone. He flickers into the shadows and reappears at Beelzebub's right side with a massive orb of frost magic spiraling in his palm.

"Your one weakness!" Yama shrieks, while thrusting his palm toward Beelzebub's side.

But before he can detonate that ice-bomb, Beelzebub suddenly motions with his hand. He summons a flame whip in his grasp, then makes a snapping motion with his arm, sending the tip of the whip flying directly into the path of Yama's attack.

BOOOM!!

The whip-tip detonates with a micro-burst of nuclear energy, reversing Yama's attack and blasting it back in his face!

"Aaaargh!"

Yama shrieks miserably as his ice magic reverses its momentum and blows off both of his arms. A hundred stalactite-spears of frozen liquid impale his body as he flies away, this time sailing into the distant reaches of his Shadow Realm.

He crashes against the furthest 'wall', and the sheer impact of his body causes the shadows around him to lose their potency. They break apart and melt away, returning himself and Beelzebub back to the battlefield, which still remains shrouded by Mephisto's Dark Mist, but no longer appears half as oppressive after Yama's defeat.

Beelzebub smirks. Before Yama can start to recover, Beelzebub lunges toward him, conjuring twin nuclear fireballs in both of his hands.

"Nooo!!" Yama howls in fear.

BOOM-BOOM!!

Beelzebub blasts Yama into a miserable mess of blackened tendrils barely clinging to life. He damn near kills Yama with his nuclear hellfire, ultimately forcing Yama to disperse his monstrous form and flee into the Dark Mist.

After Yama runs for his life, Beelzebub takes a moment to savor his victory.

"Not bad for my first fight as an Emperor." He muses out loud. "Seems I'm still a cut above my kin."

* * *

Yama, now badly injured to the point even his regeneration won't save him, slithers over to Mephisto's side.

He coughs weakly and reforms his body, though it appears a sorry, miserable sight.

"Kah! Kah! Mephisto! We managed to delay the Emperor of Hellfire a while... but he was quite a terrifying foe. Is the ritual ready yet?! We must ascend as quickly as possible."

Mephisto glances at his ally, and past him into the distance where Beelzebub stands, taking in the sights.

"You've done well, Yama. It'sss fine if you couldn't defeat him. Here, help me manipulate my undead armiesss..."

Mephisto keeps a close eye on the battlefield. He casually gestures to a spell symbol before himself, one which is actually a micro-formation capable of manipulating whole armies of the undead, as well as his other 'tricks' he's prepared for the invaders.

Yama glances at the formation. "We are not familiar with this type of magic."

"Neither wasss I." Mephisto says idly, glancing up at Uriel as she battles his Brutes. "But timesss change. Touch the formation and immerssse your sssoul ressonancce into it. You will easssily learn to perceive how the magic worksss."

Yama frowns. Something about Mephisto's words bug him, but he can't quite tell what.

Mephisto notices his hesitation. "Don't tell me you're feeling ssskittisssh after getting your behind handed to you by the Hellfire Emperor? We're both sssso clossse to reaching the next level of demonic power... if you're not ready to take risssksss, then I will deal with

thesse attackersss myssself. Perhaps it would be better if I took the rewardss for myssself too..."

"No! No... no need for that!" Yama says, as his greed gets the better of him. "We agreed to assist you in killing our mutual enemies. Let us see how this 'formation magic' works..."

Yama draws closer to the glyph on the ground, and the spiritual projection of the battlefield hovering above it.

Suddenly, the ground glows beneath Yama's feet. A blood-red field of magic leaps out and wraps around him, ensnaring him in his place!

"What?!" Yama roars, as his stomach sinks. "You- Mephisto! How dare you betray us?!"

The Emperor of Legions slowly grins at his trapped 'ally'.

"Hehehe... that Beelzebub sssoftened you up well. Muddleheaded rapissst fool! You blundered right into my clawsss!"

Before Yama can react, Mephisto suddenly rushes at him. He yanks out a knife wreathed in Death Energy, then pierces it into the force field trapping Yama. With Mephisto already knowing the 'password' to this field, he passes through it as if it isn't even there, and impales Yama's in the back!

"AAAAHHH!!" Yama shrieks.

The Emperor of Shadows tries to fight back, but his movements are tightly constricted. He can barely even move!

All the while, Mephisto flits around outside the force field, stabbing his knife inside it repeatedly, maiming and injuring Yama more and more!

"AAAH! MEPHISTO- AAH! CURSE YOU- AAAHHH!"

Yama's cries of pain quickly weaken. His voice dulls, and his spirit begins to fade.

But before he can fully perish, Mephisto stabs his hand into Yama's skull and grabs hold of his soul!

"Hehehehe! *Thank you for the meal.*" Mephisto says, his tone icy.

RIIIIP!

Mephisto tears Yama's soul out of his body, finally slaying the Emperor of Shadows and causing his body to lose its form. Yama's figure disperses into smoke, which swirls

around inside the red energy shield, unable to escape.

Mephisto eyes the Emperor Soul in his hands hungrily. He chuckles quietly to himself, then disperses the field holding Yama's remnants. The Shadow Emperor's gaseous body disperses to the four winds, never again to roam the mortal coil.

"Killing you on my own would have been sssuch a pain..." Mephisto muses playfully, while holding Yama's struggling soul. "But luckily, thessse foolsss willingly came to give me the presssent I mossst wanted. Kekeke!"

Mephisto hovers to the center of his Baron necromancer minions, where Valac's Lantern levitates. He deposits Yama's soul into it, earning looks of glee from his faithful allies.

"You actually managed to trick that bastard." Ozzar says. "Well done, Master Mephisto. Soon, your ascension will arrive. Soon, you will force the cosmos to submit to the power of the undead."

Mephisto gives an ambiguous smile to Ozzar.

"Sssoon, yesss. Sssoon, I will have all that I *desssire*..."

Part 471: Desperate Deal

Inside a world of fairy illusion magic, Blinker and Zamiel battle with one another, each holding the intent to kill.

Whiff-whiff-whiff!

Bullets traveling at nearly the speed of light continually race at Blinker as she flickers around in the sky above. Zamiel hefts a mighty railgun in his arms, pulling the massive weapon's trigger to launch tiny but frightfully lethal shards of mana-infused metal at the fairy above.

"What's the matter, Butterbitch?" Zamiel taunts. "No time to prepare a spell? Better keep dodging! One hit and you'll die! Hahaha!"

Blinker grimaces. She wants desperately to wave her hands, focus her mind, and crush her enemy, but a single misstep and Zamiel's projectiles will tear through her body, no matter how much magic she uses to protect herself!

The railgun projectiles fly into the fairy barrier enveloping them and travel elsewhere in the Labyrinth, teleported at random through the spatial magic forming this temporary makeshift prison.

"How did you get so strong?!" Blinker snaps. "You weren't an Emperor last time we fought!"

"You can thank your hubby for that." Zamiel replies, firing three more bullets. "Yep, that crocodile soul was pretty great! It helped Big Boss do all sorts of fun things!"

"BASTARD!!" Blinker screams, her eyes turning bloodshot. "GIVE ME KAR BACK!!"

"Get on your knees and beg!"

Blinker suddenly flickers toward Zamiel. She weaves between the incoming bullets, barely avoiding one as it tears through her fluttering skirt, then she fires a telekinetic burst of energy at Zamiel.

"Oof!"

Zamiel gets knocked backward a little and momentarily lowers his railgun to steady himself.

In that instant, Blinker strikes!

She conjures a wall of telekinetic energy around herself, then rushes at him while the phantom of a huge tiger envelops her.

Slash!

Blinker rakes her giant claws at Zamiel, but he jumps backward, then summons a barrier of Qi around himself, hardened mana which functions in a manner not dissimilar to Blinker's own telekinetic energy.

"Good move!" Zamiel sarcastically praises. "But you're not facing a Duke anymore! I'm more than a match for you!"

With both combatants using their own internal reserves to protect themselves, they fashion weapons out of mana and Qi.

Blinker conjures a pair of beautiful but deadly one-handed swords. Their white blades sparkle like daylight scattering across snow, making them difficult to look directly at.

Zamiel summons a single Greatsword, a wickedly curved blade colored red, resembling a dragon's tooth. The very same one he used to fight Kar. He pours a large portion of his mana and Qi into the blade to harden it, making it no less corporeal than any weapon made of demonstone.

Then he and Blinker attack!

They lunge at each other, striking with brute force.

Zamiel's body, that which once belonged to Kar, grants him immense physical power. Coupled with his own prowess as a weapon-master, he can fight like hell to stay alive and push his opponents back.

Meanwhile, Blinker possesses not only the power of a Fairy Queen, but the power of the Sphinx! She partially monsterizes her arms and legs to increase her striking power. Her face becomes somewhat lion-like, giving her a ferocious appearance!

Bang! Bang! Clink-clank! Bang!

Zamiel's sword clashes against Blinker's blades. They trade blows ten times, then twenty. Sometimes Blinker dodges the attack to use her superior speed and follow up with a strike at Zamiel's organs, but the Emperor of War slips away over and over.

At the same time, Blinker doesn't dare to fully connect her swords with Zamiel's greatsword. His striking power is too scary! Each downward or sweeping slash possesses enough might to break both of Blinker's blades. So instead, she constantly ducks and dodges, deflecting his attacks at various angles so her swords don't have to endure too much pressure.

Five minutes pass. Ten minutes. Even twenty.

But the two combatants find that they are equally matched!

Even when Blinker manages to land a strike on Zamiel's body, his Qi barrier protects him. And if she fails to deflect his attacks in time, she still manages to sidestep his large, easily predictable weapon.

"Not bad!" Zamiel says. "You've got some fight in you, woman! I can see why that croc liked you! I bet you were feisty in bed!"

Blinker doesn't bother trading jabs. "Give me back Kar's body and soul, you thief!"

"Or what? You'll kill me?" Zamiel sneers. "Go ahead and try. I've already died once. What's one more time at this point? But what a shame... if you kill me, that reptile's body will turn to dust!"

Blinker's gaze turns cold. She attacks Zamiel again, striking him repeatedly to force him back a few steps.

"If I have to kill you, then I will. Even if it means I never see Kar again. At least I'll have my revenge!"

She lashes out with even more fury than before, monsterizing her body and attuning herself to the Sphinx to further increase her power. Her dainty and beautiful butterfly wings become more muscled and feathery, like those of a gryphon. Her chest and torso sprout thick, woolen fur while her bone density triples.

Her previously weak and dainty sword strikes start packing more of a punch. Zamiel steps back over and over, losing more ground to the Monster Queen.

Even so, Zamiel never appears flustered. He continues to grin and smirk at Blinker, making her feel uneasy.

"You really want your hubby's soul back, eh?" Zamiel asks, suddenly stepping toward Blinker and brutishly shoving her back with a tricky palm strike. "Maybe we can cut a deal!"

Blinker grunts as his palm hits her chest, but his strike doesn't cause her any pain. Her body is much too durable for that.

"Don't try to pull any tricks with me!" Blinker snarls.

But instead of attacking, Blinker hesitates for a moment, gazing at Zamiel with a flicker of interest.

He doesn't miss this fact.

"There are no eternal enemies..." Zamiel says slowly. "Only eternal benefits. I'll let you in on a secret. We sapped Kar's soul of its power, yeah. But he's not dead. That croc's still got some juice left. Big Boss was thinking of snuffing him out, but... maybe you could change our minds. For the right price..."

Blinker narrows her eyes.

"What are you trying to pull?"

"No tricks." Zamiel says, puffing out his chest. "I'm already fulfilling my purpose by keeping you busy. As long as you and I fight, you're not able to help your friends. But... we don't have to stay here, locked in combat. There's another way this skirmish can go. A bit of... *give and take*..."

"Speak plainly." Blinker replies. "My patience for anything a Battle Brother has to say is already less than zero. Let's not forget what you did to Kar's entire family!"

"Right, right. Killed those crocs, me and Duriel did." Zamiel says. "You want it plain? Here goes. I'll give you Kar's soul... but only if you give Big Boss something of equivalent value."

He pauses.

"For example... how about that Sphinx magic, eh? Or maybe you'd rather carry your hubby's curse with you for the rest of your life?"

Blinker's heart skips a beat. "I should have known... that's what you've been angling for this whole time! You're trying to trick me into giving up the power of the Monster Deity!"

"Oh, but you're wrong." Zamiel says quietly. "There's nothing 'tricky' about this. It's a simple trade. A soul for a magical power."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" Blinker asks. "Where is Kar? How do I know his soul is still intact?! Show me!"

Zamiel's smile deepens. He grins at Blinker without holding back his contempt for her love and adoration.

"You want to see him? Here he is."

Zamiel holds up his palm next to his chest. After a moment, a faint glowing orb emerges from a previously hidden gap in his undead body, then hovers into his grasp.

Blinker's eyes widen. "Kar!"

She senses her husband's mana. His weak life appears far dimmer than she'd prefer, but he doesn't appear in danger of dying.

"You see?" Zamiel asks. "He's right here. All you have to do is trade away the Sphinx's power and you can have Kar for yourself."

Blinker's upper lip curls into a snarl. "You sapped him dry! He's barely even alive! Do you really think one soul is worth the price of the Sphinx's magic?!"

Zamiel tilts his long snout upward. He looks down at Blinker with a sneer.

"Well, that's not for me to decide, now, is it? It's entirely up to you whether you think the value proposition is worth the trade..."

Blinker's stomach sinks. She starts to take a step toward Zamiel, but he tightens his grip around Kar's fragile soul, making a crack appear in its glow.

"Ah-ah-ah. No funny movements. One little *squeeze* and hubby goes *pop*. Hahahaha!"

Blinker stands frozen. Unable to walk toward her husband, unable to pull back. The attachment she feels toward the Sphinx's power is nothing at all. She'd happily give it up in a heartbeat if it meant bringing Kar back.

The problem is, she doesn't like Mephisto or Zamiel at all. Hell, even beyond 'not liking' them, she hates their guts! Of all the creatures who could obtain Kar's former power, Mephisto is the absolute last being in existence Blinker would want to give the Sphinx to!

"...How do I know I can trust you?" Blinker asks, glaring daggers at Zamiel. "If I give you the magic first, you could just crush Kar to death!"

"And if I give you him first, you could simply refuse to pass the magic along." Zamiel says, unfazed by her remark. "But Big Boss already thought of that. We'll each activate a Death Promise. I'll promise to give you Kar in exchange for the Sphinx's magic, and you'll do the same. If one of us reneges on the promise... we'll die on the spot."

Blinker slowly nods. "A Death Promise. That... you've clearly thought about this carefully..."

"I'll be blunt." Zamiel says. "We have no more need of the so-called Monster King. His energy is gone. His magic, nonexistent. At this point, an ordinary human would have more use to us than he does. You don't need to worry about us pulling some last-second trick to destroy his soul or screw you over. We don't give a damn if you reunite or not. We only care that we get the Sphinx's magic."

"So... your entire plan hinges on getting me to accept this trade...?" Blinker asks slowly.

"Pff. Nah. Not even." Zamiel responds without missing a beat. "We knew you croc-suckers would come knocking. We have our major goals. This is a minor one. It's a *nice to have*. If we don't get the Sphinx, then whatever. But does that really matter to you? The only thing you should be worrying about is if croc-boy will get to be a daddy for little croc-juniors..."

Zamiel's eyes lower to Blinker's womb in a manner most unsubtle. She grimaces at his gaze, but it doesn't lower the effectiveness of his tactic.

"Our children..." Blinker mutters softly, slowly coming to hate herself more and more by the second.

A minute passes.

Neither side says anything.

Blinker stands in place, wrestling with what she should do. Her eyes twitch. Her grip on her swords strengthens and weakens intermittently as she battles the urge to give in with the urge to attack Zamiel!

But, as she struggles, Zamiel sighs.

"Guess he wasn't that important to you after all."

Zamiel slowly starts to move Kar's soul back toward his chest...

"Wait!" Blinker suddenly cries. "I'll... I'll do it! I'll do it, okay?! I'll pledge the Death Promise..."

Zamiel grins wickedly. "Are you *sure*? It's a bit degrading giving that Sphinx power to the people you hate most, isn't it? I dunno, maybe you should just let the croc stay dead..."

"Shut up! I've made up my mind!" Blinker barks. "Just get this over with!"

Blinker resolutely de-summons her swords. Zamiel follows her lead and does the same.

Then, she begins chanting magical words of power, words which Zamiel mimics. At the same time, the two draw magical letters in the air, visual representations of their pledge.

"On the promise of my future death, I pledge to give this crocodile's soul to the fairy bimbo." Zamiel says.

"On the promise of my future death, I pledge to give the Sphinx's power to the Emperor of War." Blinker says.

"In exchange, I will receive the power of the Sphinx. Then the pledge will end once both parties have acknowledged receipt." Zamiel says.

"In exchange, I will receive my husband Kar's soul. Then the pledge will end once both parties have acknowledged receipt." Blinker says.

They continue following each other's lead, adding more and more protections for their own interests. After engraving these twenty lines on their souls, they recall the powerful magic back inside their bodies and take a moment to breathe heavily. The strain of creating such precise magic and then directly inflicting it as an injury on their souls does not disappear quickly.

After a full minute of recuperating, Blinker demorphs from her Sphinx form back to her base fairy body. She closes her eyes and wills the Sphinx magic to consolidate inside her chest.

"I can't just give you the magic." Blinker says. "Instead, I've made a secret riddle. What I will pass to you is the answer to that riddle. My Death Promise confirms as much."

"I saw that." Zamiel replies. "The method of transfer doesn't matter. If you take Kar's soul but don't give me the Sphinx's magic, you'll die. Not just you, but those croc-kids of

yours. And with you dead, the croc's soul will fade away, too. So I know you won't pull any tricks."

Blinker nods slowly. She looks at Zamiel with an expression of deep distrust and hatred, but in the end, her love for Kar wins out.

She and Zamiel warily step toward each other. They carefully monitor the other person for any intentions of striking out. Even if Blinker attacks Zamiel, so long as she doesn't try to steal Kar's soul, she won't die to the promise. But the same holds true of Zamiel. If he kills Blinker but doesn't take the Sphinx's power, he won't perish either.

This might end up being one huge ploy to get Blinker to lower her guard so he can kill her!

Therefore, Blinker doesn't take him lightly. She never discounts the idea this might be an elaborate trap intended to tie up a 'loose end' by eliminating her.

Despite her fears, Zamiel makes no moves to attack her. He takes the initiative to hand Kar's soul over first, allowing Blinker to finally reach out and grab her husband's remaining life from his clutches.

Blinker snatches Kar out of Zamiel's reptilian claws, terrified he might renege at the last second! She takes several steps back, while Zamiel remains in the same spot, unmoving.

"Three minutes." Zamiel says. "If I don't have that Sphinx magic in three minutes... you're dead. Better inspect hubby's soul quickly. The clock is ticking, fairy bimbo..."

He crosses his arms and leans back, completely confident in his assessment of Blinker's intent.

As for the Fairy Queen...

Blinker lowers her eyes to Kar's soul.

No longer bound by Mephisto or Zamiel's magic, the spirit of her husband can finally speak...

"Butter...fly..." Kar says weakly, his words transmitting to Blinker's mind magically. "You... came for me..."

Blinker's heart sinks. Kar's voice is much, much weaker than she expected.

"Kar! You're... you're barely..."

"Hurgh. I'm not... not in good shape..." Kar says softly. "...did things to me. The bone-man. Smokey. He was... so vicious... but I held on..."

Kar falls silent for an instant. His spirit dims, then brightens again.

"I held on... as long as I could. The torture... it never stopped..."

Tears well up in Blinker's eyes. She listens silently as her husband speaks.

"You... I held on for you..." Kar continues. "It was hard. So hard. Hurgh. But I wouldn't... wouldn't let Smokey break me. And finally... now... I can see you again... happy... makes me so happy..."

His spirit dims again. This time, it stays dim for almost five seconds before brightening once more.

"Kar." Blinker whispers. "You're going to make it, okay? The Wordsmith, I can have Jason-"

"There's no point." Kar interrupts. "Don't bother... my precious, beautiful Butterfly... I'm so glad we could speak again. The Creator... showed me such a kindness."

"Don't give up." Blinker says. "Don't you give up on me, Kar! I'm giving away the Sphinx's magic for you!"

"A bad trade." Kar says simply. "Don't give... Smokey... even one thing. Nothing at all. I'm not worth it..."

"You are!" Blinker says, steeling her heart. She glares daggers at Zamiel, but the Emperor of War continues to smile, unmoved. "You've always been worth it. Because you're the reptile I love. I won't let our babies grow up fatherless!"

With one hand, Blinker holds Kar's soul. She hastily erects a formation around it, magically gluing Kar's soul to her left palm. She allows Kar's soul to leech life from her soul, albeit at a faint rate she won't notice. Then, with her free hand, Blinker conjures an orb of magic containing the answer to her Sphinx Riddle.

She snarls at Zamiel. "Here. Your magic."

Zamiel's eyebrows raise. He steps toward Blinker.

For a brief second, Blinker feels the urge to strike at Zamiel. To attack and kill him with one merciless blow, even if it means her own death!

But she doesn't.

She quietly holds the answer to her Sphinx's Riddle out, and Zamiel takes it.

Zamiel 'unwraps' the magic and smirks.

"Heh. Women. You're really petty, you know that? This isn't even a proper riddle!"

"Just say the *goddamn words*." Blinker hisses.

"Sure, sure. The question is, '*What stupid asshole motherfucker deserves to eat shit and die from eating too much shit?*' And the answer is... '*Zamiel, the Emperor of War!*'"

As Zamiel speaks those words, a surge of magic erupts within Blinker's chest. The Fairy Queen gasps. Her body visibly sags. With a shudder, she almost loses her footing, remaining standing only through her force of will.

At the same time, that surge of magic races out of her body into Zamiel's, empowering him and making his Emperor-level aura begin to rise.

Blinker steps back. As she does, the power of her Death Promise begins to fade. With the terms having been met, both she and Zamiel are released from their magical bonds, freeing them to once again act as they wish.

The Emperor of War releases a deafening roar! The power of the Sphinx makes his aura explode into the heavens! The walls of Blinker's Fairy Mirage shudder as a burst of hyper-violent, feral energy erupts from Zamiel's figure!

For the first time in all of recorded history, the power of the Sphinx has arrived in the grasp of the demons! And not just any demon, but a fully fledged Demon Emperor bursting with magical power!

As Zamiel roars, he begins to laugh.

"Hahahaha! This magic may ultimately belong to Big Boss, but it would be SUCH a shame to let it go to waste! Hahahaha! And the stupid BITCH gave it to me for FREE! Women are the dumbest creatures in existence!!"

He lowers his head, a primal hunger boiling in his reptilian eyes.

"Hehehe... oh, fairy bimbo... you look so *tasty*."

Part 472: Fairy's Feint

Zamiel obtains the power of the Sphinx!

He becomes the first demon in all of history to do so. And not just any demon, but a fully realized Demon Emperor, at that. As such, his physical body begins to strengthen tremendously. His physical might rises into the stratosphere, putting him on par with the mightiest demons of yore, such as Bael and Diablo. He might even be able to go toe to toe with Emperor Crow!

As Zamiel stands in place, his body grows several inches, while Blinker's seems to shrink in comparison. The loss of the Sphinx's power weakens her physically while empowering her enemy.

"Heh heh heh. You stupid fairy bitch." Zamiel cackles. "Imagine giving me and Big Boss the key to ultimate power... all because you wanted a fragment of a broken soul. Leave it to a stupid woman to fail at basic logic!"

Zamiel slowly walks toward Blinker, his eyes flashing with hunger. He wonders privately how much stronger he'll become once he kills her and eats her soul. As a genuine Fairy Queen, Blinker will surely provide him an even bigger boost!

But, as Zamiel walks toward Blinker, he doesn't get the reaction he expected. Blinker crosses her arms and looks up at him with a strange lack of fear. If anything, she acts as if all of the tension of their battle has completely evaporated!

This thought slightly bewilders Zamiel.

"Nothing to say?" Zamiel asks, pausing to loom over the small, severely diminished fairy woman. "Trying to put on a brave face, you stupid bitch? We were equal before. But now... you won't stand a chance."

"Mhm. Right." Blinker says, raising one of her eyebrows. "Yup. You'll rip me apart for sure."

Zamiel cocks his head. Somehow, he feels as if he has fallen for a trap. He mentally inspects the power flowing through his veins.

There's no doubt. This is genuine Sphinx magic. So why is the Monster Queen acting so arrogant?

Ultimately, he concludes that her act of bravado must be an attempt to intimidate him. Perhaps by standing strong and acting tough, she can make him rethink even attacking her!

"Hahaha! You won't trick me, slut!" Zamiel laughs.

Zamiel raises his hands overhead. His body partially monsterizes, transforming him into a half-demon, half-lion monster of immense physical power. He summons the blood-red greatsword from before, then swings it straight toward Blinker's skull!

Just before the blade connects with Blinker, it abruptly stops.

Or rather, the weapon does not stop, but Zamiel does.

He stops the attack himself!

"What?"

Zamiel frowns.

He didn't intend to stop attacking the Monster Queen. If anything, he wanted to kill her more than ever in his life!

But for some reason, when he went to attack her, he felt all the killing intent vanish. In its place, a desire to NOT kill her sprouted!

"The hell? This is weird..." Zamiel mutters, retracting his sword. As he does, his hatred toward her comes roaring back. He slashes at her again, this time going for a horizontal cut to bisect her torso.

But he stops again!

Zamiel's blade halts mere inches from striking Blinker's arm and midsection. As Zamiel stops it himself, his killing intent once again vanishes, making him feel even more strangely than before.

He quickly pulls back, then stares at Blinker with a queer expression. His killing intent returns once again, but he doesn't bother to attack.

"You... you! What did you do?!" Zamiel snaps, roaring at the calmly-standing fairy with her arms crossed. "You must have tampered with the Sphinx's power! You tricked me!!"

"There's no trick." Blinker says quietly. "You're just ignorant, Zamiel."

Zamiel's mind races. He de-summons the greatsword to once again bring out a massive railgun. He aims it at Blinker and grins.

"I get it! You've put a fairy hex on me! I can't cut you down myself, so I'll just blow your brains out from over here!"

He takes aim. He starts to squeeze the trigger...

But as he does, his killing intent once again disappears!

Zamiel struggles desperately. He tries with all his might to pull the trigger, to snuff out Blinker's life with the ease that should come naturally following his god-like power-up...

But he can't!

Every time Zamiel tries to pull the trigger, his body weakens. He acts as if a mandate by the Creator has restricted him from killing his prey.

Bewildered and confused, Zamiel's expression shifts between a hilarious mixture of shock and surprise. His face becomes beet red as he fights against his own body to just reach out and kill the smirking fairy!

But he can't.

For five minutes, Blinker stands unmoving and unyielding, like a cliffside next to an ocean. Zamiel's comical attempt to kill her make him look like a clown.

"Why... WHY?! What did you DO to me, you little...?!"

"I didn't do anything." Blinker says calmly. "You got what you wanted. You now possess the Sphinx's power... and all of its weaknesses. But I'm guessing you don't know much about the Sphinx, do you?"

Zamiel's undead heart turns as cold as ice. He gazes at Blinker with a look of dread.

"Its... weaknesses?"

Blinker slowly nods. No longer does she even gaze at Zamiel with a look of hatred. To her, his existence has become oddly distant.

Blinker unfolds her arms. She holds up her right palm.

Foop!

An old, ugly-looking book appears in her grasp. A book with pages browned from the passage of time.

Zamiel narrows his eyes. He stares at the book with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"What... what's that? Some old fairy tome?"

"Nope." Blinker says, slowly and dramatically opening it. She begins to read a page somewhere in the middle. "...and that's when Master Jarnof began to reveal to me the truths of my new existence. The Sphinx's power cannot be stolen. Only inherited. If a Sphinx dies in battle, the power will travel elsewhere in the cosmos. Perhaps that is even how it arrived on Earth."

She flips to a different page.

"...the Sphinx's power can be obtained through many means. Combat. Riddles. A game of chance. But always, the power must be passed to its next owner through a challenge offered or accepted by the Sphinx's current owner. And if the power does transfer, the power will ensure its past and future possessors will never again be able to strike one another a grievous blow."

Zamiel's stomach sinks. "That book... it was Bahamut's?"

"Her personal diary." Blinker affirms. "In it is the knowledge of one hundred thousand years of her life. All the secrets she learned, all the knowledge she obtained regarding the Sphinx's abilities."

Suddenly, Blinker holds the book up.

FWOOSH!!!

It bursts into flames, scattering to ash in the wind!

"No!" Zamiel cries. "Why did you-?!"

"You have your power." Blinker says calmly. "Figure out how it works for yourself, idiot. Kar and I read Bahamut's diary a few times. I've also committed it to my memory, so its loss means little to me. But now, neither you nor Mephisto will know its intricacies."

She smirks.

"Enjoy that 'ultimate power,' Zamiel. Oh, it's certainly strong. But now you'll never be able to hurt me or Kar again."

Zamiel clenches his fists hard enough to shatter diamonds. His eyes turn bloodshot with rage.

"You... tricked... me!"

"If it makes you feel any better," Blinker says, her smirk fading, "I didn't want to give you the Sphinx's power... because then I would never be able to kill you with my own two hands. I'd love nothing more than to rip you apart, but that option's off the table now. So we both ended up screwed."

"Don't try to pity me!" Zamiel roars. He once again tries to will himself to attack her, but fails. "Gah! So what are we going to do, just stand around with our thumbs up our asses?! We can't even hurt each other now!"

"That's right. We're just going to stay here." Blinker says, smiling again. "You and me. I'll deprive Mephisto of his strongest minion. I have faith that my friends will overrun and kill Mephisto eventually. We *do* have an Archangel on our side, after all."

Zamiel stiffens. He gazes at Blinker with a newfound realization.

"No... NO! I won't stay here with you! I'll break out!"

Abruptly, Zamiel fully monsterizes himself. He transforms into a living combination of a demon, lion, and Gryphon, becoming even bigger and more terrifying than before. Then he launches himself at the wall of the Fairy World holding him prisoner.

BOOM!!

Blinker's illusory world shakes for a moment, then stabilizes itself. Zamiel fails to break out.

But he attacks again!

BOOM!!

He crashes against the swirling barrier enveloping the area, but again fails to break free.

So he tries again! And again!

BOOM! BOOOOM!!

The Emperor of War repeatedly strikes and batters the wall, but his most powerful attacks bounce off it as if he were a toddler punching concrete.

"This is ridiculous!" Zamiel complains. "What the hell is your fairy magic made of?!"

"A little of this. A little of that." Blinker says cryptically. "Oh! But would you look at that. It seems someone just finished their battle outside. No sense in letting him fight the

small fry..."

Blinker flicks her hand. An instant later, a figure teleports into the arena, looking a little surprised by the rude and non-consensual redirection of his position.

"Huh?" Beelzebub asks. "Where am- Blinker?"

Blinker scowls at him. "Beelzebub! What the hell! Why are you NAKED? Put that weapon away!"

Beelzebub glances down at his fully nude body, then shrugs. "I beat the crap out of Yama, but as always, my clothes ended up scorched away. What do you want me to do? Summon new ones?"

Beelzebub motions with his hands to conjure some flames around his pelvis, protecting what remains of his dignity. Blinker rolls her eyes in response.

"Never mind that. Due to some unfortunate circumstances, I can't kill Zamiel myself. So it's your job now!"

She points past Beelzebub's shoulder, making him turn around to look at his new foe.

Zamiel also turns to face Beelzebub. His expression changes as he sizes up Beelzebub's almost entirely-naked body.

"Ohohoho! Ose's little traitor! Aren't YOU a juicy piece of ass, eh Beelzebub?"

Beelzebub needs only one look at Zamiel's monsterized form to figure out what happened. "Blinker. You gave this son of a devil the Sphinx's power?"

"In exchange for Kar's soul." Blinker affirms. "But the Sphinx power has a restriction. Sphinxes cannot attack one another. So we're at a bit of an impasse."

She smiles cutely.

"And that's where you come in! Go get 'im, Beelzebub!"

"You want me to fight a Demon Emperor who now possesses the most powerful monster magic in existence?" Beelzebub asks, raising an eyebrow at Blinker.

After a moment, Beelzebub shrugs.

"Sure. I came here to fight anyway. But you'll have to leave. If my flames strike you, I'll suffer a backlash."

Blinker nods. "Don't worry. This fairy world is a stabilized formation. Even if I leave, it'll remain. Have fun, Beelzy."

Blinker turns her back on Beelzebub. Then, she disappears, vanishing from the spot.

"Huh. She called me 'Beelzy.'" The Emperor of Hellfire mutters. "Maybe we're getting along better than I thought."

"BEELZEBUB!" Zamiel shouts, interrupting Beelzebub's moment of contemplation. "They say that now that you've become an Emperor, you've become unkillable! But every demon has a limit!"

Beelzebub turns to look at his foe. He sizes up the monstrous Emperor of War, mentally calculating just how frightening Zamiel has become.

"Every demon? I think not."

Beelzebub ignites fire beneath his feet. He flies into the air while smiling wickedly.

"You see, Zamiel. You're not dealing with the *average* Demon Emperor..."

Foop!

Blinker appears back inside the Labyrinth, right in the middle of a battlefield. She levitates above the battlefield and glances around to survey the situation.

To the west, Archangel Uriel battles not one or two Brutes... but five in total! Five massive monsters scream and roar while Uriel faces them all alone.

To the south, the humans and Kiari mop up what remains of Mephisto's minions in the exterior. Kiari's giant bugs swarm Mephisto's undead, overwhelming them with an equal number of spiders, cockroaches, and other exotic bugs.

To the north, Mephisto hides inside a force field of some sort, along with his Baron necromancer minions. They continue to chant magic, manipulating the hordes of undead while Mephisto works on something unknown. Not far from Mephisto's barrier, five Death Gates tower a hundred feet high. Several fairies and Archangel constructs battle the monsters flowing from the Realm of Death.

Blinker glowers at Mephisto, but doesn't rush forward to challenge him. Instead, she drops down to Kiari, casually firing off a few telekinetic blasts to obliterate some of Mephisto's nearby undead.

"Kiari!" Blinker says. "There you are. I wondered where you went!"

"Aahaha, sorry..." Kiari says, smiling painfully. "I got a little separated along the way. But I'm here now."

Blinker glances in the direction of their allied human soldiers.

"...We've had some casualties."

Kiari nods seriously. "They'll be resurrected as the Respected. But... I do feel guilty. I should have been here to protect them. Even if they ultimately come back to life... I still failed them. They suffered the pain of death."

Blinker winces. She holds up her left palm, drawing Kiari's eyes to it.

"Ah! That... that's a soul! Is that Kar's soul?!" Kiari asks.

Blinker nods. "It is. But he's really weak. If I fight too hard, I might accidentally kill him again."

"A second death would be a True Death. We can't allow that to happen." Kiari says. "Why don't you go back to Tarus II? The rest of us can handle Mephisto."

"No. I don't like this situation." Blinker says. "That Mephisto... he's plotting something big. He extorted the Sphinx's magic from me."

"That's not all." Kiari says. "Did you notice? Mephisto betrayed Yama! Killed him and took his soul! If Mephisto needs all the allies he can get, why would he do such a thing?"

"Yeah..." Blinker says slowly. "Why *would* he do that?"

Blinker contemplates this strange conundrum for a few moments, then shakes her head.

"As long as we kill him, his plans won't bear any fruit. Kiari, you keep protecting these people. I'm going to send someone back to Tarus II with Kar's soul. Then I'll go and help the other fairies and Archangels with those Death Gates!"

Kiari nods. "Okay!"

Blinker makes her way over to the human soldiers. She finds Private Ashley laying unconscious, along with a few other badly injured people. Their comrades surround them protectively while firing potshots at the undead to assist Kiari.

Blinker detaches Kar's soul from her hand. She creates a magical message and attaches it to him, then anchors his soul to Private Ashley's soul.

A few moments later, Blinker motions with her hands.

Foop!

All the injured and deceased personnel vanish from the spot. They travel all the way across the Labyrinth back to Tarus II, along with the message Blinker prepared for Jason Hiro.

"Stay safe, Kar..." Blinker whispers. "I still have a necromancer to kill."

While Kiari continues swarming the battlefield with big bad bugs, Blinker levitates a few feet off the ground. She zips over the heads of the undead, racing toward Princess Melia and the others to help them out.

But all of a sudden...

BOOM!!

A figure bursts out of the dirt from below and races up at Blinker.

Startled, Blinker doesn't get an instant to react before this newcomer crashes into her body and the two of them go flying toward the ceiling.

BANG!!

The newcomer and Blinker drag across the ceiling for several feet before this new foe suddenly disengages and flickers away.

Blinker gasps for breath. She hastily summons a fairy field around herself while looking for the person who just attacked her.

"Zamiel?!"

Blinker doesn't see her opponent. So swift was their attack that she didn't even catch a glimpse of them before they vanished.

"No. Not Zamiel." A female voice says, whispering on the wind...

A flicker of air displaces to Blinker's side. She instantly conjures a barrier at that position while flickering away.

BANG!

A powerful fist batters the barrier, smashing it apart!

Blinker finally gets a good look at the one who attacked her.

It turns out to be a new Demon Emperor, one she hasn't fought before, but one she knows by reputation.

Fenrir, the Emperor of the Night.

No, more accurately... it's actually Fenrir's body, possessed by the soul of Lupus, the Emperor of Scales!

Lupus levitates in midair through some barely discernible method. Blinker can just barely make out a thread of darkness stretching from a nearby shadow, one that clings to Lupus's new body and holds her aloft, like a strand of a spiderweb.

"Lupus." Blinker says. "I almost forgot about you. Looks like Mephisto isn't out of warm bodies to throw at me!"

Lupus slowly blinks.

"You seem weaker than before. Looks like Zamiel managed to get that Sphinx out of you. Should be easier for me to kill you now. Hmm, but he's not here now... so did you manage to kill him? Not that I give a shit about the likes of the Emperor of War..."

"You don't sound excited to fight me." Blinker points out.

Lupus sighs. "Why would I be? I'm trapped in the wrong body. My husband's dead. My Hell has collapsed. And now I'm the slave of some half-wit, scheming little shithead. But I can't disobey the order ringing in my mind... so here I am."

Blinker and her opponent take a moment to size one another up. Lupus doesn't seem any more impressive than the average Demon Emperor, but Blinker is certainly weaker than before after losing the Sphinx's power...

"You can't beat me." Blinker boldly proclaims. "I have a mission today. Not only will I kill you, but Mephisto too."

"Don't threaten me with a good time." Lupus says blandly. "I'd like nothing more than for you to end my suffering. It's humiliating having to slave for that hissing cunt. The fact I can never again live a decent life has sucked any potential color out of my heart."

Lupus lunges toward Blinker from a standstill. She raises her delicate feminine hands, cloaking them in shadow to empower her striking force.

"But don't think I'll hold back!" Lupus yells. "I have to fight you with deadly intent! And I WON'T hold back!"

Blinker dodges the attack, then wraps an illusory world around herself and Lupus.

"Don't you worry your pretty head, Lupus! I won't hold back either! I promise I'll spare you the pain of fighting for Mephisto any longer!"

Part 473: All Sides Converge

"How frustrating! These fiends never stay DEAD! In the Creator's name, PERISH!!"

Archangel Uriel howls in frustration. She wields a greathammer of light, one specially-made to deal the mightiest of blows while bashing it against the heads and chests of Mephisto's Brutes.

Already, Uriel has slain four Brutes. But each time she managed to kill one, Mephisto summoned another to replace it! And sometimes, he even managed to summon a second before Uriel could kill the newest one!

The Archangel of Retribution pants, gasping out strained breaths as she fully exerts herself to try and slay these godforsaken undead giants. While their striking power may not be the highest, their bodies are frighteningly durable, making her heaviest strikes bounce off as if she were attacking walls of pure titanium. Only after repeated blows can she finally cause enough damage to put one of them down.

But the problem is, now five of them keep her busy, and all of them have the same goal: To attack the humans below!

Uriel fully intended to kill the first Brute and rush over to take out Mephisto, but the pesky bastard continuously summoned new ones to keep her busy by aiming for the much weaker humans!

One of the Brutes charges past Uriel, its huge, amorphously gendered body allowing it to make terribly swift strides toward the awaiting humans a short distance away. Uriel hastily summons a wall of light in front of its chest, causing the Brute to strike the wall, then get knocked back and fall on its ass.

Unfortunately, this minor delay doesn't injure it, and only slows it down for a few seconds.

In those seconds, another Brute rushes past the first one!

Uriel howls in frustration. She slams her greathammer against the head of the nearest Brute, then turns the floor in front of the charging brute into liquid dirt with her earth manipulation, causing its foot to sink into a quicksand-like bog and become momentarily trapped.

"Frustrating!" Uriel screams, enraged beyond belief. "Dammit! I must go all-out!"

Despite the fact that Uriel has not held back against these annoyingly durable undead, she has yet to exhaust her full power. The Archangel of Retribution has continuously held back the full level of her powers due to certain fears... but with the humans below now threatened by the numerous Brutes, she cannot do so any further.

For the briefest moment, Uriel continues to hesitate.

This body is not mine. Nay, it belongs to the red rat known as Barbatos. But luckily, he still slumbers. Hopefully he shalt continue to do so for an eternity longer.

Until now, Uriel has only relied on her own abilities and magic. Fire magic, water magic, earth and wind. These, in addition to her mastery of light and darkness.

While powerful, she cannot exert the full strength she once possessed as an Archangel, in large part due to her current body's lack of alignment to holy energy. Even when she and her brothers morphed into the Cherubiim, they could only display a fraction of the power it might have been capable of unleashing during the Final Battle, and even less compared to its glory during the Dragon Wars, eons earlier.

As for her non-Cherubiim form, Uriel's magic simply doesn't strike as hard or concentrate as well as it once could.

But, locked within herself is a power she has not dared to use...

The magic of magnetism!

Not her own strength, but that of the slumbering Barbatos, whose soul was so exhausted after 100,000 years of enduring Uriel's withering attacks that he finally fell comatose, with no signs of awakening after all this time.

Unlike Uriel's magic, Barbatos's is perfectly attuned to his own body. Even more incredible is that despite only being a Duke, Barbatos possessed enough physical and spiritual strength to beat the crap out of Emperors. Because of 100,000 years of daily struggle against the Archangel soul contained within himself, Barbatos's physical and magical powers were far elevated above the norm for a Duke.

Unfortunately, this neverending battle exhausted him to his core, and now he continues to slumber, possibly never to awaken again.

In the moment between moments, Uriel makes up her mind. She reaches inside herself and seizes control of Barbatos's magic, then amplifies it with her own power!

Whoomph.

A burst of mana explodes from her body, blowing away all the dust in the air.

Uriel's head snaps up. She reaches out to the humans below, finding metal blades, guns, and other such weaponry aplenty.

To the sudden surprise of the humans below, Uriel steals them away, often yanking these items right out of the hands of multiple soldiers. They cry out in alarm, but with Kiari mopping up the undead nearby, they aren't able to contribute much to the battle at the moment anyway. Uriel ignores their frustration as she yanks these weapons to herself.

Skriiiiik!

Uriel tears the weapons apart with blunt force, ignoring all the damage she causes to the nearly two-tons of steel and iron. She ruins the weapons beyond repair while quickly and brutally fashioning the scrap into a massive greathammer.

Uriel continues fighting the Brutes while a sliver of her consciousness manipulates the metal in midair. She occasionally launches blasts of superheated flames onto the morphing greathammer while following up with water to supercool it. Despite not being the incredible weaponsmith that her sister Camael was, Uriel continues this work. She does not intend to create a legendary artifact, but merely a clumsy weapon capable of killing these Brutes with *brute force*!

Mephisto's minions detect the change immediately. Ozzar turns to his master.

"Emperor Mephisto! That Archangel, she's tapped into Barbatos's magnetism!"

Mephisto nods, his eyes focused not on Uriel, but on the battle between Beelzebub and Zamiel.

"Yesss, yesss. I anticccipated ass much." Mephisto says, sparing Uriel only a brief glance. "Everything iss procceeding ass expected."

Uriel's greathammer finally completes its forging. Without a moment to spare, the Archangel of Retribution yanks it into her grasp, desummons her previous greathammer of light, then conjures multiple enchantments of holy energy onto her new weapon, transforming it into a makeshift artifact.

"KILL!"

Uriel races at the nearest Brute. She swings her new hammer down with ten times the striking force, amplifying its momentum with magnetism.

BOOOM!!

Her hammer blasts the Brute's chest with overwhelming might, sending it flying backward! It crashes into the wall, killing hundreds of nearby undead beneath its body, and even better, the Brute remains unmoving for several long seconds.

Its internal organs suffered heavy damage!

But Uriel doesn't get to follow up with a second strike. She instead races over to the other Brutes, all four of whom have opted to spread out and attack the humans from different points.

Uriel conjures two walls of light to block a pair of brutes. She rushes toward the nearest one while sending a telepathic request to Raphael.

Foop!

Uriel teleports directly in front of that Brute through her brother's magic, then uppercuts her greathammer into its chin, sending it hurtling up and away, where it slams violently into the ceiling and drags for a moment before plummeting to the ground below!

As Ozzar watches Uriel's explosive rise in attack power, he turns to Mephisto.

"Our Brutes are crumbling!"

"They will lassst a while longer." Mephisto says, continuing to ignore Uriel's threat. "Thiss Beelzebub, ksss... he isss troublesssome. I need the Sssphinx'sss power. It isss key to my plansss..."

With Zamiel unable to escape Blinker's illusory world on his own, he exists in a space between spaces, hidden from the main battlefield, yet still able to share his vision with Mephisto, and vice-versa.

Zamiel and Mephisto both are fully aware of the circumstances inside and outside the illusory realm.

* * *

Inside the left-behind Fairy Domain, Beelzebub and Zamiel engage in a terrifyingly brutal and violent melee.

Boom! BOOOOM!!

Beelzebub blasts Zamiel not only with fire, but nuclear energy, irradiating Zamiel with lethally toxic radioactive damage. But Zamiel's undead body resist this power with ease, amplified even further by his newly enhanced Sphinx durability.

Zamiel charges at Beelzebub. He chops at him with his blood-colored greatsword, and Beelzebub dodges, unloading twenty fireballs into Zamiel's face to try and slow him down.

These fireballs deal moderate damage to Zamiel, but his empowered body easily copes with it, allowing him to continue pressing the attack against Beelzebub.

"How the hell did I end up fighting a naked fuckboy?!" Zamiel complains. "At least get over here and shake that ass for me, Beelzy! I'll show you a good time!"

"I think I'll keep away from that rotting crocodilian demonhood of yours, thank you very much." Beelzebub says blandly, before lashing a fire-whip at Zamiel's face.

The Emperor of War mostly dodges the whip, but it still lashes across his chest, carving through his defenses and leaving a scorched gash across his torso. Zamiel endures the pain and continues fighting, but he knows to fear Beelzebub's fire-whip. Its superheated tip strikes with the same heat as a yellow star, making it capable of piercing even the hardest armor, including demonstone!

Worse yet, even when Zamiel manages to successfully mutilate or badly injure Beelzebub, aside from a bit of pain and distress, he doesn't cause Beelzebub any permanent injuries.

Beelzebub has the ridiculous power to heal from anything! Even a crushed or severed head won't slow him down for long.

This means that while Beelzebub can heal from any wound, Zamiel is on a ticking timer. The more injuries he accumulates, the weaker he'll become.

As Zamiel fights, he switches up his tactics constantly, frustrating Beelzebub.

Sometimes, Zamiel dives underground, using Kar's stolen earth-manipulation abilities.

Other times, he switches out his greatsword for a railgun, a machine gun, or some other human-invented weapon.

He summons swords and shields. He protects his body with Qi, making it even more difficult for Beelzebub to injure him. In these times, Beelzebub has to strike with the tip of his fire-whip to at least continue injuring and slowly wearing Zamiel down.

But all the while, as the battles rage outside, Beelzebub starts to feel that Mephisto is deliberately dragging things out, stalling for time. Though he can't put his finger on why, he assumes Mephisto must have a deeper purpose.

Beelzebub rockets around, fully naked, using his superior speed to keep away from Zamiel while peppering him with fire-bullets.

"Hey!" Beelzebub shouts. "What are you and that necro-freak planning, anyway? He should have just run away! You won't be able to stop us forever!"

"Can't say!" Zamiel replies, swapping his sword out for a long-ranged energy rifle. He blasts Beelzebub's arm off in midair, causing Beelzebub to lose control and crash into the dirt. "What the Big Boss does, I don't question! He's got me by the balls anyway, so it doesn't matter! But I guarantee it'll be EXPLOSIVE!"

Zamiel's energy rifle releases another burst of photons, aimed directly at Beelzebub's head. Beelzebub fireports to the side, dodging the attack.

As the newly uplifted Emperor of War, Zamiel's understanding of technology isn't particularly deep, but 100,000 years of life have given him countless opportunities to observe human and Volgrim technology. What his magic does is allow him to mimic most technology he has interacted with in the past, and in particular, technology associated with unleashing death and pain!

Just as Beelzebub starts to think he's figured Zamiel out, the Emperor of War pulls out a bizarre gun of some sort, an alien-looking device with a spindly-barb on its front.

"Oh man, I JUST remembered this thing existed!" Zamiel crows, looking gleefully at the strange object in his hand. "Here Beelzy, a present!"

Before Beelzebub can determine the weapon's nature, Zamiel squeezes its trigger.

ZERRRT!

A high pitched beam of light screams toward Beelzebub, moving far too quickly for him to dodge.

It strikes Beelzebub's left arm, the only intact one. Instantly, terrible agony erupts deep inside his body, agony unlike anything he's ever felt in his life. Beelzebub barely gets a second to exhale before the wind gets driven from his lungs.

He collapses to the dirt, his body curling into the fetal position. In between his flashes of spotty vision, he vaguely makes out a thick layer of ice covering his arm.

A freeze... gun?!

Beelzebub shivers and trembles as a polar cold settles into his body, violently contrasting with his superheated blood. He desperately tries to fight off the bitter cold settling into his bones, but the pain is too great! He flickers in and out of consciousness, only to awaken in a shriek of agony as another beam lances into his chest, this one inflicting even more grievous injuries to his vital organs.

Silently, Beelzebub opens his mouth as if to scream. He writhes around like a snake on hot pavement, spasming and twitching uncontrollably.

ZERRRT!

ZERRRT!

Zamiel advances upon Beelzebub, lancing that unbelievably painful beam of freezing energy right into Beelzebub's head and killing him on the spot. Then he shoots Beelzebub's legs, his arms, and any other unfrozen area.

Naturally, Beelzebub's body fights off the cold. It begins to thaw, but Zamiel continues peppering his frozen form with one strike after another, grinning evilly to himself.

"Hahahaha! Well well, looks like that Yama-chump didn't have what it takes, but I do! Nothing like a good bucket of ice to put out a fire, you hotheated moron! Bahaha!"

This time, no matter how much Beelzebub's body automatically regenerates, Zamiel remains in place, locking him down and preventing him from recovering. And unlike Yama's dark lances, the insidious cold directly extinguishes Beelzebub's heat, preventing his recovery speed from accelerating.

Minutes pass.

ZERRRT!

ZERRRT!

Zamiel continues shooting Beelzebub to keep him down and easily outpaces Beelzebub's explosive healing factor. But outside, the situation continues to worsen.

"Hmm..." Zamiel mutters to himself. "The Archangel has taken down three of the five Brutes. Big Boss summoned another, but she'll put that one down again soon. Feels like I'm just constantly shooting a corpse... this ain't fun at all."

ZERRRT!

ZERRRT!

Zamiel's finger starts to cramp up from how often he shoots Beelzebub. He switches hands and continues shooting Beelzebub to keep the Emperor of Hellfire immobilized.

"Devil-damned bastard!" Zamiel complains. "If I let up for even two seconds, he starts thawing out! This guy is ridiculous! If only I could steal his healing factor for myself, I'd be unstoppable!"

Zamiel's attention drifts for a moment. He peers out of his boss's eyes through their shared magic link to examine the battlefield.

In that instant... Beelzebub disappears!

Foop!

The Emperor of Hellfire vanishes, teleporting to a different part of the Illusory Realm.

For a brief second, Zamiel's eyes snap to where Beelzebub was just laying, and then they jump to his new position.

"What the... he's still unconscious. Then, how did he-?!"

Zamiel quickly aims at Beelzebub's new position, but...

Foop!

Beelzebub teleports again!

And when Beelzebub reappears, a flicker of magic ignites in the air above him.

BOOOM!!

An explosion of magical flames blasts Beelzebub's body from out of nowhere, bathing him in heat for his soul to greedily absorb.

Zamiel's undead heart skips a beat.

"W-what? That... that cheating fairy BITCH!"

He quickly realizes the truth. Blinker might be fighting Lupus, but casually teleporting Beelzebub around her illusory world requires no effort on her part!

And, just like that, Beelzebub finishes his regeneration. Thanks to Blinker's Faerie Fire, he quickly warms himself up and recovers from his cold shock.

Beelzebub staggers to his feet, sending a glare toward Zamiel that makes the Emperor of War feel a twinge of fear.

"Clever... trick..." Beelzebub growls through gnashed teeth. "Freezing me. *Smart*. But I think... it's time... you died... for **GOOD**."

Beelzebub grabs his left arm.

Riiiiip!

He tears it from its stump while glaring with psychotic rage at Zamiel.

As for Zamiel, only three words come to his mind.

Wow. He's pissed.

* * *

In the realm outside, Kiari finishes cleaning up the area around the humans. With many of the soldiers lacking weapons thanks to Uriel's antics, Kiari has to do all of the work protecting them.

Kiari's bugs, small and large, work together in huge swarms to overpower Mephisto's undead. But unfortunately, despite each undead monster and demon not individually being as strong as the average Demon Lord, together they are still quite persistent.

Several ten-foot-tall Trolls crush Kiari's bugs underfoot. Some distance away, a horde of Dark Orcs swing their serrated blades wildly, cutting off the limbs of giant praying mantises and roaring after each kill. Even some of the skeletons, the weakest of Mephisto's minions, sport demonstone armor, granting them surprising resilience.

Kiari transforms herself into a half-beetle, half-demon hybrid. A thick carapace wraps around her body, making her an armored powerhouse. She wades into the thick of the battle, batting her enemies aside or crushing them to death under her powerful feet.

Meanwhile, Samuel Baker flies around with his fairy magic, picking off the weakest enemies and some of the stronger ones.

"Oh, NOW you kill without hesitation." Samuel snarks to Kiari. "What was with the waterworks earlier?"

Kiari smashes apart the head of one of the biggest orcs.

"You mean with Duke Raven? I didn't mean to hurt him like that. I nearly killed him! And besides, these are all undead monsters. It's fine to kill them and end their suffering."

Samuel glances back at the area where the humans remain. There, Duke Raven and Baron Xena lay unconscious, helmets wrapped around their heads to cut off their oxygen

and suffocate them. As demons, they won't die from a lack of oxygen, but unlike Bael, they can't remain conscious without it either.

"You know those two are both undead, right?" Samuel asks pointedly.

"WHAT?! They are?!" Kiari cries. "No way! I've spoken to Raven a bunch of times! He's not undead!"

"...He is." Samuel says, trying not to facepalm. "Why do you think they're here, working for Mephisto?"

Kiari pauses her assault on the undead to blink her eyes.

"Oh. I just thought they decided to work with him. I guess them being undead makes sense."

"Yeah..." Samuel groans, trying even harder not to facepalm. Considering Kiari could kill him with a slap of her hand, he doesn't want to push her too far, no matter how nice she might be.

Before he can continue replying, Kiari turns to look in Xena and Raven's direction.

"Well since they're undead, it can't be helped. Go ahead and kill them, babies!"

Samuel's eyes practically pop out of his head as three tiny bugs near the two fallen demons suddenly enlarge, then attack Mephisto's elites, ripping them apart and killing them while they can't fight back.

"W-what?! You're killing them!" Samuel exclaims. "We were going to keep them alive to search for intel!"

"Eh. No point." Kiari says with a shrug. "Mephisto would just yank their souls out anyway. Plus, undead have pretty high pain resistance. You have to hit them super hard before they start cracking mentally-"

In the middle of Kiari's words, the very air around the battlefield abruptly vibrates. A high pitched squealing rings in the air, making all the combatants except for the undead wince and grit their teeth.

Eeeeeee!

An instant later, the sky *explodes*. A figure comes screaming downward, crying bloody murder as flames engulf his body.

Zamiel, the Emperor of War, slams against the dirt floor with a violent *crash*. He lands face-first, breaking off several teeth as he skids forward and slows to a stop. The poor guy cries and whimpers, his 'glorious' Sphinx body looking like it was run through a meat-grinder. Both of his arms lay broken. Acrid, burnt flesh clings to his form. His gryphon feathers smoke as lingering flames continue to burn them.

"Ah... ah... oww, oh, devils..."

Then, Beelzebub flies toward him from above, dive-bombing him like a fiery bird of prey.

"WHO SAID YOU COULD RUN AWAY?!"

"Aaah!" Zamiel shrieks. He quickly burrows underground, hiding himself inside the Labyrinth and causing Beelzebub to smash into the floor behind him.

Beelzebub fails to land the killing blow.

"Get back here!" Beelzebub snarls, kicking the floor futilely. "I'm not done tearing you apart!"

Beelzebub's left arm regrows quickly. He glances around, noticing Kiari's blushing gaze.

"What? You want a piece of me too, woman?!"

"N-no..." Kiari coughs. "It's just... why are you *naked*?"

Beelzebub rolls his eyes. "Naked this, naked that. Don't look if you don't want to see."

Kiari quickly turns away from him, blushing madly.

"I don't want to see anything! Just so you know, I'm married! And faithful!"

"NOBODY ASKED!"

Part 474: Crushing the Demon

Blinker and Emperor Lupus battle one another in the skies while their fellow warriors tangle on the battlefield below. Lupus zips around via thin threads of shadow attached to the ceiling, while Blinker naturally levitates with her fairy magic.

Blinker goes all-out to try and kill Lupus quickly, but what she finds is that despite being in a body very different from her original self, Lupus has already become extremely proficient with Emperor Fenrir's abilities!

Fenrir, Emperor of the Night. Much like Yama, she was a master of the darkness, a vampiress adept in infiltration.

But unlike Yama, she was not weak to light. And neither is Lupus, her accidental inheritor!

Lupus flickers in and out of reality. Her movements are so fast that they appear almost dreamlike. She attacks Blinker from the right and the left, from above and below. Blinker teleports around, but Lupus dogs her with alarming ferocity, giving chase while slipping between the cracks of darkness that weave themselves among a battlefield constantly illuminated and darkened by gunfire and explosions.

Lupus jumps out of a shadow, catching Blinker from a tricky angle. She swipes her fingers at Blinker's side, causing a claw of darkness to materialize, one capable of tearing apart steel. Blinker flickers to the side to dodge, then fires off a brutal blast of telekinetic energy at Lupus's face.

But Lupus also dodges.

Her body disappears in a puff of black smoke, causing Blinker's attack to miss. Then she pounces at the Monster Queen from above, a spear of darkness in hand.

Blinker pirouettes in midair, twisting her body at an awkward angle to evade the spear aimed at her heart. It instead swipes across her belly, barely cutting a thin line in her blue dress.

"Watch it!" Blinker snaps. "I'm pregnant! If you hurt Kar's babies, I'll SHIT FIRE down your throat!"

Lupus and her continue jumping, pouncing, and flickering at one another as they fight.

"You're pregnant?" Lupus asks. "Congratulations! Have you decided on any names?"

She chops at Blinker with a pair of dual-swords, but Blinker summons her own sword and shield to knock them away.

"Nope! Not yet. And now that Kar's back, I'll definitely be consulting him!"

The two women fighting for their lives engage in a somewhat bizarre conversation, despite the stakes being instant death. As it turns out, neither holds any particular animosity for the other, but Lupus is compelled by Mephisto's magic to kill anyone he points her toward.

"You should go for a name involving reptiles!" Lupus adds. "Me and Wolfram had lots of children. Perks of being werewolves instead of demons."

"How many kids did you have?" Blinker asks, shooting a blast of Faerie Fire at Lupus's face before she shimmers away.

"A few hundred. They grow up so fast!"

In between rounds of banter and battle, Blinker notices the happenings inside her Illusory Realm. She gives Beelzebub an assist, but otherwise leaves him to his devices. In the back of her mind, she can't help but feel a little happy that he has to endure some pain.

Serves that jerk right! He killed millions of my friends. I'm not gonna let him off easy, no sir!

Besides, it's not like suffering mind-shattering agony will actually kill Beelzebub. He can take it!

But when Blinker goes to help Beelzebub, Lupus appears at her side.

"Pay attention!"

"Crap!" Blinker exclaims.

Lupus slams a mace against Blinker's back, sending the Monster Queen flying forward, where she crashes against the wall.

"Don't let your mind drift!" Lupus says, charging toward Blinker. "And quit yapping. Just kill me already!"

Luckily, Blinker protected herself with a field of Fairy Fortification, but even so, she still endured a painful blow. Blinker clambers to her feet and hastily summons temporal

magic around herself, accelerating her speed and bodily recovery.

Foop!

She teleports out of the way before Lupus can land the killing blow.

Blinker's eyes become more focused.

"Are you sure you want to die? Maybe the Wordsmith can help you."

"Can he bring my husband back?" Lupus asks, motioning with her hands to summon shadow-horrors in the shape of mini-Hellhounds. These 'creatures' fly toward Blinker while chomping their hungry teeth.

"I... don't think so." Blinker says. She pulverizes the incoming shadow monsters with her magic.

"Then don't bother." Lupus says. "I'm sure you understand what it means to lose a mate. Unlike you, I'll never be reunited with mine. So just let me die with dignity!"

She sprouts shadowy wings from her back, then phases into the shadows, only to materialize next to Blinker and swing that same mace at the back of Blinker's head.

But the Fairy Queen teleports to the side, a look of grim resolution on her face.

"Alright. I'll make it quick, then." Blinker says, steeling her eyes.

What happens next baffles and somewhat surprises Lupus.

Blinker begins to monsterize!

Her body turns more muscular and powerful. She assumes the form of a gryphon and lion biped, then conjures a hardened longsword made of mana in her grasp.

She becomes the Sphinx!

"What?! You still possess the Sphinx's magic?!" Lupus gasps.

"No, I don't. But I can mimic it." Blinker says, this time going on the offense. She rushes toward Lupus with her sword held high. "I'm a genius when it comes to magic!"

Blinker no longer holds back. She brings down the hammer of god upon Lupus, each swing of her sword carrying five times the striking power compared to before. Lupus tries to deflect Blinker's attacks, but the Monster Queen's savage strength leaves her undead arms feeling weak and numb.

"Gah! Ugh! Uhhh!"

Lupus grunts and groans as she continuously holds up her mace to try and protect herself, but she ultimately opts to jump backward, evading Blinker's strikes.

The hunter becomes the hunted.

Blinker's aura becomes both noble and powerful. She chases after Lupus with a body only a bit less powerful than she possessed when she could become a True Sphinx. Each strike hits Lupus like a battering ram, making her cough and grimace as she fights under Mephisto's command.

All of a sudden, the sky explodes, then Zamiel plummets out of Blinker's illusory realm with Beelzebub hot on his tail. The Emperor of Hellfire tries to finish Zamiel off, but he dives underground and escapes.

After Beelzebub exchanges words with some of the people nearby, Blinker's eyes flash with insight. She motions toward him.

Foop!

Beelzebub abruptly teleports next to her, looking momentarily confused. He ignites flames beneath his feet to hover in the air.

"Yanking me around again? That's starting to get tiresome!"

"Shut up and help me kill Lupus." Blinker says, as Lupus hangs back. "She's difficult to pin down. But don't feel bad, she actually wants to die-"

"I wouldn't feel bad anyway." Beelzebub says, immediately rushing toward Lupus without exchanging any further words.

"Wait, you nitwit!" Blinker shouts, exasperated. "We need a strategy!"

"No thanks! I like BLASTING things!" Beelzebub calls back, his bare ass giving Blinker an unsightly view as he rushes away.

"Ugh. Demons!"

Despite Beelzebub's insistence on attacking without hesitation, Blinker can't exactly fault him. After all, anything that injures him will heal in an instant. The Emperor of Hellfire has no need to worry about his opponents hitting him with a counterattack!

And so, Blinker and Beelzebub partner up. To allow Beelzebub the most free reign, Blinker hangs back, assisting him in an auxiliary role. Beelzebub assumes the role of

Tanker and Frontliner, eating any attacks Lupus sends his way, while Blinker confuses and confounds Lupus's movements with temporal and spatial magic.

Repeatedly, Blinker burns Beelzebub with Faerie Fire to quick-heal his injuries, while also placing spatial barriers here and there to obstruct Lupus's movements.

Beelzebub lashes out his fire whip. He unleashes fiery bombs, and exhales walls of flame at his scurrying opponent.

Unfortunately for Lupus, fighting Blinker or Beelzebub alone is nowhere near the same as fighting them together. In the case of these two highly competent, battle-hardened warriors, the sum of their parts is less like $1+1=2$, and more like $1+1=4$!

Before long, Lupus's resistance crumbles. She tries to beat a hasty retreat, but Beelzebub grabs her by the throat and pours fire directly into her mouth.

"Burn, you undead wench!" Beelzebub roars, as her body rapidly fills with flames.

An instant before Lupus's body disintegrates, her soul abruptly yanks out and returns to Mephisto. The clever necromancer preserves her battle-power, allowing Fenrir's body to crumble to ash in Beelzebub's hands.

With Lupus obliterated, all that remains on the battlefield of Mephisto's fighting forces are his Death Gates and Brutes.

BOOM!!

Archangel Uriel finally smashes the head of the final remaining Brute, smiting it dead and allowing its body to collapse into ashes on the ground.

"FINALLY!" Uriel screams in a fit of rage. "Verily, this necromancer hath irritated me for the LAST time!"

She snaps her head in Mephisto's direction, almost in unison with Blinker, Beelzebub, Kiari, and the humans.

Inside Mephisto's bunker, his undead servants begin to feel deeply disturbed.

"Emperor!" Ozzar exclaims. "What is your progress? Our enemies will be upon us in moments!"

Mephisto hovers over Valac's Lantern. In his skeletal hand, he grasps Lupus's writhing soul.

"Kekeke... all iss going according to plan."

So calm is Mephisto that it almost makes his minions feel assured.

Almost.

Until Uriel comes screaming toward them, falling like a meteor from the skies as she raises her megaton greathammer overhead.

BOOM!!!

Uriel's half-artifact crashes upon a powerful barrier of necromantic energy, fueled by an unknown magical source. The impact of this mighty blow sends a shockwave reversing outward to knock Uriel back, along with Fairy Princess Melia and her retainers.

"What a sturdy force field!" Blinker says, praising the exquisiteness of the formation.

Her eyes momentarily become unsettled.

Strange. Mephisto might have become somewhat adept in formations, as plenty of Emperors eventually do... but this formation is way too exquisite! Are the fairies assisting him?

Uriel grimaces. The recoil from her attack leaves her momentarily stunned, as if she had struck her own face. She blinks off her daze, only to see that Mephisto remains completely unharmed.

The Emperor of Legions faintly smiles up at her. A moment later, a figure climbs out of the ground inside his force field, a badly-injured fellow looking like he lost a fight with a flamethrower.

None other than Zamiel, the Emperor of War.

"*Cough, cough.* Oh, Big Boss. We got our butt handed to us. But we did it! We got the Sphinx's Magic!"

Mephisto's smile widens slightly.

"Gooood... passs it along."

Zamiel hesitates.

"W-well, you'll have to guess our riddle to get it, boss! I can't just give it up!"

"Of coursse." Mephisto nods. "Ssspeak the riddle and the anssswer."

Zamiel crawls a few steps closer to his Big Boss. He reveals a gruesome smile through his badly burned face.

"Ehehe! The riddle is... 'who is Mephisto's most *favoritest* minion?' Super easy!"

Mephisto blinks twice.

"Let me guesss. The anssswer isss... Zamiel, the Emperor of War."

"Wow, boss! Good guess! You're totally right!" Zamiel says, groveling like a beaten dog. As the Sphinx's magic leaves his body and transfers to Mephisto's body, Zamiel feels himself begin to weaken. "Oooh, Big Boss. I'm gonna need some healing. You think you can start the Ritual of Regeneration?"

Mephisto inhales deeply. The power of the Sphinx enters him, and he feels a might unlike any he has ever experienced before in his life... not unlike his rise from Duke to Emperor.

But he does not allow his vision to become clouded by delusions of grandeur.

His goal... is much higher.

"I don't think that will be necesssary." Mephisto says, directing a cold gaze toward Zamiel. "Your ssserviccccesss have... come to an end."

Zamiel's eyes narrow. He reveals a smirk.

"I knew it. You were planning to kill me! But, heh, tough luck, idiot! You fell for our plot!"

Zamiel pulls himself up. He rises to his feet and grins triumphantly at Mephisto.

"I might be your minion, but you can't ever lay a finger on me! Now that we've both become empowered by the Sphinx, you've lost all your leverage!"

"Ah. Isss that ssso?" Mephisto asks, raising a hand in a slow, casual manner.

Before the gazes of Uriel, Blinker, the demons and humans, Mephisto grabs Zamiel's soul and begins pulling it out of Kar's body.

"What?!" Zamiel gasps frightened out of his wits. He feels the control of his body starting to fade. "B-Big Boss! Mephisto! You can't do this to me! We're both Sphinxes! You-"

"I am not going to kill you, little Zamiel." Mephisto says. "No... our relationssship will ssssoon become... ever ssso *intimate*..."

Zamiel releases one last gurgle of fright before his movements cease. Kar's crocodilian body slumps to the ground, then collapses into dust, breaking apart after the loss of its

soul.

Mephisto caresses Zamiel's struggling soul. He momentarily smiles, then places it inside Valac's lantern, along with Lupus's soul, and Yama's, too.

Mephisto stands up. As Uriel and the others gather their strength, he casually dismisses his Death Gates, causing all five to collapse into the ground.

"Hehehe. Consssider yourssselvesss lucky." Mephisto states, his eyes glowing with excitement. "A ssseriesss of coincidencesss. A few sstrokesss of good fortune. And now, the final ingredient, the Sssphinx'sss Aura, granted to me by an ignorant woman. Hehehehe... you are all sssso lucky to witnesss the asscensssion of this Deity."

Uriel's heart turns cold. An ominous feeling rises in her chest, along with all of the others present.

"Begin the ritual!" Mephisto proclaims.

Abruptly, all of his necromancer minions turn to face him. They raise their arms up and begin to chant in the language of the demons, a foul black speech that irritates the ears.

"All praise Emperor Mephisto! All hail the rise of the Deity! All bow before His might!"

The souls inside Valac's lantern stir, as if unsure whether to be excited or fearful.

"Everyone!" Uriel proclaims, lifting her greathammer overhead. "Focus thy magic and weapons upon that barrier! Defeat Mephisto! Do NOT allow him to complete his incantation!"

Beelzebub nods. "Leave it to me!"

"I'm here!" Blinker says, as she summons magic to her palms.

"I'll, uh, do my best!" Kiari says, feeling a bit less sure due to her lack of powerful striking magic.

"That damned Archangel took my gun." Some of the humans mutter, annoyed.

The humans who still have weapons remaining start raining gunfire on Mephisto's shield, not intending to cause it much damage, but perhaps to suppress it with a stream of steady damage. Some of the soldiers heft rocket launchers, which they fire at the shield to cause explosive damage, while only two of them managed to bring along massive railguns.

Blinker conjures twin 'cannons' that begin blasting raw telekinetic force at Mephisto's shield.

Kiari's bugs... scratch at the perimeter. They do their best.

Beelzebub unleashes an unending torrent of concentrated nuclear hellfire, pouring all of his strength into one point to try and break through.

And as for Uriel, the Archangel of Retribution joins forces with her newly-freed brothers who no longer have to contend with Mephisto's Frost Giants. All four Archangels strike the force field in various ways, with Raphael being the outlier among his siblings.

Uriel strikes at it with pure holy energy, hoping to break through using demonkind's greatest weakness.

Michael continuously and rapidly slashes hundreds of times a second at the shield, but his strikes ultimately have the same weakness as Kiari's bugs: They don't possess much penetration force.

Gabriel uses his greatsword to strike with much stronger and heavier blows.

Meanwhile, Raphael attempts to decipher the magic behind the force field. While everyone else attacks Mephisto with gusto, Raphael's expression becomes increasingly contorted.

"Strange..." He murmurs. "It is almost as if... this field... is not one designed to protect Mephisto. Instead, its purpose..."

Inside, Mephisto's aura begins to rise. The more his foes strike his barrier, the more excited his servants become.

"The moment is at hand!"

"Our Emperor's glorious rise!"

"His Ascension!"

"The birth of a Demon Deity!!"

Ozzar's eyes glow with adrenaline.

"The refinement! Master, the refinement is working! Those fools outside have no idea what they're doing!"

Mephisto shoots a wicked grin toward all of his loyal followers.

"Our unity isss at hand! Not long now!"

Uriel and the rest continue to pound on Mephisto's force field. As they do, its size diminishes slightly. It compresses inward, shrinking by a few percent.

"It's working!" Kiari cries. "Keep attacking, everyone!"

Uriel intensifies the power behind her divine magic. She fires three beams of holy energy at the same spot as Beelzebub and Blinker, trying desperately to melt a hole into the interior.

"PERISH, DEMON!"

All of a sudden, Raphael's eyes widen.

"This magic... 'tis not a force field! 'Tis an ABSORPTION field! Sister! Do not continue attacking a moment longer! Mephisto-"

Before Raphael can finish his words, Mephisto crooks a hideous smile.

"You're too late, Archangel."

Abruptly, the force field implodes.

It collapses inward like a black hole.

In a single instant, the shield shrinks to the size of a golf ball, crushing every living and undead entity within its confines.

Ozzar releases a silent cry of horror as his body disintegrates.

The other necromancers don't even get a moment to react.

Even Mephisto's body collapses at the atomic level.

WHOOMPH.

The force field collapses into a micro-singularity, its central-point fixed on Valac's Lantern, where it forcibly crushes that ancient artifact into the size of a marble.

A split-second later, a terrifying blast erupts as all of the compressed energy detonates like a bomb!

BOOOOM!!!

A shockwave of pure mana flies outward, catching every living thing in its radius.

Uriel goes flying.

Beelzebub goes flying.

Uriel's constructs, Blinker, Kiari, her bugs, and all of the humans...

Everyone hurtles away and crashes against the walls, breaking their bones, shattering their armor, and rattling their minds!

The blast-wave continues traveling. It sends seismic shocks all throughout the local Labyrinth, rumbling and collapsing walls, ceilings, and floors. Countless monsters and demons for hundreds of miles receive the fright of their lives as Hell itself cataclysmically shudders, causing thousands to perish due to rubble falling loose from above!

Inside the epicenter of the explosion, a single voice cackles softly.

"HEH... HEH... HEH..."

Then, it goes silent.

* * *

Minutes pass.

Beelzebub is the first to recover. He awakens with a start, his ears ringing. Stones break loose from the ceiling and crash to the floor. Beelzebub stumbles around, looking for survivors.

Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, all of them managed to end up at the sides of the room, against the walls, where the falling rubble won't land on them.

Kiari lays in a heap, with so many of her bones broken that she can only lay catatonic, unable to do more than lifelessly twitch her fingers. Her bugs lay scattered all over the chamber, their bodies splattered and exploded due to their weaker constitutions. Even her hardest beetles barely cling to life.

Blinker, luckily, ended up thrown into her Illusory Realm. She emerges not long after Beelzebub, occasionally puking up her guts due to extreme nausea and dizziness.

As for Archangel Uriel, she possessed a sturdy enough body that her crashing against the walls didn't kill her on the spot. She did suffer multiple broken bones and a terrible concussion, but she managed to survive and splash healing water on her worst injuries.

"Uhh..." Uriel gasps, trying to breathe through her broken ribs. "The... the necromancer... trick... tricked..."

Beelzebub glances at the humans.

What he finds is a pitiful sight.

All of them have perished.

Even Samuel Baker.

The man's body lays broken and dead in a heap, never again to stand tall.

Fortunately, all of them will rise again as The Respected... but that does not change the fact that they paid the highest price in this final struggle.

Beelzebub, though, does not care much for their fates. He spares one last glance toward Melia, Saria, and Ruto, all of whom appear in just as pitiful of conditions as Kiari.

"Damn." Beelzebub growls. "That Mephisto... what was he thinking?"

Beelzebub flies into the air. He dodges the falling debris and travels toward the head of the Arena, where Mephisto's final gambit played out.

When Beelzebub lands, he finds no traces of Mephisto or his minions. Indeed, with all their bodies having been utterly atomized, not a speck of material remains.

"Good riddance." Beelzebub mutters.

Then, he turns his eyes toward a single black bead left behind, laying conspicuously in the center of the raised arena. This orb appears to be no ordinary marble, judging by the remnant death energy hovering around it.

Beelzebub picks it up. He inspects it, and his expression lightens.

"Valac's Lantern. It's gone. This is all that's left."

Beelzebub breathes a sigh of relief.

Demonkind's greatest artifact, the item that was once capable of devouring souls from all over the Milky Way... has been destroyed.

"He failed." Beelzebub says. "Mephisto failed. Stupid bastard only ended up killing himself in the end."

Beelzebub shakes his head. Then, he flies over to Kiari to try and stabilize her condition.

Part 475: A Glinch in the Matrix

In the wake of Mephisto's self-destruction, a field of carnage lays out in the open for all to see. Beelzebub tries to help the others pick themselves up, but ultimately, not many of humanity's allies remain alive at the end of the battle.

In fact, all of the humans have died, their broken, shattered bodies crumpled in heaps here and there.

Blinker gingerly caresses her aching chest. Despite being blown into her Illusory Realm, she didn't enjoy a soft landing. Had she not been partially monsterized in her pseudo-Sphinx form, she might have died on impact. As it stands, she enjoys the agony of multiple broken ribs.

Compared to the others, though, she got off easy.

"Damn..." Blinker whispers, looking dejectedly at every single dead human laying amidst the ruins. "That Mephisto... that boney-bastard..."

Uriel shakily walks around, her vision bleary and a dull ringing echoing in her ears. As the hardest combatant on the field, she suffered the least direct damage, but that doesn't mean she got off easily.

"Bloodskin heretic," she murmurs, while waving her hands to re-summon her three brothers.

Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael reappear. Despite having had their phantasmal bodies obliterated in the shockwave, they also didn't suffer any permanent damage. After all, Uriel creates them with her mana and thus they can easily die and rebirth an infinite number of times.

Gabriel looks around the area. His expression turns grim.

"Unfortunate."

Michael nods. "Leave it to a Demon Emperor."

After summoning her brothers, Uriel flies over to the most badly injured person, Emperor Kiari. Despite her obvious hatred for demonkind, she doesn't detest the cute demoness nearly as much as her kin. She splashes a bit of healing water on Kiari to

stabilize her injuries and mend a few internal wounds, then glowers at Beelzebub beside her.

"Thy feats were quite impressive during this fight, Emperor of Hellfire."

"As were yours." Beelzebub curtly replies.

The two of them stare at each other with deep meaning. It wasn't long ago that Uriel beat the absolute shit out of Beelzebub, stomping his head into paste over and over again. He can't help but resent her actions, even if he has to silently admit he deserved every blow.

Elsewhere, a pair of fairies collapse to their knees beside a third, unmoving figure.

"Saria..." Ruto whispers, as blood leaks from her mouth. "Cough... she's... she's..."

Princess Melia's right arm hangs limp at her side. One of her wings is missing, having been torn off when she crashed against the wall. She only survived thanks to a magical trinket her mother gave her, but even that has been obliterated, fulfilling its sole purpose. Despite surviving, she feels nothing but a bitter pain as she looks at her fallen retainer's body.

"I should have placed down a defensive formation." Melia mutters. "Stupid. Worthless. I can't believe myself."

Princess Ruto sniffles as tears come unbidden to her eyes. She touches Saria's chest, hoping she will discover a spark of life still remaining. Sadly, she does not. Her best friend of several hundred years lays unmoving, never again to roam the mortal coil.

"Aaaauuu... Saria... no!!"

Ruta becomes inconsolable. She ignores the agony of her own badly broken body, sobbing and wailing while her broken bones only add to her torment.

As for Melia, she grieves quietly, in her own princess-like way, willing herself to remain strong. As a future leader of her people, she must detach herself from the deaths of even her closest subordinates, though her mother would likely grant her leniency on today's occurrence.

While the fairies grieve, Blinker lands beside Raphael's construct. She glances around at all the dead bodies with a deep look of sadness.

"These people are my friends." Blinker says. "They can still rise as The Respected... but not Saria. Tell me we at least accomplished something useful, old man."

Raphael's eyes lower. His bushy eyebrows momentarily hide his gaze.

"Alas. I fear the Necromancer may hath outwitted us. We fell for his ploy."

"What? We did?" Blinker asks, turning to look at the broken necromantic altar. "But he's dead. There's nothing left. The idiot got compressed into a speck of dirt!"

Raphael raises his head. He looks at the Monster Queen with a deep gaze.

"Dost thou believeth the Emperor of Legions a fool? Think again. That force field protecting him was not a force field at all. T'was an Absorption Field."

Raphael doesn't bother to explain the difference. He easily observes Blinker's eyes turning dark as she realizes the implication.

"An Absorption Field?! So Mephisto was using the strength of our attacks to... to what, exactly? He must have been converting that energy for some purpose!"

Beelzebub flies over to the two of them. Thanks to his keen demonic hearing, he easily makes out their conversation. He holds up his palm, revealing a small blackened orb.

"This is all that remains of Valac's Lantern." Beelzebub says.

Blinker looks at the orb, but then her eyes roam a tad lower. With a quiet grunt, she motions with her fingers to conjure some pants and a shirt to cover Beelzebub's naked body. Beelzebub refuses to acknowledge her act of kindness.

"So the Lantern is destroyed." Blinker says, acting as if she didn't just see Beelzebub's Bits for the umpteenth time in an hour. "Then doesn't that mean Mephisto's plan failed, Raphael?"

"I believe Mephisto was refining something." Raphael says, his tone grim. "Deliberately, he recalled all of those Emperor souls back to his control. He backstabbed Yama, and he didn't tear Zamiel's soul out without a shred of mercy. Verily, I can think of many uses one might have for souls as mighty as those belonging to Demon Emperors, but none of them would be uses we might consider 'pure'."

Blinker shakes her head.

"You're overthinking things, Archangel. Mephisto probably did have some elaborate plan, but we unleashed too much power. Even an Absorption Field has its limits. When

the field overloaded, it compressed into a micro-singularity and killed Mephisto on the spot."

Raphael doesn't appear convinced.

"Thou art thinking too simply. The Necromancer could have easily fled, yet he did not. This shows he had a high confidence in his plan's success. He remained in place, refining some sort of magical device or a spell, right until the bitter end. Verily I say unto thee, one does not do such a thing when they are as well-known a coward as Mephisto... not unless he had some assurances."

Beelzebub strokes his chin. "Say what you want about Mephisto. He was a yellow-belly, a pathetic little snake, and maybe even a worm. But he wasn't an idiot. He was always plotting something. He's probably dead, but we should be on our guard. It's possible he might have made contingencies in the event his magic failed."

Blinker nods. "You should destroy that orb, Beelzebub. It's high time we finally eliminated the last vestiges of Emperor Valac's influence."

"That object has a dreadful history." Raphael agrees. "Melt it to slag."

Beelzebub nods. Without speaking a word of acknowledgment, he presses both his hands on top of the compressed Lantern's remains. He ignites a violent but fully contained thermonuclear heat of 4000 degrees in his palm, creating a miniature star that focuses all of its fury on the object in its center.

What remains of Valac's Lantern crumbles within seconds. Beelzebub continues maintaining the heat for a full minute while Raphael observes and Blinker heads off to teleport the injured back to the Core.

When he finishes, Beelzebub opens his palm to reveal a handful of ashes that ultimately scatter to the floor. He nods at Raphael and starts to turn away...

"Beelzebub." Raphael says.

"Hm?" Beelzebub grunts, glancing at the Archangel of Wisdom curiously.

Raphael says nothing for a few moments. He narrows his eyes.

"Hath thou... learned any Cosmic Truths yet?"

"Pardon?" Beelzebub asks, blinking twice.

Once again, Raphael remains silent for a few moments.

"There is a... strange odor on thy person." Raphael says cryptically.

"I bathe myself in fire constantly. I shouldn't stink." Beelzebub retorts.

"That is not my meaning." Raphael says, cocking his head slightly. "Couldst thou potentially be... a Candidate?"

Invisible question marks pop up over the Emperor of Hellfire's head.

"I beg your pardon?"

"A Candidate to become a Ruler..." Raphael starts to explain, before pausing. "Nay. Thy eyes speak of ignorance. Never mind. I am merely rambling."

Raphael flaps his wings. He takes to the air and leaves Beelzebub standing in his wake, while the Emperor of Hellfire scratches his head in confusion.

"...I think that old pigeon has a few screws loose."

Elsewhere in the Milky Way. On the world of Numaria, a planet filled with lush and beautiful forests, sweeping vistas, and beautiful landscapes, where the Hell of Punishment resides...

On a remote continent far from any population centers, there exists a strange blighted area that stains the otherwise paradise-like planet of beauty and perfection. In this dead zone, strange, horrifying creatures roam. Monsters and mutants. Entities with violently distorted bodies, mismatched limbs, lepers who lament their existence. Not only do their exteriors make them appear like freaks, but their internals are no better, with terribly mismatched vital organs that barely manage to keep them alive.

And not one of these formerly beautiful, powerful, or noble existences exists without suffering unimaginable pain and torment. Every waking moment is one of torturous survival. Perhaps, if these creatures were more lucid, they might even take their own lives rather than live a day longer.

Sadly, strange compulsions force them to continue living in vegetative, zombified states. They exist unwillingly, never again to enjoy free and fulfilled lives.

Few entities in the universe know of this strange five-hundred-mile 'dead zone' on the world of Numaria. Fewer care about its existence, or fully understand its source and what causes it.

Half a mile beneath the planet's surface, smack in the middle of the dead zone, an underground facility exists. A demonic laboratory, one that appears surprisingly clean, organized, and tidy, despite what the monsters roaming outside would suggest.

Torches line the walls, but their flickering flames are colored purple, giving the entire underground dwelling an ominous glow. Countless rooms house prisoners chained to the floors, walls, or torture devices. Many of them have had their vocal cords severed, so that they cannot scream.

The Master of the Dead Zone does not like to be annoyed.

Of course, the region *does* have a proper name. Those in the know often refer to it as...

The Stitched Wasteland.

Inside its underground compound, only one creature roams free: The master of this realm, a fearsome predator even among his fellow demons.

The Stitched Emperor, *Glinch*.

Emperor Glinch's body is a freakish, hellish combination of many other different creatures. Multiple legs line his lower body, with many of them having mismatched colors and appearances. They give him a spider-like appearance, but most ghoulishly, they do not even appear to come from the same species.

At the same time, several arms stick out of his back, front, and sides. Five eyes of different colors and sizes rest in asymmetrical places on his head, with three of them on the left and two on the right. Even his teeth seem to be from different entities, with some of them flat and humanlike, while others are more serrated and sharklike.

Simply put, the Stitched Emperor looks as if he has forcibly grafted various body parts from other beings onto himself. He resembles a monster from a horror story, yet walks smoothly and with practiced ease.

Inside Glinch's primary laboratory, where he performs the work he deems most important, a demonstone tablet lays flat on a circular altar. A rune glows on its surface, magically projecting a containment field above where more than a dozen differently-colored orbs of light 'swim' around, some of them large, and others small. Like fish trapped in a fishbowl, the orbs bounce against the walls, struggling to get free.

However, one of the orbs does not act in the same manner as the rest. The largest and most imposing grey-colored orb hovers in the center, as if confidently ignoring any threat

to its existence.

"It seems all went according to plan!" Glinch says cheerfully, his voice sounding surprisingly pleasing to one's ears. Thanks to having stolen the vocal cords of another being long ago, his voice has almost a sing-songy quality to its vibrato. "One, two, three... so many Duke and Emperor souls! You've truly thought it all out, haven't you, Mephist-bro?!"

The orb in the center of the rest glows a little brighter.

"Ksss. Remember our deal, Glinch." Mephisto hisses, his words telepathically traveling to Glinch's troubled mind.

"Oh, deal, *shmeal*. Don't be such a workaholic!" Glinch chirps, clasping several of his hands together in unison. He smiles prettily, the expression looking quite unnerving due to his disfigured face. "We haven't spoken in ages! It would be such a shame to just get right down to business, don't you think?"

"...We ssspoke not even a week ago." Mephisto grumbles in annoyance.

Glinch begins circling around the altar, waving his hands theatrically while he moves.

"It's such a shame all of my favorite humans disappeared recently!" Glinch says, ignoring Mephisto's tone. "Do you have ANY idea how hard it is to find reliable, mint-condition 'parts'? Humans have the best compatibility, you know. And they're so simple to operate on, even an imbecile could do it!"

"I do not wisssh to dissscussss mundanitiesss..." Mephisto mutters. "Get on with the procccedure."

"There you go again, always jumping the line." Glinch admonishes, waggling five different pointer-fingers. "Work, work, work. You should stop sometimes and smell the roses!"

"I have no sssenssse of sssmell."

"I can fix that!" Glinch suddenly says, his eyes bugging out. He zips toward the orb, hovering over it with an eager and hungry gaze. "Do you want a functioning nose?! I have lots of parts you can choose from! Humans, monsters, demons, even whale noses! How about some skin? I can change your appearance for you! Your new body can be so much prettier than your old one! OOOH, I know! What if I make you a GIRL?! I love shifting my gender! I've done it a hundred times by now! It won't even hurt a bit!"

"My original appearancce will be adequate." Mephisto says, his words sounding as if spoken through gnashed teeth.

"Adequate! Hah! You have no sense of adventure. Let me tell you, there's no greater joy than getting to see the world through someone else's eyes, or walking a mile in their feet. And I should know! HAH. HAH. HAH."

Glinch laughs in an extremely odd, stilted manner. It comes off sounding forced, as if he never once in his life learned how a normal person would do such a thing. It even momentarily unnerves Mephisto, making him fall silent for a few moments.

Mephisto gazes through his soul-vision at the other souls trapped in the magical containment field with himself.

Then he turns his attention back to Glinch.

"If you do not do ass I ssay... you will not receive the *thing* which your heart mossst desssiresss. You ssshould procceed with the operation, possst-hassste."

Glinch's happy smile abruptly changes.

His entire demeanor changes.

A cold, ominous light appears in his eyes.

"Don't even think of threatening me, *Emperor of Legions*. I hold your life in my hands."

He looms over the altar, his freakish body now appearing truly horrifying as he dispenses with the pleasantries.

"You've already become my slave. From this day forward, you will never be able to betray me. So don't act as if you have any leverage."

Despite Glinch's threats, Mephisto remains undaunted.

"I am aware. Ssspeak not ass if I am a fool. The sssoner I asscend, the sssooner we can both begin reaping the rewardsss..."

"Mmm. The rewards." Glinch says, nodding slowly. "Those, I do look forward to."

Several seconds pass. Glinch gazes off to the side, as if lost in thought.

"Fine. Talking to you isn't any fun anyway. Might as well get this over with so I can return to my research."

Glinch walks over to a nearby table, where a multitude of tools, gadgets, and magical devices rest. He begins putting gloves on each of his hands, a process that takes more than three minutes due to the sheer number of arms on his body. Then he dons a surgical mask, and a splatter-resistant apron.

The Stitched Emperor picks up a glowing rune with one of his hands, a magically enchanted hammer with another, and a dozen more implements. Then he walks back to the containment field with all the souls sealed within.

"Mephisto! You bastard!" Lupus snarls, throwing her soul uselessly against Mephisto's. She bounces away, damaging neither him nor herself. "What are you trying to pull?!"

"Yeah!" Zamiel exclaims. "What's going on here, anyway?! Why did you trap all of us here, including yourself? Are you crazy?!"

Mephisto's soul remains in the same place, unmoved no matter how the others crash against him.

"We are all about to particccipate in a glorioussss event. Perhapsss the firssst in demonic hissstory. Be grateful that I have allowed you to experiencce my ultimate plan... *for Assscensssion...*"

Glinch reaches toward the containment field. His hand passes through the barrier and grabs onto Mephisto's soul, making the Emperor of Legions cry out in pain.

"Aaargh!"

"You think this hurts now?" Glinch asks coolly. "For the next three days, your suffering will be unending. But this much pain is necessary for the *soul stitching* to work as planned. I don't want to hear your whining the whole time, so you had better suck it up."

Mephisto telepathically grimaces.

"Jusst do it! We can take the pain!"

"Soon enough, we'll see if that's true or not." Glinch says, as he begins his work.

"Aaaargh!"

"Aaaaahhh!!"

"AAAAIIIEEE!"

Mephisto's screams of torment continue, seemingly never to end.

Part 476: Respected Evolution

Beaten and battered, what remains of the Mephisto Assassination Force metaphorically limps back to their base inside the Labyrinth Core. Blinker teleports everyone home, but they don't return to roaring applause or an excited welcome. Instead, when they arrive, the mood inside the Core is one of dull frustration and a distinct lack of satisfaction.

The demons from the various Hells don't give a damn whether or not Mephisto fell, or whether humanity's forces won or lost. Still, they do take a certain sadistic pleasure in seeing how much damage Mephisto dealt to the Wordsmith's allies before he went out with a bang. Only a blind and deaf hellhound could have missed the cataclysmic explosion that erupted throughout the Labyrinth when Mephisto self-destructed.

Aside from human's tentative ally-enemies, the friendly demons, monsters, and humans don't enjoy a good mood either. With a few hundred humans having died to Mephisto's final detonation, and only a small handful of survivors having returned alive, few could call the battle a 'victory' for the First Wordsmith's forces.

Of course, the humans who died will ultimately rebirth once as the Respected, but they will also have to live the rest of their existences knowing their free revive has already been used up.

But if the loss of the humans was only a minor setback, the tragic death of Princess Melia's retainer, Saria, was a truly painful blow. Unlike the humans, she will never again walk the cosmos, as the fairies do not have a relic comparable to the Lazarus Tower.

Following the customs of her people, Melia wraps Saria's body inside a protective layer of magic to hide her appearance, preserve her dignity, and prevent any decay. She and the rest of the survivors arrive inside the Core to deafening silence, as many people merely give them a single glance, then look away, somewhat ashamed.

Despite the painful loss, one person doesn't appear totally broken up. Blinker herself, at the least, managed to wrest back her husband's soul from the necromancer Emperor. After allowing Belial to take care of her wounds, Blinker flits away to see Phoebe and Jason, leaving the rest behind.

The others in the group stay in the core with Belial. The Emperor of Passion travels to each individual, healing their grievous wounds while leaving any brain injuries to her capable assistant, Leeroy, the Duke of Restoration.

Of all the participants in the attack, none came out in remotely as good of condition as Beelzebub himself. While others may have lost friends, loved ones, or even suffered some painful injuries, Beelzebub ended up just fine! The Emperor of Hellfire whistles an out-of-place merry tune while he sits with Kiari, watching as Belial restores her injuries.

"Glad to see you're so chipper." Belial says, glaring daggers at Beelzebub.

Having lost her god-niece to Beelzebub when he killed Daisy in his detonation, Belial will never forgive him or think better of him. Seeing any sort of smile on his face simply enrages her out of her mind... but she also knows that attacking him won't accomplish anything.

Beelzebub shrugs. "What can I say? I had fun killing Mephisto's goons. I'll let you beat me around a bit if it makes you feel better."

"I'd rather focus my energy on productive things, like helping other people." Belial snaps back. "Not that you'd ever do such a thing."

Belial finishes healing Kiari, then stands up and trots away, heading over to heal Archangel Uriel.

Kiari massages her ribs, feeling relieved that her previously broken and shattered body has finally stopped hurting. She no longer craves death over that hellish pain.

"Hey, Beelzebub. Um. Thanks for carrying me out of there." Kiari says. "I know Belial doesn't like you, but... I don't think you're so bad."

Beelzebub smirks. "That's where you're wrong. I am indeed a very bad person. She has every right to hate me."

"Nah. Mephisto's a terrible guy." Kiari retorts. "You're just confused! Or at least you were. But now you're not!"

"You're not wrong..." Beelzebub mutters, trailing off.

He and Kiari sit quietly for a few moments.

Perhaps bothered by the silence, Kiari starts yapping again.

"It's so sad what happened to Saria, don't you think? She helped keep those Death Gates at bay, but she got unlucky in the end and now she's dead."

"Some people are doomed to die." Beelzebub mutters. "Others are destined for greatness. Destined..."

Kiari turns her head to look at the Emperor of Hellfire sitting beside her.

"You okay, Beelzy?"

"Don't call me Beelzy." Beelzebub says. "Only my friends can call me that, and I think friends are annoying."

"Right, right. But are you doing okay?" Kiari repeats, pressing the issue. "You seem distant. More than usual, I suppose."

Beelzebub shoots her an annoyed look. "How would you know what my 'usual' is? We barely know each other."

"Perhaps we should change that!" Kiari chirps.

"Aren't you married?" Beelzebub shoots back.

"Oh, sure. And I'm faithful! But I wasn't talking about any weird stuff anyway. Your mind is always in the gutter."

"Yeah. The gutter." Beelzebub mutters, averting his eyes.

Kiari cocks her head. "Hey, wait a minute. You dodged my question again! Tell it to me straight! Is something wrong? You seem down in the dumps."

Beelzebub shrugs.

Then he shrugs again.

"I don't know. Probably not. Maybe. Hmm. It's just something that old man said that's been bothering me..."

"Old man? You mean Agares?" Kiari asks.

"Agares? No. He died years ago. I'm talking about Archangel Raphael." Beelzebub says. "He asked me an odd question and I can't stop thinking about it..."

"What was the question?" Kiari asks.

"He wanted to know if I was a Candidate." Beelzebub says. "Then he mentioned something about a Ruler. I believed he was just being weird, but now that I think about it,

that pigeon is older than time itself. Maybe he knows something he isn't letting on..."

Kiari shrugs. "Maybe. But why would it matter, anyway? Do you have greater aspirations? Are you feeling unfulfilled?"

"Well, yes, and yes." Beelzebub affirms. "I'm an Emperor now. That should make me feel incredible, but now I instead feel like I can't grow any further. I still want to uplift demonkind... but I'm not sure how to do that. I want to do something meaningful, but I don't know *what*..."

The Emperor of Hellfire lightly tosses his hands.

"What am I even doing, blabbering to some woman? Feel free to ignore me."

Beelzebub glances at Kiari. She smiles cutely at him.

"Keep working hard, Beelzy! I'm sure you'll figure out something sooner or later. You only just evolved to Emperor, so don't rush to find meaning in your life or any of that nonsense. Why not just try helping one person at a time? Find a young demon you like and tutor them! Show them how to be awesome, like you were when you fought Yama and Zamiel!"

Beelzebub blinks. "Tutor another demon, huh... I suppose that wouldn't be a bad idea."

"Exactly! I heard you made it to to your current position thanks to Duke Agares. Have you ever heard the human expression, 'pay it forward'? If someone does something nice for you, you should do something equally nice for another random stranger. Or even two strangers! If everyone does this, the effect will double each time, and we'll quickly make the whole galaxy a better place!"

Beelzebub snorts. "If only it were that simple."

"It is!" Kiari argues. "Just try it. I bet you'll be surprised by the results."

Kiari and Beelzebub continue to talk. At the same time, some distance away, beyond the lake of demons, humans, and monsters milling about the Core, Belial finishes healing up Uriel's body, restoring the Archangel to her best condition.

Uriel flexes her previously broken arm. She and Belial stare at one another for several seconds.

"Feeling better?" Belial finally asks.

"If thou wisheth me to thank thee, thou art going to be waiting a while." Uriel says curtly.

"A thank-you would be nice, but it's not necessary." Belial says.

She pauses.

"Listen, Uriel. I know an apology is just words. It's meaningless, and it won't undo anything. But you do have every right to hate me, even after all these years. I just wanted to say... I'm sorry for my actions during the War in Heaven."

"Better late than never." Uriel grunts.

"I think about my past a lot." Belial continues. "I went my entire life without ever killing anyone. I thought that if I left people alive, but only crippled them, then my conscience could remain clean and whatever happened to them afterward wouldn't be my fault."

"And then Stormbringer arrived." Uriel says, her tone becoming one of slight amusement. "And verily, thou didn't slay ten thousand demons; thy own kin. Tsk, tsk."

"I went berserk." Belial says, nodding. "But I realized something that day. I felt exactly as bad about killing all those demons as I did when I left you for dead, or all the other times I did Satan's dirty work but never finished the job. I spent millennia lying to myself. Now I know the truth... the truth that I once denied."

Uriel crosses her arms. "Let me guess. Thou now understandeth that violence is wrong, no matter the degree?"

"Yeah." Belial nods. "But I also understand that in this universe... it's necessary. We have a Plague lurking on our galaxy's doorstep. Even if we beat it, what if another Threat comes from the void? We have to be ready to fight, and even kill, to protect ourselves."

Uriel slowly blinks her beautiful blue eyes.

"This may be the worst apology ever uttered by a sentient creature."

"Right, apology. I got sidetracked." Belial says. "I'm sorry I went along with Satan's orders and attacked you. I'm sorry you suffered, and the angels fell. I wish our species had come to a mutual understanding, rather than to blows. It is a genuine tragedy the angels no longer walk our plane."

"Ah, but we still do." Uriel says, her voice softer than before. "There is yet one angel left among the living. We Archangels stubbornly cling to the physical realm, as well. Perhaps someday our species may rebirth through the Wordsmith's magic."

She shrugs.

"Or perhaps not. 'Tis not my call to make."

Belial smiles. "I hope they do. The universe is a darker place without the angels around."

On Tarus II, at the Lazarus Tower.

The manager of the tower, a person instated to watch over new arrivals when Phoebe Hiro is not present or is otherwise occupied, turns out to be Ogie, the same Salamander who previously lived next door to Jason and Phoebe while Daisy was growing up.

After the Stormbringer War, Ogie and his wife, Jeera, relocated to the southern part of the city. But as good, kind-hearted and trustworthy people, Phoebe opted to put the old monster in charge of the Lazarus Tower. After all, while it might not require any maintenance, people who revive through it often return in a traumatized state, and Phoebe finds that having a warmhearted lovable old man like Ogie around helps ease the tension.

On this particular day, dozens of humans materialize one after the other, with only ten minutes between each Respected's rise. The red-scaled Salamander sits on a lightly cushioned chair before the primary rejuvenation platform, watching as billions of molecules of light draw together to reform into the figure of a naked human woman.

The woman slumps to the ground and coughs violently. Ogie gets off his chair, walks over to her, and wraps a robe around her back.

"Yeap, it does seem ta' hurt when ya come back. Cough up that phlegm, ma'am. You'll feel better in no time."

The woman glances up at the baggy-eyed old lizard and shivers.

"I... I... where am I?"

"The Lazarus Tower." Ogie says. "You're the fourteenth to come back so far. Yeap, lotsa people died to that Mephisto-feller. Do ya remember your final moments?"

The woman closes her eyes and massages her eyelids. She shakily stands up, with Ogie helping steady her balance.

"I, I was, I was shooting... shooting my gun... at that energy field... then the next thing I knew, I was on my knees here, coughing like crazy..."

"Seems a lotta people just kinda blanked out at the same time." Ogie says. "At least it was a quick death. Welcome back to th'world of th'living, ma'am."

He continues talking to her for a minute or two, then gives her a T-REX to temporarily wear to preserve her dignity, at least until she can return to her home and change into appropriate clothes.

After the soldier leaves, Ogie sits back down.

A minute or two slowly pass...

Then, molecules of light begin to form once more.

The figure of a tall, dark-skinned man appears. He falls forward and collapses to his knees, but only a moment later, stands up, looking extremely confused.

"Huh? The hell- where am I?"

"Lazarus Tower." Ogie says, getting off his chair. "You done-did bite the dust, young man. Ah, you must be that Samuel-feller. I was told to keep an eye out for ya."

Ogie hands a robe to the naked man, which Samuel accepts. Unlike the woman before him, Samuel doesn't appear as confused, but instead quickly accepts what happened.

"That god-damned Mephisto." Samuel growls, as he starts to put his robe on. "He couldn't just die, NO, he had to fuck us over with one last- huh?"

Samuel's robe meets an obstruction as he tries to wrap it around his back. He cranes his neck around, only to see that the robe has snagged on something stuck to his back.

"The heck? Am I wearing a backpack or something? What is my robe stuck on?"

Ogie raises his wizened old eyebrow. "Eh? Whaddya mean, feller? Don't ya know about those cute butterfly wings on yer back?"

"Cute BUTTERFLY wings?!" Samuels gasps. He quickly pulls the robe off, then cranes his head like crazy to try and get a better look. "What the FUCK?! I don't even have my Power Glove on! How in damnation do I still have fairy wings?!"

"You mean you ain't a fairy?" Ogie asks, only to pause and scratch his head. "Oh, right. Phoebe said only humans could come back. Maybe you're half a fairy, then? The kids these days, they're all so carefree..."

"I am NOT a fairy." Samuel grouches. "I'll have to see Phoebe about this. Can you hand me that knife over there?"

He gestures to a long-bladed carving knife on a nearby table, one Ogie uses to whittle wood when he's bored. The old Salamander nods, then waddles over, picks up the implement, and hands it to Samuel.

Samuel cuts two large slits in the back of the robe. Then he forces his large wings through the slits and fully dons his robe.

After tying it off, Samuel's expression doesn't improve much.

"Ridiculous. How did that even happen? Never mind. Thanks for the help, Ogie."

"No problem." Ogie says, giving Samuel a thumbs up. "Mister Neil said he wanted to talk to ya. Make sure you drop by after you've cleaned yourself up, alright now?"

"Roger that." Samuel replies.

After Ogie hands Samuel a goodbye T-REX, the Lieutenant marches out of the Lazarus Tower, where he finds a woman waiting for him.

"Lieutenant!" Private Ashley says, as she walks up to him. "How are you feeling? I heard what happened..."

"Were you there when Mephisto blew his stack?" Samuel asks, as he falls into step beside his subordinate. "No, that's right... you got knocked out and Blinker sent you back to the Core."

"Yeah..." Ashley says, as she pauses to glance at Samuel's back. "What's with the wings? You don't even have a Power Glove on."

"I have no idea." Samuel says. "I revived, and they were already there! Maybe Hope or Jason can turn me back to normal."

"Have you... become a fairy... for real?" Ashley asks. "Can you cast fairy magic?"

"No idea. Haven't tried." Samuel says, while raising his hand. "I could just-"

Samuel starts to make a motion with his hand. Abruptly, a blast of telekinetic energy fires forward and explodes against a rock.

BOOOM!!

The rock detonates like a bomb, blasting rock-shrapnel everywhere! Startled, Ashley and Samuel nearly jump out of their skin!

Several people scream in alarm. A child begins to cry as he falls over, badly injured. Ashley rushes to his side while activating her T-REX. She conjures an emergency medical nanite injector and presses it against the child's neck while hastily yanking out several rock shards embedded in his chest.

"Holy shit..." Samuel gasps, frightened out of his wits. He hurries to help an older man who fell and hit his head, while at the same time feeling more than a little spooked. "How the hell... how did my magic become so strong? I barely even did anything... hold on, sir! Stay with me!"

Samuel blinks his eyes to clear away his dazed expression. He quickly performs CPR on the man, reviving him, while nearby soldiers arrive on scene with medical supplies, having been alerted by Tarus II's automated defenses.

"Lieutenant, glad to see you back on your feet, sir." One of the newcomer soldiers says, kneeling beside Samuel. "What happened here? Did an enemy attack?"

The soldier takes the injured civilian off Samuel's hands.

"No," Samuel explains. "It was me. I accidentally... well, I fired fairy magic from my hands. I've somehow revived as one, and... sorry. I didn't realize this would happen."

"You'd better report to Commander Neil." The soldier says with a brusque nod. "And watch your magic! You could have killed someone!"

"Yeah, damn. We got lucky." Samuel says, grimacing.

He exchanges a few words with Ashley, then takes off, heading over to see his commanding officer.

As he walks, Samuel's wings flap reflexively, and he takes to the skies. He begins racing through the air at a speed higher than he's ever managed before, making him marvel at how much more potent his fairy magic has become.

Did resurrecting as a Respected change something with my powers? He wonders. I need to get to the bottom of this!

Part 477: Lost in the Labyrinth

Blinker paces back and forth nervously. She wrings her hands together as if trying to squeeze every last drop of water out of a washcloth. Not far away, Phoebe Hiro sits in front of a desk and computer terminal, calmly typing on a keyboard while she performs her daily routines. She mostly ignores Blinker's frantic pacing, but the Monster Queen's obvious worry doesn't escape her notice.

"How can you play on a computer at a time like this?!" Blinker finally asks, breaking fifteen minutes of silence.

"If Jason and Fiona can't do anything, then neither can I." Phoebe answers. "Don't worry. They've taken Kar's soul to a time-accelerated realm and are currently performing spiritual surgery on him. I have faith they'll bring him back to life."

"I should be helping them." Blinker complains, while she begins pacing again, even faster than before. "I'm a genius at magic, you know!"

"Not to brag, but so is Fiona." Phoebe says. "Jason said he'll bring you to his world once he's stabilized Kar. One way or another, he will. Just give him time."

"But why can't I go there now?!" Blinker snaps.

"Do you want Kar to die?" Phoebe asks pointedly. "Distracting Jason during this critical period... I don't think you want to do that. Just sit still and wait. Have some faith in my husband. There's no way he's going to let his best friend down now."

Blinker sighs. She walks over and sits behind Phoebe where she can see the computer screen she's using. Blinker continues to grumble under her breath, but no longer harps on about seeing her husband.

"What are you even doing, anyway?" Blinker asks, changing the topic to try and get her mind off things. She gestures vaguely toward the computer screen. "That doesn't even look interesting! It's just a bunch of numbers!"

On Phoebe's screen, a series of complex-looking formulas and graphs appear, all of them looking like complete gibberish to Blinker. While monsters might be more technologically adept than demons, the abstract nature of whatever Phoebe is working on completely goes over the fairy's head.

Phoebe doesn't answer for a few long seconds. She sighs, then lowers her eyes to her keyboard, tapping its bottom edge thoughtfully.

"Your operation to kill Mephisto exposed a lot of issues I've overlooked until now."

"Issues?" Blinker asks.

"Yes. We lost everyone. All of the human soldiers. They perished in battle, despite wearing the T-REX suits I designed. After having a chat with Marie Becker, I've been feeling... guilty. I failed those soldiers by equipping them with armor that was useless for their operation."

"Nobody could have expected Mephisto to go thermonuclear." Blinker says, softening her tone. "That explosion was ridiculous!"

"I explicitly designed the T-REX suits to be a suitable balance of cost and efficiency." Phoebe explains. "They aren't meant to allow ordinary humans to go toe-to-toe with Demon Emperors. Some of our best troopers, when working together, might be able to pin down a Demon Duke, but an Emperor is simply out of the question. At least for our current generation of exosuits."

"So why not make stronger ones?" Blinker asks.

"It's not that simple. Even with all of the incredible technological leaps we've made, nanite-based armor can only give our army so much defense. In essence, we rely on trillions of molecule-sized robots interlocking their tiny bodies together to create light and durable armor. The problem is, while this does make a T-REX exceptional at deflecting blunt damage, it simply cannot grant the same level of 'hard protection' as actual plated armor would. Explosions, heat, and electricity are huge fail-points our enemies can and will exploit."

Phoebe gestures at the formulas on her screen.

"I can create stronger nanite-based armor. It's certainly doable. Marie even handed me a *certain valuable item* that will jumpstart my next round of designs by leaps and bounds. But even so, the improved nanite production speed would plummet to a fraction of its current value. For every thousand T-REX's we make now, I'd only be able to make a single one of the newer, more durable type."

"Is that a problem?" Blinker asks. "If this new type can allow humans to fight Emperors, or at least survive clashes with them, you could simply give the armor to your

best troopers. You'd focus on elite squads capable of killing Emperors."

"It's not only about the resource cost of building these superior nanite-armors." Phoebe explains. "It's a logistics issue. Right now we only have three factories on Tarus II. I would need to devote the production lines of all three of them for over a hundred days to construct enough improved nanites to fabricate just *one* Ultimate T-REX. In that time, I could have produced 100,000 standard T-REX's. It's just not worth the time cost."

"I thought you said it would be a thousandth the efficiency. Not one hundred-thousandth?" Blinker asks, clearly confused.

"The energy, metals, compounds, and so on are not the same as the time and logistics requirements." Phoebe explains. "Those are another problem entirely. Even if Jason magicked a hundred new factories into existence, the price we'd pay to create a dozen Ultimate T-REX's would... well, let's just say I'd rather focus on Uplifting allied demons and monsters to the level they can fight a Demon Emperor."

"Sure... but there's a problem with that model." Blinker says slowly. "You have to put humanity's future in the hands of non-humans. Jason might be a trusting fellow, but I think you're a bit more pragmatic than him. To say nothing of Neil..."

Phoebe abruptly lifts her eyes from her keyboard. She turns to look Blinker right in the eyes.

"If humanity splits between Jason's faction and Hope's faction, which side will you take?"

Taken off-guard, Blinker flinches under Phoebe's gaze.

"I, I don't know! What kind of question is that? Both of you are my friends!"

"Neil wants to exterminate demonkind." Phoebe says. "He will almost assuredly ban all demons from coming along with him to Maiura. That puts our monster allies in an awkward position, you know. I don't think Neil even likes *you*."

Blinker scoffs. "*Whaaat?* Me and Neil are good friends! Unlike the demons, we monsters have been humanity's allies since day one! Are you seriously implying he'd want to push our different species away?"

"I don't know if he will or not..." Phoebe says. "But I do think that even if he doesn't make any explicit moves to do so, the option will linger in the back of his mind."

Blinker's expression becomes troubled. She averts her eyes, unable to meet Phoebe's gaze.

"Well... when you put it that way... he IS something of a human supremacist."

"Very much so." Phoebe says, turning away to massage her forehead. "And in a week and a half, I will need to give a speech to convince people to stay on Jason's side. I'm not sure if I'm up to the task."

"Hmph." Blinker snorts. "Jason's such a lazy turd. He always makes you do all the hard work. You should tell him to give his own speeches, Phoebe! Grow a backbone!"

"You'd have a point if this were only a few short months ago." Phoebe says, sobering up. She lifts her head to stare into the distance blankly. "Daisy's death hit Jason hard. He won't stop blaming himself. *I* won't stop blaming myself. Even Samantha has been fighting her own self-loathing on the matter. But in truth, it was Jason who failed 'the most' due to the powers he wields, and now he wants to redeem himself. He's not screwing around anymore. I think he's treating this entire situation as a chance to make up for the past. He's busier than you would believe."

"Busy doing what?" Blinker asks. "Aside from healing Kar, I mean."

"It'll be up to Jason to tell you himself." Phoebe answers, shaking her head. "I'm not at liberty to say. I do know he wants to keep this matter... hush-hush."

Phoebe, acutely aware of the possibility of a Psion listening in on the conversation, wisely keeps her lips sealed. Thanks to a special barrier her husband placed on her mind, no Psion will be able to intrude on her thoughts without alerting her, but that won't stop them from overhearing any words she says out loud.

Blinker doesn't press the issue. "I see. Well, I guess you two are working hard. Makes me wish I could do more on my end..."

"You just killed Mephisto." Phoebe says. "And Yama, too. Those are two threats we no longer have to worry about. You're doing plenty."

"Sure, but I want to do more." Blinker grumbles.

She and Phoebe continue talking for fifteen long minutes. With a few hours having passed since Blinker sent Kar back to Tarus II, she finds herself growing more and more antsy as the time passes.

Suddenly, the air vibrates. Jason's voice transmits into the room.

"Blinker. I've finished stabilizing Kar's condition. You can come see him now."

"What? REALLY?!" Blinker shrieks excitedly, while jumping to her feet. "He's going to be okay! Take me there already!"

Jason hesitates for a brief moment.

"Yeah. He'll... survive. One moment."

The vibration in the air stops. A moment later, Blinker *pops* out of existence.

Before she can even realize something has happened, the Monster Queen disappears and reappears in a completely new location. The instant she materializes, powerful beams of energy lock onto her position and bind her in place. Her vision goes dark as she loses not only her eyesight, but all of her other senses as well!

"W-what the heck?!" Blinker cries out in fear. "A trap?!"

Jason's voice speaks inside her mind.

[Please remain calm. I have to triple-check your identity. I've sealed off your senses, just to make sure you are who you say you are.]

"What do you mean?" Blinker asks. "I'm ME! Blinker! Your good friend-"

[Just remain calm. This won't take long.]

A strange and unsettling sensation causes Blinker's stomach to churn. A powerful scanner of some sort sends harmless but disquieting beams of radiation all throughout her body, massaging her skin and causing her bones to hum. She grits her teeth and even snickers under the ticklish sensations that simultaneously make her want to throw up.

Abruptly, the scans stop.

Blinker's vision returns, and she falls to her knees.

"Ah! Ohh... ohh... *gods*..."

Blinker presses both of her palms against the floor. Her vision sways, making her feel dizzy.

"...alize."

Jason speaks a Word of Power. Instantly, Blinker's queasiness vanishes, and she returns to full alertness.

The Wordsmith kneels down to help her up. As Blinker rises to her feet, she finally gets a good look at where she's arrived.

Blinker finds herself inside a small, tightly compacted facility of some kind. Dozens of machines aim at her in a manner she finds unnerving. Some of them appear to be the scanners that scoured every inch of her body, but others clearly seem to be weapons... weapons capable of obliterating her existence at the molecular level, if need be.

"This is my makeshift Entry Depot." Jason explains. "I didn't expect to have any visitors, but after I patched Kar's soul up, I spent a couple of days building it. This way, I can be sure anyone I bring here won't be bringing any *unwanted guests* along."

Blinker nods slowly. She stares at Jason for a moment, taking note of his lightly stubbled face. It appears he hasn't shaved in at least a month.

"Wh... where are we?" Blinker asks. "The gravity feels strange here."

"We're not on Tarus II." Jason says cryptically. "You can call this place... Chrona."

"Chrona." Blinker repeats, mouthing the word carefully. "Uhh... okay. So where is my husband?"

Jason smiles, but the expression seems forced.

"He's... well, follow me. I'll show you."

Seeing the lack of enthusiasm on Jason's face, Blinker's stomach sinks. She begins to wring her hands together in fear as Jason turns around and walks over to the door a few feet away. When he opens it, Blinker follows after him, her heart in her throat.

The Monster Queen steps outside. She lifts her eyes upward, then blinks in a daze.

"What... the...?"

The sky above 'revolves' at an alarming speed. It spins and twists violently, making her feel as if there is a spatial whirlpool surrounding the 'planet' she finds herself on. The ground beneath her feet turns out to be made entirely of steel, without a hint of dirt, grass, or greenery anywhere to be seen. At the same time, different sorts of buildings dot the landscape, perhaps only two dozen in total. The tallest one looks like a huge antennae aimed at the sky, while the smallest one seems to be a house made for a small family to live comfortably.

"Like I said," Jason explains, as he begins walking toward one of the mid-sized buildings, "I wasn't expecting visitors. I threw a little something together for Kar's sake, but once you two are done here, I really need to get back to my work."

Blinker tentatively follows the tall human as he walks toward that small, square structure up ahead.

"Chrona." Blinker repeats again. "What is this place, Jason?"

Jason doesn't answer. He continues walking forward as if he didn't hear her question.

He pushes open a door to the small building, then steps aside and gestures within.

"After you."

Blinker nods. She walks into the building, and Jason follows after her. When she enters, Blinker gazes around, spotting a myriad assortment of hastily-thrown-together, experimental, gimmicky-looking pieces of technology. Many of them look like they were cobbled from spare parts in a rush, with some of their exterior panels or other vanity pieces missing.

"This is a hospital." Jason explains. "Well. Sort of. Fiona helped me whip it up just for Kar. I wasn't expecting him to be in such bad shape. It's a miracle we were able to keep him alive..."

Jason shakes his head, making Blinker's stomach sink even further.

"Jason. Please... is he okay? Is my husband... alright?"

The Wordsmith sighs.

He points toward a white sheet hiding a bed in the corner. Behind it, Blinker can barely make out the vague shadowy figure of a crocodilian body laying motionless on a bed.

"KAR!!" Blinker cries.

The Fairy flaps her wings and rushes over to the sheet. She yanks it aside, finally getting her first look at her husband's figure.

Kar lays unmoving on a hospital bed. His chest rises and falls. His familiar crocodile body looks exactly as Blinker remembers it, from before the Battle Brothers killed him.

Blinker gently takes Kar's claw in her hands. Tears well up in her eyes.

"Kar... Kar, are you awake? Kar?"

Jason walks up behind the fairy, a dark look lingering in his eyes.

"That bastard, Mephisto. I don't know what he did to Kar, but his soul was... it was in a sorry shape, Blinker. I wanted to bring him back as good as new... but I couldn't."

Blinker sniffles. She paws at her eyes, then turns to look at Jason as tears run down her face.

"What do you mean? Speak plainly!"

Jason chews his lower lip. He closes his eyes and rubs the bridge of his nose.

"It's just... he's so weak now, Blinker. So weak. His soul was- I couldn't reform it properly. I could only mend the worst cracks and drip a bit of life back into him. But... his days of using magic are over. His soul is so fragile that it might not even be possible for him to walk again. His control over his body is going to be poor at best."

Blinker struggles to breathe. She swallows shallow gasps of breath while trying to keep her heart firm.

"Will he... wake up?"

Jason nods. He opens his eyes and exhales.

"Yes. He can talk. He's still mentally 'here.' His psyche was resilient. But you should know... Mephisto brutally tortured him. Kar suffered terribly. For the moment, I'll have to hold him here so I can keep an eye on his condition. His soul is like a leaky sieve. I can't rush the healing process, so it might be a few months until he can stay awake for more than thirty minutes at a time."

"Can't your Wordsmithing fix him?" Blinker asks.

"I thought it could. But no. Even my Wordsmithing has limits. I'm no good with healing brains, and I'm no good with souls, either."

Jason clears his throat.

"If you, uh, want, I can get a little room set up for you. You're free to stay here with him. It's the least I can do for the two of you."

Blinker nods hurriedly, as if afraid Jason will rescind the offer.

"Yes, yes, of course! I'll stay here. With him."

Jason nods his head sheepishly. He takes a few steps back, averting his eyes.

"Well, uh, I'm sure you will want some privacy. If you need me, I'll be... outside."

After Blinker nods, Jason turns and walks away, leaving her alone with her husband.

It's only once Jason leaves that Blinker can finally break down and collapse to her knees, crying tears of anguish and relief.

"Kar... Kar...!"

Somewhere inside the Labyrinth.

Dozens of shadowy figures roam the deepest, darkest corners of Hell.

These figures do not move with purpose.

They do not hold any particular intent in their minds.

Rather, they are like lost souls.

These shadowy figures move from right to left, and then right to left again. They roam around as if in a daze, lost and confused.

"We... my name... my name was... you are? Where am I... where was I going...?"

Men and women alike, these living shadows stumble about in a daze, moving toward no particular destination. Sometimes they bump into one another, gazing into each other's blackened eyes without understanding what they can even see.

A female shadow seemingly 'melts' onto the floor, then recondenses her body into something vaguely human shaped.

"Vic... Victoria... that name... it means something to me..." The woman mumbles to herself. "Was it my name? Was it someone else's?"

She turns to look at another shadow standing nearby. "Excuse me, do you know who I am?"

"How should I know?! I don't even know who **I** am!" The other shadow shrieks. "Aaaaaiiee! This is scary! So scary! How did I get here?! Who are all of you? Who am I?!"

"Please don't yell." A third shadow, this one vaguely masculine, says. "My head hurts when you yell. Do any of you know who I am?"

"I already said I **DON'T KNOW!**" The second female shadow screams. "**LEAVE ME ALONE!! AIIIEE!**"

As these roaming male and female shadows try to figure out who they are, a tiny, vaguely feminine shadow appears amidst all the others. Despite looking no different from the rest, her diminutive stature makes her stand out in a way one might not anticipate.

"Everyone." The small shadow says. "Please come to me. I have remembered."

"You've remembered?"

"This one knows! She knows something!"

"Quickly, let's hear what she has to say! Shush, you! Stop making such a racket!"

The other shadows, hundreds, even thousands of them, race toward the tiny female and quiet down in anticipation of her words.

"We are Shades." The small shadow says. "Shades and Shadow-walkers. We had a purpose. Our purpose was to serve Emperor Yama. He held us against our will. But he is dead now."

"Emperor Yama!" A female Shade exclaims. "That name is familiar to me!"

"I don't know why, but I hate that name!" Another Shade cries. "I hate it. Hate it!! Terrible name! Skree-ow!!"

The small Shade holds up what appear to be her palms.

"Please, everyone. I am not done."

"Of course, Wise One! Speak, and we will listen!" A male Shadow-Walker exclaims.

"My name..." She says, pausing for a half-second. "My name... I have forgotten my true name. But Yama called me Silent. He called me that because I do not like to speak. Each of us had a different name. But Yama changed our names to whatever suited him most. Now that he is dead, we do not have to obey his commands any longer."

"We don't?" Another Shade asks. "Wonderful! But what should we do now? Do we have a purpose?"

Silent doesn't answer for a few, long seconds.

"A purpose. I do not know."

"You are the Wise One." A Shadow-Walker states. "Tell us what to do!"

"I do not want to give any orders." Silent states. "I want to find... my brother. I had a brother. I need to find my brother."

"Your brother. Wonderful! Then our purpose is to help you find your brother." The Shadow-Walker repeats, as if to give himself even the slightest direction. "Who is your brother? What does he look like?"

"I... do not know." Silent answers, her voice soft. "I cannot remember. He was... like this. And he had a face... like... like this."

Silent speaks as if pointing to a portrait of her brother's face, but she makes no special effort to actually describe his appearance.

Even she cannot remember much, beyond a hazy outline of his face.

"Wise One, Lady Silent!" The Shadow-Walker says. "If you had a brother, then we will help you find him. How many brothers can there be among our ranks? He must be here."

"I do not think he is one of us. He is not a Shadow." Silent says quietly. "But... but... I do not know. I wish I could remember... it is all so... hazy..."

Silent begins to cry. She presses her shadowy hands against her face, weeping softly as she struggles to form the haziest links between her memories.

But she fails.

Silent cannot remember her past in any great level of detail, no matter how deeply she wishes she could.

A nearby Shade touches her back to comfort her.

"Lady Silent. Do not cry! We will help you to find your brother. Until we have remembered who we are, you can act as our leader. We will serve you and do anything you command!"

Silent nods her head between choked sobs. "Th-thank you.. thank you all. I do not deserve such kindness. I am a failure of a sister."

"You have told us what we are." The Shadow-Walker states. "That alone is a great help. In my eyes, you are truly a Wise One! Do not call yourself a failure, or all of us will weep in your stead."

Silent nods repeatedly.

"Thank you all. Thank you, all of you..."

Part 478: Pushing Benjamin's Buttons

From the depths of the Labyrinth, a small force of human soldiers run with purpose toward the Labyrinth Core. Four medics and twelve soldiers move in tandem, flanking a pair of badly burned and injured bodies on stretchers. So poor are their conditions that any teleportation effects might end their lives on the spot.

Benjamin Brown and Siddhartha Gautama breathe raggedly as the medics lug them toward the Labyrinth Core. Once they arrive, the medics meet up with none other than Emperor Belial, who was alerted to the condition of these two injured.

"Here they are, Samantha." One of the female medics says, after setting Buddha down. "They're alive, but in poor condition."

Belial glances at Benjamin Brown. She frowns, instead opting to heal Buddha first.

A strong pulse of magical energy transmits from her palms into the body of the injured human. Belial watches as the burns covering Buddha's skin slowly pull back and recede, the pain of which causes Buddha to grit his teeth and cough.

"Aahh... ahh... nnn..."

"Bear with it." Belial says. "The healing can hurt worse than the original agony sometimes. Repairing nerve endings isn't a simple matter."

Buddha doesn't answer. He merely nods, gritting his teeth to endure the pain.

After a full thirty minutes, Belial finishes mending his wounds. So severe were his injuries that she has to take a short break to wipe the sweat off her forehead. While Buddha shakily pulls himself into a sitting position, Belial glares at Benjamin Brown.

"Mind telling me what you two were up to that left you in such states?" Belial asks Buddha.

Siddhartha Gautama nods slowly. "We went on a mission to attempt to slay Emperor Gressil. We failed."

"Just the two of you?" Belial scoffs. "Even for this ancient bucket of bolts, that was a moronic decision."

"Not only myself and Benjamin Brown." Buddha says. "Creator Demila also went with us."

He spends a few minutes explaining what happened to Belial, all while Benjamin continues laying motionless, his body wracked with pain.

"A 7th Level Psion, a Vanguard, and the Master of Combat couldn't beat Gressil with their strength combined?" Belial asks, visibly shocked. "Demila alone should have been enough to crush him. I've seen what 6th Level Psions can do to Demon Emperors. 7th Level Psions would be ten times more ridiculous!"

"Gressil is no ordinary demon." Buddha says quietly. "He is the Envoy of Chaos. Psions rely on their mental stability and hundreds of millennia of training to out-think and demolish their opponents. But Gressil can interfere with their thoughts and throw them into confusion. He cannot nullify their Psionics like he can nullify the magic of other demons... but the distinction is barely worth mentioning."

Belial shakes her head. She stands up and walks over to Benjamin Brown while her cute little succubus tail twitches in annoyance.

"I can't say I'm not happy to see that you got your ass kicked, old man." Belial grouches at the infirm old man. "After what you did to Emperor Laplace, it's about time you finally had your ass handed to you. I *liked* Laplace."

Benjamin coughs weakly. His burned lungs make it difficult for him to speak.

"Haha... have you... talked... to Lily yet?"

"A few days ago." Belial says. "Not that we got to say much. I've been running around like a chicken with my head cut off, especially after a bunch of children dropped dead. Speaking of which, I don't think I'll be much use in fixing you up. I can't repair mechanical pieces."

"Benjamin grimaces. "If you allow me to drain a bit of your mana... I can fix myself."

"Excuse me?" Belial asks.

"Your mana." He repeats. "If I absorb the mana of a demon, especially an Emperor, my body can self-repair. I won't be able to regrow my missing arm, but I can probably have someone fix the rest... well, Ose used to repair my damaged parts. Marie and I aren't on speaking terms anymore."

"I didn't ask about your relationships, womanizer." Belial snaps. "And I'm sure as hell not giving you my mana."

Benjamin closes his eyes.

"So you will leave this broken old man here to die? I suppose it is... all that I am worth."

"Don't be such a drama queen." Belial says. She pauses to glance around the chamber. "Beelzebub! Come over here a moment."

Not far away, Emperors Beelzebub and Kiari sit together, talking about something unknown. Having returned from the battle with Mephisto a while earlier, they haven't yet taken the chance to head back to Tarus II. Hearing Belial's call Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. He stands up, as does Kiari, and the two of them walk over to Belial.

"Yes?" Beelzebub asks, smiling at Belial.

Belial doesn't smile back.

"This is Benjamin Brown." She says, gesturing to the badly burned lump of charcoal and steel on the gurney before her. "Know him?"

"Seven Hells." Beelzebub remarks, turning his gaze toward the Vanguard. "You look even worse than when I roasted you."

"Yeah, yeah..." Benjamin grumbles.

Belial explains to Beelzebub what Benjamin needs. After she finishes, a strangely evil smile creeps across the Emperor of Hellfire's face.

"Aww. Does the big strong Vanguard need little old *me's* help? Need to take a sip of my demon juice, Benji-boy?"

Benjamin rolls his one unmelted eye. "Laugh- COUGH! Laugh it up, Beelzebub."

Beelzebub continues mocking the old man for another minute before getting tired of it. With a reluctant sigh, he slaps his wrist into Benjamin Brown's only remaining palm, allowing the Vanguard to latch onto him.

"Suck me dry." Beelzebub says.

Kiari coughs. Her face turns beet red, though for what reason, nobody really wants to say.

Benjamin closes his eyes. He calls upon his innate Vanguard abilities and activates a special power, causing Beelzebub's mana to suck out of his body, into Benjamin's palm, and from there, all the way through the rest of him.

In fewer than 20 seconds, Benjamin fully rejuvenates himself. His mechanical parts snap back into place. His burned skin and organs heal back to perfect condition, and he regains sight in his melted eye.

While his torn-off arm cannot regrow its missing mechanical parts, the rest of his body restores to peak condition, allowing the Vanguard to stand up and climb off his cot. He cracks his neck and smiles faintly at Beelzebub.

"Well. Thank you for the assist, Emperor of Inferno. I guess I owe you a beer."

"I don't drink." Beelzebub says blandly, pulling his wrist out of Benjamin's grasp. "So glad to see you back in tip-top shape. Might want to get that arm looked at."

Benjamin frowns. "Are you feeling alright? I drained quite a lot of your mana. Usually, even an Emperor would be feeling a little woozy right about now."

"No need to worry about me." Beelzebub retorts. "I barely even noticed the drain. Even since my Ascension, my mana reserves have become seemingly inexhaustible."

Benjamin starts to say something else, only to get cut off when a woman shoves past Beelzebub and jumps at the old man.

"Daddy!" Lily cries, throwing herself against her father's chest.

"Oof." Benjamin grunts, easily keeping his balance while his joyous daughter beams happiness at him. "Hello, sweetheart."

"Where did you go?!" She exclaims, hugging him tighter. "You left a note saying you might not be back for a week and- OWW! Aaaieee!"

Lily leaps away from her father, crying out in pain as blood spurts from a fresh wound on her arm. Both she and her father have a split-second of realization as they spot a stray shard of metal sticking out of his right side, just below his broken arm stump.

Before Lily can bleed to death, Belial quickly motions with her hands to summon healing magic. She gently takes Lily's hand and smiles at her.

"Hey, Lily. Your daddy got himself banged up. Let me heal that for you."

Lily blushes. "Oh, Beli. Hi again."

"Hey." Belial says.

Beelzebub and Kiari exchange a glance. While Belial, Benjamin, and Lily continue chatting, the other two Emperors turn on their heels and stride away.

"What happened to your arm, daddy?" Lily asks, gesturing with her uninjured arm to the mechanical bits sticking out of Benjamin's stump. "That looks horrific!"

"I, uh, got in a bit of a fight." Benjamin mutters. "You should have seen the other fellow."

"Your father picked a fight with Emperor Gressil." Belial says, butting in. "He didn't win."

"Ose's brother?!" Lily gasps. "Daddy, how could you? Gressil is a terror! He's way out of your league."

"It wasn't only me." Benjamin says, shooting a mild glare Belial's way. "I also brought along a 7th Level Psion, and even the great Buddha himself."

Benjamin gestures in Buddha's direction, only to blink in surprise.

"Huh? Oh. He was just here... where'd he go?"

"Somehow, Gressil demolished the entire trio." Belial says to Lily, while ignoring Buddha's disappearance. "He beat the crap out of Creator Demila, and your father. You should have seen Benjamin's condition a few minutes ago. I think you'd have thrown up."

"Daddy!" Lily exclaims, goaded to anger by Belial's graphic descriptions. "You made it sound like you were going on a field trip, but you almost didn't come back! I was worried sick!"

"I wouldn't normally have done such a thing," Benjamin says, "but Demila and Buddha presented a picture to me of a universe that needed my help. I only desired to keep you safe, sweet- huh?"

Benjamin pauses.

The man glances from side to side, looking slightly confused.

"Who said that?"

"Said what?" Belial asks. "Hallucinating?"

Benjamin frowns. "No. I just... could have sworn I heard a woman talking. Never mind. I think I hit my head pretty hard."

"I can call Leeroy over to check for brain injuries." Belial suggests.

"Yes, please. I'd appreciate that." Benjamin says.

Belial nods. She walks away to fetch Leeroy, leaving Benjamin alone with his daughter.

"Daddy, what are you going to do about your missing arm?" Lily asks. "It looks painful."

"No pain at all." Benjamin says. "It's just mechanical parts, sweetheart. Nothing to-huh? Who said that?"

Benjamin jerks his head around again, this time looking more concerned than before.

"Daddy?"

"Quiet." Benjamin orders, his frown hardening. "I definitely heard a woman's voice. A Psion, maybe? Could be a demon fucking with me... possibly a telepath."

Benjamin scrutinizes the crowds milling about in the Core, but none of the demons present seem to be looking in his direction. A moment later, Belial returns with the Duke of Restoration in tow.

"Sir Brown." Leeroy says, bowing his head politely. "I heard you entangled yourself in quite the troublesome matter. Mind if I look at your head?"

Benjamin nods slowly. "Yes. Please do."

Visibly aggravated, Benjamin's eyes flick around thoughtfully as he continues to assess the strange female voice he heard. At the same time, the elegant-looking Leeroy daintily presses his hands against both sides of Benjamin's head while murmuring magical incantations under his breath. Leeroy's magic dives into the human's mind, mending the visible scars that have embedded themselves into Benjamin's psyche.

"Devils." Leeroy mutters. "You have hundreds of ancient scratches, cuts, bruises, and lacerations all around the inside of your skull. Some of these are embedded so deeply that I can't heal them without a more thorough examination. If I go a little deeper, I can even see..."

He trails off, frowning as he begins to mend the worst injuries Benjamin suffered recently. Indeed, the Vanguard suffered terrible brain damage at the behest of Emperors Gressil and Lucifer.

Lily watches from the side. "Will daddy be okay?"

"Of course, of course." Leeroy assures her. "He's nothing if not a hardy bastard. Any other human would have fallen comatose tens of millennia ago if they had suffered- huh?"

Leeroy abruptly stops talking. He frowns while his eyes metaphorically bore holes in Benjamin's head. He shifts the position of his hands to try and assess different areas.

"Strange. Very strange." Leeroy says softly.

"Leeroy?" Belial asks. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so..." Leeroy says. "Must have been my imagination. For a second, I thought I detected a foreign entity moving about. It was probably interference from leftover Chaos Energy. Mister Brown, I believe you should take an extended rest in my care. Why don't we call up Miss Hiro to see if she can repair your arm? In the meantime, I'd like to run some tests on your brain."

Benjamin clears his throat. "Yes, yes, of course. Thanks for the help, Leeroy. My thoughts haven't felt this clear in forever. I feel like a teenager again."

Leeroy releases his grasp on the sides of Benjamin's head, then pulls away.

"Decreased cognitive skills are a common problem with soldiers who have sustained traumatic brain injuries. It seems the 'nanites' in your blood have done good work keeping you alive, but the long term damage won't be resolved easily. If you devote yourself to my medical recommendations, I believe I can increase your cognitive throughput by at least eight hundred percent over the next few weeks."

"That much?" Benjamin asks, his jaw falling slightly ajar. "Well, who am I to turn down such a generous offer? I owe you a beer."

"I'll have to take you up on that offer." Leeroy says, smiling kindly. "Until next time."

The Duke of Restoration nods his head, then turns and walks away.

After he departs, Benjamin massages his forehead. "Amazing. I never realized my thoughts were running so slowly. I thought I had simply gotten too old to function at my peak. But now I feel as if I could easily take Gressil down if we fought again."

Lily's expression turns nasty.

"Oh no you DON'T, daddy! Don't you even think of running off on some suicide mission again! I'm putting you on house arrest!"

Benjamin snorts. He rubs his daughter's head lovingly.

"Hehe. Humanity's Finest Soldier can't deny his calling. I'm a fighter first and foremost. I thought I was done fighting, but... I kind of missed the old times. At the least, I'm tired of lazing about a mansion all day. The past hundred thousand years have been... pretty boring."

"Pft." Belial chuffs. "Aside from all the succubi you've bedded."

"Are you jealous?" Benjamin asks.

"Not. Remotely." Belial bites off, before smiling at Lily. "What say you and I go catch up? I've finished healing all the wounded, and now I have some free time."

Lily nods, then waves to her father. "Alright. Bye, daddy! And don't you go running off to get in a fight again, or I'll have Beli beat you black and blue!"

Benjamin coughs. "Don't worry, I won't. Have fun..."

He grumbles to himself as he watches his little girl trot off with the Emperor of Passion, but otherwise doesn't voice his concerns.

Several long seconds pass.

Benjamin wanders off alone, his eyes flicking around as he scans the crowd.

Eventually, he licks his lips.

"Alright. Who are you. And how are you in my head?"

He speaks out loud, but keeps his voice low. He continues to scan the crowd, looking for anyone suspicious who might be telepathically transmitting words to his mind.

[Benji-boy. Don't bother. You won't find me out there.] A voice says softly, its tone vaguely seductive.

"Alright. Then what are you?" Benjamin asks. "You aren't a demon. You're... something else."

He pauses, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"The timing's too coincidental. I fight with Gressil, then a voice starts yapping in my head. He must have fucked with my brain, somehow."

[Perceptive. You're quite a powerful human.] The voice says. [Let me speak plainly. I am Desire. I am *your* Desire. I can give you everything you want.]

"You won't be giving me jack shit." Benjamin scoffs, turning a corner into a more secluded area in the Core. "I know what Leeroy saw. He must have seen you floating

around in my head, parasite. He's going to find you and pull you out. Especially once I clue him in on what you are."

[What I am? You have no idea what I might be.] Desire taunts. [But do as you please. Try to rip me out if you like. Maybe you'll even succeed.]

"Trust me, I will." Benjamin grunts. "Don't even try to sway me with some flowery words. Now that I know what you are, nothing you say will stop me from killing you."

[You're a strong man.] Desire says. [But all men have their limits.]

"What's that supposed to mean?"

[You can't protect her.] Desire says, her tone turning cold. [Gressil can be anywhere. He can be everywhere. He has already evaded humanity's slipshod defenses hundreds of times. He walks among you when and wherever he pleases. If he wants something... he will take it.]

"Motherfucker!" Benjamin hisses under his breath, his eyes turning red with rage. "You *dare* threaten Lily?! If Gressil so much as touches a hair on her head, he will find out what happens when Humanity's Finest Soldier loses all inhibitions!"

[Hahaha.] Desire laughs, undaunted. [Humanity's Finest Soldier. A cute title. And you certainly caught my master unawares. He had no true concept of how powerful you were. But he does now. You won't be able to trick him a second time.]

"Don't be so sure." Benjamin says. "I killed Emperor Laplace. I can kill Gressil. The only reason he won is because his mommy saved his bacon."

[And the only reason *you* made it home to your little girl is because he allowed you to do so.] Desire says pointedly. [Killing you would have taken no effort.]

Benjamin pauses. His anger quickly cools as he gets an ominous feeling in his stomach.

"Don't even..."

[You have a small amount of value to us.] Desire says. [But that value is not worth much if you're unwilling to assist our goals. In any case, it's not like you will come out unrewarded... every person has a desire they want fulfilled. We will help you achieve it.]

"And what exactly is it that you think I want?" Benjamin questions.

[That is not an easy question to answer. You are a conflicted individual...] Desire purrs. [You want to live in peace. But you crave the excitement of battle. You want to watch your daughter grow up. But you are bored with your existence.]

She pauses.

[You lack a purpose.]

"And *your* purpose is to sow chaos in the galaxy." Benjamin growls. "Gressil wants nothing more than to spread suffering and torture and pain. Count me out."

[Don't be so hasty.] Desire warns. [Remember that your daughter's life is at stake. You cannot hide her. You cannot protect her. All that you can do is work to ensure she lives a long, healthy life...]

Despite Desire only possessing a voice, her next words come out sounding as if spoken through a smile.

[Master Gressil... you know how he enjoys breaking the minds of cute young toys. It would be a shame if that pretty little flower of yours... *had her petals plucked.*]

Benjamin's blood turns cold. He stares at the wall a few feet away, unsure of what to do.

"You bitch."

[Are you ready to start listening now?] Desire asks. [If not, we can always find someone more amenable to our Cause. You are not as important as you think. Our influence stretches further than you can imagine.]

The Vanguard lowers his head.

A drop of sweat slides down the back of his neck.

"I... I'll listen... to what you have to say."

[*Gooooood.* Maybe you're not as much of a metal-brain as you think.]

Part 479: A Secret Meeting (Part 1 of 2)

A day after the events that resulted in Mephisto's defeat, on the world of Numaria, where the Hell of Punishment resides...

A host of high-ranking demons wander about in a luxurious treetop building constructed in Numaria's vast jungles. Their attitudes mild, and their thoughts unfocused, they chat with one another leisurely. Notably, not a single demon aligned with humanity's interests is present, including Belial, Kiari, or the other high ranking elites that have begun to arise. For some reason, this even includes the assorted members of the Hell of Lust, who previously planted their flags firmly in Jason Hiro's camp.

No, this meeting is only for those who must 'reluctantly' align themselves with humanity's interests in an esoteric manner, such as through the usage of the Belial Boosters. And even more interestingly, not a single demon of a lower rank has been invited today, only the Emperors and Dukes.

Despite the calm expressions of the attendees, many of them harbor suspicions. Emperor Kristoff frowns as he examines the demons present. As the last surviving Emperor of the Hell of Blood, only he and a small handful of Dukes have come. But thanks to his recent announcement to merge the Hell of Blood with the Hell of Punishment, he has recently become more entrenched in chasing Emperor Auger's desires.

Strange. Kristoff thinks. Yadrat isn't here. He must be conversing with Auger. Nobody invited Beelzebub either, since he seems to be on the Wordsmith's side. The First Hell has no more elites left. Fae is here, along with Dagon and Nymph. Gorn seems to still be in isolation, but Serena has shown up, along with Emperor Crow.

Kristoff looks for Crow's trusted subordinate, Duke Raven, but doesn't see her. He also doesn't see a single monster from any of the Hells, including the Orc Ancients.

So this event is demon-only. Kristoff thinks, while picking up a golden goblet from a nearby serving tray. Inside its confines, some stale human blood rests. Kristoff sips the plasma, his expression turning sour at its taste. *We haven't been able to wring any*

decent blood from humanity since the Wordsmith took over. All we have now are what remains of my Hell's reserves. I could go for some Virgin Female blood right about now.

To Kristoff, this old blood tastes much like old milk might to a human. Still edible, but it sticks to his throat and doesn't have the fresh taste he craves. If he were a lower-ranking vampire, he would need to consume blood to survive, but as an Emperor, he can live for the rest of eternity without doing so.

Though, in fairness, he still craves its taste due to his own personal preferences.

As Kristoff looks around the room, he finds a curious pair of figures standing off to the side, talking with one another.

Emperors Melody and Bael.

Bael, still in Ose's body, now sports an oddly-advanced looking belt of some sort, a belt that looks somewhat demonic in nature, yet also features a suspiciously technologically-advanced edge to its appearance. Kristoff only looks at the belt for a moment, but the impression he receives is one of slight confusion.

Where did Bael obtain such a fancy-looking belt? Kristoff idly wonders, before his thoughts shift to other things.

Bael and Melody talk quietly. While in the past, Melody has always been a somewhat 'loud and proud' woman, someone always ready for a laugh, she now lacks spirit in her eyes. Her overall countenance is gloomy, most especially due to the fact that her entire Hell was ravaged and devoured by the Plague.

No longer do Emperors Shax, Murmur, Viola, or Guura walk the mortal coil.

Melody now finds herself lost and alone, her friends never again able to comfort her. No longer can she laugh with them, share her feelings, or talk about the simple mundanities of life.

At the same time, Bael also finds himself in a similar situation.

Bael's friends have all died, gone on the run, or changed in drastic ways.

Satan, dead.

Shax, dead.

Agares, dead.

Mephisto, dead.

Diablo, comatose.

Barbatos, comatose and his body enslaved by an Archangel.

Beelzebub... perhaps not quite a friend in the first place.

As these thoughts occur to Kristoff, his own mood dims considerably.

They've lost so many long-time friends, but am I any different? Wolfram and Lupus are gone. My wife is dead. My Hell is in ruins.

His frown turns into a momentary scowl of rage.

It's all because of that devil-damned Wordsmith. Everything was going FINE until he woke up! For the last six years, demonkind has suffered one defeat after another. It can't keep going on like this!

Kristoff inhales. He releases that breath and smooths out his expression, then walks toward Bael and Melody.

"...of existing, you know?" Melody says to Bael as Kristoff walks over. "Going through the motions. I don't know. Everyone else seems so motivated, but I don't know what to do with myself."

Bael nods. "I know what'cha mean, sister. I've been kinda keeping myself busy for the last week running Ose's errands, but she just keeps naggin' me. Won't shut up, the annoying broad. And things are all whack now that I'm stuck in her body-"

"Wait, you said you've been talking to Ose?" Melody asks in confusion. "Isn't Ose dead??"

Bael nods. "Yeah. She's dead."

He pauses.

"But she's also alive! Yup, right up here, in my noggin. I can see her when she's awake. Trust me, it's awful. Dumb broad never knows when to shut her yap."

Melody blinks twice.

"Are you sure you're not... hallucinating? Maybe you miss her more than you think?"

Bael shrugs.

"Maybe! I saw Satan recently too! And Shax! Yep, me and Shax were jamming out and having fun, but then he disappeared. Hm. You think I might be going crazy or something?"

Melody's eyes soften as she 'realizes' the 'truth' about poor Bael's 'hallucinations.' "It's been hard for you, Bael. I'll try to hang out with you more often. I wouldn't want you spiraling into a depression or anything..."

At that moment, Kristoff walks over to them.

"Bael. Melody. How are you two doing?"

Melody, realizing Kristoff must have heard poor Bael's sad story of hallucinating his friends back to life, gestures helplessly toward the goofy Emperor. "I'm doing okay, but Bael..."

"None of us are doing okay." Kristoff sighs, his heart heavy. "None of this is okay. Ever since the fucking Wordsmith woke up, things have been going downhill for all of demonkind."

"Yeah. Well, that's not strictly true." Melody says. "The lower ranks have been enjoying an easier time mutating through the ranks."

Kristoff snorts. "Is that what you think? That the 'Belial Booster' is a good deal for our lessers? Don't kid yourself. That Wordsmith is one crafty son of an angel. He's been systematically tearing our species apart."

Kristoff leans toward Melody and raises his eyebrows.

"Or do you think it's a 'coincidence' the Plague came to your world right after all the humans disappeared?"

Melody's forced smile disappears.

"You think Jason Hiro did something to draw the Plague to Sharmur?"

"I can't say for certain." Kristoff admits. "But that's the beauty of plausible deniability. As long as he plays dumb, we'll never be able to prove anything. You know just as well as I do how these humans work. They always lie to try and make our people fight one another."

Melody falls silent for a moment as she thinks of her long, storied history as an Emperor of one of the Seven Hells.

Countless times, a human King or Pharaoh or some other figure would sneakily craft a narrative to make the demons fight one another. These ploys were always uncovered

eventually, but countless casualties came as a result of false intelligence and deceptive reports.

"Damn. I thought there must be something suspicious about the attack on Sharmur." Melody mumbles ruefully. "I just didn't think... tsk. To think I lost Viola and Guura because of some half-wit Hero bastard."

Bael scratches his head. "I dunno. It could be a coincidence. Ya know? That Hero doesn't seem like such a bad guy."

"Bael. He literally killed you." Kristoff says pointedly.

"So?" Bael says with a shrug. "The dude was pissed. We DID just kill his little girl. Wouldn't you be pretty angry too?"

Kristoff sighs. "Sometimes, I envy your easygoing nature. Nothing ever seems to faze you."

Melody clears her throat. "By the way, what's going on with this meeting? Why did Auger call together us demon leaders? And why all the secrecy?"

"I have no idea." Kristoff says. "He didn't tell me anything."

"He didn't? But aren't the two of you pretty tight now? You're even uniting your Hells..."

"We are." Kristoff says. "And yet Auger kept his lips sealed. Maybe he doesn't yet trust me enough to leak his intentions before hand."

Bael sobers up his expression. "You'd better watch out, Kristoff. There can't be any trust if you two won't be honest with each other. Auger ain't exactly the most rule-following guy I know, either."

"It doesn't really matter to me anymore." Kristoff says, his tone turning morose. "I don't have any energy left for much of anything. Not with Fenrir gone. If Auger is going to pull some stunt... then he'll succeed. I can't bring myself to care."

Bael pats Kristoff's shoulder. The two of them share weak smiles filled with sadness.

The trio have lost so many people that they've become somewhat numb to the pains the universe continues to inflict upon them.

As they continue talking, another demoness approaches, someone who proceeds to shout excitedly.

"Bael!! Buddy, you're back! Hahaha! Haven't seen you in days, big man!"

Bael turns to the newcomer. "Oh. 'Sup, Fae?"

Emperor Fae slaps Bael's back. Then she frowns.

"Wait. Should I be calling you 'big man' still? Or are you a woman now that you're in Ose's body?"

"Haven't given it much thought." Bael says, before tears begin to well up in his eyes. "But... now that I don't got Little Bael around no more..."

"No ding-dong, huh?" Fae murmurs, her tone vaguely thoughtful. "Guess you are a bit more of a girl than a guy now. I'll just keep calling you Big Guy. But maybe sometimes I'll say Big Girl! That sounds like fun!"

Bael wipes away his tears. "Being a chick ain't bad. Lots of fellas wanna hang out with me now. They get weirdly touchy, though. Dunno why."

"Do they play grab-ass?" Fae asks, her eyes narrowing to slits. "You gotta watch out for that. If any guy acts too friendly, just shove a bomb in his mouth! **BOOM!** That's how I make all those annoying dickheads shut up for good! Bahahaha!"

"I can't make bombs though." Bael points out.

"Mmm. Mmm." Fae nods. "Don't worry, bro! I'll help a sister out! Gimme a week and I'll make ya some porta-bombs! Then you can blow 'em up!"

Bael smiles. "Sick."

The four demons continue talking for a while, until eventually, a magical portal opens in the center of the wooded chamber. Amidst the glowing green lights, a handsome Demon Emperor, Yardrat, steps out and looks around.

"Oh?" Kristoff mutters. "Yardrat's here. Must be time to start."

However, contrary to Kristoff's expectations, Yardrat doesn't make any announcements. He instead turns his attention to one of the guests standing off to the side.

"Crow. A moment."

Emperor Crow blinks in surprise. She nods, then follows Yardrat back through his portal before he eventually closes it.

Many invisible question marks pop up over the heads of the demons present.

"So much secrecy." Kristoff says. "Even for Auger, this is a little out of character."

"Yeah. It is pretty strange..." Melody acknowledges.

They return to their previous conversation for another thirty or so minutes.

Eventually, the portal reopens, and Emperor Crow steps out, followed by Yardrat. This time though, Emperor Auger steps onto the platform, his aged and wizened appearance giving him the air of a decrepit old bastard, not unlike Duke Agares in his twilight years.

"Everyone." Yardrat says, raising his hands to grab the attention of all the demon elites. "I apologize for the hush-hush nature of today's meeting. Emperor Auger has several important matters he wishes to speak to all of you about, and we wished to keep these talks private. It would be best if none of you informed the Wordsmiths of what we're soon to discuss."

Kristoff's gaze turns solemn, as do those of the other Emperors and Dukes. The crowd draws closer to make sure they hear every word which will be spoken.

"What is this all about?" Emperor Serena asks. "Why did you call Crow into a secret discussion, but not me?"

Yardrat looks at the blind demoness. Then he looks away.

"I'm sure everyone here has heard about the happenings in the Labyrinth yesterday. You should all be aware of the cataclysmic explosion caused by Emperor Mephisto's demise. He was slain by the Wordsmith's soldiers."

Yardrat pauses for dramatic effect.

"At least, that was originally the prevailing belief. However, as of five hours ago, we have tentatively confirmed a soul resonance identical to Mephisto's still exists, proving that he did not die. He is very much alive."

Gasps escape the mouths of only a few demons. The longest lived elites merely nod, not feeling particularly surprised a Necromancer might have cheated death.

"Your proof?" Serena asks.

Yardrat purses his lips. He reaches into the folds of his robes to withdraw a marble-sized Soul Orb.

"We used a Seeing Stone to confirm. Not only is Mephisto alive... but we believe he is here, on the world of Numaria."

"What?" Melody asks. "Here? Why would he be here?"

Several long seconds pass. Yardrat's expression falls.

"We believe... Mephisto planned out his 'death.' He is pursuing the path of Ascension. He intends to break the limits of a Demon Emperor."

"Gah?!" Emperor Dagon gasps. "But that's impossible! Countless Emperors have tried! Emperor Gorn alone, how many souls has he devoured in his quest to attain the legendary rank of Demon Deity?! If it were possible, he should have done so by now!"

Dagon's incredulity contrasts with Serena's quiet acceptance.

"That logic once made sense, given our past understanding of the demonic limits." Serena says. "Until the battle against the Cherubiim confirmed there is a way to breach the Cosmic Limit. It is, in fact, possible for demons to ascend further. Wolfram proved that the rank of Demon Deity can be achieved."

"Yes," Dagon affirms, "but that happened because of a life and death situation. You forcibly broke Wolfram's limiter, and he only managed to endure for a single hour before he ultimately perished. His body and soul fell to ash!"

The casual mention of Wolfram's death sours Kristoff's mood, but he maintains a neutral expression. "Has Mephisto successfully ascended?"

This time, it is Emperor Auger himself who steps into the limelight.

"No. He is in the process of doing so. He may ultimately fail. But I warn you all... Mephisto is not a fool. He is a skulker. He is a backstabber. He is an opportunist... but he is not a rash decision-maker. Mephisto could have fled indefinitely by hiding his soul signature from the Wordsmith, yet he did not. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because he must have had some assurances he would succeed." Emperor Nymph says.

"Precisely. Looking back, it seems obvious this must have been his goal all along. My spies tell me the Wordsmith sneaked Monster King Kar's soul off to an unknown location to try and revive him. His soul was completely drained of energy when Monster Queen Blinker retrieved it. Mephisto drained the energy and used the remnants of that useless soul as a commodity to trade for the power of the Sphinx."

Auger continues. "Furthermore, Mephisto went to great lengths to preserve the lives of the Emperors and Dukes working underneath him. He rescued their souls, which implies

he has some use for their power..."

Auger pauses. He sighs.

"If I had to guess... Mephisto has uncovered proof of something I have long suspected. The path to Demon Deity is not one you can unlock via a vast quantity of souls. Perhaps, what a demon requires to ascend... is quality."

The expressions on the faces of the other demons turn to worry as they realize the implications.

"He's going to devour Yama's soul? And Zamiel, Lupus...?" Dagon half-asks, half-guesses.

Emperor Serena frowns. "If it were that simple, he would have simply done it. All of us could have done so. I'm certain the more... voracious of us... have considered such an option. Some may have even tried."

A brief pause follows.

This time, it's Bael who speaks up.

"Demons can't just eat other demons." Bael says quietly. "I only know one who did, who succeeded."

He pauses.

"Gressil."

The room's atmosphere drops a few degrees. Several demons shift uncomfortably.

"Didn't work out so good for him." Bael continues, his voice quiet. "He ate his mother, Lucifer. Then she grew out of him as a second head. Now he's a freak. A psycho who hurts others for fun."

Bael speaks not only to remind the demons present of the past they must never forget, but also to inform the younger demons who have recently ascended about the past they might not have been alive to witness.

His warning does not go unheeded.

"Indeed." Auger says softly. "That is why I regret to inform you that... there was an option all of us overlooked. The power of multiple Emperors cannot be combined easily... but it seems it is theoretically possible."

He gestures to the west.

"Mephisto is hiding here on Numaria. I not only know where he is, but I even know his exact location. We cannot afford to let his rise succeed. We have to kill him quickly."

"Mephisto is our enemy." Yadrat adds. "He became our enemy when we didn't step in to assist him when the Wordsmith's forces encircled him. By remaining silent, we've painted a target on our backs. If Mephisto succeeds in ascending, he will not spare us his wrath. We've already seen the terrifying power a Demon Deity can unleash... but unlike the humans, we do not have a Cherubim ally. I doubt the Archangel would be amenable to protecting us."

Bael snorts. "I bet that pigeon would be happy if we bit the dust."

"So what's the issue?" Melody asks. "You know where Mephisto is hiding. If we rush in there, we should be able to kill him easily! He just lost his body. He's only a soul now! He's at his weakest."

"Indeed..." Yadrat says slowly. "But there is a... complication. The place where he resides is..."

Yadrat pauses.

"...The Stitched Wasteland."

With that declaration, the air sucks out of the room. Several demons lose some of the color in their skin.

"Oh." Melody says, lowering her head.

Seeing the expressions of fear and disgust, along with the immediate lack of enthusiasm, Auger nods softly.

"I have tried to keep an eye on Glinch's movements, over the years. But the Stitched Emperor is not someone I can control. He is a freak like Gressil. An aberration. And now I believe you should all understand the missing piece to the puzzle."

He sighs.

"Glinch is going to 'stitch' all of those Emperor souls together. Through his unique magic, he will combine Mephisto, Yama, and the rest into some sort of hybrid creature, potentially elevating Mephisto to the next echelon of power."

Melody's complexion improves. "But then, isn't that fine? We've all seen what Glinch can do, or rather, what he *can't*. His creations are unstable and imperfect. If you seriously

expect me to believe he has the recipe for turning demons into Deities, I think you're getting a little on in the years, old man."

"Again...." Auger says slowly. "If you are skeptical, why would Mephisto not be? Do you think he is a fool?"

Some of the demons become contemplative. They look at one another questioningly, uncertain what would motivate Mephisto to go along with such a crazy plan.

Surely, he would not be so idiotic as to follow a fool's errand.

Serena's sightless eyes flicker with realization.

"The Sphinx... it was not a casual benefit he obtained." She says. "It was one of, if not his greatest motivation for allowing the human forces to attack him. Perhaps that is even one of the reasons he agreed to battle Monster King Kar during Stormbringer. He hoped to obtain the Sphinx's magic for himself."

"All distinct possibilities. I am glad we are of the same mind." Auger acknowledges. "Something about the Sphinx's unique properties might make it the ideal material for an ascension to Deity. In that case, none of us here can hope to ascend, ourselves."

Some of the Emperors look pleased about this information, realizing it means their fellow Emperors won't have any reason to attack them and suck out their souls. Others appear disappointed, as this also means the path to Deity may still be unobtainable to them.

"So what you're saying is, we need to kill Mephisto now, before he ascends, but the risks will be great." Kristoff posits. "If so, then count me in. Mephisto still has Lupus's soul. Maybe I can save her existence."

"I've got nothing better to do." Melody says. "I'm in."

Bael scratches his head. "I'm kinda bored. Guess I'll see if I can help."

Several demons direct skeptical glances his way.

"Bael, will you be alright?" Melody asks. "I mean, you don't have any magic, right? And you're not the same super tough guy you were before, so... you could die."

"It would be a shame if Mephisto obtained your soul." Kristoff adds.

"I should be fine." Bael says, directing a sly smirk toward the other Emperors. "I've been chatting with Ose. She gave me all sorts of neat toys ta' play with. Who knows?"

Maybe I can still kick ass."

Serena blinks. "Ose? She's alive?"

Kristoff winces. He shimmies over to Serena and whispers something in her ear, making her expression turn downcast.

"How tragic. He even hallucinated Satan and Shax?"

"Mmm." Kristoff whispers. "I don't have the heart to tell him. Poor guy... I worry he might be going off the deep end."

"Bael may have once been physically impervious, but his psyche never was." Serena says, smiling kindly at Kristoff. "Take good care of him, Kristoff. He needs a friend in trying times like these."

Kristoff nods. "We'll lean on each other."

After Kristoff clears up the 'misunderstanding,' the other demons continue to chime in.

"I never did like that necromancer." Dagon says. "Even when I was a Duke, he always gave me the creeps. I look forward to burying him."

Each Emperor nods their assent. However, one individual does not.

"We should ask the Wordsmith for help." Serena says. "Mephisto is too dangerous for us to underestimate. If all of this is true, and if our assumptions are correct, then we might be blundering into another trap."

"There's only one problem with that line of thinking." Yardrat counters. "If Mephisto succeeds in becoming a Demon Deity, he will threaten all of humanity. The Archangel, and the Wordsmiths, will surely take action. But what if we can snuff out his life before he Ascends? If the Wordsmith assists us, don't you think he would want to take back that Sphinx power for Monster King Kar?"

The eyes of the other demons flicker with greed. They suddenly realize that this mission might not be as much about 'altruism' and 'self-preservation' as Auger let on.

"If we were to take the Sphinx's power, perhaps one of us could Ascend." Dagon says slowly, as he begins to side-eye the other Emperors.

"Or all of us." Auger says, interrupting Dagon before he can continue. "It may be within the realm of possibility."

"But what if it isn't?" Melody asks, her eyes narrowing to slits. "*Who*, then, gets to 'hold' the Sphinx's magic? *You*, Auger?"

Auger continues to smile blandly, as if he has no idea what she could be implying.

"We should wait and see if we even need to cross that bridge, Melody-dearest. After all, you should not forget that our species faces a potential extinction event. Focusing on the bigger picture should become our top priority. Perhaps it is time we elevated a leader capable of guiding us through this crisis."

"What about the First Emperor?" Melody asks.

Auger's smile widens, ever so slightly.

"What *about* him?"

Part 480: A Secret Meeting (Part 2 of 2)

The meeting continues. Auger's words cause many demons to raise their eyebrows.

"You think we should unite under a new leader?" Serena asks. "I agree. Emperor Gorn will make for a fine candidate."

Auger chuckles blandly, sounding unamused by her suggestion. "Emperor Gorn did not even attend this meeting, despite my invitation."

"My husband is a busy person." Serena says. "He has received inspiration for his next Face. That means when he leaves isolation, he will come out stronger than he is now. Perhaps this new Face may even allow him to ascend."

Several demons direct skeptical glances toward Serena, but none of them decide to object out loud.

After all... of all the demons in all the Hells, not one can claim to have a stronger desire to ascend than Gorn. He has devoured tens of millions of souls, paid Merits for the Wordsmith's enhancements, and generally gone to any possible length to push his strength to the limits. While Emperor Crow might be the strongest Emperor in terms of her physical body, Gorn is without a doubt the most well-rounded with the most extreme abilities to his name.

His power is so immense that even Auger might fear him, ever so slightly.

Auger clears his throat.

"Ahem. I believe you are all laboring under a misconception. You still think we are living during the Energy Wars. We are not. The arrangements made by Satan the Devil are ancient, and in dire need of change due to our current situation. No longer can we afford the luxury of fighting among ourselves."

The old-faced Emperor schools his expression into one a parent might direct at their naughty children as he sweeps his gaze around the room.

"I'll be blunt. Your Hells are weak. My Hell has more Emperors than any of yours individually. If that were not enough, you know the unique strength of the Hell of

Punishment and how my abilities can enhance it far beyond any of yours."

Auger gently spreads out his arms, as if to emphasize his open-hearted nature and magnanimity.

"Emperor Gorn is a powerful demon, yes. Perhaps even mightier than me. But in this time when we should consider consolidation, do you *truly* believe he possesses the same qualifications to lead as me?"

Serena narrows her eyes. She glares in Auger's direction, seeing through his ploy. But she says nothing, opting to remain silent.

"I am the Emperor of Distribution." Auger says quietly. "I collect the powers of all my subordinates, and I can shift them around in response to any threat. A single demon on a distant world can, at any moment, be granted the strength of ten Emperors. The younger among you may not be aware, but Yardrat became a terrifying foe to humanity during the Energy Wars as a result of his belief in me. He chose to accept me as his leader, and in doing so obtained immense power and versatility."

"You can also rescind the powers of any who bend the knee." Serena finally says, her icy eyes directing a glare at him. "Those who 'contract' with you will become soulbound to your whims. In my eyes, you are no better than Mephisto himself."

Yardrat steps forward. "I object to your lies! I have served Auger dutifully for 100,000 years! I have never once seen him mistreat or rescind one of his subordinates' powers. There were times of crisis when he temporarily took the power of one subordinate to bolster another, but always he returned it. You are simply incapable of looking past the bridge of your nose at the bigger picture!"

"We are demons. Trust is in short supply." Serena says softly.

"Perhaps it is time that changes." Kristoff says, drawing the gazes of the other Emperors. "Auger made a promise to me, one I believe he will keep. My Hell has bowed to him. He will not force my subordinates to contract with him. This is in stark contrast to Mephisto, who forcibly kills and soul-binds others to his whims."

Yardrat nods appreciatively. "That's correct. With my liege, you consent to adopting his customs. With Mephisto, you have no choice! You must kill him or be killed! There is no benefit to following his whims, for he will throw you away if it means saving his own

bones! But by following Auger, you ensure you will always have the strength to protect yourselves when enemies show up at your door."

He continues. "Better yet, the more who follow Auger, the greater his access to a diverse arsenal becomes. Right now, he can already project an impressive amount of force to any Emperor who follows him, but there is infinite room for this power to increase. Gorn may have reached his limits, but Auger has none."

"You two flatter me." Auger says, smiling like a kindly old grandfather. "Ultimately, I believe the Seven Hells lost their way after Satan's death. Be honest with yourselves. Have we truly lived up to his legacy? We had no natural enemies for 100,000 years, so we turned to fighting ourselves. Now that the Wordsmith has begun to subvert our authority, we risk the death of our long-held demonic traditions."

Auger's smile disappears. He glares at the other Emperors.

"Are you lot... *happy* with this arrangement?"

Several Emperors and Dukes shift uncomfortably under Auger's withering glare. They lower their eyes to look within themselves, contemplating his words.

"It is true... we've allowed ourselves to suffer numerous defeats due to our lack of unity." Emperor Crow says. "But that does not mean you should be the one to lead us. I follow Gorn because I believe that might makes right! And Gorn is far stronger than you, Auger. Unlike Mephisto, he may even Ascend without the use of clever tricks or external assistance."

"Mmm. Gorn is stronger than me." Auger says, though his tone seems to imply he might think otherwise. "But Gorn does not care about any of you. You are all pawns to him. Even now, while we ponder matters that will surely affect our species, he avoids coming here. He does not think this meeting is of any significance. Don't you think that seems a little disrespectful?"

"Respect is earned." Crow retorts. "I will not insult you, Auger. You have many accomplishments to your name. But you only Ascended at the tail-end of the Energy Wars, while Gorn fought in those wars from the very beginning. You have no right to slander his name!"

Several demons nod along to Crow's words, directing looks of annoyance Auger's way.

"Very well, then. Perhaps you are not all ready to discuss this issue now. But do keep it in mind, moving forward." Auger says. "Demonkind's existence is at stake. We would not want another tragedy to occur like the one that befell Sharmur."

Emperor Melody's countenance darkens. She looks away from Auger, the memory of her friends putting her in a mentally weakened place.

"Well then, Crow." Auger says, changing the subject. "I suppose now is as good a time as any for you to tell the others about the proposition I made to you."

Crow nods. She turns her attention to the other Emperors, raising her blue-feathered arms in a grand gesture.

"We must account for the possibility that when we attack Mephisto, we will fail to defeat him. If such an event comes to pass, he may Ascend, and we will no longer stand a chance. Unlike Wolfram, who Ascended as a result of Serena's magic, Mephisto's rise is likely to be permanent. He will not die after one hour, so we won't have the option of stalling him or delaying for time until he self-immolates. That means that once he Ascends, he will only grow stronger and stronger over time. We will need to kill him quickly."

The Emperor of Sacrifice shrugs heavily, sighing under her breath.

"I have created a last-ditch Ritual. To be honest, I always imagined it would be useless, because the thought of getting enough Hells together to use it simply wasn't feasible. If there's one thing Auger has said that is true, it is that we should consider setting aside our differences for the sake of our collective well-being."

"What are you saying?" Serena asks, slightly confused by Crow's words. As members of the same Hell, she considers herself well-versed in Crow's capabilities and thought processes, but never has she imagined Crow could speak in such a melodramatic fashion.

"This new Ritual is known as the Ritual of Combination." Crow says simply. "It requires a multitude of demons to agree to lend me their strength in the event of a catastrophe. By combining the energies of as many Emperors, Dukes, Barons, and other demons as possible, I may temporarily gain the strength to do battle with even a Demon Deity."

Emperor Fae's jaw drops. "What?! That's amazing! Holy shit, Crow! Why didn't you bust that out when we fought the Cherubiim?! We could have kicked those pigeon's asses

with ease!"

Crow shakes her head. "The Seven Hells did not trust one another enough to facilitate this Ritual's success. Frankly, it will cost you all of your mana and stamina in the short term, and I would only gain a portion of that power. It's a wasteful Ritual that will exhaust all of your fighting ability and leave you defenseless. If I had tried convincing you to use such a method when the Cherubiim appeared, do you truly think you'd be willing to become pigs for the slaughter in the mere hope I could defeat the Archangels? What if I had then gone on to kill all of you after slaying Uriel?"

Crow looks at the faces of each person present. None of them says a word.

"That's what I thought." She says. "Today, we better understand the existential threats we face. We know about the Volgrim and the Plague, now that we've had our memories restored. And we've seen for ourselves the insidious lengths the Wordsmith will go to to undermine our authority. As Auger has said... the times are changing."

Kristoff nods slowly. "If we fail to adapt, our entire species which once seemed to rule over the Milky Way will only become a footnote in history."

"We never truly ruled anything." Melody points out. "We've always come second to the Volgrim. At this point, we're simply trying not to slip to third behind the humans. I don't think we'll succeed, either. The Wordsmith is just too powerful."

The demons present furrow their brows as they realize the true gravity of the implications behind this meeting.

No longer are they fighting to keep humanity in check, but instead to preserve their existences, their sovereignty, and their lives.

"Mephisto will kill us if we don't kill him first." Auger says. "So let's discuss how we can do that."

Auger waves his hands. Mana coalesces in the center of the room, creating a shockingly realistic image of the planet Numaria. Some of the recently elevated demons raise their eyebrows at this display.

"An ability belonging to one of my subordinates." Auger casually explains. "Look here. Seven hundred miles from our current position, you can see a dark spot on the otherwise perfect beauty of this world."

Auger revolves the planet's projection so that a disturbing blemish reveals itself to those present. A huge, barren wasteland rests smack in the center of the otherwise gorgeous jungles, mountains, and rivers. So hideous is its appearance that it almost resembles a wound festering on the planet's surface, like a terrible burn mark forcefully inflicted upon a man's arm.

"This is the Stitched Wasteland where Glinch resides." Auger explains, mostly for the benefit of the newest demons. "Glinch is nominally my subordinate. I can tap into his powers and draw upon them... but only if he allows me to do so. His body is a freakish mixture of demon, monster, human, and even angel biology. He likes to 'swap' body parts, internal organs, and other extremities with those of other creatures."

Auger continues. "We have relied on Glinch several times over the millennia. While he can be considered an ally and my subordinate, he also can be considered an entirely foreign entity we only barely tolerate. He is a psychotic experimenter who will go to any length to pursue his twisted fantasies. And this is most obvious by the wasteland he has formed over the last 100,000 years."

"If Glinch does not want to see you, you cannot visit him." Yardrat says, adding onto Auger's explanation. "His Wasteland is protected by powerful creatures. They are soulbound to the Stitched Wasteland and unable to leave, but make no mistake... the strongest among them are at the same level as Demon Dukes and Emperors."

"Even more frighteningly, Glinch has assembled over a hundred of these elites to protect him." Auger says, glancing at Emperor Dagon and the other newest elites present. "A hundred. All of us combined cannot match his forces."

"What? We can't?!" Hamir, the Duke of Hailstorms, asks. "Then isn't this mission hopeless? We won't be able to stop Mephisto's rise!"

"If we had to fight Glinch's chimeras all at once in a huge battle, we would lose. He has a home field advantage more terrifying than you can imagine. But fortunately, we won't have to do that." Yardrat says.

"We can pick them off one by one, or in twos and threes." Auger says. "You might think this would enrage Glinch. You would be wrong. It may seem as if Glinch created an army to protect him, but that is not the case at all. Glinch does not fear death in the slightest. You cannot threaten him, and you cannot cow him into submission. As for his chimeras, he did not deliberately create them to protect himself... rather, they were

merely the most successful experimental test subjects that he left alive to roam around the wasteland, lost and confused."

"Glinch gave his chimeras one command." Yardrat says simply. "*Kill anyone who I have not given permission to enter.* Beyond that, he does not care if they live or die. He has no love for, or any interest in, his old experiments."

Melody's expression darkens. "I've never spoken to Glinch before. Never seen him in person, either. I've only heard rumors... he sounds like a devil-damned psycho."

Auger sighs. "Glinch acts as Glinch pleases. The only way to get him to do anything for you is to follow his demands. Even the Volgrim have been known to bend the knee if it means making use of his talents."

"The Volgrim too?" Dagon asks in disbelief.

"The Volgrim too." Yardrat affirms.

Emperor Nymph crosses her arms. "If we move out as soon as possible, we can begin killing our way through Glinch's chimeras. But it will take time. Each one is extremely hardy and possesses a frighteningly powerful body. The option to assassinate Glinch has also been considered, but will not be taken. We only wish to stop Mephisto's ascension. We do not want to make an enemy of the Stitched Emperor. His talents are too useful."

Bael snorts. "What can he possibly do for ya? Put an actual third leg down where your 'third leg' is?"

Some of the more immature demons snicker at Bael's comment. Nymph rolls her eyes.

"No, Bael. Glinch is actually a fairly adept healer. Nowhere near the level of Belial, but she isn't on our side anyway. Glinch is quite good at patching up injuries... provided you don't mind a few troublesome side effects."

"Like growin' a third leg." Bael quips.

The other demons merely groan this time.

"We don't have time to spare." Auger says, as he begins drawing the meeting to a close. "This assault will require all of you to fight like Hell. You'll have to smash your way through Glinch's chimeras while moving with enough speed to reach and kill Mephisto."

Dagon frowns. "Why do you say 'you' without including yourself? Don't tell me the top demon of our Hell is going to just sit on his ass while we go out there and-"

Before he can finish his sentence, Yardrat's eyes flare with rage!

"INSOLENT! You shut your mouth, Dagon! How DARE you talk that way to our liege! Auger's power is what gives our Hell its superiority, you moronic SHIT!"

Nymph also jumps to her leader's defense. "Auger's life is too important for us to risk! If he were to die, it could even damn the entire demon species!"

Before anyone else can butt in, Auger raises his hands and smiles kindly.

"Yardrat, everyone, calm down. Dagon is young and immature. Let us not bully our junior. If the need arises, I will show up to personally dispense justice upon those who would threaten you. My powers work best when cast remotely, but I can step in if necessary. I would not want my cute little juniors to think less of me or my combat capabilities. Naturally, this old demon is capable of putting up a bit of a fight."

Dagon lowers his eyes. "Apologies, Emperor Auger. I spoke out of line. I shouldn't have questioned your motives."

While the other demons share their opinions on Dagon's moment of insolence, Bael scratches his head.

"What, seriously?" Bael mutters under his breath. "Don't these dummies know? Auger's a total badass. He even kicked Satan's butt once. Guess it's just been so long that everyone's forgotten what a killer the old man is, heh."

Melody glances at Bael. "You say something?"

"Nah. Just thinkin' out loud." Bael says with a shrug.

"Oh, okay." Melody says, not paying Bael's dumb rambling any mind. "You should probably sit this battle out though, Bael. You ain't got any magic. I'd cry if something happened to you."

"No sweat." Bael says, giving her a thumbs-up. "I can handle myself. Ose even made me a sweet suit of armor. You're gonna be so jealous when you see it."

Melody raises her eyebrow in a clear sign she doesn't really believe him, but she still nods. "Oh. Well, that's cool then. I'll look forward to seeing it. Just keep yourself safe, Bael."

"Can do!"

As a multitude of Hells bring their best warriors together to combat a unified threat, across the galaxy, some time has passed since the death of Confessor Vulpanix at the hands of Hope Hiro. She has not yet revived, but an emergency council meeting must take place even in the absence of her testimony regarding those events.

Dozens of the mightiest and highest ranking Volgrim from all five sub-species sit arranged in a circle, facing a projection at the center of the arena. This projection changes what it displays as the meeting progresses, first showing images of Serris and its top-secret research sites, followed later by images of the Milky Way, the battle hotspots against the Plague, and even the situation on the world of Tarus II.

All of the Five Founders attend the meeting in person. Numerous 7th and 8th level Psions also attend, though the majority of them do so virtually, as they must stay at the front lines of battle in the event of additional Plague Incursions.

High Technopaths, High Changelings, and even a handful of delegates from the Dolgrimites attend.

Among those present is the individual known as Creator Demila, who maintains a lofty air despite her somewhat low ranking compared to all the other Psions mightier than her, and the representatives of the other sub-species who have plenty of fame and accomplishments to their name.

Founder Cuanali speaks at this time, a day after the meeting's start.

"Then we are all in agreement. The Second Wordsmith poses an existential threat to our regime. We will follow the First Founder's orders and continue as planned until Hope Hiro launches his next attack."

A dismal attitude lingers in the air. The world of Serris, while not protected by any High Psions, was certainly considered a stronghold only a metaphorical stone's throw from Volgarius itself, merely a few lightyears from the homeworld. Under ordinary circumstances, Dosena herself should have been able to come to its rescue, let alone the two Executors who were dispatched to fly through the Void.

Unfortunately, Hope Hiro's attack was so brutal, uncompromising, and swift, that Serris was obliterated before anyone had time to properly react.

Now, all of its denizens have been killed, marking Hope Hiro as an enemy comparable to the Plague.

[I worry that these measures will not be sufficient.] Executor Riley states, sweeping her gaze around the arena. She levitates uprightly, with her arms crossed and her presence projecting an aura of strength in her immediate era. [We are risking everything on a gamble. Especially the First Founder's life.]

Founder Unarin slowly blinks as he listens to Riley's mild criticism.

"There is no need to worry. The Second Wordsmith is a human. He has human inclinations, human desires, and human weaknesses. The fact that he has subordinated himself to a lesser human already shows he is not as mentally formidable as many of the enemies I have battled in my lifetime. I am somewhat confident in my assessments and predictions."

Despite the shaky wording Unarin uses, even a term like 'somewhat' has a vastly different meaning for him than it would someone of lesser intelligence. Executor Riley gazes at her idol, the most intelligent Volgrim in the entire Empire, and nods.

[Of course, First Founder. It is your life to do with as you please. If you are confident in your assessments, I will not pretend to know better than you. I will defer to your judgment.]

The other Volgrim present all nod in unison.

Founder Unarin's word is Law. If he states that something will happen, only the Creator himself should have the power to prevent it from doing so.

"We will continue acting as we have, aside from following the new Hope Containment Protocols." Founder Cuanali says, her mouth-tentacles moving to accentuate her words. "I declare this meeting adjourned. Return to your posts."

The Volgrim elites all nod in unison. Psionic and technological projections wink out, vanishing quickly as they return to their duties, leaving only those who attended physically behind to shuffle or teleport out of the chamber.

Unarin stands up. He turns to look at Founder Dosena, only to pause and frown.

"Is something wrong?"

The Second Founder gazes forward, a blank expression on her face. With her arms crossed, she appears as stoic as ever, but Unarin seems to notice something out of the ordinary.

Founder Cuanali also pauses to look at the other two Founders. So does Founder Treyza, the Changeling, and Cinculu, the Dolgrimite.

[I am not certain.] Dosena says, her tone distant. [I sense something I have not sensed since...]

A pause.

[Perhaps I am mistaken. I feel as though a new Cosmic Entity is beginning to form. But its presence is weak. It will falter in its ascension and fail.]

Unarin maintains a calm expression. Only his flickering eyes tell another story.

"Another Cosmic Entity? Different from the one guiding the Plague?"

[Yes. Different.] Dosena answers.

"Hmm. What are the odds this entity could be... the Wordsmith?"

[I do not believe it is the First or Second Wordsmith.] Dosena states. [Neither is it the Cherubiim. It is something new. I will monitor its attempt at breaching the Cosmic Barrier.]

"Very well. Do that." Unarin says, before turning his attention to the other three Founders.

Founders Treyza, Cuanali, and Cinculu look at Dosena with mixtures of curiosity, interest, or utter apathy. Cinculu, in particular, does not seem to think much of the Second Founder. He turns and walks away, not deigning to speak to the others. Indeed, he has not spoken a single word since arriving.

As the huge reptilian monster lumbers away, Treyza cocks their head.

"Founder Unarin. What is this about a Cosmic Barrier?"

Unarin smiles. "Need-to-know information. If you ever need to know, it will mean a catastrophe has befallen our Empire. Dosena must handle this matter on her own, as she always has."

"Of course. This one listens, and this one comprehends." Treyza says, bowing its head politely. "This one shall return to its research. Farewell to all of you."

Cuanali lingers behind, watching as Treyza leaves. Once all the spectators have departed, leaving only the three Founders behind, Cuanali presses her tentacled fingers together.

"First Founder. I have determined that Marie Becker intends to send a large batch of Cybernites to the human homeworld of Tarus II. Should we interfere?"

Unarin frowns. "Oh? That's not like Marie at all. Didn't the Wordsmith visit her a few cycles ago?"

"He did." Cuanali confirms. "I believe he may have convinced her to help accelerate humanity's development speed. This falls under the classification of a Level III Emergency. We should not allow the humans to rapidly advance."

Unarin massages his forehead and sighs. "Haah... no, we should not. But the times are changing. The Volgrim are not as strong as in the past. The Plague presses on us from all directions. We will have to outwit these humans if we wish to someday bring them under our thumb. And right now, with Serris gone, we need help combating the Plague."

He stares at Cuanali with the same gaze a father might give his daughter.

"In war, there are many forms of battle. If one's military is not as strong as the one run by their enemy, then they may consider psychological warfare, economic warfare, or other such means. The humans are still weak and developing. We have many avenues we may yet pursue."

Cuanali nods. "I contemplate, and I comprehend. I only wish that you might be able to use your sharp mind to retrieve our Celestial Designer. Psymin Miralax is my close friend. I do not wish to see her suffer any more than she already has."

Unarin reaches out and touches Cuanali's cheek.

"And neither do I."

A moment later, they break apart. Cuanali bows her head and departs, leaving Unarin alone with Founder Dosena.

[Too much is changing too quickly.] Dosena says.

"Having trouble keeping up?" Unarin teases.

[No.]

Dosena pauses.

[I am nearing my breakthrough.]

Unarin's faint smile vanishes.

In its place, a look of deadly-serious intent replaces it.

"You're certain?"

[There is a barrier preventing me from reaching the level of High Cosmic.] Dosena slowly explains. [But I have found a weak point. I now believe ascension to the 10th Level is fully possible.]

Unarin swallows heavily. He gazes upon Dosena with hungry eyes, licking his lips as he imagines the possibilities.

"The Plague's controller has been bullying us for too long. If you can successfully ascend, we will be able to seek out the root of our enemy and tear them apart. We won't have to act defensively any longer."

[Do not get ahead of yourself.] Dosena warns. [I still require time to amass a foundation capable of shattering the High Cosmic barrier.]

"But thanks to the Wordsmith, we now know of the Cosmic Realm's existence..." Unarin says thoughtfully, looking away and stroking his chin. "The Primary Plaguehost must be hiding somewhere inside that realm."

[You underestimate the size of the Cosmic Realm.] Dosena warns him. [It is as vast as the Milky Way itself. From our initial probing attempts, I have determined that at my current level I would require one hundred thousand cycles of constant searching to scour every meter of the Cosmic Realm. Our Enemy keeps their aura hidden well.]

"And if you were to ascend to the 10th Level?" Unarin asks.

[The time requirement *would* be shorter.] Dosena answers noncommittally.

Both Founders fall silent for a few moments.

"Then focus on breaking your limiter. And keep an eye on whatever is giving you that 'bad feeling.' We don't want another Cherubiim running rampant."

Dosena nods.

[As you command.]

Part 481: The Hall of Heroes

Some time earlier, in a part of the Milky Way Galaxy hidden from the gods themselves...

The Hall of Heroes.

Hope Hiro's greatest construction hovers inside a void of brilliant luminosity: A golden palace of incredible size, capable of comfortably housing the thousand artifacts he seized from the Volgrim.

The Hall of Heroes resides within an alternate dimension not unlike Jason Hiro's 'Chrona Realm.' However, while Jason's special dimension has been maximally upgraded to a TDR (Time Dilation Ratio) of 250:1, Hope's has only reached a TDR of 100:1. As for why this is the case, the answer lays in the biggest difference between his realm and Jason's.

The Hall of Heroes... is filled with Heroes.

With so many powerful artifacts concentrated in one realm, Hope simply cannot accelerate the flow of time beyond a certain level without destabilizing reality and killing himself in the process. This judgment, delivered by Solomon himself, is what gives Hope the final assurance he can push no further.

After spending a few days with Solomon building the palace according to the Knowledge-Seeker's specifications, Hope finally takes a day to rest.

Inside this time-accelerated domain, a few days will only require an hour or two in the outside world. Hope strolls about with Solomon's corporeal figure, a much more realistic projection compared to the one Jason used to summon when he possessed the Crown.

"What now?" Hope asks.

"Now that we have built this Hall, you should begin a series of tasks to accelerate your learning process." Solomon responds. "I already spent six years training Jason. Inside a realm like this, you can leapfrog your other self and become a far more proficient combatant and leader compared to him."

"Right, I understand that much." Hope says, reaching out to pick up one of the artifacts at random, a pearl-like orb just big enough to fill the palm of his hand. "I'm

asking what I need to do specifically."

Solomon gestures to the relic in Hope's grasp. "You've obtained almost a thousand artifacts from the Volgrim. Frankly, I only recognized a tenth of them on my own. Luckily, the Volgrim knew of the vast majority of their identities, so that will alleviate much of our troubles with identifying them. You should spend one day with each artifact, learning who their original owners are, what abilities they can offer, and how you can integrate them into your future battles."

"One day for each..." Hope says slowly, as a frown crawls across his face. "But there are nearly a thousand! That'll take three years!"

Solomon shrugs. "Why do you think I had you construct this Hall of Heroes? You require time to assimilate your gains, boy. The Volgrim will be too fearful to make a move against you, for now, but I worry they might make a move against your woman. You should bring Amelia here, where they can't reach her. Then you won't be stuck with only me for the whole duration."

Hope's frown eases. "That's a good point. The Volgrim might target her... but what about Neil? Shouldn't I bring him here, too?"

"Tsk, tsk." Solomon clicks his tongue. "You've much to learn about projecting strength. Bringing Amelia here is more for your companionship than for the sake of protecting her. Ask yourself, boy, what sort of message will you be sending the Volgrim if you bring people you care about into a secret realm? It will tell them that you fear reprisal!"

Solomon and Hope walk into a large, lavish golden hall with a table capable of seating over a hundred people. As soon as Hope enters, several ethereal maids and butlers materialize, formed from the magical power contained within the Hall of Heroes. They quickly spread out and begin creating a delicious meal fit for a king while Hope walks over and sits at the head of the table.

"You're saying I should project fearlessness and strength." Hope says. "But will that truly deter Unarin? Everyone seems to think he's an extremely intelligent leader. What if he sees through my ploy?"

Solomon sits on Hope's right, at the seat of honor. The two of them together somehow make the dining hall feel even bigger and lonelier than it did before they entered.

"Your line of thinking is too simple." Solomon says slowly. "Let's recap the actions you've taken."

He pauses.

"First, you sneaked through all of Volgarius without raising any alarms. It can be seen by how the Volgrim did not confront you until your arrival on Serris that they were not even certain you were present. This indicates a lapse in their detection capabilities."

"Are you sure that's the case?" Hope asks. "Looking back, it's pretty obvious the Volgrim suspected I was on Volgarius. Sangin Lidra was probably the one to tip them off."

"That's right. They 'suspected' you were on Volgarius." Solomon says meaningfully. "But they did not know for certain. I believe none of them could actually detect your presence. Perhaps not even Founder Dosena herself! Only Confessor Vulpanix had the ability to do so."

"Too bad I couldn't kill her for good..." Hope mutters, his eyes narrowing to slits. "If she's the only one who can properly detect me, I should make sure to finish the job sometime in the future."

Solomon nods. "Returning to my previous point: The second action you took was to engage in dialogue with Confessor Vulpanix, a dialogue in which you easily outwitted her, crushed her spirit, and broke her mind and body. She fled in a manner most pathetic, bringing shame to the Volgrim Empire. This has demonstrated to the Volgrim that you are not a pushover like Jason, ready to go to any length to be their friend. You punished them for their words and misdeeds. You took decisive action!"

"A lot of that was just you feeding me what to do, though." Hope points out.

"So? Unarin is the thinker, and Dosena is his powerhouse. You and I can be thought of in much the same way. Few people are capable of being the brains and the brawn. Just look at Duke Bael, for instance. He may be one of the most powerful demons in terms of physical strength, but as for his brain, *heh*."

Hope nods. "If he ever wised up, he'd become a real threat."

Solomon nods. "The last action you took was to obliterate Serris. This sent a message to the Volgrim not only that you were capable of doing so, but willing to do so. The destruction of an entire planet is not a casual act. Anyone who can accomplish such a feat automatically elevates themselves to an extremely high threat level. The Volgrim know

Jason destroyed Polaris with a Supernova, and now with your added feat, they will dread doing anything that might set you off again."

"I also set clear limitations." Hope points out. "The Volgrim will know, or soon realize, I only destroyed the planet because Vulpanix pissed me off. As long as they tread lightly, they will be safe."

"That's right." Solomon says, smiling encouragingly. "But, think of the message you will send if you immediately try to whisk away Amelia, Neil, and a bunch of other people close to you. What will the Volgrim think if after demonstrating such power, you begin hiding people from their wrath?"

"They'll think I'm scared..." Hope says slowly. "But won't they think that anyway if I bring Amelia here?"

"Not necessarily. She is your future spouse, after all. Having her by your side is only natural." Solomon replies. "The same is not true of Neil and the rest. Leaving Neil relatively unprotected serves as a sign of confidence. It won't be hard for the Volgrim to realize that you and him are close friends. If they were to capture and threaten him, they would have leverage over you, but that is also a terrible mistake they would never make. From Unarin's point of view, you should appear a cunning rationalist who is willing to go to any length to punish injustice... even the blatant murder of billions of Volgrim on Serris."

Hope nods, unbothered by the extreme actions he took only a few days earlier. "Alright. So let's assume I spent a few years mastering these artifacts. What then?"

"Do you want me to plan out your every move?" Solomon asks, raising an eyebrow. "I certainly can, but you *are* this era's current living Hero. It would not be entirely appropriate for me to coddle you."

"Right, yeah..." Hope mutters. "I have my own ideas. Well, for now, I think I'll bring Amelia here. Worry about the other stuff later. I've got time."

"Time aplenty, though not an eternity." Solomon affirms. "Take care to spend what time you do have efficiently."

Hope nods. He waves Solomon away, and after the old man has disappeared, he utters a Word of Power.

"Return."

An instant later, a figure materializes on his right side, hunched over.

"What the- aah!"

Amelia cries out in alarm, toppling over as she loses her balance. Hope jumps out of his chair.

"Oh, lord! I'm sorry, honey! I didn't realize you were- man I'm an idiot, sometimes."

Amelia rises to her feet with Hope's assistance. As he pulls her up, she gives him a pouty look of annoyance, followed immediately by a quick look of shock around the luxurious room filled with gold and jewels.

"Where the heck...? Where am I?"

"This is the Hall of Heroes." Hope explains. "A lot has happened. Sorry, I've been a bit busy over the last few days."

Hope launches into a brief but information-packed explanation of his recent exploits, causing Amelia's head to spin.

"You blew up an entire PLANET?!" Amelia cries, the blood draining from her face. "What is wrong with you? Hope! That's... that's EVIL!"

"They are our enemies." Hope says quietly, schooling his face. "You didn't see what the Volgrim did to the humans they captured. They kept cloning people, murdering them, then they would repeat the process again. It was barbaric."

Amelia inhales a quick breath. "But you've always told me that the actions I took when I was the Black Queen were evil and that I should seek redemption. Now you're going out and murdering planets too?? This is really screwed up!"

Hope winces. "Things aren't quite that cut and dry, Amelia... they're just not. But I can't say more right now. Just know that I had a good reason for doing everything I've done."

Amelia closes her eyes. She rubs her hand against her eyelids as if to try and scrub her memories clean.

"I don't get it... but... I guess I can't take the high ground here. I'm just as bad as you."

"No, no, that's not the case at all." Hope says, gently touching her shoulder. "There's a lot going on, alright? In a few years, you'll understand the ploy I've worked out. For now, I just needed to get you inside the Hall of Heroes so you'd be safe from the Volgrim."

"A few years?" Amelia asks, lifting her head. "What do you mean?"

"Ahaha... well... we're not exactly in the physical realm anymore." Hope replies.

He spends another few minutes bringing her up to speed not only on the events that have transpired, but also his plans for the near and far future.

"So you're going to master all of the Artifacts? And then you'll be able to stomp the Volgrim if they ever cross you?" Amelia asks.

Hope smiles. "Not just the Volgrim. The demons too... and most importantly, the Plague. As bad as the Volgrim are, the Plague is our worst nightmare. We can't allow it to strike humanity's worlds."

Hope invites her to sit at the table. With Solomon gone, Hope opts to sit beside his fiancée. They calm down while the maids and butlers stroll in, plates full of piping hot food. Meats, vegetables, all sorts of entrees arrive, making Amelia raise an eyebrow.

"Bit wasteful, don't you think? We can't eat all this."

"Bah, we don't have to." Hope retorts. "I can just Wordsmith any leftovers back into their raw ingredients."

"Who are these people anyway?" Amelia asks, gesturing to the blank-eyed palace attendants.

"Constructs. Not unlike the ones Jason made, but mine are a bit simpler and easier to make."

The Second Wordsmith opens his mouth in an 'aha' expression. "That reminds me! I think it's about time I took care of business."

Amelia watches with a quizzical expression as Hope summons the mightiest artifact in existence to his palm.

Excalibur, the Divine Blade!

Hope uses a Word of Power to materialize the sword from elsewhere in the Hall of Heroes.

"Excalibur powers this entire realm." Hope explains. "And it still has tons of energy left over. It's actually ridiculous how much mana one little sword can wield. It's like a supergiant star that never runs out of juice."

Amelia curls her upper lip. "I don't like swords much. Certainly not that one."

"Huh? You don't?" Hope asks.

"No. It reminds me of Joan." Amelia says, her tone low. "Remember? Joan took over Arthur's body and... tortured me."

"Ah. Well, Arthur himself isn't like that." Hope says, turning his attention to the divine blade. "**Projection.**"

With a single Word of Power, Hope reaches into Excalibur and activates the soul contained within.

King Arthur materializes a few feet away, his body appearing partially transparent but also surprisingly whole. The Hero-King glances around, then locks eyes with Amelia.

"Ah. Black Witch..."

Amelia slowly blinks her eyes. "Arthur."

Hope frowns.

"You know each other?"

"We fought." Arthur says. "A long time ago. She doesn't have the same aura anymore, that fearsome Hunger that used to be so evident on her face, but she was a terrible foe back in the day. I won't forget her for as long as I live."

Amelia faintly smiles. "I'm not 'technically' Amelia, if you must know."

She looks at Hope.

"Don't you remember? I'm the person who killed Arthur."

"WHAT?" Hope cries, leaning away from her. "No way! You never told me!"

"I didn't think I needed to. You have Jason's memories. Don't you remember when I summoned Arthur and Satan to fight Jason? I killed Arthur and seized his body, but I was unable to lay claim to his soul. So it entered Excalibur, leaving me with his mindless flesh-half."

"Black Witch." Arthur repeats. "Body thief. City eater. In the end, you met your demise. Now you're not even the same woman who slew me following my Greatest Sin. I hold no more animosity toward you."

"Yeah. I, or rather, the original Amelia, wasn't exactly in her right mind back then anyway." Amelia says, shrugging helplessly. "I kind of had a dragon inside me."

"Happens to the best of us." Arthur concludes.

Hope scratches his head. When he called his fiancée here, he had completely overlooked her relationship with the Hero-King. In hindsight, it should have been obvious to him, making him feel a little foolish.

"Err, let's move on." Hope says, trying to wave away the slightly tense and awkward atmosphere. "Arthur! I brought you here because I've had something on my mind for a while now. Only now do I have the opportunity to make it happen."

The handsome golden-haired King crosses his arms and smiles. "Oh? Go on."

"I have a body for you. The perfect body." Hope says. "You can finally return to the real world to aid me by wielding Excalibur at its full power. I also plan to make bodies for all of the past Heroes, at least the ones who want them."

"Ah." Arthur says, immediately looking less interested. "Well, I appreciate the thought, young Hero, but my time is over. I've no interest in returning to a corporeal existence. I'd much rather continue to stay within the Divine Blade."

Hope grins. "I thought you might say that. But don't jump ahead of yourself! You've yet to see the body you can possess! And you don't have to possess it all the time. You could always jump into it during times of great danger. It would help me feel more at ease if you were available to help humanity."

"I don't really think it matters how suitable the body is." Arthur says, slowly shaking his head. "You misunderstand. I am undeserving of returning to reality. The sin I carry... the lives I've taken... I forfeited my right to be called a Hero. Let alone a Hero-King, such titles are unbecoming of me. I'm afraid I'll have to refuse."

Hope pauses. Slightly surprised by Arthur's insistence, he didn't expect the Hero-King to reject him so thoroughly.

"Well... look, just give the body a once-over, alright? Maybe you'll change your mind."

He pauses.

"Summon."

A moment later, Hope summons the Arthur Construct to his side from elsewhere in the Hall of Heroes. The Arthur Construct stands tall and proud, its physical appearance perfectly mimicking Arthur's soul-body. Even Amelia raises an eyebrow.

"It's a perfect replica of the man." Amelia says, before turning to Hope. "Well... except..."

"Haha..." Arthur laughs awkwardly. "You've gone to such an effort, it does make me feel a bit embarrassed to continue denying your request. This is indeed a mighty body."

"Right?" Hope says, suddenly feeling a little put-off by the looks Amelia and Arthur are giving him. "But you still don't want it?"

"I did not want the, ahem, the 'body' before, and that stands even more so now." Arthur says. "She's certainly a mighty warrior, to be sure."

"Right..." Hope says slowly. "Any particular reas- wait, did you say '*she*'?"

Amelia and Arthur exchange glances.

The former Black Queen coughs into her fist.

"Ahem. Hope, uh... you... you do know there's a female soul inside of this body, right?"

"Huh?" Hope says, glancing at the construct, then back to the other two. "What do you mean? The construct is soulless."

Arthur squints at Hope, making a weird grimacing expression.

"Ahhh... so you haven't noticed. Well, that explains your... lack of manners. Indeed, there is a soul inside that body, boy. And it is female..."

Arthur turns his attention to the construct.

"I apologize for the Wordsmith's rudeness. He seems to be lacking in the... soul-sensing department."

The Construct says nothing. It slowly blinks, then nods at Arthur.

"You have a soul?" Hope asks, now visibly bewildered. "Can you speak?"

The Construct looks at Hope, then nods.

"But you've never said anything before!" Hope protests. "All this time!"

Finally, the construct opens its mouth.

"I did not feel comfortable doing so."

Finally hearing the Arthur Construct speak for the first time ever, Hope can practically feel his mind explode inside his skull. He stands up and stares in wide-eyed fascination.

"Well- I mean, I- I feel terrible! I've been talking about you all this time as if you were a robot or something!"

The Construct nods. "Yes. You were rude."

Despite its voice being masculine, as well as its appearance, Hope gets the impression the Construct might be... offended.

"Are you truly a woman?"

"I am." The Construct affirms. "And I do not like my appearance."

"Oh..." Hope mumbles.

Feeling a little dispirited, Hope scratches the back of his head.

"I wish you'd said something sooner. I didn't mean to give you a sense of... body dysphoria, or whatever."

"I didn't think you'd care." The Construct says slowly. "You needed a weapon. I am a weapon. I fight. I kill. That is all."

"Hope, you're such a jerk." Amelia teases. "I think you should make her look prettier, now."

Hope nods. "Would you... like to look more feminine?"

Immediately, the Arthur Construct takes a step toward Hope. She gets right in his face, her expression bland and unchanged.

"I would."

Hope takes a step back, feeling deeply intimidated by her stoic attitude.

"A-alright. Uh. One second..."

Hope closes his eyes to form a mental image of a female King Arthur. As he does, he happens to look inside his Mind Realm, where he sees Solomon stifling a hearty laugh.

[The hell are you guffawing about?] Hope thinks. [WAIT! Did you know the whole time?!]

Solomon lets a little air escape his lips. [Pff. Pffff... yes... it was quite amusing, I must admit. Your inability to sense different types of souls is your funniest quality!]

[Dickhead.] Hope grumbles. [At least help me construct a new appearance for her.]

[Oh, certainly.] Solomon says. [I've been waiting for you to notice for ages! I already have one prepared.]

[You already had one... ugh.] Hope grumbles, even more annoyed.

He opens his eyes as images of a female face and body materialize in his mind.

"Appearance. Shift. Hair. Eyes. Face. Shoulders. Muscles. Torso. Breasts..."

He quickly fires off several dozen Words of Power, changing the female Arthur's body rapidly, causing her hair to become far longer, her eyes to expand, and her figure to become visibly more feminine.

After a full minute of transformation, Hope ceases his work. He glances at Amelia and Arthur, then back to the Construct.

"Well? What do you two think?"

Amelia blinks twice. Stars dance in her eyes. "Pretty..."

Arthur clears his throat. "So this is how I might have looked if I were born a woman, hm? I could fall for myself."

The new female Arthur stands just as tall and imposing as her original self. With a powerful, muscular body, she looks no less intimidating than Arthur himself. But now, her face appears much more beautiful and feminine, along with the rest of her body. Her long golden hair hangs down to her waist, and her sparkling blue eyes truly captivate one's imagination.

She turns to a nearby mirror hanging on the wall, then walks over to examine herself. After running her hands through her hair and lightly touching her face, she nods.

"Acceptable."

Hope chuckles. "You're not much for words, are you, uh..."

"Artoria." The Construct says. "My name will be Artoria. You will refer to me as such."

Despite her bland tone, Hope gets the impression she might actually be threatening him if he doesn't comply. He hurriedly nods.

"Right! Artoria Pendragon! We'll just say you're Arthur's... twin sister! How about that? Sorry for my earlier misunderstanding. I can be a tad dense sometimes."

Artoria walks over to Hope. She stares at him for a few seconds with the same unchanging, intense gaze she always does.

"Yes, you can. But I forgive you."

"Wow..." Hope mutters. "Somehow, you're *way* scarier when you talk."

Part 482: Hope's Desire

Two months pass.

Inside the Hall of Heroes, Hope continues the task assigned to him by King Solomon. Each day, he picks one of the artifacts at random and experiments with the soul inside, trying to see what sort of effects the Hero contained within can unleash.

As half a day passes in the outside world, Hope gradually acclimates to the lack of pressure on himself.

For so long, he has followed along with Neil's orders and recommendations. He has fought and killed demons to serve humanity's better interests. This often resulted in the Second Wordsmith suffering physical and mental injuries, but these traumatic events also served to harden his resolve.

The demons are humanity's enemy. Hope knows this in his heart.

But inside the Hall of Heroes, time breezes by, especially thanks to sharing plenty of romantic time with his loving fiancée. Sometimes, Amelia tries baking or cooking food to keep Hope's energy high. He could always Wordsmith some food or have the spiritual butlers and maids do the job, their soulless bodies perfectly capable of rising to the task.

But Amelia finds herself often having little to do, so she insists on making Hope try her home cooking. Unsurprisingly, the former Black Witch is a horrible cook, but Hope still happily eats whatever she gives him, so deep is his love for her.

As usual, Hope goes about his business, summoning Heroes from their relics to learn more about them.

A little girl, perhaps 12 years old, sits on a rock in front of Hope. Her body is only a spiritual projection beamed from her artifact, but like Solomon, she still appears visibly solid and substantial thanks to the Hall of Heroes' special enhancements.

Hope smiles at the girl. Having obtained knowledge of all of the relics from the mind of the captured Volgrim elites, few details have evaded him up to now, but this artifact still piqued his interest, if only because there was so little information on it inside Psymon Miralax's memories.

"Your name is...?"

"Wendy!"

Wendy smiles cutely at Hope, her long brown hair hanging down to her waist.

"This is great!" Wendy says unprompted. "I was so lonely inside that void, but now I'm back! I can see the world again! I thought I was going to be all alone forever..."

Her words echo a sentiment shared among many of the Heroes Hope has met until now.

Loneliness.

Isolation.

Manic fits.

Countless Heroes have gone insane from 100,000 years of complete isolation. Until now, Hope has never met someone so bubbly and happy inside an artifact.

"You seem to have gotten along well enough. Are you doing alright?" Hope asks.

"Mhm!" Wendy chirps. "I used to feel lonely, but then I realized I could just make a new friend if I wanted to. So I did! And he always kept me company."

"Who's your... friend?" Hope asks the little girl.

"He's right here!" Wendy says, gesturing to the empty space on her right. "His name is Windy! He's a magical Wind Rabbit!"

Hope continues to smile.

Fuck. She went crazy, too. The Wordsmith thinks.

"So... Wendy. Your friend's name is... Windy?"

"Mhm!" Wendy nods.

"Alrighty then." Hope says with a quiet sigh. "If you don't mind my asking, what were your heroic abilities?"

Wendy cocks her head. "My what?"

"You know. Your heroic abilities. Your powers. Your magic." Hope tries to explain. "I'm a Wordsmith. I can make magic happen just by speaking a single word. For example, **Flower.**"

Hope conjures a lily in his grasp. Then he smiles and hands it to the little girl.

"Wow! That's amazing!" Wendy says, holding the flower out to the empty space on her right side. "What do you think, Windy? He's pretty cool, isn't he?"

Hope once again continues to force a pained smile.

"So... your power is...?"

"Oh, I don't know if I have a power at all." Wendy says. "I uh... OH, right! I can change the direction the wind is blowing!"

Hope blinks.

"You what?"

"The wind's direction!" Wendy says cheerfully. "If it's blowing east, I can make it blow west. I do tend to get really tired afterward, though... sometimes I plop over and fall asleep right in the grass."

Hope fiddles with Wendy's artifact, a small wooden statue of a cat. Despite appearing visibly faded with time, its spiritual aura has protected it from crumbling to dust over the ages, allowing Hope to understand that this must have been one of Wendy's toys when she was still alive, before her untimely death.

"Well, I don't have much use for changing the wind... but I bet you'd have made for a great sailor." Hope says, his smile becoming a bit warmer.

"Mhm. I always wanted to get on a sailboat and float across the sea..." Wendy says wistfully. "Say, you're not going to make me go back inside that void again, are you? I can be useful to you, if you just tell me what you want."

Wendy's cute smile starts to slip. An edge of panic appears in her eyes.

"Don't worry." Hope says, reaching over to squeeze her shoulder. "I won't put you back in the void. This is the Hall of Heroes. Now you and, uh, Windy- you two can make lots of new friends with other Heroes. I'll even work on getting you counseling so you can recuperate from your isolation."

"Ohh!" Wendy chirps, immediately brightening up. "I don't really understand, but as long as I don't have to live in the void anymore, that would make me so happy! Thank you mister Hope!"

"Anytime." Hope says. "Now, tell me more about yourself..."

For the next several hours, Hope gets to know the young girl. He learns about her life and personality, as well as her heroic feats, or rather, her lack thereof.

Ultimately, Wendy was a mere peasant living in an English fishing village who never accomplished anything of note in her life. She died to a disease, and that was the extent of her life's story.

After finishing with Wendy, Hope leads her to a garden filled with trees, bushes, vines and flowers. In this garden, a dozen other recently awakened Heroes mill about, all of them becoming visibly more interested as Hope leads Wendy inside.

"Everyone, this is today's new arrival, Wendy." Hope explains. "Let's all take good care of her."

After he spends a few minutes introducing Wendy, he takes off, leaving her and the other Heroes behind.

Not long after exiting the garden, Hope's smile deflates. He nudges Solomon's Crown grumpily.

"Almost sixty Heroes. Most of their powers, useless. These people are nobodies."

Solomon materializes beside Hope. He teleports from a different part of the Hall of Heroes, having been working on a side-project of some sort.

"You are fortunate to be the mightiest Hero who has ever lived, wielding a power unimaginable to your predecessors. Don't act haughty just because you lucked out, boy. The majority of Heroes lived short, mediocre lives. They were only Heroes in a technical sense."

"Wendy's just a girl who changes the direction of the wind before immediately falling asleep." Hope complains. "It's barely a magical ability at all. And what about the guy who could grow vines... slowly? What am I gonna do with an ability like that? Grow a beanstalk to the realm of giants? My Wordsmithing can already do the same thing!"

Solomon's kindly smile vanishes. He gives Hope a disapproving look.

"Listen. This is for your own good. Each of these Heroes are your predecessors. After all this time, they have become broken and destitute. Their souls are ruined, their psyches poisoned. This isn't just about you obtaining a quick power-up, it's about respecting the sometimes valiant, often pitiful lives of those who lived and died before you!"

Slightly taken aback, Hope nods respectfully at Solomon.

"Right. Yeah, sorry. I didn't mean to be rude..."

Solomon continues to stare evenly at Hope. After a few long moments, he looks away.

"I spoke with Raphael. He told me that Uzziel's condition has improved. He chose to give her ring to the Daughter of Heaven, Cassiel."

Only ten days earlier, or a few hours in real time, Hope and the Archangels sat down to repair Uzziel's soul in a process most incredible, but one which only brought back a babbling toddler-like angel, not the same person Uzziel once was.

Hope lowers his eyes.

"The Daughter of Heaven, huh?"

He avoids returning to the previous topic.

"I guess that's a good ending for the former Archangel."

Solomon nods, his gaze distant. "Mmm. Indeed."

A few awkward moments pass. Solomon clears his throat.

"Best get back to what you were doing. Keep up the good work, and you'll surely meet many intriguing Heroes of the past."

Hope nods. "Right."

Solomon vanishes, his body flickering away to reappear elsewhere in the Hall of Heroes.

After he leaves, Hope gazes into the distance for a moment, then he pulls the Crown off his head and sets it on a nearby altar. Inside the Hall of Heroes, he doesn't need to wear it for Solomon to remain in the physical realm.

Rubbing his head wearily, Hope starts mumbling to himself as he walks away. He looks at the floor while he walks, a hundred-mile stare on his face.

"...all so tiresome." Hope grouches quietly. "But he's the Knowledge Seeker. He's much smarter than me. I'm sure he has a purpose for making me do... all this."

Hope walks past a room where five Heroes he's spoken to in the last month sit in a circle, talking about their lives with one another, in a sort of group recovery session.

Hope ignores them.

He continues walking until he reaches his home, a large and luxurious residence with a spacious bedroom and a comfortable bed. When he opens the door and steps into the living room, he immediately spots Amelia laying lazily on the couch, a thick book in her hands. From afar, he notes the title appears to be *Pete's Dragon*.

"I'm back." Hope says, his tone coming off a little gruffer than he intended.

Amelia glances at him. "Welcome home. Are you... doing okay?"

Hope shrugs.

He walks over to the couch and plops down at the far end, beside Amelia's bare feet. Given how she's chosen to stretch out on the couch, she takes up most of the space, but still retracts her legs a bit to give him room.

Somewhat reluctantly, Amelia bends the corner of a page into a makeshift bookmark, then closes the book and sets it aside. She sits up and turns herself so she can flop against her fiancé's chest.

"I'm just feeling a little worn out." Hope mutters, wrapping an arm around Amelia's shoulder. He smiles, despite his poor mood. Embracing her always makes his day better.

"Mmm." Amelia says, raising her eyes while leaning her head back. She looks at Hope's hairline. "No Crown?"

"No Crown." Hope confirms.

Several seconds pass. Amelia's eyes meet Hope's. The two smile at each other warmly. Hope leans down, and their lips press together.

"Mmm..."

Amelia makes a cute noise as she gently kisses Hope. He grunts in satisfaction, enjoying this private moment.

The two don't go any further than that. They merely pull apart and gaze into the fireplace before them. Heat wafts forward, warming the room to the perfect temperature, and creating a cozy atmosphere.

"This is nice." Hope murmurs. "I'm feeling better already."

Amelia's smile slips a little.

"You know..."

"Hm?"

Hope glances down at Amelia, noticing that she has averted her gaze.

"Is something wrong?" Hope asks.

"Not exactly." Amelia says. "It's just... I've been noticing you keep coming home in a bad mood every day."

"Oh. Sorry." Hope says, feeling slightly ashamed. "I should leave that at the door."

"I'm not bothered." Amelia says. "Not personally. But I am worried for you. Don't you think... you're acting a bit too passively?"

"Huh?" Hope grunts. "Passively? What do you mean?"

Half a minute of silence follows, as Amelia carefully considers her words.

"...before all of 'this,' you spent six years running Neil's errands."

"Neil and I agree that the demons must be eradicated." Hope retorts. "Is that bad?"

"And now you spend your days doing whatever Solomon commands." Amelia continues, ignoring Hope's counter-point. "If you think following their orders is the right thing to do, then that's that. I just worry that you haven't thought carefully about your decision to do so."

Hope frowns. "Amelia, what's this about? Do you think I'm an idiot for listening to what Neil and Solomon have to say?"

"That's not it at all." Amelia replies, finally turning her head back to look up at Hope. "But you're a Wordsmith. You're this generation's Hero. Say what you want about Jason, but he does what he wants to do and what he thinks is best. When Solomon tried to make him do something he didn't want to do, he refused, and Solomon came to you. Doesn't that make you feel a little... odd?"

"I'm not Jason." Hope replies, his frown deepening. "Jason is an idiot. Jason nearly got all of humanity killed because he kept falling for Ose's schemes. I'm being smart by listening to the counsel of people wiser than me."

"Listening to good advice is, of course, admirable," Amelia says, pulling out of Hope's embrace to turn and look at him more directly. "But it's been eating at me since you brought me here... if Solomon tells you to jump, you ask 'how high.' And that would be fine, except I can see that *you* don't even like it. You just do whatever the old man says, even if it goes against what you think would be best."

She gazes into Hope's eyes.

"In your heart, do you think that your judgment is so poor, you don't deserve to have any plans of your own?"

Hope opens and closes his mouth a few times.

"That's- that's not the case at all! Look, Amelia, I'm not stupid. I know my own limitations. A smart man learns from his mistakes, but a wise man learns from the mistakes of others. Solomon is the smartest man in existence! He's setting me up to learn the history of the Heroes, to master their artifacts, and to give me incredible power."

"His goal is to genocide all of the demons. Just like Neil's goal." Amelia points out. "And what exactly makes you think Solomon is so wise? Have you forgotten? Solomon was duped like a clown by Satan the Devil. He fell for Satan's ploy and this ultimately led to the deaths of countless innocent people in Jerusalem, including Solomon's extended family!"

"That's proof that the demons are evil!" Hope protests.

"It's proof that those who call themselves 'wise' are just as capable of making terrible mistakes as everyone else." Amelia says. "My point is that you are acting completely passively. You haven't formulated any plans for the future, and you leave all of that to Solomon. Worse, it's *eating* at you. I can see it in your eyes! Every day, you come home looking more and more beaten-down. You simply aren't willing to see the signs the way that I do."

"You can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs." Hope argues. "Of course I'm frustrated. I think this work Solomon is putting me through is tedious and boring. But he's right! I descend from Jason, and it's easy enough to screw up by trying to do things my way. It's better to build up my willpower and make myself more formidable by training my patience. Jason never listens to anyone, and that's why I'm going to be better than him!"

"Who told you listening to your elders was what a wise person would do?" Amelia counters. "Was it Solomon? I bet it *was* Solomon."

"Well, I mean..." Hope says, only to trail off.

"Exactly." Amelia says, shaking her head. "I'm not saying you should tell Solomon to piss off. I'm just saying I don't like seeing you become more and more bitter while lying to

yourself as you've been doing. Maybe you should think about what YOU want to do, and less about doing what the old man commands."

Hope falls silent. He looks away from Amelia and falls deep into thought.

"...Yeah. Maybe you're right. I don't know."

The two lovers fall into an uncomfortable silence.

"I don't know what I want." Hope says slowly. "I've never really put much thought into it. I guess if I had to choose, I'd pick... whisking you away to live on a vacation world?"

Amelia snorts. "Like hell you will. I'm bored enough here as it is."

"You are?" Hope asks, looking at her with concern. "I didn't realize."

"That's because you're so busy doing whatever Solomon commands that you haven't paid much attention to me." Amelia states factually. "Hope, I've been *cooking* for you. I hate cooking. I'm not even good at it. I'm just sitting around, playing housewife while we aren't even married yet. I, Amelia, used to run around Earth and beat the shit out of Heroes like Arthur. I, Annette used to... well, not do much at all besides whatever Bahamut commanded."

Amelia throws her hands up helplessly.

"I don't have powers anymore, or magic. I just hang around a bunch of *Heroes* all day long. It's frustrating, Hope! I want to BE someone, to DO things that are useful. That's another reason I hate seeing you bow to Solomon's every whim. You might not realize it, but you and I are similar in that regard. We're not doing what *we* want to do."

"So what is it you want to do?" Hope asks.

"Something... cool." Amelia says vaguely. "Maybe I should take up martial arts training. If I can't use magic, I can at least become good at physical combat."

"I could give you powers." Hope points out. "Through my Wordsmithing."

"It's not the same thing." Amelia groans. "Never mind. At this point, I'm just whining about my feelings."

"Babe..." Hope says lovingly, reaching over to pull her close. "I'm listening. I'll think about a way we can improve this situation. You're right, we have been just sitting around, letting Solomon dictate our lives. Or at least I have. But at the very least, I can think about a different future. *Our* future."

Amelia smiles. "As long as you're happy, I'll be happy too."

Hope leans in to kiss Amelia, and she reciprocates.

The two of them finally drop the conversation, moving on to their favorite shared activity.

All the while, in the back of Hope's mind, he thinks about what Amelia said.

What does *he* desire?

Part 483: Chamber of Waiting

After Hope and Amelia make up, the two of them enjoy a raucous night of love-making, complete with giggling, moaning, and all sorts of lewd noises.

The next morning, Hope wakes up feeling a lot better than he has for the past two weeks. Thanks to Amelia's suggestions, a firmer thought begins to take root in his mind.

I am my own man. I can't just let other people order me around. It's demeaning, and it cheapens my role of being a Wordsmith. If I want to be equal to Jason, I need to be more proactive!

While Hope is certainly a more brutal incarnation of the original Jason Hiro, capable of fighting and killing without batting an eye, he's also found himself slowly sliding into a subservient role to Neil Adams over the past six years without originally intending to do so.

Hope wakes up and sits on the couch in his living room, thinking to himself while Amelia snores quietly in the bedroom, behind its closed doors. His mind revolves quickly and efficiently, even without Solomon's Crown, as he begins thinking of how easily he's fallen into this role.

Has Neil been manipulating me? Hope wonders. *I was only eighteen when Jason cloned himself. I was emotionally distraught. I was lost and feeling a deep sense of grief. Then I tried cloning Amelia in the aftermath and it nearly threw me into psychosis. Neil was there for me in those hard times... but was he doing it just to be a good man? Or was he doing it because he wanted more power?*

Hope quietly slurps some orange juice out of a wineglass, its sweet tanginess rousing his mind further. As the delicious liquid slaps his senses, his eyes narrow somewhat.

He did manipulate me. Hope acknowledges. *But looking back, I can hardly blame him. Neil hates the demons. If I were Jason, I would not sympathize with him, and would think of Neil as a rogue element. A useful ally, but also a threat to my leadership. But Jason is Jason, and I am me. Neil showed me the evils these demons commit, the evils Jason won't acknowledge.*

Hope takes another sip, purely on reflex.

Jason is ignorant. I would have been ignorant too, if Neil hadn't opened my eyes to the truth. In that respect, I can't exactly blame Jason. The problem is, Jason is the Wordsmith humanity acknowledges as their leader, while I go unappreciated. I should be in the running, but I've been sitting pretty for too long, allowing Neil to take the reins. I won't resent Neil for his manipulation, but I can't allow him to keep leading me around by the nose, either.

A few moments pass as Hope begins to remember all the good times he's had with Neil.

He smiles.

Even if his initial motivations for manipulating me were selfish, the truth is, Neil was there for me when Jason and Phoebe weren't. I love Neil. He's like the father I never had. He hardened my resolve and made me wake up to the cruel reality of this universe. Jason is content with trying to make amends with the demons, but I'm not. Even if there are a few 'good' demons like Belial, the overwhelming majority have human blood on their hands. They're murderers, rapists, slavers, and so much more.

The Wordsmith rubs his chin thoughtfully.

But... I have to admit. Neil's focus on the demons poses a problem. The Plague is a more distant threat to humanity, but it's also a more existential threat than the demons ever will be. The demons will never be able to kill humanity, because they rely on our souls to evolve. Since Jason has also put the fear of the Heroes in them, the demons won't be making any immediate moves to attack us, either. Plus-one to him, for once. I should start focusing on the real problem humanity faces...

Hope's expression changes to annoyance.

Neil won't go for that. He's a smart guy, but his single-minded hatred of demons is a serious weak-point. I'm sure he cares at least a little about the Plague, but he's much more interested in slaughtering the demons. Damn. What am I going to do to convince him to look at the bigger picture?

In the back of Hope's mind, another voice whispers.

Why do I need to convince him? Aren't I the Wordsmith? He should ultimately defer to me for the final decision on all subjects.

A few seconds pass. Hope blinks.

Yeah... that's a good point...

He glances around the room, frowning at that seemingly random thought that came to him out of nowhere. Until now, he's never truly considered the idea of going against Neil on even the smallest matters.

Hmm. It's true that Neil should be deferring to me, but we can't afford to split our focus in this critical period. The last thing I want is to throw humanity into chaos. We need to proceed carefully but precisely. In which case, I should definitely try to convince him to see the bigger picture. Unlike Jason, Neil actually has enough intelligence to think about his biases.

Hope swirls the last dregs of his orange juice around, eventually finishing it off in a single gulp. Uttering a Word of Power, he deletes the cup from existence, then stands up and stretches, popping his back. He cracks his neck, then yawns quietly, shaking the last bit of sleep out of his eyes.

Thirty minutes later, Hope exits his residence quietly, allowing his fiance to remain fast asleep. As he leaves, he frowns to himself.

Amelia said she's been getting restless and bored here. I should try and help her find a purpose. I don't want her feeling claustrophobic. She deserves better..

He makes his way toward the Artifact Storage, where over nine hundred artifacts still remain, each one a hurdle that will take him a full day to inspect, analyze, and converse with the artifact's owner. The Chamber of Waiting, as Solomon has deemed it, is a luxurious golden room glittering with fancy chandeliers and other gaudy decorations, all placed by Solomon himself. As Hope steps into the room, he thinks to himself about how awful and gaudy Solomon's tastes in interior decoration are.

This place hurts my eyes, AND my sensibilities.

Hope glances around at the different shelves, altars, and pedestals where various relics rest, each one in a line of sorts, waiting for Hope's inspection. He scratches his head, unsure of which one to pick next. A dozen prominently placed altars of seemingly high importance reside in the center, while forty-seven less prominent pedestals surround them, all of which have artifacts resting on their tops. By comparison, the artifacts plopped on the shelves lining the walls seem far less important. Hope wonders, not for the first time, if Solomon had a deeper purpose behind arranging these specific artifacts in the center of the room...

At that moment, Solomon materializes next to the Wordsmith, projected directly from his Crown, despite not being atop Hope's head.

"You're awake later than I expected." Solomon remarks. "Long night?"

Hope coughs. "Active night."

"Young love is truly beautiful." Solomon says with only a faint smile. "I've been thinking about yesterday. I can tell you've been feeling a bit... frustrated by the breed of Heroes you've conversed with. I suppose sixty 'lesser' Heroes in a row is making you start to think there aren't many truly worthy predecessors in our lineage."

Hope eyes Solomon quietly. "Well. I had a talk with Amelia about that. I'll admit... I've been a bit moody lately. I've realized the issue is more than I'm acting a bit too passively."

"Oh? In what way?" Solomon asks casually.

Hope pauses, deliberating on whether or not he should tell Solomon. However, since he will inevitably put on Solomon's Crown at some point, Solomon will be able to see his memories, so hiding the truth won't do him any favors.

Better to simply come out and say it.

"I feel that you and Neil have been... guiding my actions... a little too strongly." Hope says. "The two of you order me around, and that was fine before as I was content with simply following orders to allow you two to focus on the bigger picture."

Solomon turns to face Hope. He smiles.

"I thought that might be the case. You're a young man who has demonstrated remarkable patience up to now. Frankly, I'd be disappointed if you didn't start wanting to start making plans of your own. A Hero who lacks self-guidance is no Hero at all."

Feeling slightly surprised, Hope blinks twice. "I, uh, I didn't think you'd take it so well."

"What sort of man do you think me to be?" Solomon snorts. "If you want to follow, I will guide you. If you want to lead, then I will follow instead. I am flexible in my thinking."

Solomon chuckles.

"Let me guess. Amelia put these ideas into your head, didn't she? She made you think I've been deliberately manipulating you to pursue my agenda while reducing your

autonomy."

Some of the color drains from Hope's face. "Well, I mean-"

"It's fine." Solomon says, waving his hand casually. "I take no offense. Listen, Hope. I have one goal. I been transparent with my intentions. I want to kill the demons. Neil also wants to kill the demons. You yourself seem to want this goal as well, unlike Jason, because you have seen the harm the demons have wrought. If you want to pursue other interests in a primary or secondary matter, that is perfectly acceptable. I've waited 100,000 years for the extinction of demonkind. Another two or three hundred years won't make a difference at this point, and you Wordsmiths are the first truly immortal Heroes, so I'll eventually get my revenge."

"What happens if I decide someday that I don't want to kill the demons?" Hope asks.

Solomon shrugs.

"I have faith you won't make such a decision. But if you do, then it is no matter. There will be others who share my vision. I am nothing if not patient."

"So you'll jump ships again." Hope remarks. "Like you did with Jason."

"You can always melt my Crown to slag if that distresses you." Solomon retorts. "It's not like I can stop you."

Hope clears his throat. "That won't happen. I'm not a friggin' psychopath."

"And neither am I." Solomon says, patting Hope's back.

The two men fall silent for a few moments. Solomon decides to change the subject.

"How about we do something fun today?"

"Fun?" Hope asks, perking up a little. "Like what?"

The tension between both Heroes eases considerably as Solomon guides Hope toward one of the twelve altars in the center of the room. These altars seem far more prominent and important than the pedestals surrounding them, and even more so compared to the artifacts simply plopped on shelves along the walls.

"Heroes can be divided into tiers." Solomon explains. "Such divisions are rather arbitrary. One of my old rivals, Madam Mildred, believed that there were five tiers our predecessors and descendants could be divided into. As for me, I prefer to sort them into

three tiers. The arrangement doesn't really matter, but I just want to point out the distinction."

"Why sort them into tiers?" Hope asks, before realizing the implication. "Until now, you've only told me to view the artifacts along the walls. Are you saying..."

"I choose to mentally arrange Heroes by the strength of their Heroic Manifestations." Solomon explains. "The Heroes you've seen until now are considered Unexceptional. The Heroes on these forty-seven pedestals are Exceptional. And the Heroes on these altars, as well as myself, are Legends. Arthur also belongs in this final category."

He pauses to look at Hope.

"Though, compared to your predecessors, I'd say you and Jason belong one additional tier higher. Perhaps you and Arthur should occupy the same position."

"How would Mildred sort the Heroes?" Hope asks curiously.

"Her five tiers are not based upon the physical or spiritual strengths and abilities of a Hero." Solomon explains. "Rather, she looks at their contributions to human history, their feats, their powers and strengths... her approach is more holistic. The issue I take with her organization method is that an Unexceptional Hero in my list can shoot to the top of hers simply by virtue of being a strong political influencer, war general, or business magnate."

"What's the problem with that?" Hope questions.

"It demeans the title of Hero." Solomon says with a frown. "Heroes are Heroes because of our metaphysical power. If we allow the Unexceptional to put themselves at the same ranks as Arthur, then wouldn't that imply non-Heroes lacking any metaphysical powers should also be granted such recognition?"

Solomon shakes his head. He grimaces.

"Heroes should be categorized according to their abilities. I do not deny that many of these Unexceptional Heroes have performed incredible feats simply via political maneuvering, deception, or other ordinary feats, nor that plenty of them had a strong influence on history. But it's simply absurd to grant them a loftier title when ordinary humans could do the same things! Their powers had little to no effect on their feats."

Hope finds himself somewhat unconvinced, but he decides to just shrug and go along with Solomon's ranting.

"Alright, alright. So the Heroes on these twelve altars, their artifacts hold the rank of Legend, at least in your mind?"

"That's right." Solomon says. "I originally intended to first introduce you to all of the Unexceptional Heroes, then the Exceptional, and finally the Legends. But now, I've changed my mind. I'll introduce you to them more at random so you can get a better feeling for who they are, and so you can see the wild contrast in powers and personalities."

Solomon gestures to a cuneiform tablet resting flat atop an altar of clearly Babylonian origin. The altar itself appears rectangular, as if made from several identically-sized building blocks, all seamlessly blended together and painted blue and gold. At a glance, Hope can't tell what material the altar is made of, whether brick, dirt, or stone.

Solomon stops before the artifact. His smile slips as he gazes at it. He heaves a mighty sigh.

"The fellow inside this altar, without a doubt, possesses one of the most powerful abilities among his contemporaries. In a one-on-one battle, I am not certain whether even Arthur could defeat him."

Hope's heart jumps. "What?! But Arthur is supposed to be the most powerful Hero in terms of sheer strength. How strong could this other guy be?"

"This 'other guy' is named Hammurabi." Solomon says tersely. "He reigned in ancient Babylon nearly a thousand years before my birth. In fewer than fifty years, he spread his domain across a vast swath of the Earth. He personally slew three Demon Emperors in his lifetime, and more than a dozen Dukes."

Solomon pauses.

"As for the rest... I'll allow him to tell you himself. But you'll be talking to him alone. Hammurabi and I do not see... eye to eye."

"You two have history?" Hope asks.

"...You could say that." Solomon answers.

After a moment, Solomon's figure vanishes, leaving Hope alone in the Chamber of Waiting. The Wordsmith only looks at Hammurabi's cuneiform tablet for a moment before shrugging and picking it up. He doesn't immediately awaken the Hero within, but instead squints to read the surprisingly tiny, finely-etched writing. It appears to be an

ancient foreign language based on hieroglyphs, but beyond that, Hope can't tell much about it.

He could translate the words, but doesn't bother to do so. Instead, he walks out of the room and heads toward a nearby garden where he can sit alone with the person he brings out.

A few minutes later, Hope plunks down in a comfortable outdoor chair inside a grassy garden pagoda, with fake sunlight streaming down from above, then he places Hammurabi's artifact onto a table before him.

"Awaken. Materialize." Hope says.

Instantly, a lofty and majestic man appears on the other side of the table. He pops into existence sitting on the chair opposite Hope, his eyes tightly closed, and his hands pressed together. His fingers sit splayed in some sort of meditative arrangement, and his body remains perfectly still.

Hammurabi, the ancient Babylonian king, does not even seem to breathe. His fantastical blue and purple robes seemingly drip off his body in an endless array of spillover patterns. Hope finds himself comparing Hammurabi's clothing to Solomon, and he finds that both kings have their own manner of decadence. Hammurabi sports a two-foot beard that hangs far down his chin, along with thick, bushy facial hair. Atop his head is a six-inch-tall hat that would almost appear dopey if someone wore it with modern garb, yet which makes Hammurabi appear strangely regal in an inexplicable way.

The Babylonian king remains unmoving. Hope waits for him to react, but Hammurabi continues to sit in silent meditation, as if having failed to recognize the change in his surroundings.

Ten seconds pass.

Twenty.

Thirty...

A full minute passes, with Hope growing increasingly more weirded out by Hammurabi's unmoving state.

I-is he... dead? Hope wonders. *He doesn't seem dead...*

Hope quietly clears his throat. "Ahem."

It takes five long seconds before Hammurabi finally rouses himself.

The muscular man slowly blinks his eyes open. He glances at the world around himself, slowly taking in his surroundings. He seemingly ignores Hope for several long seconds, as if having awoken from a dream.

After fifteen seconds of drinking in the garden's beauty with his eyes, Hammurabi finally looks at Hope.

"Hero? Mmm. Strong aura. Weak soul."

"I am this generation's current Hero." Hope says slowly. "My name is Hope Hiro. I am a Wordsmith."

Hammurabi doesn't reply for several seconds. Hope begins to realize this is a man who is slow to action, and slow to speak.

"Many clues gleaned." Hammurabi says, as he slowly sits up in his chair. "You state that you are this generation's Wordsmith. But you also state that you are only 'a' Wordsmith. This means there are others."

Hope's heart skips a beat. *Damn, he's perceptive.*

"Yes." Hope replies. "How are you able to speak English so easily? I thought I'd have to translate your speech like I did for the other Heroes."

Hammurabi's eyes become momentarily unfocused. He squints at Hope, then cocks his head slightly.

"My Law is the Word, and my Word is the Law. I know of many things, past, present, and future. The tongues of the future-speakers are among them."

Hope nods, but he doesn't fully grasp Hammurabi's meaning.

"You're saying...?"

"I sense Solomon's aura." Hammurabi says, ignoring Hope's clumsy probing attempts. He turns his head to the side, looking off toward the distant edge of the garden. "And Arthur. And many, many others."

"This is the Hall of Heroes." Hope explains. "We're not on Earth anymore. In fact... Earth was destroyed 100,000 years ago."

Hammurabi blinks his eyes three times. He turns his attention back to Hope.

"Earth, destroyed. Mmm. I predicted this might happen. Not the demons; the Volgrim. Humanity still has a Hero. They must yet draw breath. What is our current situation? A resistance effort, perhaps? Slave colonies? Freedom fighters?"

"It's... complicated." Hope says. "But if you're willing to listen, I can explain the situation to you bit by bit. We have nothing if not time to talk."

Hammurabi reaches up to stroke his long beard.

"Go on."

Part 484: Hammurabi's Code

Three hours pass in the Hall of Heroes.

Hope weaves a long tale of his life, explaining to Hammurabi the ins and outs of the modern world, the situation they find themselves in, and how events have transpired until now.

He has done this many times now for every other Hero summoned, but none of them have maintained the same constant interest in his words as Hammurabi. Compared to the whimsical little Wendy who only swallowed the broader narrative while her eyes glossed over during the small details, Hammurabi listens intently, rarely speaking except to seek clarification on a few matters here and there.

Hope tells Hammurabi about his origins as Jason Hiro, and how Jason used Solomon's Crown to clone himself. He talks about the battle against the Black Witch, and clarifies that the Amelia who Hope is with now is not exactly the same person by any means. He talks about the human-demon war and their relationship over the last hundred-thousand years. He talks briefly about the Plague, though he does not know as much about the Volgrim's war against this foreign enemy as Jason, so he can't offer much insight into the details.

One topic that Hammurabi especially seems interested in is Hope's escapades into the Volgrim Empire, where he learned much about the Psion's powers and how they functioned. Hammurabi presses Hope for details more here than anywhere, only stopping when he feels satisfied with his knowledge of the situation.

Unlike Solomon, who can rapidly download memories through his Crown, Hammurabi lacks this ability, but Hope finds that the ancient Babylonian King does not come up short compared to Solomon. In some ways, he even appears to subtly exceed Solomon, almost as if the two of them specialize in different branches of intelligence.

By the time Hope finishes detailing the situation and catching Hammurabi up to date, he feels more than a little exhausted. He rejuvenates his spirit with a Word of Power and heals his worn-out throat. Then, he sits and waits while Hammurabi falls completely silent.

Five long minutes pass.

Hammurabi stares ahead blankly, his eyes seemingly peering past the cosmic veil of uncertainty. His hands lay folded in his lap. He looks off to the side, seemingly forgetting about Hope's existence.

Eventually, after a long period of contemplation, Hammurabi clears his throat.

"Hm. The situation. Much worse than I expected. And much better."

"Huh?" Hope asks. "How can it be better and worse?"

"This war. This... Plague. I sense a terrible plot behind it." Hammurabi says, his eyes flickering with insight. "Not as simple as it first seems. Invaders from another galaxy? A terrible experiment broken free from a Volgrim facility? These answers..."

He pauses.

"...do not satisfy me."

Hope cocks his head. "Why do you say that?"

"Difficult to explain..." Hammurabi states, with a long pause between his words. "Too many questionable elements. How Solomon was not able to divine this, I am not certain. More likely... he already has, but has kept you in the dark."

"You're saying... Solomon is deceiving me?" Hope questions, his eyes narrowing to slits. "I won't deny the idea has crossed my mind recently."

"Deceiving. Strong word." Hammurabi says noncommittally. "He may have his reasons."

"Maybe I should call him here." Hope suggests.

"Not yet. I wish to speak to you a while longer." Hammurabi replies. "My pupil can stay waiting."

Hope's body jerks in surprise. "What? You're his teacher?"

"Indeed. My artifact, and others existed throughout much of human history. We were passed down through the generations, educating our descendants, those deemed most worthy, with the intent of ensuring humanity's future progress."

Hammurabi's expression becomes inscrutable, perhaps slightly grim.

"But some descendants. Greedy bastards. Rat-faced little gremlins. They did not heed the wisdom of the predecessors. They squandered our knowledge. They lived wanton lives of pleasure, caring little about the state of the Earth. Every other generation, some child

of some scion came to rule a corner of the Earth, only to waste away and give the demons an opportunity to return."

Hammurabi snorts, metaphorically expelling fire from his nostrils.

"Impudent! My Code was the first to chart a path for humanity. Too many children, grandchildren, and their grandchildren ruined what came after. Had they followed my guidance, we could have ascended to space two thousand years sooner. Archangel Michael might not have had to make his sacrifice. The Volgrim would not have defeated us so easily."

"Right," Hope says slowly, "but what does this have to do with Solomon? How are the two of you related?"

Hammurabi doesn't appear bothered by Hope's topic-reminder. "Solomon was a promising seed I taught personally. Few Heroes possessed his level of insight, before or after him. Unfortunately, as the years went on, he began to develop his own independent thoughts, and ultimately fell into wanton debauchery and womanizing. He cavorted with whores and palace sluts, taking for himself over a hundred wives."

The Babylonian *harrumphs* in disgust. "Listen well, boy. A Hero must rise above their fleshly desires. I responsibly took three wives, but only to further my lineage. I kept my heart distant and gave them no authority over my lands. Solomon was a young fool who did the opposite. He gave his women great leeway! You must remember that women are to be treasured, and respected, but never uplifted beyond what their minds can comprehend. They are like a forbidden fruit. Given time, they will corrupt you into a sinner and a lecher!"

Hope frowns. "That... isn't the way I look at women. No offense, sir. I've seen plenty of smart women who are capable of matching or even surpassing men. Phoebe Hiro, for instance-"

"Exceptions are not the rule." Hammurabi interrupts. "And even the smartest woman will never be equal to a man. Look at how far Jason fell after uplifting his woman to the same level as himself! He allowed the demons to overrun him, and humanity nearly lost all its strength. Had such an outcome occurred, you might have remained in Gressil's clutches. Jason would have become mentally broken, to the point he could no longer be called a Hero, proper."

Hammurabi shakes his head.

"When a woman is granted too much leeway, society itself begins to crumble! Equality is but a myth my descendants have deluded themselves into believing for the sake of appearing virtuous."

Hope's frown deepens.

This Hero... he's certainly... old-fashioned. I'd better take his words with a grain of salt. It's like I'm talking to a sexist grandfather.

Hope clears his throat. "Right... well, it seems you certainly have strong opinions on that matter-"

"My Word is Law." Hammurabi interrupts. "The unfolding of history has only proven that my insights are *timeless*."

"*Right...*" Hope groans, forcing a strained smile. "So. With all that said. Can you tell me more about yourself? I've told you all about the future. What was your life like, back in ancient Babylon?"

Hammurabi pauses. "You do not know of my illustrious name?"

"Uh. Well, not really." Hope says, suddenly feeling embarrassed. "I think I've heard your name... once. Maybe twice. But I'm not much of a history buff."

"Shameful!" Hammurabi exclaims, spirit-spittle flying from his lips. "The youth are too ignorant! What nonsense has that Solomon-brat been filling your mind with? Only now, after six years, has he decided to educate you about the predecessors? And in such a hands-off manner? Perhaps a hundred thousand years of isolation have dulled his mind, after all."

"Sorry..." Hope says sheepishly. "I'd really like to learn more about you, though. Learning from you personally would give me the best firsthand experience, don't you think?"

Hammurabi falls silent for ten long seconds. He heaves a great sigh.

"Very well. Speaking is a laborious act, but after a hundred thousand years, I suppose it would not hurt to recall the past."

He once again pauses, this time to reform his thoughts into a cohesive narrative.

"In the Ancient Era, the angels and demons fought for control of the Earth. During the War in Heaven, a lone Titan took it upon himself to create a new type of warrior, a

specially chosen human capable of bearing his willpower. That Titan was named Hercules, and he passed his Titan power on to a human named Jephthath, the First Hero."

Hope nods, remaining silent while Hammurabi speaks.

"Jephthath was deceived by the Archangel Raphael, who sought to limit humanity's future power by preventing Jephthath from passing his power on directly to the next generation. Instead, that power became known as the Heroic Aura, and it would leave Jephthath's body after his death, traveling to another so-called 'worthy' successor to empower them as the next Hero."

"Many Heroes arose after Jephthath's death." Hammurabi explains. "Powerful warriors. Magicians. More than a hundred in total, their names of which have become lost to history. They failed to properly rule humanity, with only a few managing to carve out small, meager empires here and there. For five thousand years, Heroes rose and fell without consequence, holding back the demons without truly uplifting our human species."

Hammurabi confidently slaps his chest. "All of that changed when this great King was born!"

Hope's eyebrows jump. "What made you special?"

"My intellect." Hammurabi declares without hesitation. "Those predecessors of mine, with rare exception, were but paupers, chimpanzees compared to this King. They wasted their gifts. They never thought of the broader picture. But I did. I realized the war was unending. A stalemate between humanity and demonkind would only benefit the angels in the long-term."

Hammurabi narrows his eyes. "You know the angels are not our friends, correct?"

"Solomon has said as much." Hope acknowledges. "Raphael... has his own agenda."

"How convenient the 'Archangel of Wisdom' continues to endure, even after all his failings." Hammurabi says with deep suspicion. "Too many coincidences follow that *winged serpent*. But never mind him."

The Babylonian continues with his story.

"I crafted humanity's first Laws. Laws capable of uplifting us and making us focus on the broader picture. I built the first great Empire of Man! The Babylonian Empire, one

which stretched across all of Mesopotamia! Had I lived but a decade longer, I might have conquered the entire continent."

"How did you die?" Hope asks.

"Sickness." Hammurabi states. "The exact disease, I was uncertain. I have long suspected one of the demons poisoned me, but I was never able to prove such for certain."

Hope rubs his chin. "If your intellect was what made you such an incredible King, why could you not continue to rule even after death, through your artifact?"

"Ah! I would have liked to." Hammurabi acknowledges. "But things are rarely so simple. My son, Samsu-iluna, was unable to communicate with me. The Heroic Aura traveled to a lesser vassal Empire, which rose up to do battle against mine. Not that it mattered. My son was a wretch, a brat who took the wealth and power I had painstakingly accumulated, wasting it on acts of sin! He failed to put his house in order, and ultimately fell."

Hammurabi's spirit dims considerably, making his figure appear dull and blurry. Hope momentarily worries that he might suddenly die, until he senses Hammurabi has only become somewhat depressed.

"Humanity could have risen quickly under my guidance, even after my death." The old Babylonian reminisces bitterly. "But that Raphael... the bastard truly tricked Jephthah well. The Heroic Aura's movements, though seemingly random, always seemed to spread bits of chaos and disorder when it jumped to the next generation. By the time my artifact landed in the hands of a later Hero, three hundred years had passed. This particular Hero was also unreceptive to my wisdom. He merely used my intellect to trick and deceive his enemies, growing an empire of rapists and barbarians! After he fell, the same thing repeated with the next two Heroes, disillusioning me further."

"Many generations passed." Hammurabi says quietly. "Some Heroes did arise, those who listened to their elder's words. These men, though, they would have become great figures without my presence."

Hammurabi tosses his hands helplessly.

"Humanity did eventually uplift itself. Great men came to power, and they made strides to advance our species. But that took time. And now, I see that the fruits of time

grew much more slowly than we needed. Humanity now is but a pale shadow of its former self."

"You keep mentioning 'great men,' but what about the women?" Hope asks. "Weren't there any female Heroes in the centuries after your death?"

Hammurabi waves his hand. "Once in a thousand moons, a female inheritor would appear. I did not deign to waste my intellect on them. Women must listen obediently; they are not suited to lead nations and states."

Hope nods quietly. *I thought he'd say as much. This guy doesn't seem as wise as he initially made himself out to be.*

But still, Hope remains polite. Even if Hammurabi might be a bit of an old codger with an outdated mindset, Hope doesn't doubt he is a fountain of wisdom. The Wordsmith simply decides to take anything Hammurabi says under heavy consideration.

"Tell me about your Law, your Code." Hope says. "What is it?"

"The Code is a list of 282 principles I created over the many years of my life." Hammurabi says proudly. "Every generation that passed only confirmed my wisdom. After death, I added a further one hundred tenets to it, but scholars tended to overlook these later additions, much to my chagrin."

He continues. "I could speak all of my laws to you, but it would be quite time-consuming, and I sense you are a young and impatient man. Let me first explain the primary tenets."

"The first tenet! What goes around must come around! Fairness is godliness! Those who commit crimes must suffer the same fate that they inflicted upon others."

"The second tenet! No man is above the law! Even this King himself, if he should break these laws, should suffer the same consequences as his lessers! Naturally, I lived uprightly and did not besmirch my name, so as to set an example for my lessers."

"The third tenet! Men must respect their elders! Those who are old have lived long, and they are the wisest, most befitting of leading the young. Children who are unfilial must be disciplined as harshly as required!"

"The fourth tenet! Women are to be treasured and loved! But a woman must never hold authority over a man. They are slow of mind, and inferior of conscience. If a woman does commit a crime, she should be given some leeway, due to her feminine limitations."

"The fifth tenet..."

"The sixth tenet...!"

Hammurabi rattles off a dozen tenets before abruptly falling silent and looking at Hope to see if the young Wordsmith has managed to properly followed along.

To his credit, Hope nods slowly, carefully absorbing what Hammurabi has said.

"Your viewpoints are... certainly interesting."

"They are correct." Hammurabi retorts.

"Perhaps. But this idea of an 'eye for an eye' only leaves everyone blind."

Hammurabi snorts. "You did not think of such a statement yourself. Indeed, it was a so-called 'philosopher' who came up with that ridiculous notion. I saw for myself the evils any man would cause if left to run amok. Boys grow up to become men, and eventually leaders. They must be disciplined properly, lest they fall into debauchery and sin."

"So you disagree that your philosophy would leave the world blind?" Hope presses.

"Vehemently." Hammurabi says, unamused. "Men who feared the consequences of their actions would always seek to undermine my Word. But my Word is Law, and my Law is Truth. Every king must discourage his young men from becoming bandits and pleasure-seekers so that they can become leaders worth admiring."

Hope clears his throat. "Can you give me specific examples of the laws you wrote? Something to show what you would specifically propose?"

Hammurabi doesn't hesitate. "The 229th Word. *If a builder has built a house for a man, and has not made his work sound, and the house he built has fallen, and caused the death of its owner, that builder shall be put to death.* This law shows that a man must not act flippantly, but must be responsible in his work so that others do not come to harm because of his negligence."

"What if the house were to collapse due to an accident?" Hope asks. "Wouldn't you be punishing the man for something he had no control over?"

"Hmph. The 2nd Word!" Hammurabi immediately retorts. "*If a man brings an accusation against another of laying a spell upon him, but has not proved it, the accused shall go to the sacred river, he shall plunge into the sacred river, and if the sacred river shall conquer him, he that accused him shall take possession of his house. If the sacred*

river shall show his innocence and he is saved, his accuser shall be put to death. Some men are simply unlucky. These sorts should never be placed in positions of authority. If the Creator himself should judge them so, then they will perish due to their bad luck. This King has no care with regards to the life of One Hated By His Creator."

Hope's face scrunches together in disgust. "That's awful. You would allow a man to die due to no fault of his own? And you would lack any feeling of regret over his demise, even if he were totally innocent?"

"Precisely." Hammurabi replies, unashamed. "You are still young. You have yet to see the folly of men hated by the stars running rampant beneath your command. It is a Cosmic Truth that some men are hated by the Gods, and they will bring ruin upon themselves and those around them. Better to allow them to die than for their influence to bring ruin upon your lands."

Hope's increasingly more pained expression starts causing his stomach to twist into knots.

This Hero is a freaking lunatic. No wonder Solomon didn't want to be around him!

Hammurabi notices the disbelief on Hope's face. He frowns at the young man.

"You are young. But not as young as I, when I took over Babylon. For a man of your age to be so naive, it is a frustratingly common occurrence."

"I won't deny that you probably had progressive and forward-thinking ideas during the ancient times," Hope says, "but your philosophy feels quaint now. I'm sorry, but women *are* equal to men. Demonkind nearly beat the crap out of Jason, and Ose was the one leading them."

Hammurabi's frown lightens. "Your feelings on my Word do not matter. Only the facts do. The fact that Ose lost is proof enough of how women must never become leaders. And what of Marie Becker? She was humanity's leader during the Energy Wars, and as expected, humanity fell."

"You're only looking at examples of that confirm your viewpoint." Hope argues. "Raphael led the angels, and he lost too."

"When a man loses a battle, he inevitably loses to another man." Hammurabi states solemnly. "Raphael lost to Satan. This is because Satan was a superior leader compared to Raphael. But Marie Becker lost because she was never capable of leading humanity. This

is the fault of her gender, and it cannot be held against her. If someone had properly treasured her, she would never have developed the idiotic idea to take control of the whole planet and lead our people down a path of damnation."

Hammurabi speaks with complete self-confidence, as if his words were delivered to him via the Creator's own lips. "You need only look at the Volgrim and how they currently rule the Milky Way, while a man leads them to greatness."

"And what about the Plague?" Hope counters. "For all you know, there's some sort of... female mutant creature leading it! Some sort of female parasite."

"If so, then I have little doubt Unarin, or one of the Wordsmiths, will someday defeat the Plague." Hammurabi says, smiling like a kindly grandfather. "But more likely, there is a malevolent entity guiding the Plague's path. I would not go so far as to assign it a gender."

Hope struggles desperately against the urge to roll his eyes.

"Alright. Well... I guess-"

"You should call Solomon here." Hammurabi interrupts. "We've spoken long enough for me to get a measure of the man the so-called 'Knowledge-Seeker' has trained. I am interested in seeing how my old pupil has endured, after all these years."

Hope swallows the question he was going to ask.

At this point, getting Solomon in to have his butt reamed sounds like a lot of fun. I see why he didn't follow Hammurabi's 'guidance,' though. This old guy is quite the opinionated fellow.

"Solomon." Hope says. "Hammurabi wants to speak to you."

He waits a few seconds, expecting Solomon to materialize. He knows from experience Solomon can definitely hear him if he focuses his intent.

But the Knowledge-Seeker doesn't come.

Hammurabi's smile fades away. A malevolent glare takes its place.

"That brat. I should have known. He's trying to *hide* from me."

Abruptly, Hammurabi stands up, startling Hope.

"SOLOMON. SHOW YOURSELF!"

A thunderous BOOM blasts out of Hammurabi's mouth, a concussive wave of force that slams into Hope and launches him backward, breaking his chair and causing the Wordsmith to tumble backward, banging his head on the pagoda floor before inelegantly sprawling onto the grass. He winces painfully, before pulling himself up to snarl at Hammurabi.

"Hey! What's the big idea?!"

Hammurabi barely even looks at Hope. "You are a Wordsmith, yes? You speak Words of Power. HMPH! You are not the only one with a voice that commands authority! You should have been prepared for anything, but you lowered your guard. Solomon has taught you poorly."

Hardly has Hammurabi spoken, before Solomon materializes before him.

The Knowledge-Seeker stares disdainfully at his teacher. His narrowed eyes give Hope the immediate impression that he can't stand to be in Hammurabi's presence.

"I take offense to that accusation." Solomon growls. "You're as loud as ever, Hammurabi. I bet you even fooled Hope into thinking you were a quiet, soft-spoken man."

"HMPH." Hammurabi growls back at Solomon. "Impudent disciple. How dare you speak this King's name. Where is your respect for your elders? Get on your knees and kowtow, this instant!"

Solomon rolls his eyes. "Hammurabi, a lot has changed during your millennia of meditation. I no longer-"

"I SAID **KOWTOW!**" Hammurabi barks, blasting a second wave of concussive energy at Solomon. This time, Hope manages to brace himself for an instant before the blast rips him off the grass and sends him flying again. He slams his head against a rock and nearly faints, only awakening and healing himself after several seconds of disorientation.

"Ugh... that... old... bastard..." Hope coughs, with blood pooling from one of his broken teeth. "H-**Heal!**"

Hope recovers from his injuries, then sits up, looking for Solomon and Hammurabi.

What he sees next shocks him to his core.

Solomon kneels at Hammurabi's feet, his forehead pressed against the ground, and his arms extended in front of him, like a lowly servant who has sought contrition for the

greatest offense to their master.

"That's better." Hammurabi says, grinning at his student's predicament. "This is what you get for daring to protest against the Voice of the King!"

Hope's jaw drops.

Hammurabi... is also a Wordsmith?!

Part 485: Voice of the King

Hope stares in wide-eyed shock at Solomon. The Knowledge-Seeker bows as deeply as his body will allow him, kowtowing like a servant at Hammurabi's feet. As for the man himself, Hammurabi smiles smugly, clearly pleased that even in death he can still demand his student's filial piety.

Solomon gurgles angrily in his throat, desperately trying to rise above this humiliating position with all of his strength. But he cannot!

No matter how he struggles, he has to remain face-down, obediently bowing at his teacher's feet.

Hammurabi directs the smile of a kindly old grandfather Hope's way, as if Solomon's sudden change of heart came naturally and as a consequence of his own actions. In Hope's eyes, Hammurabi detaches himself from the act, seeming to pretend that he had nothing to do with Solomon's 'decision.'

"You're a Wordsmith?!" Hope blurts out as he jumps to his feet.

"Hah. Not quite." Hammurabi says, his voice once again softening. "I possess the Voice of the King. I can compel others to obey me with great ease."

He glances disdainfully at the man bowed at his feet. "Good. You've demonstrated a sufficient level of obedience. You may rise, Solomon-boy."

Hardly has Hammurabi spoken before Solomon releases a gasp and jumps up, staring angrily at his teacher. His face flushes red with a mixture of rage and embarrassment, not least of which is due to being made into a fool in front of Hope, his own protege. Still, Solomon bites his tongue, for fear of pissing Hammurabi off and making his student bow a second time.

The humiliation might actually cause Solomon's proud soul to wilt and die!

Hammurabi continues to smile amiably, as if having had little to do with the rage visible on Solomon's face. He turns his attention back to Hope and paces toward the young man with the authority of a wise sage.

"The Voice of the King is one of my signature abilities. None may disobey it." Hammurabi declares. "It matters not how powerful they are, how strong their soul is, or

how elite the person's combat skills might be."

"So it's a power of compulsion..." Hope says slowly. "You can't create objects or defy the laws of physics."

"I cannot." Hammurabi acknowledges. "But the Voice of the King is an ability many have underestimated at their own peril. Even if my opponent were the lauded Second Founder of the Volgrim Empire herself, she would not be able to resist me."

Hope's eyes widen. His heart skips a beat as he realizes the implications.

"Holy-! If that's the case, then aren't you invincible? You could order someone to kill themselves! You could bring enemy states, nations, and empires to ruin!"

Hammurabi gloats quietly, clearly pleased by the shock in Hope's eyes. But before he can continue to praise himself more, Solomon speaks.

"Teacher! Your ego is too overblown! Stop acting as if the Voice of the King has no limit. You and I both know that isn't the case."

Hammurabi's expression slightly deflates. He glances at Solomon in annoyance.

"I was getting to the limitations."

"Not quickly enough." Solomon bites back.

The ancient Babylonian rolls his eyes dramatically, sighing out loud as if deeply aggrieved by Solomon's words.

"Yes, yes. The Voice of the King is not infallible. It acts upon the order of the world, and the order present in one's mind, body, and soul. I cannot compel someone to act against their sense of right and wrong, or to defy their conscience. I was able to make Solomon-boy kowtow because despite his insistence to the contrary, he knows he owes me filial piety for the years I spent carefully instructing him in the ways of seeking wisdom. If Solomon did not truly feel indebted to me in his heart, my Voice would not have affected him."

Hope's expression lightens. "That's a pretty significant limitation."

"Not as much as you might think." Hammurabi retorts. "In my lifetime, and following my death, I have met countless villains, heroes, and people of little importance. Rarely will the Voice of the King fail to compel someone, because all creatures follow some sort of a moral compass, whether they acknowledge this Truth or not."

Hammurabi fans out his fingers and examines his nails, putting on airs before the Wordsmith.

"Even the most callous and cruel murderer knows, deep down, that their actions are evil. Even if they seemingly erase their guilt, they will never truly destroy their conscience. No matter how small the sliver of self-recrimination, my Voice can bring it out and grant me authority over their actions."

"You've used this power to kill demons, I take it?" Hope asks.

"Oh, yes. Many times." Hammurabi says, looking into Hope's eyes. "If I wanted to command you, doing so would present me no difficulties. It is deeply apparent that you are a walking mess of contradictions. The bloody and violent actions you've taken in the past did not come easily to you, and even now you continue to lie to yourself about how easily killing comes to you compared to your other half."

"Telling an enemy to bow to the sunrise for thirty minutes would easily allow my teacher to kill them while they were helpless." Solomon explains. "It is for this reason that I previously stated that even the mighty Arthur might not be able to defeat Hammurabi."

Hammurabi waves his hand. "But worry not. I will never use my power for selfish pursuits or my own gains. My power is one of order, and I loathe greed with all my heart. I strictly follow my Code, which means I would never kill or strip the authority from someone who did not deserve such a punishment. I am as bound to my Code as my enemies are to theirs."

Gears metaphorically turn inside Hope's mind. He feels a little frightened of the idea that Hammurabi could take control of him and force him to Wordsmith without his consent, but the realization that Hammurabi has imposed constraints upon himself lessens that worry somewhat.

"Do you have other powers?" Hope asks.

"Many." Hammurabi says, smiling slightly. "But the most significant one is... *Eye for an Eye*."

"The power of Reflection." Solomon says, much quieter than before.

"Those who would attempt to bring harm upon this King in an unjust manner must instead suffer that harm upon themselves." Hammurabi explains. "This ability granted me a measure of invincibility unparalleled in my era. Even today, were I to walk the

mortal coil in my flesh and blood body... I am not certain any living enemy could best me."

"Solomon told me you killed three Demon Emperors." Hope says. "Was that...?"

"A simple matter." Hammurabi says lightly. "My lifelong goal was to put Satan the Devil to death. Unfortunately, the Emperor of Subjugation was too powerful. Satan could not be killed by my hands. I successfully destroyed his body on many occasions, but he always revived and fled, leaving me empty-handed. I ultimately decided to kill his strongest followers, but they grew wise to my strength and hid themselves away in the mountains and beneath the oceans."

He pauses.

"That is why I continue to believe it was a demon who poisoned me to death. Any deliberate attack inflicted on me would instead be returned to the deliverer. But a subtle poisoning? It must have been the event which brought about my eventual ruin."

Hope nods, not particularly caring about the events of ancient history. Whatever led to Hammurabi's death, it no longer has any bearing on the modern galactic situation, so Hope can't be bothered to dwell on it.

Hope walks over to his chair, now destroyed by the thunderous force behind Hammurabi's roar. He utters a Word of Power to restore it, then creates a third chair for Solomon.

"Let's continue where we left off." Hope says.

Hammurabi and Solomon both sit down. By now, Solomon's earlier humiliation has faded somewhat, allowing him to return to a more dignified expression. It's clear he doesn't enjoy being in Hammurabi's presence, but neither does he have a choice.

For three long hours, Hope continues talking to Hammurabi. He learns about other abilities the Babylonian king possesses, as well as the various predictions he made during his life.

"You're telling me you predicted Earth's fall?" Hope asks.

"It was a possibility." Hammurabi acknowledges. "I believed there was a fifteen percent chance of such happening."

"But why would you think that? Weren't you too busy building an empire to worry about things like Earth's ultimate fate?"

"You have erred." Hammurabi responds, lightly waving his hand. "You think I am referring to the time I spent while living. But I am actually referring to the period after my death. I had 5,000 years to contemplate a great many things. I ultimately came to the conclusion that there was other life in our universe."

"And that life," Hammurabi adds after a slight pause, "could potentially be far more advanced than ourselves."

Hope scratches his chin. "Was it because of the angels? Because they existed in the vacuum of space for many eons, so there would plausibly be other forms of life 'out there'?"

"Exactly." Hammurabi nods. "If the angels had evolved or were created by an external force, who is to say other such forces did not exist. Later thinkers, such as Madam Mildred, would come to refer to this phenomenon as the 'Fermi Paradox.' As for myself, I had no deep thinking or systemic imagination of the universe's mechanisms. I merely hypothesized the existence of extraterrestrials to be more likely than not."

"As did I." Solomon mutters. "Though we could not conclusively prove the existence of an alien species until the arrival of the Volgrim during the Energy Wars. They had successfully observed Earth for thousands of years, and we never knew it. In truth, the signs were there all along."

"We lost the war." Hammurabi says quietly. "But we may yet make a comeback. Had a Hero not returned, this would be unlikely. But! Now that the Wordsmiths exist, if humanity can move past its internal divisions, it can unite to battle for a common cause. I predict great things for our species..."

Hope, Hammurabi, and Solomon continue to talk for a while longer.

Eventually, the Wordsmith concludes the discussion and opts to leave. He gives Hammurabi a respectful, if somewhat distant bow of the head.

"I enjoyed our discussion. The Hall of Heroes will be your new home, moving forward. You can exit your artifact at will to converse with the other Heroes as you desire."

Hammurabi waves his hand. "No need for that. I've little interest in speaking to Lowborn Heroes, only Trueborn ones. Solomon-boy and I will stay here a while and catch up. You may run along, young one."

Hope frowns slightly at being dismissed so casually, as if he were a child getting in the way of 'the adults,' but he chalks his feelings up to Hammurabi's distaste of commoners and peons. The old man is clearly way up his own ass when it comes to his ego.

Hope bows his head again, then he strides out of the garden.

He begins wandering the Hall of Heroes, passing by several others he's brought out of their artifacts in the past two months. Some of them he waves at, but the others are still traumatized and wary of speaking to him.

He even passes by Wendy, who gives him a cute little wave of the hand.

When Hope passes by a room Solomon has deemed the Armory, he pauses.

The Wordsmith glances inside, where he sees Amelia talking quietly to two female Heroes, though she does keep her distance. Amelia holds in her hands a notepad and paper. She nods at the two, saying something Hope can't quite make out, while occasionally jotting down notes.

Hope stands in the doorway for a minute until Amelia notices him. She says goodbye to the other two women, then walks over to her fiance.

"Hope. There you are." Amelia says. "I was hoping I'd run into you soon."

"Are you up to no good again?" Hope asks, smiling at her.

Amelia doesn't reciprocate the smile. Her gaze remains focused.

"Hope, did you copy the knowledge of the Volgrim we captured? Specifically, the knowledge about these Heroes?"

Hope's smile fades as he notices the serious look on his fiance's face. "Of course. I downloaded the information into Solomon's Crown, and I absorbed it all myself."

"Have you been looking into the details of these Heroes?" Amelia asks.

"Huh? No. Not really. I mean, I've skimmed their information but... there's literally a thousand names. It's a lot of work. I'll meet them all eventually. Why? Is there a problem?"

Amelia frowns. She purses her lips, hesitating to say something.

"I could be wrong. It's just a hunch. Look, can you Wordsmith a book of information about what we know of these Heroes? All of them. Sort the information in the book by their names."

"Uhh..." Hope grunts, scratching his head. "Yeah, sure. Any time. But is something the matter? You seem spooked."

"It's just a hunch." Amelia repeats. "I'm probably wrong, but it can't hurt to investigate..."

"Investigate what?" Hope asks.

"Can you just make the book already?!" Amelia exclaims, frowning at him. "I'll tell you when I've proven or disproven my suspicions. Until then, there's no point in slinging accusations around."

Hope nods at Amelia slowly, but in his head, invisible question marks pop up.

Accusations? Amelia sure is acting strange. Has she noticed something I overlooked?

Hope holds out his palm. "**Book. Write. Etch. Knowledge. Organize. Inspect.**"

A giant, unwieldy, and surprisingly thick tome jam-packed full of information lands atop Hope's upright palm. Weighing in at nearly five pounds, it turns out to be the size of multiple Bibles stuffed together, making him raise an eyebrow.

"I didn't even know I had that much knowledge saved..." Hope murmurs, before Amelia snatches the book out of his grasp. He falls silent and watches as she plops it down on a bench nearby and starts to flip to seemingly random sections.

"Adrian Peters... died at age 43, life accomplishments... metaphysical abilities..."

Amelia flips around the book while glancing at her notes. Hope catches glimpses of her scribbles, but it isn't organized at all and the best he can make out is a series of names, dates, and numerical ratings of various Heroic powers.

"Were you able to-" Hope starts to say, before Amelia interrupts him.

"This will do." She says abruptly, pausing to look up at Hope. "I'm going to be a bit busy for a while, Hope. Keep up your talks with the Heroes."

"I just finished talking to a Hero named Hammurabi." Hope says. "Want to hear about him?"

Amelia doesn't immediately answer. She returns her attention to the giant book, then flips through its ten thousand pages in clumps of one to two hundred at a time until she reaches the 'H' section for names. She points at Hammurabi's name, then shakes her head.

"No need. I'll be referencing this book for now. Hope, can you enhance my reading speed? I really need to focus for a few days."

"I- uh, sure." Hope says, feeling more and more weirded out by Amelia's strange behavior. "You're certain you can't just tell me what this is about?"

"You'll know soon enough!" Amelia snaps, visibly annoyed by Hope's persistence. "Try showing a little patience for once."

"Okay!" Hope exclaims, taking a step back. "Sorry."

Amelia's anger quickly fades. She looks away in contrition.

"No, I'm sorry. That was rude of me. Just be patient, alright? It won't take long."

Hope nods. He steps toward her, and the two of them share a loving hug. As they embrace, Hope catches a look at the other two female Heroes, both of whom whisper to themselves about this apparent lover's spat.

Damned nosey ghosts, Hope thinks.

Hope utters a half-dozen Words of Power to enhance Amelia's reading speed, then he makes his exit.

He travels to the dining hall and plops down, while spirits in the shape of maids and butlers materialize to attend to his needs. They begin setting up the table for him to eat, then leave to cook food.

At the same time, Hope ponders the events of the day.

I don't know what Amelia has noticed, but it must be something important. I'd better try my own hand at solving the 'mystery.'

He summons a copy of the same book he made for Amelia, then leans back in his chair to read...

Part 486: The Mountain Hermit

Over the next few days, Hope becomes more proactive when it comes to the Heroes Solomon introduces him to. The Second Wordsmith doesn't simply start talking to them, but instead uses the book he made to read up on their powers, their history, and their feats while alive.

Naturally, after introducing Hope to Hammurabi, Solomon doesn't follow up with even more mighty Kings. He once again returns Hope's attention to the 'lesser' Heroes, the people who didn't necessarily accomplish much during their lives.

This time, Hope takes some time before talking to the Heroes to study up on their lives, that way he can have a better knowledge of who they were and what they accomplished.

Sadly, Hope comes to find that a surprising number of them barely even have a page in his Heroic Encyclopedia. Some amount to only a first name and the date they lived, if even that.

On the fourth day after meeting Hammurabi, Hope introduces himself to one of these lesser Heroes. The book tells him the man's name is Jeremiah, and that he lived at some point in the 6th century BCE... but beyond that, not a single extra detail is provided.

Hope scratches his head. "Guess I can't expect much from this guy."

He reaches out to Jeremiah's artifact, which turns out to be an expertly crafted walking staff made of oak and ivory. Compared to many other artifacts, this one appears quite large, at almost five feet tall (1.5 Meters), weighing in at nearly ten pounds (4.5 kilos). Not only is it large and cumbersome, but also quite hefty. Hope immediately gets the impression that someone talented in fighting with a Bo Staff might be able to weaponize the staff in a pinch.

He walks over to the garden pagoda, sits down, then summons the Hero contained within.

"Awaken. Materialize."

In the chair opposite Hope, a hunched-over old man appears, with a long, scraggly beard, and equally long bedraggled hair. His eyes remain closed, as if he is fast asleep. He

sits on the chair while lolled forward, seemingly about to fall off at any second, yet he remains moored in place.

Hope momentarily gets a sense of déjà vu from how the old man reminds him of Hammurabi. However, the difference comes in that this old man does not appear to be a legendary king, but rather an old mountain hermit swaddled in rags. His face is dirty, and his hands are calloused, showing he has lived a long life of hard labor. Given how the notes in his book state that this Hero lived during the 6th century BCE, he certainly lived during a primitive time compared to the luxury of Hope's modern era.

Several seconds pass. Just as Hope is about to clear his throat to wake the old man up, Jeremiah slowly blinks his eyes open.

"...Mmm? Where... am... I?"

His voice comes off choked, sounding as if he has a frog in his throat. Jeremiah's raspy tenor even gives Hope the impression he never drank a glass of water in all his life.

"Hello." Hope says respectfully. "My name is Hope. I am a Hero from the future. My title is Wordsmith."

The old man blinks several times, uncomprehending. He looks around the pleasant garden then reaches up to gently scratch his scalp.

"Hero... future... I do not understand."

"Your name is Jeremiah, yes?" Hope asks.

"Jere...miah... yes. That is what people called me."

Jeremiah licks his lips, perhaps to try and moisten them. It doesn't seem to have much effect.

Hope frowns slightly, but quickly schools his expression. "Can you tell me about yourself?"

Jeremiah stares at Hope blankly. "Not understand."

"You know. Tell me about yourself. Who you are. What your life was like..." Hope explains, trailing off.

"Who am I?" Jeremiah repeats. "I am Jeremiah. Simple man. Live in cabin. Hunt. Eat. Sleep."

"Uhh. What did you do during your life?" Hope asks. "Surely living in a cabin wasn't everything."

Jeremiah once again glances around the beautiful garden, visibly confused.

"Not understand. Why ask questions? I am nobody."

"Well, you're a Hero..." Hope says slowly. "This is your staff, right? You lived a long time. Surely you must have done something interesting during your life."

"During my life..." Jeremiah repeats. "During my life... I am not... alive... now?"

Hope blinks. He finally realizes the missing piece to the puzzle.

"Ah. No, Jeremiah. I'm sorry. You've... died. Maybe I should explain the situation a little better."

Hope quickly but cautiously launches into a long and detailed explanation of Heroes, how they function, and the mechanics behind the artifacts. Jeremiah sits silently, saying nothing, while Hope explains how much time has passed, and the future Jeremiah now finds himself in.

After thirty minutes, Hope winds down his explanation, eventually falling silent as he watches the old man try to digest this news.

"I am... Hero." Jeremiah says slowly. "And I have died. I am in... Sheol?"

"No." Hope says. "You have been... reborn. In a sense. Your body is a spiritual form now. But you are back in reality, albeit not on Earth."

"Sheol." Jeremiah repeats.

"No, not Sheol." Hope explains patiently. "This is simply a garden in the Hall of Heroes."

"Hall of Heroes." Jeremiah says. "I am a Hero?"

"I think so, yes..." Hope says, no longer quite as convinced. "Your name is Jeremiah and you lived in the 6th century BCE... do you have any relation to the Biblical figure who was a prophet for the Lord? Did you see divine visions during your lifetime?"

Jeremiah, as always, continues to look completely lost. "Divine visions. No. Ordinary man. Simple life. Stay in forest. Hide from soldiers. Evade capture. Hunt game. Eat. Sleep."

Hope's eyes flicker. "You hid from soldiers?"

"Yes."

"From what nation?"

Jeremiah frowns. He looks away, as if trying to remember.

"King... someone. Wanted men for his army. Bad man. Did not trust him. I stayed far away. Always saw enemy coming."

"How did you see the enemy coming?" Hope asks.

Jeremiah looks at Hope as if he just asked the dumbest question of all time.

"With eyes."

"Right," Hope says, forcing a pained smile. "But you lived in a forest. How did you see past the trees?"

"...With eyes." Jeremiah says again, as if it's the most obvious answer in the world. "Look through trees. Look through rocks and mountains. Look through city walls and see evil king. Simple matter. King's soldiers were slow of mind, poor vision. Could not see what I saw."

Hope's heart suddenly skips a beat.

Hold on a second. This isn't normal! He's describing a heroic power!

For the next several minutes, Hope carefully but deliberately coaxes more and more information out of Jeremiah. He learns how Jeremiah's Heroic Power works through inference and vague explanations, ultimately coming to realize he has some sort of incredible eyesight that can peer through any barrier.

Already, Jeremiah has easily looked through the entirety of the Hall of Heroes, and even the blackness of the Void, where the Hall of Heroes hangs within a dimension between reality and the imaginary realm. Unable to see the stars, Jeremiah came to the conclusion he must have arrived in the afterlife, where no stars reside.

"You could see their thoughts?" Hope asks, after Jeremiah gives him another piece of information.

"Yes. Easy. Thoughts simple. Not hard to follow. Could see plans and goals. Sometimes could see other things."

"Can you read my thoughts?" Hope asks.

"Your mind is empty." Jeremiah states. "This makes you... god?"

"I'm not a god. Just a fellow Hero." Hope says, feeling a little relieved. Since Jeremiah can't read his mind, that means the protections Hope crafted to shield his mind from the Psions must also work on other mind-readers. "Did you have any other 'gifts' you were born with?"

Hope uses this term due to Jeremiah's usage earlier in the convo. Apparently, the forest hermit realized at some point that his abilities weren't ordinary, but due to his lack of an education, he came to think they were merely improved senses that any ordinary person could possess.

Indeed, the more Hope learns about this quiet and simple man, the more he grows to like him. Unlike the loudmouthed Hammurabi, Jeremiah speaks quietly and politely, only growing frustrated if Hope fails to pick up on 'obvious' cues the people of Jeremiah's era would consider common knowledge.

Hope eventually stands up and holds out his hand. "Since you've already seen the other Heroes, why not come with me? I'll introduce you to a few of them."

Jeremiah doesn't move.

"...Do not enjoy talking. Other people loud. Annoying."

"Err, am I annoying?" Hope asks.

Jeremiah looks Hope right in the eyes.

"Yes. Very."

"Oof, well, alright then." Hope replies, feeling slightly embarrassed. "How about I make you a nice, quiet little house in a forest? You can hang out by yourself if you want, or you can come out to visit with people if you get bored."

Jeremiah blinks. "Acceptable."

Hope chuckles in embarrassment, feeling more than a little self-conscious. He leads Jeremiah to a quiet corner of the Hall of Heroes, where he summons a brand new mini-world amidst the void, conjuring a forest into reality with his words, as well as a shack isolated in the center of all the trees.

Jeremiah watches with mild fascination, looking from the newly created world to Hope, and back to the world...

"You... are not god?"

"I'm not." Hope answers.

"I see." Jeremiah replies, not exactly convinced.

After Hope finishes building what he has decided to call the Hermit's Realm, he leads Jeremiah to his new home, and pauses outside the door of a cute, cozy log cabin.

"Is this big enough? I can make it larger if you want."

Jeremiah nods. "It is sufficient. Bigger than the one I built."

"Well. Enjoy your time here." Hope says. "If you need me for anything, I've installed this fancy red button on your wall. Just push it, and I'll pop over to say hello. Or Solomon will."

"Mmm. Many thanks. Good hospitality." Jeremiah says gruffly.

After Hope places Jeremiah's artifact inside his hut, he heads back to the Hall of Heroes.

Hope thinks to himself about the strange old man. Unlike the majority of 'lesser' Heroes Hope has encountered, Jeremiah actually seems to possess a decently strong ability, and he lived a long life. Most lesser Heroes were like Wendy, dying young to disease or hunger.

"There's such a disparity between them." Hope mutters. "And it's weird that Jeremiah lived so long, had such a decent power, but ultimately still amounted to nothing. I guess he doesn't have an ambitious bone in his body. He's content to simply live in his hut, far from the world's woes."

Hope continues to ruminate on Jeremiah. He cracks open his Heroic Encyclopedia and updates it with a more detailed description of Jeremiah's life story, as well as his abilities and other notable feats.

"The Volgrim didn't know anything about Jeremiah except that he was a Hero, and that was only because of his artifact's aura. They couldn't interface with his artifact. He didn't have any noteworthy historical records talking about him. All they could glean was his name and the era he lived in."

Hope pauses.

"It doesn't seem likely the Volgrim would have been able to pick this information up after Earth's destruction. They must have collected Jeremiah's artifact before the end of

the Energy Wars. Maybe while they surveyed humanity for thousands of years, they covertly stole our artifacts as time went on."

Hope pieces together an important clue, possibly revealing an important Truth he had previously overlooked. Until now, Hope assumed the Volgrim collected the artifacts during the Energy Wars, or scraped them from Earth's surface following its destruction.

But logically speaking, with as little information that existed involving Jeremiah, and with no way to interact with the Heroes inside the artifacts, the Volgrim would have needed to scour historical records, ones which would have been destroyed when the Earth's surface was annihilated.

"They stole from us for a long time." Hope concludes. "Fucking bastards. I'll make those alien pieces of shit pay someday."

As Hope wanders the halls, he casually observes the slightly more numerous spiritual figures walking around. These Heroes, reborn through the Hall of Heroes' magic, sometimes nod at Hope and even chat with him, but plenty of others turn away, shunning contact.

It isn't that these anti-social Heroes hate Hope, but rather, that 100,000 years living in empty voids have turned many of them into hermits incapable of properly speaking to other people.

If anything, Jeremiah isn't an extreme case, but quite ordinary and well-adjusted compared to his peers.

Hope rounds a corner, where he spots the adorable Wendy talking to another girl her 'age,' though the two of them are actually both 100,000 years old. Having been permanently frozen in their child-bodies upon death, it still makes them look like two children yapping about mundane childlike matters to Hope's eyes.

After Hope gazes at the girls for a moment, he turns away and continues walking.

Eventually, he ends up inside a vast library, one that extends up into the sky, and down into the basement depths. In the ground level of this vast Heroic Library, he finds Solomon hard at work.

Solomon's primary goal, ever since the construction of the Hall of Heroes, has been to construct the greatest library in all of existence.

Solomon's fingers fly at inhuman speeds as he manipulates a powerful computer interface. Every second, he types out thousands of words, his fingers and eyes moving with such terrifying speed that Hope might assume the old man was actually an artificial intelligence, had he never learned how amazingly Solomon's power synchronize with his Crown.

Every half-minute, Solomon finishes writing a book, then it *pops* into existence on a table next to him. One of the spiritual assistants Hope created, typically in the form of a male or female librarian, will come over, pick up the newly written book, then walk to a nearby shelf and slot it in.

Hope doesn't say anything to Solomon at first. Instead, he walks over to one of the newer shelves and grabs a book from one of its ledges, purely at random.

Rygel's Intro to Pyrokinetic Engineering and Warfare.

Hope puts it back and grabs another one.

The Man Who Fell From the Sky.

He looks at another book title.

Practical Fusion: Volume III.

These books range wildly from historical records to highly advanced engineering textbooks, and plenty of fictional stories as well. The entire gamut of literacy finds itself on Solomon's shelves. Hope even finds a copy of *War and Peace*, funnily enough.

"Not a lot of page-turners." Solomon idly comments, his hands continuing to dance across the computer keyboard and interface at blinding speeds. If engaging in conversation with Hope slows him down in the slightest, Hope can't tell at all.

"I met a hermit-fellow named Jeremiah today." Hope says. "He seemed like an outlier. He was an ordinary person from ancient times who also somehow managed to live to old age while possessing a fairly potent ability, yet he never put it to use in the pursuit of some greater goal."

"Jeremiah." Solomon repeats. "A rare case of a Hero I've barely interacted with. Tell me more about him."

Hope nods. He launches into a brief but information-dense explanation of his discussions with the old hermit, while Solomon continues to write book after book.

In the time it takes Hope to finish talking, ten minutes have passed, and Solomon has written another twenty books.

"It's not often a Hero of his caliber would slip under my radar." Solomon says. "He's quite talented, yet has remained entirely out of the history books. If the Volgrim hadn't picked up his artifact, he might have perished along with the Earth."

Hope frowns. "Speaking of which. I just realized today that the Volgrim must have been collecting the Heroic Artifacts well before the Energy Wars. What do you think about that hypothesis?"

"It's the obvious conclusion one must draw." Solomon says, turning his head to look at Hope. "Did... did you only just now think of it? I assumed that fact was obvious."

Hope blushes, suddenly feeling incredibly embarrassed. "Uh. Yeah. Just now. I'm gonna go... think I've made myself into enough of a fool for today."

Solomon shrugs. "Take the rest of the day off. You've earned a rest."

Hope nods, then turns away. He heads out of the Library and walks down the hall, eventually arriving back in the garden pagoda. He plops down in his favorite chair and sighs, enjoying this moment of being alone. No other Heroes ever enter the garden, due to its status as the newcomer onboarding zone, and Hope's personal sanctuary.

Hope lazes back in his chair and yawns. He converts it to a rocking chair with a Word of Power, then begins to gently tilt forward and backward, rocking himself to sleep...

But then.

An indeterminate amount of time later, Hope awakens, feeling as if he's being watched. He opens his eyes to see Amelia sitting across from him, her eyes fixed on his sleeping figure.

"Oh. Hey, babe." Hope says, yawning. "How long have you been there?"

"Not long." Amelia says, her expression somewhat constrained. "I wasn't sure if I should wake you. But it's good you woke up on your own."

Hope blinks twice. Something about Amelia's actions have been weird, the past few days.

"Are you alright?" Hope asks.

"Privacy barrier." Amelia says. "Now."

Hope quickly sits up in his chair, feeling more alert than before. His fatigue vanishes as he realizes something important must be eating at his fiancé.

"Sure. **Barrier. Silence. Opaque. Privacy...**"

Hope casts a dozen Words of Power, even going so far as to check for foreign influences inside the barrier, such as a Psion sneaking in under his nose. He only detects himself and Amelia.

"What's going on?" Hope asks, as his eyes drift down to the book clutched in Amelia's arms, the Heroic Encyclopedia he made for her.

Amelia pauses for a moment. She chews her lip and looks around shiftily.

Abruptly, she turns to Hope and blurts out six shocking words.

"Hope. Solomon is lying to you!"

Part 487: Consortium of Sages

Hope's blood turns to ice. He gazes into his fiance's eyes, seeing the conviction in her stance.

"Solomon is lying? About what?!"

Amelia gnashes her teeth.

"It's so obvious in retrospect. I knew something was fishy the moment I came to this so-called Hall of Heroes. Surely, you must have noticed too."

"I- I don't think I did?" Hope says, visibly confused. "Come on, honey, don't- don't play word games with me. Tell it to me straight."

Amelia snorts. She crosses her arms and looks away from Hope.

"Hope. How many artifacts did you recover from Serris?"

"A little under a thousand." Hope immediately answers.

"Are the artifacts here all the ones that have ever existed?" Amelia asks, still looking away.

"No..." Hope says slowly, as he tries to follow along with her thought process.

"So it's not that a thousand Heroes have lived." Amelia continues, carefully leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for her fiance to mentally follow. "If anything, a thousand is the bare minimum."

"Solomon did imply there are likely hundreds more." Hope acknowledges, his frown deepening.

Where is she going with this? He wonders.

"You're still not seeing the problem." Amelia says, returning her gaze to meet Hope's eyes. "Let me ask a simple question. How does the Heroic Aura function?"

Hope rubs his forehead. "It waits until a Hero dies, then it randomly jumps into another human's body, repairing the flaws in their spiritual foundation and uplifting them to the rank of Hero. Assuming what Vulpanix told me was true, anyway."

"So every time a Hero dies, the Heroic Aura jumps to the next inheritor." Amelia observes. "Now let me ask this: How many years did humans live on Earth until the end

of the Energy Wars?"

"I'm not exactly sure of the number." Hope says, as his mind begins to piece together her clues. "Five thousand... maybe ten thousand years?"

"Let's say ten thousand." Amelia continues. "And let's say all the Heroic Artifacts in the Hall of Heroes are all the Heroes who have ever existed, and that there are no others."

She pauses.

"Just for the sake of argument."

Hope's heart skips a beat. "That... that would mean..."

"Even if we account for awful nutrition and plenty of Heroes being weak little peons who died young, it seems strange that the average Hero's lifespan would only be ten years." Amelia states. *"Doesn't it?"*

"It does..." Hope mutters, his stomach beginning to sink. "Wendy is the youngest Hero I've met so far. And she died at age twelve. I would expect to have met dozens of children if... if the names and dates lined up. But until now, I've met more over-twenties than I have under-twenties."

This time, it's Hope who pauses.

"The numbers... they don't add up. Not at all!"

"No. They don't." Amelia says, her voice cold. "Don't you find that suspicious? I certainly did. So I had you compile that book for me, and I've made a shocking discovery."

Amelia reached behind her back to pull a rolled up paper out of the sash wrapped around her belly. She slowly but deliberately unfurls it before Hope, revealing... a line with numbers every 100 increments, starting from -8,000 and going to +2,000.

On this paper, above the main line, hundreds of smaller lines have been drawn in, etched seemingly at random, with countless lines staggered above one another, overlapping at points, and allowing Hope to quickly draw a conclusion.

"This is... a timeline graph." Hope mutters. "Don't tell me! This is a timeline of humanity's history, and these lines represent the lifetimes of each Hero in the Hall of Heroes."

"If what Solomon told you about the Heroic Aura was true, none of these lines would intersect." Amelia explains. "When a Hero dies, the Heroic Aura is supposed to jump to

the next inheritor. But as you can see, there's no pattern at all. Heroes are born randomly. They often live at the same time as one another. And their numbers become more numerous the closer you get to the arrival of the Industrial Era. At one point, I confirmed more than twelve Heroes walked and breathed in the same year."

Hope's mind reels. He takes a step back, feeling a wave of disorientation strike his brain. Suddenly, he begins to question every interaction he had with Solomon, every assumption he'd made about all the Heroes he's met so far. How glibly he ate up whatever bullshit Solomon told him.

"This... this makes no sense. Why would- why would Solomon lie about this to me? What does he stand to gain?!"

"Maybe you're not as unique or special as you thought." Amelia says. "Maybe there can actually be many Heroes alive at one time. But... I'm not so sure about that."

"You're not?" Hope asks. "Why? Did you figure something else out?!"

Amelia chews her lip for a moment, then she points at the timeline.

"Look here. Notice the bottom-most Hero lifetimes? For some reason, there *are* Heroes that completely fail to intersect with one another. And when I paid attention to their identities, I realized they had one common correlation."

Amelia looks at Hope meaningfully.

"You remember the three 'tiers' of Heroes Solomon told you about? There are the 'altars,' where 'great kings' reside. Then there are the pedestals, where lesser, but still prominent leaders reside. Heroes who possessed incredible power, but weren't *quite* as lauded as the most centrally-positioned Heroes."

Hope recalls what Solomon told him about Hammurabi, Arthur, and the others of their breed.

Then, he remembers a seemingly casual line Hammurabi uttered at one point...

Something about... something about not wanting to 'interact with Lowborn Heroes, only Trueborn ones'...

"Trueborn Heroes..." Hope murmurs.

Amelia, satisfied by the recognition in his eyes, nods sagely.

"You see it now. The strongest Heroes also seem to be the ones whose lives never intersect. At the same time, these 'lesser' Heroes pop up all over the place. It seems Solomon has failed to tell us about a hidden component of the Heroic Aura."

"The Trueborn Heroes are the actual bloodline of the Heroic Aura." Hope says quietly. "They always possess genuine, powerful artifacts made by Camael. At the same time, lesser Heroes, the so-called 'Lowborn,' they often end up trapped inside random objects like spoons and gardening tools."

Hope closes his eyes for a moment to think deeply.

"It all makes sense." He says slowly, while massaging his forehead. "The Heroic Aura doesn't 'empower' a human into becoming a Hero. It only heals their spiritual flaws, which consequently uplifts them into that role. This means multiple people might be able to be empowered... somehow."

Amelia nods. "I believe the Heroic Aura seeks out people who have high spiritual affinities. Even with the damage the angels implanted in human souls, some people must have more innate potential in others. But how does that allow for there to be multiple Heroes living at one time?"

She pauses.

"...I also believe there are multiple Heroic Auras. Two. Three. Maybe more? They might be weaker versions of the one you possess. The others might have died off a long time ago, while the primary Aura still exists inside of you. The fact you and Jason both are Heroes goes to show that there can be multiple Auras!"

"I'm not so sure about that." Hope mutters. "Multiple Heroic Auras seems... implausible."

"Perhaps, but how else would you explain these timeline inconsistencies?" Amelia asks. "We need to confront Solomon! There's no way that old snake doesn't know the truth!"

Hope chews his lower lip. "There was that matter involving... Daisy."

"Jason's daughter?" Amelia asks, before her eyes glint with recognition. "Right... she demonstrated clear and obvious signs of Heroic powers prior to her death."

"Yeah. Her death." Hope mutters, feeling somewhat glum. Perhaps, in another life, Daisy might have been his daughter with Phoebe. Any resentment he feels toward Jason

doesn't transfer to Jason's child, but rather, a sense of guilt for being unable to protect her.

Hope fiddles with his fingers absentmindedly.

"Daisy had powers. If the way the Heroic Aura worked was the way Solomon and the Archangels claimed, that wouldn't make any sense. There must be something we've overlooked."

"That's my assumption." Amelia nods. "I just don't see why he hid this. Solomon must have a nefarious reason for deceiving you."

Hope calms his emotions. His heart-rate slows, and his expression becomes less turbulent.

The Second Wordsmith looks into the distance, spacing out as he dwells on the conversations he's had with Solomon for the past few months.

"Possibly. But I'm not so certain. He might have a good reason."

"Or he'll twist your ear with an excuse!" Amelia exclaims. "Face it, Hope. That old bastard has been lying to you! All he cares about is killing the demons! He'll do anything to control you, manipulate you, gaslight you! He just wants to turn you into a tool for exacting his revenge!"

"I've known his motives for a long time." Hope says calmly. "And he is, without a doubt, more intelligent than me. I can see him coming up with a plausible-sounding explanation that would mollify and calm me down."

Hope continues, his face becoming more devoid of emotion than ever.

"It's always something, isn't it? Neil manipulates me. Solomon does too. Everyone wants to control the Wordsmiths. If I should be angry at anyone, it should be myself. I keep falling for other people's schemes. I'm as bad as Jason, in that regard."

Amelia blinks twice. "What are you saying? Aren't you pissed at Solomon?"

"Oh, I am." Hope says. "Very much so. But... I'm accepting it now. Getting angry won't give me an edge. He'll use my anger to trick me somehow. I need to confront him about this, but on my terms."

Hope's eyes flicker.

"You were right. About my lack of initiative. It's definitely time I started focusing on my own ambitions. Killing the demons is important, but it can come later. I have bigger fish to fry..."

He faintly smiles.

"If Solomon is indeed lying, he'll learn the consequences of his actions."

Amelia nods slowly. "That's good. You should be focusing on yourself more. What you want to do. What are we going to do about this discovery, though?"

Hope reaches over and touches Amelia's cheek.

"Nothing. Not today, anyway. I'm not in the right state of mind. Let's... wait until tomorrow. I need some time to think. You and I will confront Solomon together, so he can't use sleight of hand to distract me."

"I'm not easy to trick." Amelia acknowledges. "Especially not by wiley old men. They always think they know better. They don't."

"Jason might have Phoebe, but I have you." Hope says, revealing a slight smile. "And I'm definitely the winner in that arrangement."

Amelia's temper lessens. "When it comes to me versus Phoebe... let's just not."

Hope nods. "That's fair."

* * *

Hope and Amelia make a plan. Then, the Second Wordsmith drops the privacy field, returning the two of them back to reality.

They make their way back to their residence, but neither Hope nor Amelia say much to one another. For his part, Hope thinks long and hard about how he's going to confront Solomon, as well as what his plans are for the future. As for Amelia, she continues dwelling on the many possible reasons Solomon would have to lie to her fiancée.

Both of them make it home. They eat some dinner, chat about nothing in particular, and go to bed. This time, they don't enjoy any raucous lovemaking.

Their minds are much too occupied for that.

The next morning, Hope wakes up first as always, but he decides to wait for Amelia to stir as well. She tends to be a heavy sleeper, a thought that makes him smile.

She's so cute when she sleeps, Hope thinks.

After the two rouse themselves and prep for the day, they nod at each other, then make their way to the Heroic Library. Solomon, a spiritual life form who has lost all need to sleep, continues to systematically build and expand the size and scope of this library, publishing two books every minute.

When Hope and Amelia enter, Solomon doesn't stop his work. As they walk up behind him, Solomon merely nods.

"Up and at 'em, finally? You certainly slept later than usual, Hope."

"Keeping tabs on me?" Hope asks.

"You've been acting odd for the past fourteen hours." Solomon says, as his hands continue to dizzily fly across the computer interface at blinding speeds. "Amelia, you seemed so agitated when you had Hope erect that privacy filter, but you were quite calm when you left..."

"I don't like to be spied on." Amelia says, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes. "You have a lot to answer for, Solomon."

Hope frowns slightly, due to Amelia's sudden accusatory tone. He quickly schools his expression.

"Solomon." Hope says slowly. "Amelia had some... reservations. She expressed an interesting finding she had, and I'd like to hear what you have to say about the matter."

Finally, Solomon's hands stop moving. He pauses his work on the computer and turns to look at the two people standing behind him. As a spiritual life form connected to the Hall of Heroes' metaphysical aura that permeates its every nook and cranny, he can observe all its internal events without needing to directly use his eyes, but he realizes Amelia's 'findings' must have been important. He decides to look them in the eyes and proceed from there.

"Alright." Solomon says. "I'm all ears. You two don't seem to be in the... best of moods."

"I'm not making an accusation." Hope says quickly, before Amelia can potentially bite off an insult. "I just want answers. Regarding the Heroic Aura... is there anything about it that you haven't told me yet?"

Amelia opens her mouth to speak, but pauses and closes it again. She smiles faintly, pleased by Hope's line of questioning.

The question is open-ended enough that Solomon might not realize exactly what we're aiming for. Perhaps the old man will reveal some other information we didn't know. He's probably not stupid enough to do that... but a woman can dream.

Solomon notices the faint but unmistakable look of smugness on Amelia's face. His inscrutable expression, however, gives no clues.

"Anything that I haven't told you..." Solomon says slowly. "There are many things I have not spoken out loud, either because I wanted you to discover them on your own, or because I did not think you were ready to hear them yet. You have more than enough time to learn the Truths of our reality, Hope. There is no need to rush your Journey hastily."

Hope continues to faintly smile, but his stomach twists into a knot.

Damn. That was a good rebuttal. Now if he doesn't say anything, Solomon can claim that whatever I bring up is simply an opportunity to educate me.

Hope pauses to think of a reply, but before he can say anything, Amelia speaks up.

"Old man. How many Heroic Auras are there in the universe?"

This finally elicits a change in Solomon's expression. "How... many?"

"I've noticed the discrepancy." Amelia says. "One thousand Heroes in the Hall of Heroes alone. Hundreds more implied to be unaccounted for. Ten thousand years of human history. And most damning of all... there is an unbroken line of Kings and Emperors and Leaders whose lifetimes never overlap, while the weaker Heroes are all over the place. I can only conclude there are multiple Heroic Auras in the universe, and you've... *forgotten* to tell us this information."

Hope stifles a grimace. *She blurted it out. Dammit!*

"We're not trying to accuse you of anything." Hope says quickly. "I just want to know what the meaning is behind this... timeline misalignment."

Solomon raises his eyebrows.

"You finally noticed. I wasn't exactly trying to hide it, Hope, Amelia. Why do you think I made a point of placing the Kings, Nobles, and the Peons in three different layers within the Chamber of Waiting? It was to show a clear division in status between the Heroes."

Solomon pauses.

"But you are also... mistaken. There is only one Heroic Aura. I expected you to come to a different conclusion, Hope, especially after your chat with Vulpanix. Can't you see the truth of the matter?"

"What truth?" Hope asks. "Can the Heroic Aura... enter multiple bodies at once?"

"No. That's not it either..." Solomon murmurs, belatedly sighing. "How much time have the two of you spent inside the Hall of Heroes?"

Slightly taken aback, Hope frowns. "A little under three months. Why?"

Solomon continues. "That's less than a day in the outside world. But you haven't paid attention to the happenings on Tarus II in half a week of real-time, give or take a day."

"Right..." Amelia says, frowning more deeply. "Your point?"

"The same phenomena happening out there has happened many times in the past." Solomon gently explains. "I just received word that the newly passed-out Power Gloves have had... *interesting effects* on their users. Hope, when was the last time you talked to Neil?"

The Second Wordsmith scratches his itchy palm. "Not since a few days before the attack on Serris."

"Well. Jason's been busy." Solomon says. "He's developed a special glove that can transform humans into creatures of other species. I learned from Neil not long ago that one of his soldiers, a man named Samuel Baker, experienced lingering effects following his transformation."

Solomon pauses, then leans forward to look at Hope and Amelia more intently.

"He possesses an 'S-class' transformation compatibility with the fairy species. After transforming into one, he's begun to exhibit signs of keeping his magical powers even after exiting that state. Now, why do you think that is?"

Hope and Amelia both frown deeply. Even Amelia, who saw the Power Glove in action and helped build the new spiritual battle dome on Tarus II's northern edge, wasn't privy to military secrets and knew nothing about the change with the Power Gloves.

Hope scrunches his eyebrows together. "Does this mean... humans can repair their spiritual flaws... without using the Aura at all?"

"That's right." Solomon says, smiling like a kindly old grandfather. "I suppose it is time I told you about a long-held secret to which few people have been privy."

With a pensive sigh, Solomon pauses for a few moments to gather his thoughts. He looks away wistfully, then returns his gaze to Hope and Amelia.

"I am a member of the Consortium of Sages." Solomon begins to explain. "The Consortium is an ancient lineage of humanity's thought leaders. Hammurabi was one of its founders. Siddhartha Gautama, Madam Mildred, and many others, including myself, joined later. All the members were either Trueborn Heroes, or Uplifted Heroes. Not just anyone could join the Consortium. Our goal was to ensure humanity continued to improve over time, and that we always maintained sight of our true enemies, the demons and angels."

He continues. "Due to a series of unfortunate accidents, as well as... deliberate acts of evil, we all swore a pact to keep the information I am about to tell you a secret. Most people mentally labor under the idea that the Heroic Aura 'empowers' the human it enters. This notion is incorrect, but it was formed deliberately by the Consortium. We wanted people to think Heroes were 'uplifted' humans, boosted in magical power by the Aura. But they are not."

Amelia nods. "Because the Aura only repairs flaws in a person's spirituality."

"That is half of the secret." Solomon acknowledges. "The other half is that, after a Hero dies, the Heroic Aura *seeks out* the one human embryo in existence possessing the highest spiritual potential. With the Aura boosting the unborn child's developing spirituality, they almost always emerge from the womb possessing incredible untapped strength."

"Then," Solomon continues, "when they come of age, their spirituality coalesces like a diamond, empowering them to the highest state any human can reach. You Wordsmiths are, in my opinion, the final evolution of what an empowered human can become."

"Heroes project a natural aura of power." Solomon concludes. "There is only one Heroic Aura, but simply being in proximity to a Hero has a chance of triggering an evolution in an unascended human. That is why so many Lowborn Heroes have walked the Earth. Where Trueborn Heroes roam, Lowborn can and will ultimately become uplifted."

"Holy crap." Hope mutters. "So all this time, ordinary humans have not only had the capability to become Heroes, but they already did in the past."

"Lesser Heroes." Amelia points out. "Not as strong as genuine ones."

"But Heroes nonetheless." Hope counters. "Solomon, why didn't you tell us this sooner? Why keep it a secret?"

Solomon's kindly smile fades away. In its place, a look of disappointment forms.

I would have liked to," Solomon says slowly, "but I made a pledge, as did the other members of the Consortium of Sages. This information was never to be revealed lightly. Not only did we not want the Archangels to realize we had grown wise to their underhanded plot to cripple humanity, but other humans knowing could trigger a catastrophe."

"What sort of catastrophe?" Hope asks, confused. "How could having more Heroes be a bad thing?"

"You assume that having more empowered humans is a net gain for humanity." Solomon says, a hint of warning in his voice. "But haven't you forgotten something important?"

Finally, Hope realizes what Solomon is playing at.

"Dracula. The Dark Hero." Hope mutters.

"That's right." Solomon whispers. "Dracula was not the first Hero to go rogue. But he was the first Trueborn to do so. Before him, many ordinary men and women became Uplifted and used their newfound abilities to seek riches, dominate others, and seize control of the Earth."

"So the Consortium's goal," Amelia says, "it was to... eliminate evil Heroes?"

"Sinners. Enemies of Man." Solomon says with a nod. "Worse than demons. Traitors to their own species. Our Order hunted these fiends down and killed them in cold blood. Not only were we to kill them, but to shatter their artifacts as well, ensuring they could not spread their heinous thoughts after death."

"But there came a problem." Solomon continues. "It surfaced for the Consortium when the most powerful human on Earth, the Trueborn Hero of that era, became the one we had to kill. Our Uplifted agents... they could not contend against his power. And so... Dracula brought a dark age upon humanity."

He looks at Hope and Amelia with deep meaning.

"In the same way, so will Jason's flippant mass-uplifting of ordinary humans. Dark figures may arise... but who shall be ready to take them down before they can deal damage to their former brethren?"

"The catastrophe... is the arrival of Dark Heroes?" Hope asks.

"Agents of devils." Solomon affirms. "Greedy spreaders of Chaos. They will emerge. If left unchecked, the demons won't have to lift a finger. Our species will immolate itself, just as it nearly did so many times before..."

Solomon clears his throat.

"I did not tell you of these things, because I wanted to see if you would draw those conclusions yourself. Since you have, that means you can be informally inducted into the Consortium if you so wish."

Solomon pays special attention to Amelia.

"You are the one who discovered this discrepancy, not Hope. While you do not seem to possess any magical affinity on the surface, I find it hard to believe one who bears the Black Queen's memories would remain in this state forever. If you decide to accept my offer, I will work on finding a way to restore your natural abilities."

Amelia blinks, visibly surprised by Solomon's offer.

"I... I don't know... this is all so sudden."

"You may decide now." Solomon says. "Or you may decide later. But it was you who possessed the wisdom to see the Truth laid out, not Hope. It is only fair that you should obtain this choice. Hope has enough on his plate."

Hope frowns slightly at being slighted, but quiets down, feeling a bit better when he realizes his fiancée now has a unique opportunity to become useful.

Perhaps, if this were to give her a goal worth striving to achieve... Amelia might finally feel valued, and no longer a burden to her fiancée.

A few moments pass. Amelia contemplates Solomon's offer.

She taps her cherry-red lips, then frowns as she looks at him.

"Before I even think of accepting, I have some... doubts."

Solomon smilingly nods.

"Ask whatever you like."

Author Note: This part was heavily rewritten due to a major oversight I made when I first published it. Simply put, I forgot that Hope and Vulpanix had spoken about Humanity's Flaw. Now the rewritten part accurately reflects their discussion and fixes other things I noticed on a re-read!

Part 488: Wordsmithing's Limitations

Despite the seriousness of the discussion so far, and despite Solomon's smooth words, Amelia sobers up and looks the old man right in his pair of spiritual eyes. She crosses her arms and frowns.

"Let's slow things down a bit, Solomon. Your explanations so far are certainly plausible, but I haven't forgotten that you can think ten or a hundred times faster than Hope and I. You're awfully good at spinning things the way you want them to be heard."

"I've spoken no lies." Solomon retorts.

"You don't need to tell a lie to make an answer biased." Amelia fires right back. "In fact, it's not what you've said so far that's bugging me. It's the fact that you didn't say it *sooner*."

Solomon holds up his hands helplessly. "My hands were tied. I took an oath never to reveal this information except to those who were worthy of knowing it."

"Yeah?" Amelia snarks. "That's awfully convenient. And how many other oaths have you taken? How many other things are you holding back and will you continue to hold back 'for our sake'? This information doesn't hurt us in any way to have known sooner, yet you're acting as if it was some grand puzzle, some game we had to figure out. Meanwhile, there could be dozens of potential Dark Heroes popping up under our noses, and if we had known sooner, we could have kept a closer eye on the situation."

The more Amelia talks, the less incredulous Hope becomes at all of the revelations Solomon uttered. He settles down and listens to his fiance driving pointed words into Solomon's chest, then crosses his arms and nods along to what she's saying.

"She's right, Solomon." Hope says. "You should have told us this sooner. Got any other fun secrets we should know about now? The way you keep stringing me along isn't cute. It's sketchy as hell. It makes me... not want to trust you."

"I have been keeping a close eye on the people of Tarus II." Solomon explains. "If any Dark Heroes had appeared, or anyone with malicious intent, I would have told you."

"Oh, isn't that just *dandy* of you." Amelia says blandly. "And who knows when that could have been. Now that Hope and I know about Dark Heroes, we can take preventative

measures, but if we found out a month or a year from now, we might have missed important signs or clues of evil happenings among humanity. I'm just wondering what other non-trivial information you're keeping from us, secrets that could screw us if they went south before we realized."

Solomon heaves a dramatic sigh. "I always tell you information on a need to know basis. If that does not engender your trust, Hope can always use his Wordsmithing to rip it out of my head. It's not as if I can stop him."

"I'm not so sure about that." Amelia says, her eyes narrowing. "Taking information from the mind and soul of the Knowledge-Seeker? It sounds like a losing proposition. I don't think Hope would have as much leverage as you claim. I bet if he did that, you could turn the tables on him pretty easily. You might even be laying a trap for him with your words as we speak."

"Always with the conspiracies." Solomon says, looking away with a distinct lack of interest.

"I'm not so sure it is a conspiracy in the first place." Amelia says, before changing the subject. "But enough about all of that. I don't really care about your fancy Order of Sages or whatever. I do have a lot of questions about it, though."

"Ask, and I shall answer." Solomon says, returning his gaze to the former Black Queen.

"You said your order hunted down Dark Heroes." Amelia points out. "And you also said you failed to kill Dracula. What happened to him? What happened to his artifact?"

"That is an unsolved mystery." Solomon answers. "We were never able to locate Dracula's artifact. Due to how closely he worked with the Hell of Blood, we believed they had acquired his artifact. However, upon Jason waking me in this far future hellscape, I came to realize that shouldn't be the case. I doubt the Hell of Blood would have Dracula's artifact at their disposal, yet be as weak as they are. I have to surmise his artifact was either destroyed by someone else, or taken by someone else..."

"Like the Volgrim?" Hope asks.

"I did think it was them at first..." Solomon mutters, "but we've acquired what I presume are all of the artifacts the Volgrim took from humanity, and Dracula is not among them. Either Unarin kept a few relics somewhere secret, or a different actor acquired the Dark Hero for their own uses."

"Who else could it be?" Amelia asks. "If not the demons or the Volgrim, then...?"

"The monsters are prime suspects." Solomon says. "Fairies. Orcs. Goblins. There could be a random Troll somewhere in one of the Hells fiddling around with Dracula's artifact for all we know. Wordsmithing can't locate artifacts, so we don't have a way to search, either."

"You think a Troll is using one of the most infamous figures in human history as a toy?" Amelia asks pointedly.

"No. Just giving an example." Solomon says. "I still think the Volgrim have Dracula's artifact. If not them, then it may have been destroyed when they glassed Earth."

"Let's hope it has." Hope says, before chuckling to himself. "No pun intended."

Amelia smiles for an instant at her fiance's self-referential pun before schooling her expression again.

"Alright, let's focus on other things. My next question is in regards to the... treatment of Lowborn Heroes. Why weren't they ever given genuine Heroic Artifacts?"

"The angels could not detect the ascension of normal humans to Lowborn Heroes." Solomon explains. "They could only detect when a new Trueborn Hero had reached his or her age of maturity. Camael could, of course, look into the future, but she was not capable of divining every little event, and following the War in Heaven, her powers waned. She had lost too much Holy Energy, and as such chose to only look for important celestial events, such as who the next Trueborn would be, as well as what artifact to craft for them."

Solomon gestures vaguely to his left at nothing in particular.

"Take my Crown, for instance. Camael had made it long, long before I was ever born. However, she did not originally make the Crown for me, specifically. She merely divined what my broad abilities might entail, and thus went back to 'fine-tune' the Crown for me. When I came of age, she passed it to me from the heavens above, allowing me to step into my role as a Heroic King."

Solomon shrugs. "But she only had so many artifacts. Now that you've comprehended how many Heroes there are, can you understand why she only focused on crafting or adjusting artifacts to fit the strongest Heroes?"

Hope blinks. "The strongest Heroes? Hold on, you've just made me wonder... were there ever any Lowborn who were as strong as Trueborn heroes?"

"Ah! Now that is a good question." Solomon says, nodding his head sagely. "There were not many such cases, but there certainly were such cases. One such example was Blade Dancer Karla, a Lowborn who was born an ordinary daughter of Emperor Yang Guang. He was a despot, a tyrannical madman who she eventually rose to overthrow."

Solomon continues. "Karla obtained the gift of ascension by happenstance and ultimately slew her father with her newfound abilities. She was not stronger than the Trueborn Hero of that particular generation, but she *was* stronger than plenty of the Trueborn who came before and after. She was one of dozens of Lowborn who achieved great feats, but even she did not obtain the gift of a Camael-forged divine artifact."

"Karla." Hope repeats, making a mental note to try and remember her name. "I guess obtaining a relic wasn't terribly important. Jason and I are doing just fine without relics of our own, as should be plainly obvious. But that also makes me want to know: Are Dark Heroes even a threat to us now? We're Wordsmiths. Surely we can just... stomp them into meat paste with our magic if they become a threat."

Solomon frowns disapprovingly. He looks at Hope as if the young man had just babbled baby-like nonsense.

"Use your head! Do you think the title of 'enemy to humanity' comes only in the form of some fool slinging fireballs at random civilians or a mere cold-blooded murderer? Enemies to humanity can come in a thousand different forms. I'll bet Jason even thinks of killing Neil every once in a while. Neil's goals diametrically oppose Jason's, so in that respect, Jason could see Neil as a 'threat' worth eliminating."

"But killing Neil would piss off Hope." Amelia points out.

"And?" Solomon questions. "Are you saying that if Hope suddenly died and Jason was the sole Wordsmith left in existence, there would be nothing stopping him from killing Neil?"

Amelia and Hope exchange a glance. The Wordsmith chews his lower lip as he returns his gaze to Solomon.

"Well... Jason's a relatively kind guy. I can't see him just killing Neil like that..."

"You've identified one possible barrier. The moral one." Solomon patiently explains. "But there are so many more that would impede Jason's desire to kill Neil. Think of the enemies Jason would make if he killed the man. Neil's death might turn him into a martyr. People would question Jason, wondering if he were truly worth following. They might start to ponder Neil's philosophy more closely, and that would be truly dangerous. Killing a man is one thing, but killing an *idea*? Many have tried, but few have succeeded."

"So, killing a Dark Hero would probably be harder." Hope concedes. "Since they'd have magic and stuff."

"Yes. *Magic and stuff*." Solomon groans, resisting the urge to facepalm. "Imagine a random soldier who obtains the ability to grow plants and vegetables. Sounds harmless, right? Maybe this person starts off by doing good deeds, endearing people to him. Then one day, he decides that the demons aren't so bad. He starts influencing people to stand up for demonic rights or other such nonsense."

Solomon leans forward. "What then? Can you just kill him?"

Hope and Amelia's expressions both become gloomy.

"No..." Hope mutters. "He's become a popular figure. You'd have to, I dunno, undermine him, or something. Make people turn against him."

"And that, my boy, is why the Consortium of Sages existed." Solomon says. "If killing the bastard is all it takes, these matters could be solved easily, if not cleanly. But it's never as easy as plunging a dagger into a back. No, you have to take care of all the externalities, plan the victim's demise carefully, think about how to undo the damage they've wrought... and in Dracula's case, the damage was permanent. He brought vampires and werewolves into existence! We've never been able to put that genie back in the metaphorical bottle."

"It truly isn't easy to take care of a Dark Hero then." Amelia acknowledges. "But before, didn't you say you would find a way to give me my powers back so I could hunt these potential evildoers? Why bother when we have Hope here? He can just Wordsmith me new abilities, right?"

Solomon falls silent.

He remains unmoving for a few moments, frowning as he evaluates Amelia's physical condition.

"It's... not that simple. I've long suspected that Wordsmithing is not as convenient as Hope and Jason think it is. You can't just pull infinite power from nowhere."

"It's always felt pretty convenient to me." Hope protests. "I can give myself the ability to read minds easily. I can teleport around, terraform planets... granted, I need a lot of mana to do some things, and Jason nearly killed himself from over-exertion once, but those limits are pretty soft."

Solomon appears unconvinced.

"I doubt you've stress-tested your abilities adequately over the years, Hope. Have you ever used your Wordsmithing to bequeath a power on another person for a long period of time?"

"I... no? I can't say I have." Hope mutters. "You mean like granting someone telepathy?"

"Right. Like telepathy. But I'm not talking about doing so for a day or two. I mean giving that power to them with the expectation it will be a permanent ability in their arsenal."

"Well. Now that you mention it... not really." Hope says, suddenly feeling embarrassed at this huge gap in his knowledge base. "I know Jason has been allowing demons and humans to redeem permanent power-ups for Merit Tokens. Emperor Gorn even took him up on that deal, right?"

"The price is pretty high." Amelia says. "It's like a thousand Merit Points or some other ludicrous number. Not at all cost-effective for anyone but Demon Emperors."

"And that presents a... problem." Solomon says slowly. "The only people Jason has actually empowered so far are Demon Emperors. Beings with extremely hardy bodies, minds, and souls."

"It's pretty screwed up he's giving them boosts." Hope says, nodding.

"No, I'm not talking about the morality of the situation." Solomon clarifies. "I'm talking about the previous subject, empowering ordinary humans with your Wordsmithing."

Solomon reaches out and rests his spiritual palm on Hope's shoulder. "Young man, pretend for a moment that you granted your fiance here all of the powers she once lost.

Darkness manipulation, a mighty body, and so on. What long term effects could that have on her?"

"I have no idea." Hope admits.

"Right, and neither do I." Solomon says. "We know Jason empowered Phoebe's body to give her superhuman strength. The Body Booster is one of his inventions that empowers people through a mixture of Wordsmithing and general-purpose magic. Interestingly, the people who've subjected themselves to this magic have shown no adverse reactions."

"So... Wordsmithing someone's body permanently is fine?" Hope questions.

"There are inherent limits to every person. One thing you may not have realized is that the Body Booster facility on Tarus II has strict limits for how many times people can use it. It makes people far stronger than they were before, but it does so in 'doses'. People can only increase their strength or their senses a few times, and each dosage of magic must ensure they don't go over their biological limitations."

Solomon gestures to Amelia.

"Your fiancé is, not to be rude, an ordinary female human. Women are inherently weaker than men in the physical department, at least on average, so the maximum strength they can wield is also lower. It's obvious when the body is reaching its maximum potential, but what about a person's mind or soul?"

Hope's eyes light up with recognition.

"Ah! So... you think magic is limited by someone's soul-power?"

"I don't think so, I know so." Solomon proclaims. "If you were to uplift Amelia's abilities, you would have to keep in mind she is not the same Amelia who died on Solaris. She has an ordinary body now, and perhaps an ordinary mind and soul. I doubt she can wield the same powers she previously did."

Amelia coughs. "I'd appreciate it if you two didn't yap about me like I'm not standing right here."

"Right." Solomon says apologetically, pulling away from Hope. "The problem is, we've not conducted any genuine experiments on the transhuman capabilities your Wordsmithing can unleash. Jason's Body Boosters aren't good enough. Unless Amelia

wants to become a guinea pig, I would advise against 'bolting' powers onto her soul willy-nilly."

"So what's the solution then?" Amelia asks. "Can YOU give me powers, old man?"

"I don't know." Solomon admits. "I've never deliberately tried to ascend a normal human to the rank of Lowborn. The fact it happens naturally means it should be possible if I spend a bit of time on the subject."

Hope scratches his cheek. "That reminds me... why didn't any Lowborn arise in the 100,000 years Jason was inside his cryopod?"

"I covered that already." Solomon says. "Humans don't ascend at random. They need to have their spiritual powers stimulated, or perhaps 'jolted.' Typically, coming into contact with a Heroic Aura is what can cause an ascension. I should also mention it's rather strange that Daisy ascended, since the children of Heroes almost never become Heroes themselves. It's not as if magical power runs in the blood. High spiritual potential is effectively a random mutation in the human genome."

"But you said that humans using Jason's new Power Glove were keeping the abilities afterward." Amelia points out. "So... couldn't humans who interacted with fairies and demons on the regular just as easily ascend?"

"Interacting with other species isn't the same as transforming into them and using their powers yourself." Hope answers. "But also, Jason and I are around now, so maybe just coming into contact with our Heroic Auras gave these people the basic ability to ascend, and the Power Gloves accelerated that transition."

Solomon nods approvingly. "I would have said about the same thing. In any case, the details don't matter much. Humans are beginning to ascend to the rank of Lowborn, and we must be prepared for the almost guaranteed eventual rise of Dark Heroes. The Demon Emperors will certainly recognize the potential in these figures and will look to sow discontent wherever they can."

Solomon directs his full attention to Amelia.

"Well? What do you think about being inducted into the Consortium? Have I allayed your fears by now? Or do you still want to grill me with more questions?"

Amelia scrunches up her face, looking displeased.

"I don't know. To be honest, I don't like you, Solomon. I also don't trust you in the slightest."

"Trusting me isn't what I asked." Solomon says calmly. "If you value your ties to the human species, joining the Consortium will mean taking a pledge to protect humanity, even from dissident elements like me. Imagine if I were truly working against humanity's best interests. It would be your job to kill me."

"Well, isn't that convenient." Amelia says blandly, crossing her arms. "And of course, by speaking this possibility, you make it seem like it would never happen. Nobody would be so stupid as to voice the possibility they fear most, so you *must* be a totally trustworthy guy. Right, Solomon?"

The Knowledge-Seeker heaves a sigh. "Believe me or don't. It's up to you. I don't know where your intense distrust comes from. I've explained myself as best as I possibly could."

"Excluding the fact that you held information from us, and are almost assuredly still doing so." Amelia bites back. "Besides. I kind of have a thing against Heroes. You know, because of *Joan*."

"It's a shame we lost the Sword from Heaven." Solomon remarks. "Would be nice to wave it around once in a while and calm you down."

"Alright, alright, you two." Hope says, intervening before their spat gets any uglier. "Solomon, I think we've heard enough. Thanks for giving me more info, but I have to agree with Amelia. Your lack of honesty is killing our relationship. I don't know if I can trust someone who habitually holds important information back from me 'for my safety.' And at this point, even if you change your ways and start putting me in the loop without my input, I won't know if you're telling me the whole story."

Hope shakes his head. "I just can't work with someone I can't trust. From now on, I'm not putting your Crown on until you show some sincerity."

Solomon frowns. "Hope, my boy, you're taking this too personally. I only wanted to see if you would-"

"I don't want to hear your excuses." Hope says raising his palm. "No more. I'll continue learning about the Heroes in here. I'll continue my training... but for now, I'm going to also start working on my own goals. I'd like to be at least a *little* more ambitious, moving forward."

Solomon nods slowly. "Right. A little more ambitious. I... see..."

Hope and Amelia say their goodbyes, then they turn and head out of the library, leaving Solomon behind.

The Knowledge Seeker's expression faintly shifts to one of anger.

"...Arrogant little bitch. She's twisting that boy's ear and bending him to her whims. Now she's turned him against me."

Solomon rubs his chin.

"Nothing worse than when a plan gets ruined because some woman decided to spread chaos at random."

He turns around and resumes his work, continuing to build his master library, a storage of knowledge that will someday surely shake the cosmos...

Part 489: The Exodus Deliverers

Months pass.

Hope and Amelia no longer interact with Solomon as much as they once did.

True to his word, Hope stops putting on Solomon's Crown, becoming less and less trusting of the Knowledge-Seeker's wily ways. Like Jason, he too begins to see Solomon in a different light.

As for Amelia, she ultimately rejects Solomon's offer to join the so-called Consortium of Sages.

Despite their falling out with the Knowledge Seeker, neither Hope nor Amelia come to blows with him. They continue to learn from him, but now with a healthy dose of skepticism directed at anything he says.

Hope continues speaking to and learning about the different Heroes present inside each of the artifacts. He allows Solomon to guide him toward different individuals, but he also takes a more proactive approach in learning about each one before interacting with them. Thanks to the book Hope compiled for Amelia, he has plenty of reading material on the various legendary figures present in humanity's history.

One day, nearly a year after his falling out with Solomon, Hope enters the Chamber of Waiting along with his half-mentor. As always, he maintains a healthy dose of skepticism toward Solomon, but also tries to keep his words polite and constrained.

"You will soon reach the 800th Hero." Solomon says to Hope cordially. "Of the Heroes you've met so far, there have been kings and paupers alike. But what do you think about the fellow I'm going to introduce you to today?"

Hope glances at the altars of the twelve great kings of Earth's past. Already, he's met nearly all of them, with only two remaining.

But the person he's going to meet today is not among them. No, this individual comes from the pedestals in the center of the room. A powerful individual to be sure, a noteworthy historical figure in his own right, and also a Trueborn, but...

"I am a little... confused." Hope says, gesturing toward a pair of large stone tablets. "I've read about his heroic feats. His powers seem incredible. He brought Egypt to its

knees. He split the Red Sea. He summoned pestilence and hellish nightmares upon his enemies. So... why do you consider him a Lesser Trueborn?"

"Moses is not the fantastical enigma you might think him to be." Solomon explains. "He is... he is a very strange man. His powers are mighty, but... well, let's just say his dossier does not tell the full story."

Solomon smiles cryptically, making question marks pop up above Hope's head. He shrugs his shoulders, then takes a step back.

"I'll leave you to meet the man, the myth, the legend himself." Solomon says. "Just... don't expect too much. Moses can be a tad *fanatical*."

With those ominous words, Solomon disappears, returning to his library to continue writing books.

Hope scratches his head, then picks up the two tablets, each of which has five lines on them.

"Two artifacts?" Hope mutters, hefting the rather large and cumbersome stone tablets. To his surprise, they don't seem to be fragile in the slightest, but as hard as demonstone. "What would happen if I split the tablets apart? Would Moses die? Could he appear in two places? Never heard of a Hero possessing two artifacts like that..."

It doesn't escape Hope's notice that Moses's artifact is quite similar to Hammurabi's, in that they both depict ancient writing detailing laws and commandments humans were intended to follow. And from the discussions he's had with Hammurabi on occasion, Hope knows the ancient Hero King sneers at Moses's shoddy half-baked 'commandments.'

Ignoring the potential inter-Hero drama, Hope hefts the dual tablets and takes them out to the garden, where he has interviewed nearly 800 other Heroes. He sets the tablets on the stone table, propping them up with some Wordsmithed easels, then clears his throat.

"Materialize."

Hope summons the Hero from within the tablets. What he instead gets surprises him to his core!

Not one, but two men materialize on the other side of the table. Both of them look eerily similar, to the point Hope guesses they must be twins!

Both men wear crimson-colored robes, and sport beards, but one of them has a beard that hangs down his chest and reaches his belly button, while the other's beard only hangs a couple of inches off his chin, appearing much more modest. The two men appear quite old, in their 50's or so, but aside from the beards they look essentially identical.

"M-Moses?" Hope asks, not sure which one is which.

"Ah! We have returned to reality!" The short-bearded man says. "Brother, look. The Garden of Eden! The Creator has delivered us, after all these years!"

"As I knew he would." The long-bearded man says, appearing a bit calmer. "Oh, our God is a great God. He delivers us from evil, and he smites those who lacketh faith!"

The two men don't seem to notice Hope, or perhaps they don't particularly care about him.

He coughs to get their attention.

"Ahem. Uh, Moses? Is one of you named Moses?"

"I am he." The long-bearded man says, finally acknowledging Hope's existence. "Where are my manners? Forgive me, boy! You are clearly a servant of the Lord! I did not intend to ignore you. I am Moses, and this is my brother, Aaron."

"Good day to you, lad!" Aaron says, stroking his short beard. "And what might your name be?"

"I am Hope." Hope explains. "I'm the Hero of this generation, a Wordsmith."

Hope spends a couple of minutes explaining the current situation, catching the two Heroes up to speed. As he does, their smiles begin to fade, and their expressions become grave.

"Oh, how dreadful." Moses says.

"How horrid!" Aaron exclaims. "To think that all of humanity fell into despair for nearly one hundred thousand years! To think the Earth was destroyed!"

"Fear not, brother." Moses says, patting Aaron's shoulder. "Were our prayers to the Lord not answered? He has awakened us in this dark future to aid our successor! As he has many times before."

"You speak the truth, brother." Aaron says, immediately calming down. "So long as we have faith in our God, we shan't fear any evil."

Hope scrunches up his face for a moment before quickly schooling his expression.

I'm beginning to see what Solomon meant, he thinks.

"I've never seen two Heroes in an artifact before." Hope says slowly. "You two are twins?"

"Indeed. A rare breed among our kind." Moses acknowledges. "And proof of the great calling the Creator entrusted us with! Together, my brother and I traveled the lands to free the Israelites! We fought the Pharaoh! We brought down damnation upon Satan and Diablo, the Creator's enemies!"

"We were the first dual-Heroes to walk the Earth." Aaron says with great satisfaction. "We condensed the Lord's words into ten commandments for the later generations to obey. We brought order to our people and used our twin strength to repair the world which had begun to fall into lawlessness and decadence."

"I... see." Hope says, trying not to sound too rude. "I'm just a little confused. Solomon helped me acquire enough information to make a book about the ancient Heroes, and it didn't mention you were twins-"

"Solomon?!" Moses interrupts, his expression darkening. "That lawless, whoring, son of a devil? He still draws breath?"

"I mean, he's inside an artifact like the two of you. But yeah, he's still 'alive' in a sense..." Hope answers hesitantly.

"Humph." Moses sneers. "All the Wisdom the Creator could grant, and that decadent womanizer spent most of his days engaging in sins and misdeeds most foul! It is a pity his filth continues to taint the name of Heroes to this day."

"Here here, brother." Aaron adds. "The Lord does not look favorably upon adulterers and those who worship other gods."

Hope cocks his head. "You said Solomon worshiped other gods?"

"Indeed. To please the women he bedded, the Knowledge-Seeker bowed to statues and other gross idols of false gods." Moses sneers. "Whether they be foreign princesses or whores from within his own lands, that wretch would go to any length to bring a woman to bed."

Hope doesn't particularly care about this one way or the other, but he nods politely and puts on an expression of displeasure. "Oh, I didn't realize he was that sort of man."

Well, moving on. Why don't you two tell me about yourselves. I'm not sure how twin Heroes would function."

"It was quite simple." Moses says. "Our souls were not linked together, but we returned to the Lord's embrace in death. We shared the artifacts, and as such, we became bound in eternal undeath."

"Does that mean when one of you died, the other stayed alive a while longer?"

Moses nods. "I died first. Then, my brother followed a year later."

Hope rubs his scruffy chin. "So it's not as if when one of you passed away, the other did as well. That's good to know."

He pulls out the Heroic Encyclopedia and flips to the pages detailing Moses's life. "It says here you were called the Exodus Deliverer. Can you tell me about your Heroic Abilities?"

Moses smiles. "You are laboring under an incorrect assumption, young man. Neither I nor Aaron possess any magic."

"You don't?" Hope asks, blinking twice.

"Nay. Aaron and I are merely agents of the Lord!" Moses proclaims.

"We pass the power of the Creator through our bodies, but we do not control it, only guide its path." Aaron continues. "The Lord commands our fate. He illuminates our way, and as such, we act as nothing more than His servants."

Hope coughs. "Right. Well, what powers did the Lord 'pass through' you?"

"Oh, a great many types." Moses says, his gaze turning thoughtful. "The Ten Plagues were a few of them. When we later came to blows with the Emperors of demonkind, the Lord protected us with divine lightning from above."

"When we starved in the desert, he bequeathed us manna from heaven." Aaron adds.

"Ah yes, that delicious manna." Moses acknowledges with a lick of his lips. "On one occasion, the Lord sent down upon me the strength of ten bears, allowing me to battle his enemies with great fervor. Aaron even momentarily obtained the swiftness of a sparrow!"

"Indeed, those were the good days." Aaron laughs, lingering on his ancient memories with great fondness.

"So... you two say the Lord passed his power through your bodies," Hope says skeptically, "then does that mean you could... talk to the Creator?"

"Of course, of course." Moses says, closing his eyes and nodding his head. "Aye, we spake to the Creator on many an occasion. Even now, we hear His voice touching our souls."

"You can talk to him now? Right now?" Hope asks, trying desperately not to roll his eyes.

"Of course! The Creator is quite fond of you, in fact." Moses says, opening his eyes to smile happily at Hope. "You are a good agent for His will."

"Really?" Hope asks, while smiling and holding back a laugh. "And what does he think about Jason?"

"Jason?" Moses asks, frowning in confusion. "Who...?"

"The other Wordsmith." Hope clarifies. "The Creator did tell you about him, right?"

"Ah. The other Wordsmith." Moses says, looking away. "Well, you see, God's way is not to give us all the answers we need, but the strength to seek it out. He would not babble at me uselessly, but grant me a way to find the answers I seek."

"Right. Of course." Hope says. "Did he tell you *anything* useful, or...?"

"You watch your tone." Aaron says, suddenly standing up and glowering at Hope. "Brother! This boy is insulting God! Look into his eyes! He believes our God is a weak God! He believes he is superior to the Lord!"

Moses' smile vanishes. He stands up too, as if realizing the intent behind Hope's words. "Brat. You dare doubt the power of the Creator?!"

"No, no, that's not the case at all." Hope says half-apologetically. "It's just... I don't believe that you can actually speak to the Creator. You DO know he's dead, right?"

"The Creator is dead?" Moses repeats. "Poppycock! If He has perished, then why can I still hear Him?! You simply lack faith! You are a bloody secularist!"

In Hope's head, a random thought occurs to him. *I'm surprised Moses would even know what a secularist is.*

He stands up to match their postures. "Now now, let's not freak out. If you can talk to the Creator, the most powerful being in the universe, then surely he can tell you

something actually useful."

"The Creator does not accept tests of His power!" Moses proclaims. "How dare you question the Lord's existence! I'm beginning to feel the need to teach you a lesson!"

"But you can't teach me a lesson." Hope points out. "You don't have any magic, remember? You can only 'channel' the Lord's power-"

"INSOLENCE!" Moses roars!

At once, the Hall of Heroes begins to shake. A powerful rumbling surges in the air.

The table and chairs rattle. They begin to vibrate and glide around as some sort of earthquake assaults the majestic palace. Hope's heart skips a beat as the two brothers hold up their hands, and darkness sweeps across the room, blotting out the light permeating the Hall of Heroes.

"BOY!" Aaron shouts. "How DARE you question your elders?! No man must speak against the Lord! No man must desecrate His name!"

The darkness rapidly thickens, transforming the garden from a beautiful scene of pristine greenery into a hellishly black and frighteningly gloomy scene of night-time. Not even the lanterns on the walls pierce the gloom, and Hope loses the ability to make out anything but the glowing eyes of the two ancient Heroes before him.

"REPENT!" Moses demands.

"REPENT!" Aaron repeats.

Shit, Hope thinks, I got carried away. These two might be wackos, but their powers are the real deal!

While he could easily shut down their powers by using his own, Hope doesn't want to turn the brothers against him. In the future, he will need their power and that of the other Heroes to destroy Jason and unite humanity.

So, Hope quickly schools his expression. He drops to his knees and bows at the feet of the Exodus Deliverers.

"Forgive me! I had eyes but could not see! You truly are agents of the Lord! I repent!"

"Do you truly repent?!" Moses yells.

"I do! I have seen the error of my ways! Only God himself could command such, *uh*, power! Such vast power! You must be the agents of His will!"

As Hope speaks, the rumbling begins to slow. Eventually, it stops, and the pitch-blackness pulls away.

"Good. Good!" Moses says twice. "You have learned a valuable lesson, boy! If you were not the Hero of this era, I might have smote you dead for uttering such heretical words!"

"The Lord would have smote you dead!" Aaron chimes in.

"Right! The Lord would have smote you dead!" Moses says unashamedly, as if those were the words he previously spoke. "But all men eventually err. You are fortunate to have learned your lesson quickly. You may rise."

Hope takes a second to collect himself before standing up.

"Haha... no hard feelings?"

"Of course not, of course not." Moses says twice, sitting back on his chair. "To err is to be human. Now, let us continue our discussion."

"Sure..." Hope mutters, as he also takes his seat.

For the next several hours, Hope learns more and more about the Exodus Deliverers. He probes them for information, and builds a picture in his head of what they can do for him.

Ultimately, he realizes they truly believe their powers are not their own, but that the voice of God is what guides their hands. This confounds him, but not wanting them to blow up the Hall of Heroes again, he ultimately relents and decides they won't be of much use in his future goals.

"You can roam about the Hall of Heroes as you please." Hope says, as he leads Moses and Aaron out of the garden, their tablets in his arms. "There are many Heroes here you probably know already."

"Including Solomon." Moses growls.

"Yeah. You really don't like him, do you?" Hope asks idly.

"Any god-fearing man wouldn't." Aaron snorts. "That bastard cares little for others. He is selfish to a fault. You should not trust him either, boy."

"Noted." Hope says quietly.

He mounts their tablets in a room specially made for 'processed' artifacts, those he has already interacted with, and finally heads back to his chamber.

Along the way, Hope spots Amelia inside the Heroic Armory, where a few Heroes who specialized in crafting weapons and armor during their lives chat with her while they work. Inside this room, the Heroes idly create beautiful, if somewhat impractical suits of steel, hauberks, as well as weapons ranging from swords and axes to javelins and halberds.

These weapons, though inferior in capability to modern weapons and armor, still look quite extraordinary. Hope walks up behind his fiancée, where he finds her chatting with a pair of female Heroes whom Hope already met and spoke to in the past.

Li Xian, a Chinese Princess who lived during the Tang dynasty in the 7th century. She was a famous armor-maker who uplifted her people through her skills in metallurgy, and also quite a beauty to boot, with long blonde hair and vivid blue eyes.

Elisabeth Kindelmann, an armor-maker from Hungary who lived during the 16th century, and who helped craft protection for her king and his men. She sports bouncy curled blonde hair, along with a practical set of blue shirt and pants.

"-quite possible." Elisabeth says to Amelia, flashing a quick smile at Hope before continuing with what she was saying. "But imbuing magical elements into armor is not a simple matter. I knew of a few demons who managed to do such a thing, but the effects were quite weak."

"So it's not doable?" Amelia asks, looking a little dismayed.

"The Wordsmith can probably do it." Elisabeth replies. "And now that I have such a fine forge to work with, perhaps in time I might be able to do so as well. We already know crafting artifacts is possible thanks to Camael, and she is my idol! I look forward to matching her someday."

Princess Li Xian nods. "Will require effort. Not simple, but doable, yes."

Amelia turns to look at Hope as he touches her shoulder. "Oh, you're finally done with today's Hero, huh?"

"Yup. I met Moses, the actual fellow from the Bible. He had a brother with him, Aaron. Turns out they were twins."

Li Xian blinks. "I know Moses. Rude man. Very disrespectful. Strange fellow, too religious."

Elisabeth shrugs. "I've never met the man, but if I spot him or his brother, I'll try and say hello sometime."

Hope laughs. "Wouldn't recommend it. Miss Xian is on the money... the guy's a total wacko."

He and Amelia say goodbye to the Princess and the Metalsmith, then walk out of the armory, past a half-dozen other famous men and women from Earth's past.

As they walk, Amelia scrunches up her face. "The Hall of Heroes started shaking at one point. Was that...?"

"Moses and Aaron threw a freaking temper tantrum." Hope groans. "Couple of big bearded babies."

When they arrive in their room, Hope summons a privacy field so he and his fiance can talk.

"Not many Heroes are left." Hope says, plunking down on the couch. "I'll have met all of them before the year is over."

"You're still going to go through with your plan?" Amelia asks.

"I am..." Hope says, more quietly than before. "The Volgrim have to pay for what they've done."

His expression darkens.

"Unarin must die."

Part 490: Warframes

Eleven days after the destruction of Serris.

In the Milky Way, a series of incredible events begin to unfold in unison, though none of the participants intended for such to happen.

Jason, humanity's First Wordsmith, enters a time-accelerated space with the intention of bettering himself and his abilities. For how long he will remain inside, none can say. Perhaps not even the man himself.

Hope Hiro, humanity's Second Wordsmith, concludes the first major leg of his training by meeting all of the thousand Heroes he took from the Volgrim's secret base on Serris. But he has plans of his own now...

Phoebe Hiro and Neil Adams ready themselves for a major debate in just a few days, one which will shape the course of humanity's future as they both seek to convince their fellow humans to join their side. For Phoebe's part, she wishes to unify humanity, the monsters, and the demons into a single cohesive faction as per her husband's wishes. As for Neil, he wishes to do exactly the opposite, casting the demons as irredeemable villains who must fall in the Creator's name.

Meanwhile, the reigning Demon Emperors discover that Mephisto has not died. He has begun the process of not only reviving himself, but attempting an ascension never before seen in demon history. His goal is to achieve the rank of Demon Deity, a feat only previously accomplished by Wolfram before his body immolated. They march on his location, nestled in the forests of Numaria, where Emperor Glinch's domain stands proud and previously unassailable.

* * *

On the world of Volgarius, the crown jewel of the Volgrim Empire, a planet filled with tens of trillions of inhabitants, all is not well.

Many secret orders pass hands. Technopaths silently transmit commands from above to their subordinates, often obfuscating the exact reasons for why they must move to follow sometimes bizarre objectives. Psions quietly communicate through a central

psionic network, disseminating orders just as odd as the ones the lower Technopaths have received. Even the Changelings follow these commands.

A 5th-Level Psion frowns deeply as she obtains new directives from her superior. [I do not comprehend. These materials are on the most secure planet in the Milky Way. Why should we transfer them to a less secure facility?]

[Do as you're told.] Her 6th-Level Psion commander says gruffly. [These crystals are somewhat precious. We must preserve them. And take care to move any incidental storages of Trifrancium and Dilithium, as well.]

The subordinate's face shifts to visible alarm. She leans toward her superior. [Is... is Volgarius in danger? Is the Plague...?]

[No questions.] The male Volgrim says, turning and flying away.

Across Volgarius, a quiet evacuation calmly takes place. Many elite Volgrim board ships, confused as to the hush-hush nature of the commands being passed down to them. They spread out, moving to sub-capital planets outside the Volgarius system, sometimes tens of lightyears away.

Inside the Founder's Hand, Commander Randis, Unarin's brother, the Fist of Volgarius, manipulates a large projector with images of thousands of Volgrim-controlled worlds inside a virtual Milky Way hologram. Every second, multiple notifications pop up, alerting him to one happening or another, some ranked as Green Level, some as Yellow Level, and some as Red Level.

With more than two million orbital cycles of practice, Randis calmly tends to every alert with practiced confidence.

An explosion at an exosteel factory. Yellow Level.

A missing shipping container filled with exotic materials. Green Level.

A conflict of orders between two opposing Psion factions. Yellow Level.

A Plague incursion at yet another Volgrim-controlled world. Red Level.

No matter what appears before him, Randis's hands and brain keep up with the unending torrent of information. While only a few Ascended actively work inside the Founder's Thumb, including Randis, Muuxunuu, and Unarin himself, they are all elites capable of thinking and acting at speeds no human could comprehend. Even without the

cranial augments possessed by elite Technopaths, their intelligence and wisdom are incomparable to that of even the mightiest human.

Randis performs his duties with a completely neutral expression, as if the impending catastrophe has not even reached his ears. So assured is he that he inspires an aura of calmness among the more well-informed elites inside the Founder's Thumb. While they might ordinarily feel jumpy due to the terrible rumors swirling around, the mere fact that Randis displays no fear makes them not want to worry unnecessarily.

Unarin will guide us. Unarin will protect us from the Calamity, they think.

Ever since his ascension to the top position of Volgrim society, their most lauded leader has never faltered.

Whether during the Great Wars, the genocide of ninety-five percent of the Volgrim population at the steel claws of the Sentinels, or the rise of the Plague, Unarin has always reigned supreme.

He has become a God in his people's eyes.

Likewise, his brother Randis is just as great a hero to the Volgrim, though one many often overlook.

It was Randis who personally led a dozen assaults on the Sentinels, risking his life to ensure those wretched machines would fall.

It was Randis who stood up to the Volgrim elites when they imprisoned his brother, winning a ten-cycle battle of attrition as he personally smote dead a hundred mighty opponents in the ancient Colosseums of Venar III.

And now, it is Randis who guides the Volgrim through the impending crisis, as steady as a mountain before a tsunami.

"Randis." A male voice says from behind the obsidian-skinned Ascended.

"Unarin." Randis says, never taking his eyes off the projections before himself. "No energy signature detected as of yet."

Unarin walks up beside his brother, his ruby-skinned body striking an excellent contrast with Randis's black skin.

The First Founder glances at the galaxy map. Then he looks at a local map for Volgarius, one which shows 6 major regions of the planet at once.

"Eleven cycles." Unarin murmurs thoughtfully. "He's certainly taking his time."

"You think he will come." Randis states. "So he will."

"The Second Wordsmith is quite the enigma." Unarin says. "Resourceful. Greedy. Precise."

"Comparatively, the First Wordsmith is.. lacking." Randis follows-up.

Unarin nods. "Perhaps."

The two brothers remain quiet for a moment.

"Are you afraid?" Randis asks.

"No." Unarin says.

And he means it.

Randis sends a rescue team to a yellow-level alert, where a mine has collapsed on some Technopath workers.

Unarin nods. "You have many things that require your attention. I'll check again in three standard time units."

"You may visit whenever you need to talk." Randis says, never once looking at his brother. Always, he is busy tending to the Empire's needs.

Unarin departs.

He walks to a large open window, one which allows him to peer at the lush green gardens surrounding the Founder's Thumb.

On many occasions, he comes and stands here, thinking while admiring the view.

These gardens are the only major source of greenery on all of Volgarius. While they are not especially vast, they are visible from space, due to the way their color pops out of the steel and glass world of stratoscrapers overwhelming Volgarius's surface area.

After standing and staring for ten long seconds, Unarin frowns.

"Hmm... the feeling is intensifying. Shouldn't be much longer now."

The Second Founder, Dosena, materializes beside him. Her arrival is completely silent. Even when she tears the Void to travel across space, none can hear her approach.

[I can kill him.] Dosena says. [It would be easy.]

"But it would not be correct." Unarin says. "The universe is a vast place. I know this. You know this. Making peace with the Wordsmiths is of paramount importance."

[You refer to the great Game.] Dosea says. [The Milky Way lacks a Ruler. We are not players in the Game.]

"That may change if you reach the 10th Level." Unarin says. "No matter what happens, do not move unless I order you to do so. I will control my own destiny."

[I would not dream of doing so.] Dosea replies, seemingly offended Unarin would imply otherwise. [But that is not why I came to see you.]

Unarin blinks. He turns his head to look at the High Psion standing on his right.

"Is something the matter?"

Dosea frowns. [Do you recall that Cosmic Energy signature I told you about? I can sense it is growing stronger. Someone is definitely trying to Ascend.]

Unarin pauses. He looks back out the window, gently rubbing his chin.

"One of the Wordsmiths?"

[I do not believe so.] Dosea says. [I have detected a hint of evil in the ascension process. It is not the same feeling I obtained when I examined the Wordsmiths.]

Unarin doesn't say anything for a while.

He thinks back to the events of the past several orbital cycles.

Ever since the appearance of the Wordsmith, things have changed quickly and dramatically.

The galaxy is no longer stable. Now, it has begun to devolve into bursts of Chaos.

He recalls a conversation he had with the Wordsmith.

"...Dragon?" Unarin says absentmindedly.

[I am not certain. It might be.] Dosea replies.

"Keep your senses peeled, then." Unarin says. "Tell me if you detect anything more concrete."

Unaware of Mephisto's plans, the Volgrim have unknowingly been caught unawares. They have no way of knowing that as they speak, a dreadful power is amassing in a quadrant of the galaxy some ten thousand lightyears away.

But they are not afraid.

If any Cosmic entity should enter the Milky Way's Akashic Barrier, its inhabitants will not be defenseless.

The Volgrim have an ultimate weapon.

Her name is *Dosena*.

Tarus II.

Neil Adams sits inside a stealth-cloaked transport shuttle, along with ten of his honor guards, powerful soldiers decked out in armor comparable to Lieutenant Samuel's Rhino Exosuit. These specialized T-REX's were not made by Phoebe, but by humanity's other foremost inventor, Hans Wagner.

While Hans might not get the public's limelight in the same way their golden girl Phoebe does, his inventions are just as crucial as hers.

It was his nanite bombs that disintegrated many Grez when the demons first initiated battle with the Labyrinth Core during Stormbringer. He also developed alternate versions of the T-REX, including the Clinician, which saved countless wounded soldiers from certain death.

And on this day, Neil Adams just so happens to be heading to a remote factory built a hundred miles away from the Fortress of Retribution's city limits. This factory, of course, is run by none other than Hans Wagner.

And its identity is very special indeed.

Humanity just so happens to possess an incomprehensible, reality-defying technology that not even the Volgrim can easily copy.

Replicators.

And not just Replicators, but Fusion Power Plants, ones which have a magic and technology hybrid power system that grants humanity the equivalent of a sun's power.

These two things put together are absolutely incredible feats of engineering only made possible due to the Wordsmiths and their intervention.

While Phoebe Hiro may have factories of her own, she has not exploited the abundance of power to the maximum extent.

This remote factory is different.

Neil Adams licks his lips in anticipation. His shuttle arrives above a forest, where it passes through a cloaking field, revealing a large open clearing hidden underneath. A single square panel on the ground indicates an entry point into the facility, though there are other ways to access its interior through the usage of fairy temporal magic elsewhere on the planet.

But those ways don't suit Neil's purpose. While he might be trying to keep the factory a secret, it's not that he fears its discovery, but that any leg up on the demons could give him a huge boost in military supremacy in the future, even if only temporary.

Neil's shuttle lands underneath some trees, carefully positioned to minimize its visibility from orbit. While the Volgrim *probably* can't pierce the stealth field covering Tarus II with their spy technology, and *probably* can't see underground, it's still better to be cautious than not.

He exits the shuttle, and his guards follow him. They meet with a soldier stationed inside the facility who comes out to greet them. Then, she guides humanity's military commander down into the planet's depths.

As they walk, the soldier hands Neil a datapad. "Mister Wagner told me to give this to you, Commander."

Neil smiles faintly and accepts the datapad. He raises his eyebrows while he walks, gazing at its contents.

"Six new models? So fast?"

"After seeing Miss Hiro's performance during Stormbringer, Mister Wagner determined it would be best if our armed forces shifted direction, sir." The woman says respectfully. "He's devoted eighty percent of our energy allotment solely to mechanized war units."

Neil nods. "The performance parameters seem exceptional, at least to my layman eyes."

"Mister Wagner will explain the finer details." The woman says, flushing in embarrassment. "I'm not technically inclined, so I won't be of much use."

"That's fine." Neil says, as he lowers the datapad to his side. "I'm sure he won't go off on a terrible rambling diatribe, extolling the technical parameters of this new death

machine. He definitely won't turn my excitement to tears of boredom."

The woman snickers, then quickly schools her expression to one of professionalism and discipline. Sometimes, even Neil can surprise people with a joke.

They walk down a long hall where they arrive before an assortment of elevators. A couple of them open within moments as engineers and soldiers step out, notice Neil, and quickly salute.

"Sir!"

"At ease." Neil says.

He and his guards step in the elevator, though due to weight and size limitations, they split into three groups to go down in different elevators.

A long three-minute descent follows.

Neil travels more than a thousand meters underground before the doors open. He steps into a massive factory, where the glint of welding torches, the hammering of machinery, and the chugging of mechanized labor rings through the facility.

Huge mechs hang from the ceiling, suspended by thick metal cables. Much like the Arachnid-Class Phoebe employed during Stormbringer, and the Planet-Walkers, these robotic constructs are larger than tanks, but now they come in a variety of basic configurations. At a glance, Neil notes a thirty-foot tall slender model, a fifty-foot tall heavily armored model, one that rolls around on treads, and even an odd gyroscope-based mech that rolls on a single magnetic ball.

While only half a dozen prototypes hang on the ceiling, Neil quickly understands that these are the building blocks to humanity's next major wartime upgrade. In addition to the enhancements of their human bodies through Jason's Body Boosters, his soldiers will soon sport lethal new weaponry, as well as machines capable of flattening cities and razing demonic empires to ash.

"Ah! Neil! So good to see you!"

Hans' voice slightly startles Neil, but he doesn't let the interruption of his thoughts show on his face.

Neil turns to look at the tall, wiry German scientist. "Hans. These new prototypes are looking impressive."

"You like zem, yes? Zey are quite beautiful, I must admit!" Hans chirps, his eyes curving into crescents. He adjusts his glasses as he walks over to Neil's side. "I am particularly proud of zee third one from zee left."

Hans points to one of the six mechs hanging from the ceiling. Its size is not the largest, but it does sport a sleek silver paint coating.

"The Ironclad." Neil says, recalling the name of that model from the datapad he was given. "I didn't have time to do much more than skim the data. What does it do?"

Hans leads Neil up a flight of stairs to an overhead observation deck, where they can better look at the giant warframes. Here, they can see every individual engineer welding and working on the different prototypes, some of them levitating through the use of flight-capable Hummer exosuits.

"It is a simple machine on zee surface, but its interior contains a wealth of secrets!" Hans explains. "Zee machine is equipped with a transforming two-type weapon called a Batterer. It can switch between a melee-hammer mode for close combat, and a shotgun-mode for mid-ranged combat."

Hans points at the Ironclad's back. "See zat green glowing nacelle? Zat is a shield generator. It ignores weaponry striking at melee range and deflects only bullets, lasers, and other long-ranged ordinances."

"A solid mid and close-range warframe." Neil says to himself.

"Aye." Hans acknowledges. "But zee enemies we will soon face are demons, so zis machine is not ideal for dealing with zem. Instead, look to zee second from zee end."

Neil follows Hans' finger. He gazes at a pitch-black machine with glowing red wings made of magical energy sticking out of its back. A single longsword rests in its hands.

"Zee Reaper." Hans says, visibly pleased with his work. "A very special machine. I could not make it alone. I had to enlist zee assistance of a fairy. It has a unique property you won't believe..."

"Go on." Neil says.

Hans glances at Neil's right hand. "You still wear zat glove I made for you. Good. You know how it is especially effective against enemies with abundant reserves of mana? So too is zee Reaper. It is armored, yet flexible. It drains zee mana from whoever it strikes, empowering itself. Zee mightier zee enemy zee Reaper faces, zee better it can perform."

He pauses.

"Within reason, of course."

Neil's eyes light up. "A warframe designed to kill Emperors. You've outdone yourself, making something this useful so soon."

Hans' excitement dims. "It is only a prototype. I have not been able to test its effectiveness against a Demon Emperor hellbent on destroying it. I worry it may not be durable enough to protect its pilot..."

"I have nothing if not abundant faith in your abilities." Neil says with a smile. "Do not sell yourself short, old friend. Jason may have Phoebe, but I have you, and in my eyes, you are her equal."

Hans scoffs. "You flatter me, but we both know zat is not zee truth."

"Mmm."

Neil doesn't belabor the point.

"I've heard rumors some of the Emperors have abruptly gone missing." Neil says. "When Hope returns, I'll have him try to find them. In the meantime, keep working on these machines. We might need them soon."

"Once zee prototypes are ready, we will scan zeir data into zee systems." Hans says. "Zen we will be ready to mass produce zem."

"I look forward to seeing them in action." Neil replies.

Hans shows off the other four models, each one making Neil's smile grow wider and wider. He offers some minor suggestions to spice up the lineup, and eventually takes his leave.

As Neil exits the underground base, he looks up at the sunny sky.

"First, the demons. Then, the galaxy."

Part 491: Killing Unarin

Volgarius, inside a Technopath-controlled stratoscraper where Sangin Lidra talked to Exolis Whitspur, the leader of Clan Dyna, only two weeks earlier.

Foop!

Abruptly, Hope Hiro materializes on the takeoff platform where dozens of interplanetary spacecraft once rested. This outward-facing hangar is exactly the spot where Lidra departed to travel to Serris, and also a spot Hope chose to leave a Waypoint behind.

But when Hope materializes, he finds that not a single ship rests on the platform.

Hope holds Excalibur in his right hand, and Hammurabi's miniaturized tablet in the other. On his belt, three other powerful artifacts rest, each one specially chosen for this mission.

But despite arriving ready to immediately engage in battle, Hope instead finds himself all alone!

He hasn't even hidden his body. He hasn't shielded himself or made himself invisible... he simply boldly steps out into the light, expecting to draw the gazes of every Psion within a thousand clicks.

What he instead finds is... nothing.

Hope looks around, slightly bewildered.

"The fuck?"

He swivels in place, casting his senses out like a wide net. He speaks several Words of Power, only to realize the once-bustling citytropolis of Volgarius has been mostly deserted.

He does spot a random speeder flying here or there. Sometimes an airbus. Sometimes a hauler with junk.

But compared to the tens of thousands of aircraft that dotted Volgarius's skies only two real-time weeks ago, it appears practically barren now.

Inside Excalibur, King Arthur chuckles humorlessly.

"So it's like that. It seems the Volgrim anticipated you would return. They've evacuated the planet."

Hope's expression sinks. "They did?! But how?! There were like eight bazillion sentients living here!"

"They have Warp gates, young one." Arthur says calmly. "And likely millions or billions of spacecraft. It's not a stretch to think they could do such a thing."

"Yeah, but-" Hope starts to say, only to pause as the hairs on the back of his neck prick up.

He spins around, startled to see that a High Psion has appeared behind him.

"About time." Hope says, grinning viciously. "You must be Dosen, the Volgrim's mightiest Psion. Here to face off against the legendary Wordsmith?"

The Psion across from him wears flowing red robes, and a dark cape billows behind her back. Her striking golden skin makes her appear quite vicious; an elite among elites. Hope isn't certain if she is Dosen, as he has trouble telling the different Volgrim apart, but it must be her, given how easily she sneaked up on him.

The Psion looks at the human with a complete lack of emotion.

[You are mistaken. My apologies, for I was hoping to meet you sooner. Perhaps under more... pleasant circumstances.]

She pauses.

[My designation is Creator Demila. I am a 7th Ranked Psion, like Confessor Vulpanix.]

Hope blinks. "I already trashed Vulpanix. You think you can do better than her?"

He tightens his grip on Excalibur, ready to leap forward and cut Demila down. However, he still holds back, wanting to hear what she has to say.

[Again. You are mistaken.] Demila says. [I am not here to fight you. Though, if meting out death is the only thing on your mind, I suppose we could do so. Compared to Vulpanix, I will not prove much of a challenge. She is more powerful than me.]

"So why are you here, then?" Hope asks, glancing around to see if a cavalcade of 8th Level Psions will pounce out of a tear in space to blast him to smithereens.

[Founder Unarin has a message for you.] Demila says. [He wants to meet you at the Founder's Thumb.]

Hope narrows his eyes. "So it's a trap then. You want to lure me to your headquarters so you can catch me unawares."

Several seconds pass.

Demila exhales through her nose, in a manner somewhat similar to a sigh.

[I have been instructed not to harm you. We have evacuated the planet to prevent you from causing a mass casualty event. You need not worry that Founder Unarin himself will not be present at the designated meeting site, nor that he will try to deceive you. That is not the Volgrim way. That is *not* the First Founder's way.]

Hope cocks his head. His eyes flick from left to right, waiting to see if a camera crew is going to pop out and say that he's being pranked.

Obviously, no such thing happens.

"This is a trick." Hope states.

[I can guide you to the Founder's Thumb.] Demila says. [Do you wish to meet Founder Unarin?]

This time, it's Hope who pauses.

He narrows his eyes, gazing intently at Demila like a hawk.

"No need. I'll make my own way. **TELEPORT!**"

Abruptly, Hope vanishes from the spot!

Normally, teleporting tens, hundreds, or even thousands of miles without returning to a Waypoint would drain the Wordsmiths of their internal mana reserves. Jumping to a new and novel location, for some reason, takes much more energy than one where they've placed a Waypoint previously.

But thanks to the power of Excalibur, Hope possesses practically unlimited reserves of mana. He travels halfway across Volgarius in an instant, materializing in the skies above the Founder's Fingers.

Immediately, Hope erects a powerful force field around himself, one fueled by Excalibur's reserves. He levitates in the sky, pivoting around to look for danger. In his mind, he plans to intercept a half-dozen 8th Level Psions who were surely going to ambush him!

But once again, even when he casts Word of Power to detect foreign entities, he finds... nothing.

No enemies.

No ambush.

No aircraft.

Nothing at all.

By now, Hope is beginning to feel truly perplexed. He detects several scattered Technopaths and Changelings inside the smallest of the five towers arranged in the center of the grassy green nature preserve. This, he assumes, must be the Founder's Thumb. As for the other towers, they are completely empty.

"What the hell is going on...?" Hope mumbles to himself.

Inside Hammurabi's tablet, the old man chuckles quietly. "Solomon told you not to come here, boy. You should have listened. You're making a fool of yourself."

Arthur nods, his spiritual senses easily sweeping the area. "There's no need to go any further, Hope. Unarin has beaten you."

"No." Hope growls. "He's a monster who has treated humanity like cattle. Today, he must die. Whether he's here or not, I'll hunt him down, find him, and kill him."

Arthur shrugs. "Suit yourself."

Hope focuses his mind. He notices a few bio-signatures inside the Founder's Thumb he's never encountered before.

Not Technopaths.

Not Changelings.

Not Psions.

He concludes they must be either Dolgrimites or Ascended.

One of those entities stands on a platform extending out of the Founder's Thumb. This particular Ascended has bright pink skin, and beautiful watery-blue eyes.

Hope teleports to the individual's position, materializing before the Ascended he recognizes as Muuxunuu, Unarin's Head Administrator.

While Hope has never seen her or Unarin in person, he did see both of them during the broadcast where Unarin revealed he was in possession of Excalibur.

When he arrives before Muuxunuu, Hope's heart skips a beat.

He realizes that despite being an alien creature with features different from any human... she is... shockingly beautiful. Much more so than her appearance seemed to be on the video he saw.

Hope becomes momentarily awestruck by how lovely and innocent Muuxunuu appears. Her limpid eyes take a moment to travel from Hope's previous position to his new one. When they make contact with Hope's eyes, he takes a step back.

"I, uh, you-?" Hope awkwardly stammers. "Unarin, uh, take me to him?"

"Hope Hiro. Mighty Wordsmith." Muuxunuu says respectfully, bowing her head toward him. "I am Unarin's Head Administrator, his personal assistant. The First Founder is expecting you."

Hope quickly gets a grip on himself. He frowns at her oddly subservient attitude.

"This is a trick." Hope says.

Muuxunuu raises her head. Her expression becomes one of faint confusion.

"A trick?"

"There's no way this is legitimate." Hope says, pointing Excalibur at her. "Where is Unarin, really?"

"He is in his Sanctum." Muuxunuu says, unbothered by humanity's deadliest weapon being pointed at her chest. "Unarin does not lie. Unarin does not deceive."

"I find that hard to believe." Hope snarks. "Everyone lies at some point."

Muuxunuu simply stares at Hope.

"Not Unarin."

She turns around, presenting her back to Hope without a hint of fear. If he wished, he could reach out and behead her with ease.

Muuxunuu turns and walks into the hangar.

Hope pauses for two seconds, unsure what to do.

But eventually, he relents. He follows her inside, keeping his eyes peeled for ambushes and traps.

As always, Hope hardly sees a single other Volgrim. Once, he spots a Changeling walking down a hallway in the distance. Another time, he spots a Technopath in a sound-proofed room working on something mechanical.

"We have evacuated Volgarius." Muuxunuu explains. "We did not wish to leave countless innocents available for the Mighty Wordsmith to slaughter unjustly. The Volgrim who remain are critical to the functionality of our society. They must continue to perform their duties, no matter what."

"So what you're saying is, the people who are left are so critical that if I killed them it would utterly cripple your species' capabilities?" Hope asks, smiling at Muuxunuu's back evilly.

Muuxunuu nods. "Yes."

Hope's smile vanishes. He suddenly feels as if asking that question was incredibly stupid.

For some reason, he just can't bring himself to harm the pretty Ascended woman in front of him, or mindlessly lash out at the other Volgrim.

Hope really only intended to kill Unarin and any Psions or Technopaths who blocked his path.

But the closer Hope draws to Unarin's Private chambers, the more unsettled he feels.

This is... too easy. It can't be this easy. Unarin must be laying a trap for me.

Eventually, Muuxunuu and Hope arrive at a pair of massive metal doors. Each one appears heavy, as if they must be ten feet thick and weigh fifty tons each.

But to Hope's surprise, Muuxunuu walks up to the doors and gives them a push. They open inward slowly, with great gravitas, confirming to the Wordsmith that they are indeed as massive as he thought.

Holy hell. Hope thinks. *This Muuxunuu is... strong! She's not as simple as she appears.*

After Muuxunuu opens the doors, she steps to the side and looks at Hope with her beautiful blue eyes.

"The First Founder waits for you inside."

Hope holds Excalibur a little tighter, as if afraid he might drop it should Dosena pop out to attack him from nowhere.

"So you claim." Hope says, but this time, his words lack the same venom as before. He just can't bring himself to be rude to such a nice, pretty lady like Muuxunuu.

After a moment of awkward silence, Hope marches into the First Founder's Inner Sanctum.

This place, where Jason has already walked, carries with it a deep and rich history. Hope glances around at the pieces of artwork on display, the miniaturized cityscapes crafted with impeccable detail, and the beautiful chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

Everything about the Sanctum screams 'high class' to Hope, who starts feeling like a country bumpkin by comparison.

"Unarin!" Hope yells. "Show yourself! Come out and face me."

Hope easily detects Unarin on the second level, up a flight of stairs. Before Hope can approach, Unarin walks up to the balcony and looks down at the young man below.

"Hope Hiro." Unarin says softly. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Cut the crap." Hope snaps. "**Teleport.**"

He vanishes from his position and reappears behind Unarin, whirling to face the First Founder.

Unarin calmly turns on his heel and smiles at the Wordsmith.

"Not much for pleasantries, I take it. You're very different from Jason."

"I've come to kill you." Hope says, flicking his eyes around. "So let's cut the crap. I know you wouldn't be here, unprotected. Where's Dosena?"

"Dosena is here." Unarin says. "But she will make no move to stop you, no matter your intentions. If you intend to kill me, then by all means, I won't bother wasting any air on the matter. Have at it."

Unarin folds his hands behind his back, stands up straight, and looks at the Wordsmith with an expression of pure apathy.

Hope scowls. He lifts Excalibur up and presses the blade against Unarin's neck.

"You're eager to die?" Hope asks.

"Not eager." Unarin corrects. "Truth be told, I'd rather keep living. I've many things yet to accomplish. But I'll not skulk about, hiding in secret fortresses to drag out my certain death. If a Wordsmith wishes to kill me, I good and well can't hide, can I?"

"So this is it then?" Hope asks. "You just stand there, I kill you, and it's over?"

Unarin nods. "You are angry at me. You blame me for the fate which befell humanity, as you should. I was one of the key architects of your people's fall and later enslavement to the demons. I also authorized those tests to be performed on captive humans. I treated your species like cattle. It's only reasonable you would hate me enough to want to kill me."

Fury begins to cloud Hope's vision. "So you admit to it! Do you think a bit of honesty will prevent me from beheading you, right here and now?!"

"By no means." Unarin says. "Let me assure you. I am Unarin. I am not a clone, a construct, or a hologram. I am the one you hate most. If you intend to kill me, you can do so at your leisure. Dosena will not intrude, and will allow you to leave, unmolested. You can even kill all of the Volgrim inside the Founder's Thumb, if you wish. You'll cripple our wartime capabilities, and the Plague will surely destroy what's left of our Empire within ten orbital cycles."

He adds, "A decisive end to the Volgrim Empire, wouldn't you agree?"

Hope's angry scowl lightens. He stares deeply into Unarin's eyes.

"What are you playing at? You're making this too easy. Trying to use reverse psychology on me?"

"It's nothing as silly as that." Unarin says. "I assume you're a smart human. You possess Solomon's Crown, yes? You should be wise enough to see the folly of what you're about to do."

"The folly...?" Hope asks, Excalibur's blade still hovering a mere millimeter from Unarin's neck.

"Hope." Unarin says calmly. "When you kill me... and the other Volgrim here... what will happen?"

Hope remains silent for a time.

"The Plague will... go unopposed..." Hope says slowly.

"So you do see the issue." Unarin says. "That's right. The Volgrim protect our galaxy from the Plague. We are losing this war, of course. Slowly, we lose more and more worlds to its advance each and every cycle. Assuming no external events occur, we should collapse entirely within one hundred orbital cycles. Perhaps a bit more."

Unarin smiles.

"But then you come along and separate my head from my neck. Our people suddenly lack the leader who has held them together for millions of cycles. I imagine our bulwark will buckle quite quickly. The Plague will rapidly devour hundreds, thousands of worlds. They will come for yours. Humanity shall perish, along with the Volgrim. The end."

Hope's stomach sinks.

"So that's your ploy. You know I can't kill you, because if I do, I'll damn humanity."

Unarin raises an eyebrow.

"That's not true. You are a Wordsmith, Hope. You can kill me, destroy the Volgrim Empire, and hide humanity inside a pocket space of some kind. You don't have to live in this galaxy at all. You can always go somewhere else, somewhere the Plague won't find you."

Hope nods slowly. "Yeah... I *can* do that."

He pauses.

"It feels like there's a 'but' coming, Unarin."

The First Founder rests his hands on his waist. "*But*... there is no such thing as an unclaimed galaxy. If you think the Plague is frightening... you've no idea what horrors lay out there, beyond the Milky Way's confines... in the Void."

"There are other sentient species in other galaxies?" Hope asks.

"Hahaha." Unarin laughs emotionlessly. "Far more than you can fathom. Our universe is bigger than you can comprehend. The forces you have seen are dwarfed by many magnitudes of other frightening creatures lurking, waiting in the Void."

Unarin shrugs.

"You have been hurt. I am sorry for taking humanity and turning it into a chattel species. The demons feasted on human bodies and souls for 100,000 cycles. My people tested our technology and abilities on captive humans, as well."

He leans toward Hope with an intense look in his eyes.

"But if you think we did all of that for *fun*? Then you are sorely mistaken."

Slowly, Hope lowers Excalibur to his side.

"You're saying you had to torture men, women, and children? You had to brutalize humans and their clones? It was necessary for the greater good?"

"Perhaps not necessary." Unarin says. "But... efficient. Your species is quite remarkable. Equal to my own in terms of its versatility. We made many incredible advances by studying human biology. And every advance was for the explicit purpose of turning the Milky Way into a future player in The Game."

Something about those last two words alarms Hope. He furrows his brow at the First Founder.

"What do you mean? What 'Game'?"

"The Game is The Game." Unarin says simply. "The eternal Game between Rulers. It transcends time. When this Eternity ends and the next one begins... The Game will continue, as it always has, as it always will."

Hope begins to feel as if Unarin isn't babbling random mumbo-jumbo, but something of life and death importance. Something Hope must absolutely pay attention to.

"You're not making sense." Hope says. "Explain it more succinctly."

Unarin scoffs. "Weren't you going to kill me? I don't see any point in continuing."

"Fuck off." Hope snaps. "Fine. You've piqued my interest. I won't kill you. Are you happy?"

Unarin widens his eyes. He gasps, as if in amazement. "Truly? You are more benevolent than I expected, Mighty Wordsmith. I will carve this favor on my heart for all eternity."

Hope begins to feel somewhat depressed. Now he understands why Arthur and Hammurabi subtly mocked him for thinking he could just stroll up and kill Unarin.

Although, in his heart, Hope realizes he never wanted to do that anyway. All he wanted to do was get some answers; to learn why the Volgrim would inflict such cruel and barbaric acts upon innocent humans, cloning them and torturing them over and over again for a hundred thousand years.

Finally, it seems as if he will receive the answers he wants most.

Unarin folds his hands behind his back. His expression of sincere gratitude vanishes, and in its place, the same commanding aura as before takes over.

"I'm surprised. I thought Solomon would have told you. If the Mind Thief doesn't know, I cannot imagine why not. He must know of the Game, yet he does not speak of it to you. Perhaps I would be doing him a disservice if I told you myself."

"Solomon and I aren't on the best of terms." Hope retorts. "I've caught him deceiving me several times."

"Understandable. You don't enjoy being lied to." Unarin says sympathetically. "I may withhold information, but I never lie. I have no reason to do so. Lying is something weak and dishonest worms do, not rulers and leaders."

"So tell me about the Game already." Hope says. "Or are you pulling words out of your ass?"

Unarin doesn't hesitate to answer Hope's question.

"Archangel Raphael should know more about this than even I do. If you doubt anything I am going to tell you, you can ask him for clarification."

He continues with a question. "Tell me, Hope. What do you know of the event your people once called the *Big Bang*?"

Part 492: Glinch's Thralls

On the world of Numaria, more than half a dozen Demon Emperors and twenty Demon Dukes march through the paradise-class planet's forests as they head toward Emperor Glinch's Stitched Wasteland.

Emperor Auger does not directly join the party. He stays back at the capital of his world, viewing the happenings remotely through the power of a subordinate.

But Yardrat does lead the party. He is joined by Emperors Fae, Dagon, and Nymph, as well as Duke Hamir and several other elites of their Hell. It becomes obvious to all the other demons present that the Fourth Hell of Punishment is truly the mightiest among all the others. Even mere Dukes can explode with the power of Emperors, should Auger choose to grant them that ability.

As for the First Hell of Damnation, its remaining members are truly a miserable sight. Bael has become the lone Emperor still loyal to his Hell, while Mephisto and Zamiel no longer care about the alliances of their species. Bael is joined by Vepar, formerly the Baron of Toxicity, now having evolved to the rank of Duke through the human-demon alliance efforts.

Vepar, while not an Emperor, is still an insidious existence. Like Mephisto, she can transform her body into formless clouds of poison gas. She can strike with venom and poison alike, paralyzing her foes or corroding their nervous systems with ease.

Also notably absent is Beelzebub, due to him forcibly becoming aligned to Jason Hiro. While Beelzebub might actually prove an incredible powerhouse if he were to continue fighting for the First Hell's benefits, the problem is that none can say whether his allegiances would make him privy to spilling secrets of this operation to the humans...

From the Second Hell of Lust, not a single Duke joins the party. This Hell has already thrown their lots in with humanity, so no members of the Mephisto Extermination Operation are eager to have their secrets blabbed. Defeating Mephisto could lead to a discovery about the potential for ascension past the rank of Emperor. No demon elite wants that information to fall into the hands of their enemies.

From the Third Hell of Blood, few elites remain. Many of them were slain by the Cherubiim, reducing their Dukes to only a sliver of the other Hells. The Emperor of

Thirst, Kristoff, still walks the mortal coil. He is joined by two subordinates, Vespera, the Duke of Gloom, and Rhesus, the Duke of Predation. These are the elites he considers his Hell's most capable remaining powerhouses, and the ones most suited for the mission to bring about Mephisto's end.

From the Fifth Hell of Calamity, a large number of Dukes join two Emperors, Serena and Crow, as they trail along behind the other Hells.

Unbeknownst to anyone present, Emperor Yumagi is alive and well. The only demons who observed his return were those aligned with Mephisto. Not even Gorn is aware that Yumagi survived the Cherubiim's wrath, and Yumagi is strangely keen to keep his return quiet.

As for the Sixth Hell of Isolation, only Emperor Melody has chosen to come along. The other elites of her Hell simply aren't in the right headspace to join her, following their fall to the Plague.

Yama's Hell, the Seventh Hell of Corruption, has fallen apart with its Emperor being absorbed by Mephisto. Now, its many darkness-aligned entities have scattered in search of a figure lost to time...

Yardrat, Fae, Dagon, Nymph, Bael, Kristoff, Serena, Crow, and Melody march on the Stitched Wasteland, along with twenty Dukes. A terrifying force in any previous era, but one that feels somewhat weak and vulnerable in the months following the return of the Cherubiim, as well as the two Wordsmiths, not even mentioning the enemy they might face should they fail to stop Mephisto's ascension.

Yardrat's glum expression does nothing to uplift the moods of the others around him. As he and the other Emperors run across Numaria's surface, weaving their ways through the dense forests and trees, Bael speaks up from the back.

"Hey, Yardy! Why are we runnin' like a bunch of chumps? Just pop us over to Glinch with those fancy portals of yours!"

Yardrat shoots a glance back at Bael without slowing down. "I can't. Glinch's minions have an uncanny ability to twist the space around themselves. I couldn't create stable portals once we're inside if my life depended on it. I've no doubt he bred them for the express purpose of keeping me from spying on him."

Fae jumps over a bunch of twisted prickly-vines, scratching her palm on their thorns. "Doesn't that mean if something goes wrong, you won't be able to yank us out of the Stitched Wasteland?"

"Trust me." Yardrat mumbles, sounding more than a little depressed. "You don't want to hear my answer."

"There is no need to concern yourselves with escaping." Crow says solemnly, deftly flying through the underbrush with her blue wings. "If Mephisto ascends, it won't matter where we flee. He will be capable of hunting us like deer."

Yardrat snorts. "Speak for yourselves. I enjoy running away if it means saving my life."

"Coward." Bael says. "A REAL man always fights to the end!"

"Aren't you in a woman's body now?" Yardrat shoots back. "You're one to talk."

"H-heh! Women can be real men too!" Bael protests. "Get with the times!"

Emperor Melody laughs. "You tell him, Bael! Preach it!"

Serena remains silent, merely rolling her sightless eyes at everyone else's childish barbs.

* * *

Five hours pass as the demons race through Numaria's forests.

Eventually, the trees begin to thin out, before abruptly disappearing altogether. As if erased by a nuclear bomb, the forest's cover vanishes to reveal a grey-colored lifeless plain lacking all traces of warmth and life.

The Stitched Wasteland.

As soon as the demon leaders reach the edge of the wasteland, they pause their flight to stop and look around.

"Glinch's domain is bigger than you might first believe," Yardrat explains, gesturing toward the horizon. "Offhand, I believe the last time we measured the Stitched Wasteland's diameter, it was nearly 500 miles. You can't even see the other side from here because it dips below the horizon. The good news is, we only have to travel halfway into the interior, where Glinch's central laboratory resides."

Dagon, the Emperor of Pathogens, kneels down to scratch at the ashen soil. He grimaces as it clings to his palm and starts to burn his flesh.

"Acidic." Dagon mumbles.

"Every time Glinch creates a new thrall, his domain expands." Serena explains. "His toxic miasma is invisible and odorless, but it destroys plant-life and lower animals with ease. It won't have any effect on elites like us, but it's best if you don't deliberately play with the soil he's corroded."

Dagon shakes the soil off his palm, grimacing as he has to clap his hands and rub them against his pants to stop the acid from burning him further. Luckily, one of the Dukes nearby has a weak healing ability, so they're able to fix him back up.

"What a miserable shithole." Fae groans. "I do NOT get what Glinch enjoys about living here! I'd go crazy from boredom after a week!"

Bael laughs. "No kidding, toots. Why do you think Glinch is such a wacko? He already went crazy!"

"Oh. Fair point." Fae mutters.

The Emperors and Dukes start moving toward the center of the wasteland, following Yadrat's lead. They do not run, but move at a brisk walk, keeping their eyes peeled for threats. Ten miles in the distance, they spot a pair of strange aberrant creatures standing perfectly still, looking at one another with hollow eyes, but they can't make out the details of those figures at their current distance.

"Bael, watch out!" Serena suddenly shouts, startling everyone.

Every demon elite's head snaps toward Bael's general direction just in time to see an invisible creature materializing, its massive body poised with a giant claw up in the air, ready to slash down at Bael.

The monster's huge torso and comparatively tiny head and skinny legs contrast with its wretchedly massive arms, its mottled and rotted skin, and its beady green venomous eyes.

The instant it snaps its claws down to assassinate Bael, the dumb galump accidentally trips on a rock, stumbling and avoiding the monster's attack! Bael falls face-first in the soil and the creature's downward slash swishes across his back, barely missing him by a millimeter!

"Lucky!" Yadrat exclaims, his pupils the size of pinpricks.

Crow roars in rage. She leaps toward the monster, the strange deformed horror with proportions far different from any naturally born creature in existence, and she swings her fist at its chest!

THUMP!

Crow knocks the creature down, sending it skidding backward across the dirt to lay in a heap.

But Crow doesn't celebrate. To her shock, she didn't even manage to bruise the monster, only knock it on its ass! The frighteningly durable monster silently stands up, and its body rapidly fades away as it becomes invisible.

Not once does the creature make a sound.

"Everyone watch out!" Crow shouts. "This bastard is strong! I don't even know if I hurt it!"

The heart of every demon elite skips a beat as they try to look for any signs of the monster. Only Serena, with her Soul Sensing capabilities, manages to trace its vague movement.

"Over there!" Serena says, pointing in front of Yardrat.

The monster once again becomes visible as it tries to slash Yardrat in half, but he isn't caught off-guard and leaps backward, safely avoiding it just in the nick of time.

"TEAR!" Yardrat yells, gnashing his teeth.

The Emperor of the Void tears the air in front of himself, unable to properly create a portal, but still able to momentarily rip a crack in space straight across the monster's torso.

A shallow cut on its chest is his only reward.

"Lucifer's Tits!" Bael exclaims, climbing to his feet. "This thing is as tough as demonstone!"

Melody fires off sonic blasts at the monster, punching with her fists to try and blow out its eardrums, but her attacks have no effect.

The monster continues charging at Yardrat to try and cut him to pieces. As it does, Crow once again steps up to protect Yardrat, deflecting its rending claws with her steel-like feathers while dishing out punishment with her fists. Crow is without a doubt the

most physically imposing member of the party, possessing more strength than any demon in existence except for Belial.

But even she can't manage to do more than knock the monster back!

The other Emperors quickly start pitching in. Dagon summons corrosive chemicals to try and melt the monster's thick hide. Nymph summons vines from beneath its feet to wrap its legs and keep it immobile. Kristoff summons bloodied blades to cut the monster from behind, slashing its back with swords made from his own plasma. Fae fires explosive projectiles with a low yield at the monster, taking care not to accidentally hurt her allies. Melody sends sonic shockwaves into the ground, trying to soften the soil to trap the monster in quicksand.

But the monster proves more frightening than any of the Emperors imagined!

Bael and Serena can't provide much assistance to the others. They watch helplessly as Nymph's vines corrode to ash, melted by the Stitched Wasteland's ability to destroy plant-life. Fae's explosions barely even knock the monster back. Dagon might as well be shooting the monster with a squirt-gun for all the use his chemicals have. Melody can't seem to accomplish anything either!

"Shit." Bael growls. "I gotta help them."

"You don't have any magic." Serena says.

"No. But I got this." Bael says, reaching down to touch his weirdly fancy belt.

When Bael activates the Matriarch's Armor, it begins popping out of his waist and engulfing him from head to toe in lethal-looking demonstone armor. His plated chest and spiked shoulders turn Bael from a dopey looking version of Ose into a commanding and fearful warrior clad in demonic armor, making Serena gasp in surprise.

"Bael?" Serena asks, unable to see the armor, but sensing that his soul has suddenly become difficult to detect due to something shrouding his entire body. "What did you do?"

"Ose gave me some armor." Bael explains. "It ain't mine. But we'll talk 'bout it later. I gotta help the others!"

Bael doesn't hesitate. He rushes toward the monster, joining Crow as a frontline tank to try and draw the creature's attention.

Crow barely even registers Bael's new appearance, shoving any concerns about the demonstone-clad warrior to the back of her mind. All she feels is relief when the monster's brutal strikes slow down as it starts slashing at Bael as well.

THUNK! THUNK!!

The brutish monster silently whales on the others. For ten minutes, Bael and Crow take the beatings of their lives while Yardrat slowly tears its skin and cuts its bones with targeted spatial distortions. He alone manages to injure the creature the most heavily, while the other Dukes and Emperors can barely offer much assistance.

Bael grimaces as the creature grabs him by his helmet, lifts him up, and throws him like a ragdoll. Bael cries out in alarm as he goes flying and lands in the dirt, two hundred feet behind the brute.

"Spawn of a- you piece of trash! Nobody throws Bael!"

He jumps to his feet and starts to run back toward the monster, only to pause when he senses movement.

Bael quickly turns around. He nearly jumps out of his skin when he sees what he can only mentally describe as seventeen snakes with baby-heads crawling along the ground toward him. The snakes have a single conjoined core body that ties them all together, but it appears as flat as a pancake. Like some sort of Hydra consisting of stitched-together body parts, this multi-headed monster uses its childish faces to drag itself toward Bael at a speed most distressing, causing his buttohole to pucker up.

"Eee! Gross!" Bael cries. "What in the hellhound's anus is that?!"

Like the previous monster, this 'Snakedra' freak doesn't cry out or make any noises. It silently slithers toward Bael while one of its heads remains elevated to gaze directly at him.

Not wanting his friends to be overwhelmed, Bael decides to try and take the monster on by himself. His eyes fill with determination, and he conjures Mjölnir in his grasp, summoning it from his belt.

"Bad snake!" Bael barks, lunging at the monster to smash one of its heads.

SPLAT!!

Bael crushes the first head with ease!

But as he raises the hammer to strike again, the monster pounces at him! Its sixteen remaining heads bite his armor and wrap around his arms and legs, smothering him and causing him to fall backward.

"Crap, crap!" Bael yells. "Uh, don't worry guys, I've got this! Just keep killing the big one! I've got this cunt right where I want him! YEEOUCH!"

The Snakedra squeezes with all its strength, trying to burst Bael's body like a watermelon. Luckily, the demonstone only creaks a bit and doesn't fold inward, allowing Bael to survive, albeit not to do much else.

Serena, seeing that the others are too occupied to help, decides to try and assist Bael in some way. Since her abilities aren't much use against the first monster unless it turns invisible, she turns her gaze toward the Snakedra.

Emperor Serena maintains a good distance between herself and the Snakedra. She closes her eyes, focuses her mind, then shapes her right hand into a claw pose, snapping it in the Snakedra's direction.

An invisible beam of soul energy travels the gaps between dimensions, drilling into one of the Snakedra's heads. Serena focuses with all her might, attempting to try and locate the monster's soul so she can manipulate or influence it.

Unfortunately, she finds that while the creature does have a soul, it has become a mish-mash of fifty other souls, all witlessly stitched together to create an aberrant, thoughtless machine for killing.

Pain. Pain. Pain. The Snakedra thinks. *Pain. Pain. Pain.*

Serena grimaces. Her eyes squeeze shut even tighter as she tunes out Bael's exclamations of how 'totally okay and fine' he is. She digs deeper into the Snakedra's psyche, eventually extracting a thread of its existence for her own benefit.

Serena's eyes finally open.

While most entities possess eyes that can 'see' the physical realm, even as an imp, Serena was blind from birth. She was never able to see the world around her, but all of that changed when she met her husband, Gorn.

He and her were only Imps at the time. They became Lords together, and upon her ascension, she gained a new type of vision utterly unique to herself.

The power to see the soul realm.

While usually incapable of influencing the material realm, the soul realm is the domain Serena has become most adept at influencing over the millennia. As an Emperor, her power has become quite substantial in this regard.

Serena tears a fragment of soul energy out of the monster. It doesn't even shudder, but she doesn't care.

With her soul-seeing eyes, Serena deftly manipulates the thread of soul energy, using her fingers to hastily but efficiently craft a Soul Puppet, something not unlike a voodoo doll.

After forming a Soul Puppet in the form of the Snakedra, Serena grabs it out of the air and begins wrenching its heads around, stabbing at its body with her fingernails, and otherwise torturing the false image as much as possible.

Not once does the Snakedra cry out in pain, but its body does twitch and spasm. It writhes and squirms, continuing to hold Bael steady, but sometimes weakening its grip as it loses control of different parts of its body at random.

Meanwhile, Bael occasionally feels the wretched monster weaken its grip on him. Bael might not be the brightest bulb in the box, but as an accomplished veteran of countless wars, he is well-versed in the art of combat.

Bael isn't certain why the creature has started to spasm, but he won't turn down any good opportunity that arises.

He calls forth the power of Mjöltnir, summoning lightning from above to strike the hammer. The moment before the lightning falls upon him, the creature suddenly loosens its grip, allowing Bael to swing the hammer at its central body.

BOOOM!!

A terrific blast of thunder and lightning detonates on the Snakedra, making it recoil in agony, release Bael, and pull away from him.

Abruptly dropped on his ass, Bael jumps backward, leaps to his feet, and lifts his hammer high.

"Nobody gives me a squeeze without my OK, bub!"

Bael charges at the monster. He starts smashing its heads one by one, crushing them to bloody pulps while the creature uselessly writhes on the ground, taking the abuse without retaliating.

Five minutes later, Bael slays the bastard, putting it to death for the rest of eternity.

Tired and winded, Bael gasps for air. Never has he had a fight that left him out of breath, but even with the Matriarch's Armor, Ose's body is far weaker than Bael's ever was. He severely regrets losing his invincibility.

Bael turns around and spots Serena.

"Oh! Hey, whew! I just got done kicking that monster's ass!" Bael says. "Good thing I'm such a badass, I must have intimidated it into lettin' me go, heh."

Serena opens her mouth to correct him, but thinks better.

"Right. Excellent work, Bael. You're as capable a fighter as ever."

Bael grins inside his helmet. "Heh, damn right. Now, lemme help the others finish that fat ugly one off."

Bael charges into battle, this time equipped with Mjolnir. He transforms the hammer into his favorite weapon, Big Bonk, and swings the ten ton steel ball at the brutish monster's back.

BOOM!!!

Bael flattens the creature, burying it face-first in the dirt and giving Crow an opportunity to deliver a full-power punch to the back of its head.

SPLAT!

Her fist connects, and she crushes the monster's skull, spraying its brains out all over her feet.

Crow pants like a dog on a hot summer's day. Sweat pools on Yardrat's head from the amount of focus he had to exert to kill this first monster. Even Fae and the others look a little tired.

With the crisis momentarily averted, the demon elites look around, finally noticing Bael's new getup, as well as Big Bonk pressing against the brute's back.

"Bael?" Fae asks. "Hot damn, that's a sweet set of armor!"

"You really saved our asses!" Melody adds.

Crow glances toward the other dead monster. "You killed that one? By yourself?"

Bael thumps his chest. "Couldn't have done it without Ose's fancy-shmancy armor. The ugly bugger got so scared, it just laid there and let me beat it to death! Heh!"

"It just laid there?" Crow asks, glancing around. She notices Serena, then pieces the events together. "Oh, I see. Well, god job beating it by yourself, Bael. You still know how to kick tail."

"Damn right!" Bael proclaims, smiling from ear to ear.

One by one, the other demon elites figure out Bael didn't *exactly* defeat the monster all by himself, but seeing as how he's been so down ever since losing his powers, they don't want to hurt his feelings.

"We've only fought two creatures so far, but they were both terrifying." Yardrat points out. "If we have to face two or even three at the same time, we might die! Everyone, proceed slowly. Do NOT rush in. We need to pick Glinch's thralls off one by one."

The other demons nod.

"Right!"

Part 493: Glinch's Game

Two hundred and fifty miles. A long walk under normal circumstances, and certainly not a distance any person would trek if they didn't have to. Today, such a voyage feels ten times worse for Hell's elites, given the situation that begins to arise.

Yardrat leads the Mephisto Assault Force competently. As a vice-leader of the strongest Hell, he is no slouch when it comes to killing or commanding others. Despite having his spatial powers heavily suppressed, he still presents a lethal cocktail of destruction, able to dish out ridiculous levels of damage by turning his unstable spatial abilities into destructive attacks aimed at the weak points of Glinch's aberrants.

The problem is, as the assault force begins to push toward the center of the Stitched Wasteland, they meet far heavier resistance than they anticipated.

Originally, Auger planned to have the assault force move slowly, picking off enemies, one by one. But unexpectedly, Glinch decides not to play by the rules, and his minions begin deliberately approaching the demon elites in twos and threes.

At first, this horrifies Yardrat and the others, but they quickly realize the creatures Glinch sends aren't all merely the strongest aberrants he's ever made. Instead, they represent a diverse set of skills, strengths, and weaknesses tailored to the hunting party.

The first two monsters they fought were the Brute and the Snakedra. The next three end up being creatures that even the Dukes in the party can deal damage to, somewhat, but they end up forced to split into three groups to deal with these new enemies.

"Glinch, that bastard!" Emperor Fae yells. "He's toying with us!"

"He's treating us like an experiment." Yardrat says coldly, as he, Crow, and Fae take turns whaling on the strongest of the three monsters. "This is little more than a game in his eyes."

At the same time, Bael, Dagon, and ten Demon Dukes battle a slippery gelatin-like monster that breaks apart when struck and melts together, as if made of slime.

"Gross!" Bael moans. "It keeps stickin' to Big Bonk like glue!"

Dagon blasts it with corrosive chemicals, causing it to melt and reform. "It won't stay dead!"

The third monster ends up being a replicator-type entity, a mid-level elite on the weaker end of the Emperor spectrum that Nymph, Kristoff, Serena, and Melody have to battle with their own complement of Dukes.

Serena uses her powers lightly on the Dukes around her, boosting them to the bottom of the Emperor tier, temporarily upgrading their abilities without straining their bodies too heavily. She also sends Soul Webs to the minds of the others, linking their thoughts so they can better coordinate their attacks on the creature.

The multiplying monster boasts a ridiculous regenerative capability on par with Beelzebub, as well as the power to occasionally split its body in half, with the new form possessing the same level of strength as its original form.

In this battle, Kristoff's two Dukes end up shining the brightest. Vespera, the Duke of Gloom, and Rhesus, the Duke of Predation, both of them upgraded to the lowest level of the Emperor hierarchy by Serena's magic.

Vespera. A vicious and violent demoness with powers somewhat reminiscent of not only Kristoff's fallen wife, Fenrir, but certain abilities that echo those of the once-mighty Emperor Lucifer. Able to summon legions of darkness-imbued minions, as well as the ability to lock enemy minds within prisons of nightmares, the Duke of Gloom is a person Kristoff has high hopes for, especially if she manages to ascend to the rank of Emperor.

Her appearance is quite seductive. She wears skimpy robes that only technically shroud her skin from sight, though their semi-transparent nature leaves little to the imagination. Most notably, one of Vespera's defining traits is her utter lack of the red skin characterized by most demons. Hers is light blue, for she is actually a *Satyr*, one of the few that still survive to the modern era. Were someone to try and make a move on Vespera, they might find that despite being beautiful, she is a cruel and blackhearted woman who enjoys tormenting the minds of lesser beings.

As for Rhesus, he is a demon who focuses purely on the brutal nature of killing and slaughter. As the Duke of Predation, he combines the features of vampires and werewolves into one body, allowing himself to gain power by devouring the blood, skin, and bones of his enemies. His strength might not match up to that of Emperors Belial or Crow, but his ability to take a beating and continue enduring grants him longevity in battles that would leave any other Duke dead. He proved this by surviving the battle against the Cherubiim while the rest of the Third Hell's Dukes perished.

Rhesus wears a set of finely crafted demonstone armor, plated with a thin layer of silver to give it a metallic sheen. His glowing red eyes speak to the hunger in his heart, and the Slaughter Blade affixed to his right gauntlet ensures he is always ready to end the lives of those he hates. Much like Emperor Wolfram, Duke Rhesus has an animalistic werewolf-like appearance, but unlike Wolfram, he also sports vampiric fangs, demonstrating that he is the offspring of two different demonic subspecies. Every movement Rhesus makes speaks to his killing nature.

Vespera, temporarily evolved to the rank of Emperor, conjures dozens of shadowy monsters to attack and bind the bodies of the Replicator aberrant. She attacks the creature with a giant halberd made of pure darkness, keeping out of its range to slash and cut it while infecting its wounds with corrosive miasma.

Rhesus, on the other hand, brawls up close and personal, taking on the same role as Crow and Bael in the other two parties. When the Replicator beats and batters him with its club-like fists, Rhesus only grins maniacally, biting at its shoulders and hips to rip off its limbs. He greedily devours whole chunks of the chimera's body, swallowing them to boost his own strength in the smallest ways.

"Delicious!" Rhesus roars. "High quality food for this Emperor!"

The aberrant silently snaps its fist at Rhesus, battering his head and knocking him back half a step. He immediately returns the favor with a brutal punch to the monster's stomach, doubling it over while running his single gauntlet-blade through its gut.

"Nice hit! Here's my retort!"

Rhesus sweeps his arm to the right, and then the left, slicing the creature in half. He pounces on its severed body, ripping it apart with his teeth and claws, spraying blood everywhere. As he greedily devours the monster, two more copies replicate and lunge at him from both sides.

"Rhesus, you glutton. Pay attention." Vespera says with a frown. She aims her palm at one of the newly replicated copies and fires a shockwave of darkness at it, sending it flying backward. The creature hits the ground headfirst and spins, landing in a sprawled-out heap.

As for the other copy, Rhesus leaps and rams his fist into its chin, uppercutting it into the air while also shattering its jawbone.

"Not today!"

Emperor Melody finds that, unlike the Brute from earlier, she can actually deal heavy damage and even kill this replicating aberrant, but no matter how fast she does, the creature always manages to copy itself multiple times from its other living selves, defying every law of energy conservation.

BOOM! BOOM!

Melody sends dual shockwaves of concussive force into the bodies of two Replicators, making them shudder and freeze, while allowing other Emperors to land killing blows. Nymph swings a giant log of magically hardened wood at the head of one monster, crushing it into meat paste. Kristoff rams his fingers into the other one's heart and sucks its blood dry, leaving behind only a desiccated husk.

"How does it keep conjuring so many clones?" Kristoff asks, bewildered. "And each one is as strong as the others! Is this aberrant secretly a Wordsmith?!"

He doesn't receive an answer. None of the others know. However, as they fight on, they become more attuned to one another through Serena's Soul Web. They move more in unison and adjust their teamwork to kill the Replicators faster than they can duplicate themselves.

Eventually, Melody delivers the final blow on the last remaining duplicate, blowing its body apart with a grenade-like explosion of sound, causing viscous chunks to splatter her comrades. To their utter relief, after killing more than a hundred of the duplicating freaks, no others appear.

Kristoff's squad rushes over to help finish off the other two deviants in Yardrat and Bael's squads, only to arrive just in time for both to kill off their respective foes.

"Whew!!" Bael exclaims, doubling over and gasping for air, every inch of his Matriarch Armor drenched in blood. "Oh, Satan the Devil! That was- aahhh... I need a breather, woo!"

He isn't the only Emperor out of breath. Sweat lines the foreheads of every single elite, except for Serena, whose support duties kept her out of the direct line of fire. Yardrat's body shakes from exhaustion. Crow's biceps pulse fiercely with adrenaline-fueled blood. Vespera's bloodshot eyes tell a story regarding how much mana she's expended.

"We've only killed five monsters!" Nymph exclaims, her beautiful red skin glistening with sweat. She conjures a handful of leaves to daintily dab and dry herself off. "Just five! How could Glinch's minions be so powerful?"

Bael lifts his head. He looks toward the distant center of the Stitched Wasteland.

"Woo... ho-boy, not gonna lie, fellas. I don't know how many more of those I've got in me."

"We have to keep pressing on." Yardrat says through gritted teeth. "Can't you feel the slow thickening of mana in the air? Mephisto's time to ascend must be arriving soon!"

The other elites grimace. They look toward the center of the Stitched Wasteland, fearing they won't have energy to make it there, let alone ultimately kill Mephisto.

"Let's take a five-minute breather." Kristoff suggests, recovering from his exertion a bit faster thanks to the vitality of his blood. "But keep on your guard. It's clear Glinch isn't going to make things easy for us."

The other elites nod. Nobody sits down, but they all stand in place, steadying their breathing and borrowing leaves from Nymph to dry their sweaty bodies off. Even Bael temporarily removes his armor to dab himself dry.

One demon is the exception, though.

Now reverted back to his Duke form, Rhesus greedily bites and chews at the corpses of Glinch's fallen monsters. He hungrily rips them apart like a wolf that hasn't eaten meat in ten years. Some of the more squeamish demons curl up their lips in disgust, while Vespera and Kristoff appear unmoved. They've long grown used to his ways.

Suddenly, Rhesus looks at Bael.

"Hey!"

Bael looks back at him. "What?"

Rhesus points to the corpse of the slime-creature Bael helped kill. "You gonna eat that?"

Bael slowly shakes his head. He nudges it toward Rhesus with his foot, then takes a step back. "Nah, bro. Uh, help yourself. I'm..... *full*."

"Great!" Rhesus yells, rushing over to chew and slurp up the slimey remains of the once-human-shaped creature Bael ultimately helped slay.

"Some fellas..." Bael murmurs, looking away.

As Rhesus takes these precious five minutes to ravenously devour Glinch's subordinates, Yadrat suddenly looks up in the sky. "Bloody hell! How long has that been there?!"

The others, except Rhesus, follow his gaze.

"What the-?!" Bael exclaims.

"What is it?" Melody asks.

Serena, unable to make out anything but a glowing mass of mana, blinks her unseeing eyes. "A physical description would be nice."

Nymph rests her hand on Serena's shoulder. "It's an... egg. A flesh-colored egg."

"By flesh-colored, you mean...?"

"Sorry. Demon-flesh-colored. Red." Nymph clarifies.

The egg hovers in the sky for only five seconds before suddenly rushing downward toward the demon elites. They quickly raise their fists and weapons, ready for battle, as it crashes into the dirt a hundred meters away.

The egg cracks open. Its shell explodes into fragments, spilling a disgusting green liquid all over the dirt, the stench of which makes many of the elites want to puke.

"Oh, that's awful!" Bael whines, before reactivating his Matriarch Armor so he won't have to suffer the foul odor.

As a cloud of thick green gas evaporates, a bipedal creature steps out of the crumbled egg's remains. Its sleek, moist body makes it resemble a fish. Its mottled green skin makes it appear as if it were born of the forest, a soil-based life-form coated in viscous fluids.

But strangely, its faceless head makes it feel... alien.

Upon seeing this new threat, one demon loses all their color.

Emperor Melody's pupils shrink to pinpricks. A cold chill sweeps across her skin as she immediately takes a step back. "No... no, no, no..."

The other Emperor glance at her in confusion, then back at the monster.

"What is it, Melody?" Kristoff asks quietly, as the creature remains standing in the distance, not yet moving toward them.

"P-P-Pla... Plague..." Melody whispers, a lump in her throat making it hard for her to speak. "That's- that's a- a- K-K-Kuh-Kolvax...ian..."

The temperature around the elites seems to plummet ten degrees. They look at the monster in horror.

"No.. Glinch wouldn't..." Yardrat whispers. "He'd never go this far..."

As the Emperors and Dukes remain standing, uncertain of what to do, the creature's head changes.

Its faceless facade morphs. A line spreads across the middle, where its nose would normally be. The Emperors become unsettled as a giant mouth begins to materialize, filled with shark-like teeth.

"Not..... Quite....." The 'Kolvaxian' says.

The voice that escapes the creature's mouth causes Yardrat to frown. He recognizes it immediately.

"Glinch? Is that you?"

The monster doesn't speak for several seconds.

When it does, it only utters one slow, halting word.

".....Yes."

"What is this?" Yardrat asks. "Did you... did YOU create the Kolvaxians?!"

The monster slightly cocks its head.

"No."

A pause.

"Pale. Imitation." It says.

"Imitation?" Yardrat repeats. "You're trying to copy the Kolvaxians? Why?!"

The creature once again remains motionless for several seconds. Emperor Serena frowns. She detects a faint microburst of mana rising from the ground, entering the monster's body.

"Because." The monster says, its voice still very much an eerie copy of Glinch's voice. "Curiosity."

It pauses.

"Must... Investigate. Many... Mysteries."

"Are you protecting Mephisto?" Yardrat asks. "Don't you see? If you let him ascend, he'll kill you! He's an enemy to all demonkind!"

The fake Kolvaxian 'smiles', its creepy, wide mouth curving up at the far corners.

"Enemy. Demons. Yes. Me? No. *Insurance*."

Abruptly, the Kolvax-clone leans forward, and a look of pain spreads over its face. Before the other demons can figure out what's going on, the creature makes a strange motion with its stomach.

"Gurr... gurrk... BLERK!"

It vomits green liquid all over the ground, and a hundred tiny marbles filled with mana land amidst the vomit, all of them glowing red visible to the naked eye.

The monster returns to its standing position, that same creepy smile on its face.

"Here. Present."

"What?" Kristoff asks, looking at those marbles of mana.

"Present." The Kolvax-clone says. "For. You."

"Whoaaa," Bael says, "you don't expect us to... eat those. Do you?"

"Beneficial." Glinch says. "Healing. Restoration."

"You're out of your mind." Serena says, narrowing her eyes. "You're mad, Glinch."

"No." Glinch says. "Not... Mad. Curious. Survive. Face... Me. Become... Stronger. Mephisto... Hungers."

The demons watch, stone-faced, as the pseudo-Kolvaxian begins to descend into the dirt, allowing the decrepit soil of the Stitched Wasteland to swallow it whole. It melts into the dirt in the same way as the Kolvaxians have always done, causing Melody's shivering to intensify.

"...can't just be a copy...." Melody mumbles, her shrunken pupils gazing in horror at the facsimile of the creatures that tore her Hell apart.

When it vanishes, all of the Emperors become quiet. Yardrat cautiously approaches the mana-infused pellets, then scoops them all up in his hands and walks back to the others.

Yardrat glances at the faces of the other demons. He holds the pills up, allowing them to look at the blood-colored beads of highly condensed mana.

"Well?" Yardrat asks. "Thoughts?"

Rhesus, having finished devouring the blood, skin, and bones of Glinch's monsters, cracks his neck. "I don't know what those are. I'll pass."

"Serena?" Yardrat asks, looking at the Emperor of Soul Whispers.

"These pills are not harmful." Serena says, though her expression appears grim. "In fact, they're highly beneficial. They will restore our mana reserves and replenish our fighting capabilities quickly. There is no harm in taking one."

Despite the confidence in her statement, nobody moves to grab a single pill.

"The problem being?" Yardrat asks, still gazing at Serena.

"It should be obvious." Serena says, pressing her teeth together tightly. "Think of the message this sends us. Glinch doesn't take us seriously as a threat. He's worried we'll be defeated and die to his minions too easily. He wants us to fight in our optimal condition."

Kristoff sniffs the pellets. "There's more. These are infused with the blood of powerful monsters. They don't smell familiar to me. I bet Glinch obtained the blood through his Volgrim connections. The blood likely comes from exobeasts on Psion hunting worlds."

"Even I can guess what that means." Bael says. "These pills won't just bring us back to peak condition. They'll make us stronger."

"Especially the Dukes." Serena points out. "Glinch is... fattening us up."

"The fact he can create pills capable of uplifting demons is a statement in and of itself." Dagon says coldly. "It means he possesses an ability not unlike the Wordsmith's Belial Booster. He can create pills that will uplift lesser demons."

"This much should be expected." Kristoff retorts. "We've seen the strength of his minions. Pound for pound, each one is far stronger than any of us individual Emperors. He must have discovered a way to condense energy into these pills. If he wanted, he could... build an army."

"There's another player in the game." Yardrat mutters, glancing toward the center of the Stitched Wasteland. "He wants to compete with Auger."

"And Gorn." Serena says, glaring at Yardrat.

"Not so fast." Nymph says. "Aren't you guys forgetting? If Mephisto ascends, neither Auger nor Gorn will have the power to contend with him. In a galaxy where a Demon Deity reigns, Emperors will become mere minions. Glinch isn't telling us he wants to raise an army of loyal minions. He's never given a damn about ruling our people."

The other elites lower their heads, grimacing as they realize what she's saying.

"We're just... food." Vespera says quietly. "He intends to raise me and the other Dukes to Emperor... so Mephisto can... *eat us*."

As the elites stand around, no longer sure of what to do, Bael scratches his head.

"Welp! If you can't beat 'em, beat 'em off, that's what I always say! Gimme one of those pills!"

He snatches a pill out of Yardrat's hand before the Emperor of the Void can react.

"Wait, Bael, we haven't determined-!" Yardrat starts to say, too slow to stop Bael.

"Nom!"

Bael casually removes his armor once again, pops the pill in his mouth, and swallows it. A second later, his demonic energy condenses, his fatigued body restores back to its pristine state, and his muscles bulge beneath his clothes.

"WOO! OH YEAH, BABY! That's that GOOD SHIT!"

A fire ignites in Bael's eyes. He roars to the sky and pumps his muscles, while steam pours from his nose.

"Oh MAN! WHOA! I could fight a bat! I could kick a dog! I feel AMAZING! You guys have GOTTA pop one of those bad boys!!"

Bael begins dancing around, full of hype. As he has the time of his life, the other demons frown.

"Is it just me, or..." Dagon mutters.

"Yeah." Yardrat says. "His breasts *did* get bigger."

Vespera blinks. "Give me a pill."

"Emperors first!" Fae exclaims.

While those two hastily grab themselves a pill, the other Emperors only decide to take theirs after seeing the effects of the pills on their comrades.

Emperor Serena glances at the spot where Glinch's fake Kolvaxian disappeared into the dirt.

This isn't a game. She thinks silently. We're balancing on the edge of a knife. One wrong move, and we'll fall to our doom.

Artwork for Vespera!



Artwork for Rhesus!



Part 494: Intellect Awakens

After every Demon Duke pops one of Glinch's pills, they begin to evolve. The change shocks the Emperors to their cores. Yadrat prepared himself for the inevitability that these incredible pills would do the unthinkable, but seeing it happen in real-time is very different from imagining the concept in his head.

He and the other leaders, movers, and shakers of the Four Hells who came along can only watch numbly as Vespera, Rhesus, Hamir, Vepar, and all the other Dukes explode in strength, smashing through their limiters to ascend to the realm of Demon Emperor.

Their bodies glow with power. They fall to their knees and roar to the heavens, delighted in achieving that which they previously thought was unattainable.

In an instant, the balance of power across every Hell shifts, yet few even know of that which has just transpired, and fewer still take the time to think clearly about what this will surely mean in the coming days, weeks, months, and years.

If they cannot defeat Mephisto, it won't matter if they have six Emperors or six hundred. The power of a Demon Deity will crush them all into dust, with nothing left behind, aside from their dying screams.

As for the fifty newly ascended Emperors, their names and titles are numerous, almost numbing to dwell on. Among them are a smattering of renowned individuals, such as:

Vepar, the Corrosive Emperor.

Vespera, the Emperor of Nebulae.

Rhesus, the Emperor of Ripping.

Hamir, the Emperor of Tempests.

As well as numerous others.

The moment they ascend, their titles become known to all demons who gaze upon them. They need not speak these titles, as if having been named directly by the Creator himself. In the entire history of demonkind, few have managed to shroud their true names, the most notable individual being Gressil, who hid his Emperor-level strength until the time was right for others to know.

But these newly risen Emperors have neither a need nor a desire to hide their powerful new titles. They look at one another and grin evilly, excited to begin wielding their abilities as soon as possible.

After distributing half of the pills, Yardrat finds that he still has more than forty left. He turns to Emperor Melody.

"It wouldn't be appropriate for me to hold onto the rest." He says. "My Hell already has more elites than everyone else. If we make it out of here alive, rebuild the Hell of Isolation with these."

The other Emperors blink in surprise at Yardrat's gesture of goodwill. Some of them feel it's a bit of a waste, but the longest lived Emperors and former Dukes ultimately don't bother to interrupt him.

Bael crosses his arms and nods.

"Good call, Yardy-boy. That's what Shax would want."

"Shax was a fine demon." Yardrat says, as Melody takes the pills from him. "His death has always weighed on my mind. If I can help his Hell with a small gesture like this, then I'll do so without thinking twice."

"Thank you." Melody says quietly, looking at Yardrat with a strange gaze. She pockets the pills and sighs.

Shax wasn't just a cool music-loving dude, but a kind demon who made countless friends. He never attacked or fought anybody undeservedly, and he based his Hell on the principles of friendship and cooperation. Even the demons who might not have gotten along with him still respected him. His death to the humans ruined the morale of many demons at the time.

"Don't thank me until we kill Mephisto and leave here alive." Yardrat says, turning his attention to the distant center of the Stitched wasteland. "Everyone, let's move out. And remember, those pills were not for *our* benefit. This is where the real fight begins."

The others nod grimly. They begin marching toward Glinch's lair, and as they walk, powerful chimera cross their paths at regular intervals. No longer do only two or three of Glinch's minions appear, but instead five and six at a time, each and every individual far too powerful for mere Emperors to defeat alone. They quickly get the impression Glinch

has managed to raise entities capable of challenging 5th and perhaps even 6th-Level Psions.

With nearly sixty Emperors on their side, the swarm of demons begins moving forward with great haste.

Yardrat imbues his body with the power of space. He flickers around to deal massive damage to Glinch's chimera with punches that rip across dimensional spaces.

Fae flies into the air and rains bombs from above. She takes the initiative to attack distant enemies with her strongest bombs, weakening and softening them up for her allies to take on later.

Dagon and Vepar work together. With both of their powers having reached the bottom of the Emperor-level in strength, they melt, corrode, poison, and suffocate any enemies susceptible to their poison and acid attacks.

Nymph keeps away from the front-lines. Due to Glinch's wasteland ruining any vines or plants she summons within seconds, she instead focuses on popping out plants sporadically to yank allies out of the line of attacks, or merely irritating her enemies by momentarily tripping them with vine shackles around their ankles.

Kristoff focuses on dealing damage and draining Glinch's chimeras of their blood. Any injuries he inflicts tend to bleed heavily, especially when he focuses his mind on doing so.

Serena uses her magic to boost dozens of newly ascended low-Emperors to mid and high tier Emperors, making their powers considerably more deadly. She also keeps her eyes out for invisible threats or other troublesome soul fluctuations.

Crow stays on the front-lines. Her incredibly durable body allows her to retain the title of the mightiest melee attacker among all the demons present.

Melody focuses on defense. Instead of trying to kill the chimeras, she leaves that business to the superior damage-dealers and instead uses her shockwaves to fling her enemies around and batter their attacks aside.

Vespera plays a versatile role, sometimes summoning shadowy minions to assist the others, sometimes jumping into battle herself to cut chimeras down, and other times teleporting around through the various shadows to distract the different enemies.

Rhesus becomes far stronger after evolving. Despite being hesitant to bother with the pills, he is no different from the other demons in his desire to mutate to Emperor, and the

permanent strength increase he obtains puts him second only to Crow herself. Perhaps given time he will even surpass her as his power approaches the apex of the Emperor level!

And finally, Bael swings his flail with reckless abandon. He batters any enemy that jumps in front of him without any thought to strategy or planning. He ends up attacking with a strength not far behind Yardrat, dealing the killing blow to more than a few of Glinch's monsters.

For hours, the demon elites beat and batter their way past dozens of highly enhanced creatures, becoming more and more cognizant of the fact that if Glinch wanted them dead, he could merely command his chimera to swarm them and they wouldn't stand a chance of survival. It causes the smarter elites to shudder when they realize Glinch possesses military strength greater than the combined might of all Seven Hells, even after their ascension!

However, Bael is not one of those highly intelligent elites. He doesn't give these matters much thought. He merely continues beating the shit out of his enemies, pausing once in a while to rest his weary body and swap out with the other Emperors nearby as they fight with all their might to push toward the center of the Stitched Wasteland.

At some point, while Bael does his thing, a spiritual sense awakens from within the Matriarch's Armor.

Emperor Ose's remnant soul sliver opens her eyes and returns to the physical realm, unaware of what has been going on since she began resting. With what remains of her former self, she isn't able to stay awake for days and weeks like she could when she was still alive. She has to sleep frequently, lest her soul dissipate from straining itself. She awakens to find that Bael is no longer meandering around on Tarus II or hanging out in her secret demonic base. Instead, he's become engaged in some sort of incredible high-stakes battle, along with dozens of other mighty demon elites!

Ose blinks several times. She says nothing to Bael, but uses what's left of her spiritual senses to try and get a sense of the other demons around her.

Hm? So many Emperors... what happened over the last few days? Have I been unconscious for longer than I anticipated?

She gazes at Vespera, Rhesus, and Vepar, her eyes widening as she recognizes the permanent status of their new Emperor rank.

Devils! Has the Wordsmith's Belial Booster become more effective? How in the Seven Hells can there be fifty brand new Emperors out of nowhere?

She identifies the former Dukes with ease, having once been intimately familiar with the elites of the Seven Hells.

This is... the Stitched Wasteland? Why is everyone going against Glinch? No, more importantly, why do his minions appear to be so much more powerful than I remember? I heard they were at the level of Emperors, but now it seems they must be higher than Emperors, but lower than Demon Deities. Perhaps half-step Deities? Or simply Emperor-level souls contained within much stronger bodies?

Ose doesn't immediately decide to question Bael. She doesn't even alert him to the fact she's awakened. He's a moron anyway, so talking to him won't provide her with much more info than if she simply used her judgment to determine what's going on.

This is all so strange. Ose thinks. According to the Matriarch Armor's internal chronometer, I've only been asleep a single week, yet a frightening number of things have changed. Has a demon civil war erupted? Perhaps Glinch has decided to rebel against the Seven Hells, so Auger opted to put him down once and for all?

Her spiritual form shakes its head.

No. That isn't Glinch's style. He doesn't care about amassing power, or wealth, or fame and fortune. He doesn't care who rules the Seven Hells. He can't be bought, or bribed, or intimidated, or cowed into submission. Glinch does whatever Glinch wants to do, and not even the Volgrim can change his ways. Since his ability to manipulate bodies and souls is so formidable, the Volgrim have even lowered their heads to commission him on various top-secret R&D projects...

Ose narrows her eyes. Unlike the overwhelming majority of her kin, she is a demon who specializes in not only subterfuge and infiltration, but also high technology. She has stolen many peeks at the Volgrim's Black Level projects in a manner most discreet. Not even the High Technopaths were able to discover her breaches.

If Glinch isn't rebelling, then... could it be that this fierce battle isn't what it seems on the surface?

She pieces together multiple clues at blinding speeds.

Look at how Glinch's army only moves toward the assault force in groups of two or three. They could easily swarm Yardrat and the others, but they don't. That means Glinch is holding back.

She nods to herself.

Coupled with the fact that so many Emperors have ascended... ahhhh...

Ose forms a hypothesis, mulls it over, and smiles to herself.

So it's like that. Glinch must have been commissioned or requested by Auger to improve the fighting capabilities of the Seven Hells. Perhaps he developed some secret new method to uplift demons to the rank of Emperor at Auger's request, and now he's helping battle-forge these new elites. A sound strategy, considering the Wordsmith's rapid rise to power.

Ose ultimately comes to the wrong conclusion, but based on purely the different observable clues in her field of vision, the guess is quite good. She comes to assume that this is part of a secret training exercise intended to build up Hell's forces and churn out powerful fighters capable of pressing against the Wordsmith's bulwark.

Beelzebub isn't here. Ose thinks. None of the Second Hell's residents either. The Hell of Lust must have become quite intimate with the humans, which makes sense. Unlike the other Hells, they rely on fornication with humans to uplift their bodies and souls. The two make for optimal allies.

She checks out the allied forces again, this time paying attention to the specific demons present.

It seems not a single demon that has shown sympathies toward the Wordsmiths has come along. Melody is here all alone. Her Hell always was at least somewhat aligned with humanity, but Melody herself won't be particularly attached to non-demons. Yama isn't here... he must still be at large, along with Mephisto.

Unaware of the fates which befell Mephisto, Yama, and several other demons over the past week, Ose unfortunately misses a few important clues, but that can hardly be blamed on her.

Kristoff, Vespera, and Rhesus. Is this all that remains of the Hell of Blood? Perhaps they left their remaining Dukes behind as a reserve force, or perhaps those members will be uplifted later. I wonder what Auger is thinking, raising so many Emperors at

once. He won't be able to keep news of their ascensions a secret for long. The Wordsmith will find out, and he'll become immediately suspicious provided he has an IQ five points higher than Bael.

As her thoughts drift to Bael, Ose finally decides to open up to him.

[Hey, idiot. I'm awake. What's going on here?]

Bael swings Big Bonk at the head of a fifteen-foot-tall brutish monster not unlike the one he first fought when he entered the Stitched Wasteland, but this one possesses a turtle-like shell on its back, making it specially resistant to heavy attacks.

"Huh?" Bael asks, after retracting his flail. "Oh, Ose! You're awake! Gimme a few minutes, I gotta pound some punks!"

Ose rolls her eyes. [No need for that. Just take a few steps back and talk to me. This training exercise isn't a life and death matter anyway.]

Bael pauses to consider her words. His jaw slackens a little as he tries to catch up with what she said.

"It... it's not?"

Some of the demons nearby Bael notice his attacks slowing. A couple even hear him talking to himself, but unable to hear Ose's voice, they just assume the poor *galumpf* must be having one of his ditsy moments. They quickly fill the gap lost by Bael's slowed momentum, leaving him to fall back even further.

[Of course not.] Ose says. [Tell me what this exercise is all about. How did Glinch uplift so many demons to the Rank of Emperor?]

Bael's eyes widen. "Wow, Ose! You just woke up and you already know Glinch did this? You're so smart!"

[I don't need your praise.] Ose says, annoyed. [Just tell me how Glinch raised fifty Emperors in only a week.]

"Ohh. Uh, he gave us special pills." Bael says. "Yeah, super strong stuff. Made my titties bigger too."

Ose blinks. [What?]

"My titties. They got real big. Didn't grow my ding-dong back though..."

Bael eyes fill with tears as he remembers the sadness he felt when his pants remained uninflated.

[Moron! I don't care about y-your *mammary expansion*! What sorts of pills were they? How did Glinch make them?]

Ose's growing frustration, as always, proves impossible to keep out of her voice. Bael doesn't seem to mind.

"Oh I dunno. Kristoff said something about x-beats and blood." Bael explains absentmindedly. "Why? You wanna grow bigger soul-titties too?"

[NO!] Ose roars. [I don't care about my boob size, you nimrod! FOCUS! What 'x-beats' are you talking about? Do you mean EXOBEASTS?]

A light seems to go off in Bael's eyes.

"Ohh, right! Yeah! X-O beasts! Like uh, X-O-X-O. Kissing beasts! I'm so silly. Can't believe I forgot that."

Ose closes her eyes and makes punching motions toward an invisible wall.

I'm gonna kill him. She thinks. I'm going to kill Bael and torture his soul for all eternity if I EVER figure out a way to bring myself back.

She clenches her jaw and opens her eyes.

[Bael. Does the Wordsmith know about Auger's plan yet?]

Bael scrunches up his face.

"Uhhh... Auger's... plan?"

[Yes. His plan to create more Emperors.] Ose clarifies. [He's working with Glinch, yes?]

"He is?!" Bael gasps. "Wow! Auger's so smart. I'd never have thought of that. This sure explains a lot."

Invisible question marks pop up above Ose's head. She squints her eyes as if trying to look inside Bael's head and locate his pebble-sized brain amidst a galaxy-sized void of emptiness.

[So... does... the Wordsmith... know?] Ose asks through gritted teeth.

"Nah. Doubt it." Bael says, waving his hands nonchalantly. "Unless..."

[Unless?] Ose asks.

"Unless it's all part of Auger's brilliant plan." Bael concludes, nodding to himself. "Damn. How is everyone so smart? And I thought we were coming here to kill Mephisto."

Ose's face freezes. A feeling like cracked ice washes across her soul.

[Me...phisto? You're here to kill Mephisto?]

"I dunno." Bael shrugs. "I thought we were coming here to kill him. But this must be part of Auger's plan to trick me and the others so he can make the Hells super strong. I guess all that stuff about Mephisto becoming a Demon Deity didn't mean anything after all. Thanks for helping me understand, Ose! You're the best!"

Bael gives Ose a HUGE mental thumbs up, grinning at her with the same level of stupid happiness he always does.

Ose's soul nearly implodes from the mental gymnastics Bael just unleashed upon her.

[Oh... devils...] Ose weeps. [Why... why couldn't I have been trapped with Auger... or Fenrir... or Gorn... even Serena! Why did I have to end up stuck with demonkind's biggest idiot?]

"It's probably just your bad karma." Bael grunts. "You were such a bad girl, taking all those dirty pics. The Creator had to punish ya."

[WHAT PICS?!] Ose snaps. [Bael, I'm going to turn your pea-brain into MUSH if you keep thinking such VILE thoughts!]

In the middle of Ose's raging, Yardrat fights his way to Bael's side.

"Bael! Is something wrong? Why have you stopped attacking? Are you exhausted?"

Bael blinks. He turns his attention to Yardrat.

"Huh? Nah, nah. Ose woke up, so I'm having a chat with her real quick."

He pauses before adding: "By the way, why didn't ya tell me this was all Auger's brilliant plan? You know I'm good at keeping secrets!"

Yardrat glances at Bael, baffled, while continuing to conjure lines of eviscerating spatial attacks upon the frontline enemies.

"What plan? What are you on about?"

Bael lightly slaps Yardrat's back and chuckles.

"Aw, man. Good one, Yardy-boy! *What plan?* Hah! You're a real kick in the pants sometimes!"

Yardrat pauses his fighting to stare at Bael for three full seconds in absolute confusion. Then he turns and walks away, muttering something under his breath about *that guy being off his rocker ever since he body-swapped*.

Bael jumps back into combat, having finally figured out the 'true' reason for coming here. As for Ose, she mentally slumps to the 'floor' of Bael's Mind Realm, drained by the idiocy she's just endured.

But, at least now she better understands the actual situation.

Ose sets aside her anger and rage. She closes her eyes and focuses, thinking about what she's actually learned. Her swift mind allows her to combine the new, albeit potentially unreliable intel she obtained from Bael, with her pre-existing theories.

Mephisto is ascending to Demon Deity. Glinch must be working to train up an army of Emperors... for some reason. Perhaps Mephisto threatens his interests or something. Ugh. If only I could just speak directly to someone not named Bael. If ONLY I had made my soul interface capable of projecting my voice outwards. Stupid, stupid!

Ose begins to feel glum.

She looks up at the sky, her senses able to detect anything around the Matriarch Armor within a 360 degree sphere.

She gazes at the waning sun, the ashen clouds of the Stitched Wasteland only blocking some of her view toward space.

I have to be more proactive. I can't just blame Bael. It's not his fault he was born with the IQ of a dead slug. I mean, it's a LITTLE bit his fault... but he can't really help being unable to retain information for longer than five nanoseconds. If I'd simply planned out my existence post-mortem, I might still manage to retain some influence over the Hells.

Ose becomes momentarily depressed. She begins to wonder if these things even truly matter.

She's dead.

She's unlikely to ever again walk the plane of existence.

She's not powerful anymore. All she has left is a fragment of a soul and her intellect formed during her 100,000+ years of life.

But that depression quickly fades away as she firms her resolve.

Ose is many things. She's easily annoyed by idiocy, temperamental, stuck up, and a bit of a viper, but she isn't mentally weak. Her willpower is formidable, and it was forged by the life she's endured, as well as the actions her adoptive mother took to empower her in her youth.

I don't need a body or magic to remain relevant. Ose thinks. I still have my intellect. Even if I can't taste good food or lounge on a comfortable bed, I still have ambitions. I want to continue expanding my influence.

She rubs her chin and looks thoughtfully at the battle around her.

Bael's an idiot. But he's also easy to manipulate and control. And nobody would ever expect him to accomplish much. That means the humans, the other demons, and especially the Volgrim will underestimate him.

Hmm.

Perhaps I can turn this situation to my advantage.

Her attention pivots to Glinch's laboratory, still more than a hundred miles away.

I wonder if the Stitched Emperor might be able to help my situation, too? It's certainly worth a shot.

So many possibilities...

Ose will never bow to the universe's will, so long as she retains her mental faculties.

She will **never** surrender.

Part 495: Bael, the Leader

The Demon Emperors continue fighting toward Glinch's central facility at the heart of the Stitched Wasteland. Their progress is slow, as they have not spent much time fighting together, and Glinch deliberately adds additional chimeras whenever the Emperors start to break through.

All-in-all, the situation only seems to slowly worsen for Hell's elites. Yardrat does his best to lead the others, but with so many newly ascended Emperors, he struggles to organize them into properly synergized teams. Yardrat is somewhat competent in his role as leader, but in truth, he's always been more of a subordinate, especially compared to Auger.

While the battles rage, Ose watches intently. Thanks to her 360-degree view of the environment around the Matriarch's Armor, she's able to use her considerable intellect and lightning-fast thinking speed to learn the intricacies of every demon present.

That Rhesus is quite a formidable fighter, but he keeps sliding over to fight beside Bael. Ose thinks. There's no need to have the two of them tanking blows when they would perform better if split up. And just look at Emperor Vespera! Her shadow minions are comparable to Yama's Shades in terms of killing potential. I especially enjoy the way their attacks leave burning shadows on the enemy. It ensures any inflicted wounds won't heal on their own.

The Emperor of Infiltration flicks her gaze around speedily. Her eyes dart from one Emperor to another, analyzing their combat capabilities with the same insight she once used when she ruled the First Hell.

[Bael.] Ose says. [I've been watching the demons fight. I can't speak to the others, so I need you to speak in my place.]

Bael swings Big Bonk down onto an enemy chimera's head, knocking it into the dirt. It explodes into smoke, then reforms ten feet away, resuming its attacks.

"Kinda busy here!" Bael shouts. "No time to yap."

[I want you to pull back and start doing as I say.] Ose explains. [You're able to deal a lot of damage, but you will be a lot more useful if you just tell others whatever I tell you.

Understand?]

Bael frowns. He continues attacking the chimera in front of him, but after ten or twenty seconds, he pulls back.

"Fine, fine. Whaddya want me to do, then? Make it quick!"

[There's no rush.] Ose explains. [Glinch is toying with us. He could send in his minions all at once and we'd all perish, but he wants us alive. That means we hold a strategic advantage.]

Bael nods. "Uhh... uh-huh... right..."

Ose rolls her eyes as she realizes the stupid moron is losing interest in her words.

[Never mind all that. Listen, just start telling the other demons to switch to these positions. First, we want to make sure Yardrat, Crow, and Vespera stay together. Just the three of them are enough to kill a chimera. Then, pull these other two Emperors over to fight beside Rhesus. Then..."

Ose takes a minute to explain her plan, but she quickly loses Bael. He blinks his eyes, then raises a palm.

"Slow down, toots. Ya lost me. Let's do this one at a time. So, uh, Crow, Yardy-boy, and Vespera, right?"

[Right.] Ose nods. [Send them to face that three-headed Ogre-chimera.]

Bael slaps his demonstone-plated chest. "Hey, Yardy! I'm takin' command! You, Crow, and Vespera, git on over to tackle that big guy!"

Ose quickly follows up. [Then, talk to Rhesus...]

The Emperors become more than a little confused when Bael starts barking orders. However, given his reputation as a legend in the ancient wars, and the fact that they're currently making practically no headway against Glinch's minions, some of the Emperors seem eager to try anything new.

But not Yardrat.

Visibly upset at Bael's sudden demands to be the leader, Yardrat shoots a nasty glare Bael's way.

"Have you gone braindead? Since when do you call the shots around here, Bael?! This is a battle, and it requires tactics!"

"Y-yeah?" Bael asks. "I know all about tic-tacs! Don't you worry about that, bub! I'm like, smart and stuff!"

Ose facepalms so hard she nearly crushes her own skull.

[Bael, you nimrod. Don't just babble back! You have to act like a leader! A lion doesn't fear the opinions of sheep!]

Bael's eyes spark in comprehension.

"Ohh, so it's like that. ROOOAR! ROAR-ROAR-ROAAAR!"

Bael begins making weird roaring noises at Yardrat, noises that visibly disturb the Emperor of the Void and make invisible question marks pop up above his head.

"Th-the hell are you doing?" Yardrat asks, more confused than angry.

"I'm a lion, and you're a sheep!" Bael proudly declares. "And that means I gotta roar like a lion!"

Bael gives Yardrat a HUGE thumbs-up, making the Emperor of the Void's face shift for a brief moment to an expression of despair.

"He's gone utterly cuckoo..." Yardrat mumbles.

[Bael, I didn't mean you should LITERALLY roar like a lion!] Ose howls. [You can't POSSIBLY be this- no, no, what am I saying? Of course you can. Oh, devils...]

She massages her forehead, while Bael stands around for a brief moment, more than a little confused about what she even wants him to do.

"Man, screw all this yapping." Bael grunts. "You think too much, woman. Hey, you, Vespera! Didn't the Duke of Pain give you an order?! Get your cute tush over there and fight with Crow! And Rhesus, when I tell ya to fight the smoke-guy, I MEAN fight the smoke-guy! Don't you give me no lip!"

Ose blinks in confusion. She watches, momentarily stunned, as Bael begins barking orders with real authority, commanding the other demons without acting even slightly confused. Yardrat opens his mouth to intervene, but he doesn't even manage to speak a word before Bael points a menacing finger in his direction.

"You'd better shut that yap, punk! Don't make me come over there and ram my boot up your ass! When Daddy Bael gives you an order, you follow it!"

Yardrat flushes, visibly annoyed by Bael's sudden demands to be heard, but also somewhat intimidated.

"B-but, Bael, I'm the one in char-"

"Not anymore!" Bael exclaims. "The way you've been leading us, we'll be lucky if we catch a whiff of Mephisto's FARTS! I'm gonna take charge and take names!"

Yardrat once again seems to want to argue with Bael, but seeing as Glinch's chimeras have begun pushing back the Emperor's lines, he simply grits his teeth and does as Bael commands.

"Whatever." Yardrat grumbles. "It's not like he can do any harm. At the rate we're going, we'll never make it to Mephisto in time. Maybe if we listen to Bael, we'll get a miracle."

All the while, Ose's eyes practically pop out of her sockets. She gasps as Bael somehow takes command of the situation, using nothing but his innate bravado and swagger to convince the others to listen to him.

[I can't believe your moronic ploy worked, but I won't complain!] Ose exclaims. [Alright, Bael. Now, let's turn our attention to Kristoff...]

One by one, Bael follows Ose's instructions. He completely shuffles around and reorganizes the groups, placing himself, Vepar, and Dagon in the center of the line, along with half a dozen purely-offense-based Emperors to form a strike force capable of crushing any foe.

When Bael gives the command, the ten Emperors he's chosen begin rushing forward, firing toxic and acidic blasts of magic at anyone in front of them, tearing a deep hole in Glinch's formations. This lance-like assault squad immediately eases the pressure on all the other Emperors, who begin fighting more furiously to crush their immediate opponents and swarm over the bodies of the fallen chimera to attack the next group.

Yardrat fights with fire and fury, but in his heart, he becomes deeply shocked.

It actually worked?! Seven Hells, that Bael might actually be a tactical genius! I think I've been underestimating him all this time!

Emperor Serena joins Bael's group. While she might not possess much offensive potential, her ability to empower other demons allows her to selectively buff specific Emperors at specific moments when dangerous foes appear.

But in the back of Serena's mind, she begins to doubt Bael's sudden rise in competency.

Could it be true? Has he really been talking to Ose? It would explain a lot of things.

She casts soul-searching magic to investigate Bael, but all she finds is the same brilliantly shining soul in his head, a soul she has always known to be much mightier than that of any other demon she's encountered. She doesn't detect Ose's comparatively faint and tiny soul due to it being drowned out by Bael's presence.

No. Nothing seems different. Maybe his evolution to Emperor is beginning to enhance Bael's intellect. His mighty soul must hold some secret purpose anyway, right?

Suddenly, Serena's sightless eyes light up.

Of course! It all makes sense now! Bael has inhabited Ose's body. I'll bet some of her residual energy has slowly seeped into him over time. Now that he has truly evolved to the rank of Emperor, he might be mutating more toward Ose's affinity for intellect and lightning. It wouldn't surprise me if he gained electrical elemental powers sooner or later!

Serena 'figures out' the truth, making her feel quite assured about how Bael came to be so competent out of seemingly nowhere. Unfortunately, she fails to guess that a tiny sliver of Ose's soul has taken refuge inside the Matriarch's Armor.

As for the other Emperors, they become so consumed with taking out their rage on Glinch's goons that they pay no mind to Bael whatsoever. If he gives an order, they follow it, only allowing themselves to feel some delight at how their newly formed teams are at least three times more effective at slaughtering Glinch's minions.

An hour passes.

Bael's Bulwark bludgeons its way brutishly through blobs of enemies, tearing them to pieces and melting them into mere puddles of trembling DNA. They cause so much damage to Glinch's minions that the once formidable chimeras become ultimately ineffective. They pull back on all fronts, allowing the demons to catch their breath.

With Glinch's minions giving up ground, the Emperors regroup, thrilled that they've actually managed to win. By now, even if Glinch charges them with every last remaining chimera, the other Emperors will have the strength to slay them all.

One of the chimera steps toward the Emperors.

"Not bad." It says, in Glinch's voice. "I didn't expect you to evolve your teamwork so quickly. Bael, you've truly surprised me."

"Aw, shut your yap." Bael snarks. "We're coming down to kick your ass, Glinch!"

"My doors are open. Come in if you dare." Glinch replies, as the chimera steps back into the group to rejoin its peers.

A rumbling from deep underground causes Yardrat and the other Emperors to flinch. A sensation of powerful mana wafts up through the dirt, making their hair stand on end.

"Hurry!" Yardrat exclaims. "Mephisto is beginning to mutate! He's started the ascension process!"

The unmistakable feeling of a powerful demonic mutation swells in the air. The fifty-plus Emperors race toward the center of the Stitched Wasteland, where they find a cave that goes down into the ground at a ninety-degree angle.

Mana thick enough to be visible to the human eye pours from that opening in the planet's surface, making their skin turn prickly.

"Come on!" Yardrat shouts.

He leads the charge into Glinch's tunnel complex. Luckily, he has visited before, so he knows the layout of the facility. There are no surprises in terms of its interior, and he guides the others through multiple branching side-paths, down the main corridors, and toward the center of the tunnels.

But, before he and the other demons can reach their destination, a strange sensation swallows them.

All of their magical abilities abruptly vanish, as if having receded into an inescapable void.

Yardrat stomps his feet and abruptly slows to a stop. His eyes go wide as he spots, in the distance up ahead, a two-headed figure standing in the middle of the hallway leading to Glinch's core laboratory.

"No..." Yardrat whispers, his pupils shrinking to pinpricks. "G-Gressil?! You're working for Glinch?!"

The other Emperors also slow to a stop behind Yardrat. Even Bael pauses and frowns.

"Ah, hello, *friends*." Gressil says slowly, as he stands in the darkened hallway, his glowing red eyes fixated on the many demons present. "We haven't chatted in quite a while."

"Get out of the way, Gressil!" Yardrat shouts. "We outnumber you! Even without our magic, you can't defeat us!"

Gressil cocks his head.

"What are you implying, Yardrat? I'm not here to fight. I'm just standing in this random hallway, minding my own business. I only came here to see the *show*."

"You're... not here to fight?" Emperor Melody asks. "You're lying!"

"Don't you want to see what will happen?" Gressil asks, speaking slowly enough to draw out each individual syllable. He lifts one of his hands and makes a vague gesture behind himself. "The first Demon Deity. Our people have never experienced such an honor. It would be a shame if something were to... *interrupt* this momentous occasion."

Bael narrows his eyes. He steps out in front of Yardrat and points a finger at Gressil.

"Shut your mouth, prison-bitch! We ain't gonna let freakin' *Mephisto* be the first demon to ascend! He's a bad dude, almost as bad as you!"

Gressil turns his gaze toward Bael.

"But Bael. It will be so *interesting*, seeing what comes next. Aren't you a little curious?"

Bael stomps toward Gressil while yanking on Big Bonk's chain.

"Nope! And I'm tired of wise-asses like you yappin' my devil-damned ear off!"

Bael snaps his flail toward Gressil, sending the multi-ton spiked-ball flying at the Emperor of Chaos's chest.

But before it can slam into and possibly kill Gressil, he disappears, then reappears right next to Bael.

BOOM!

Gressil's fist smashes into Bael's helmet and sends him hurtling to the side!

Bael crashes into the corridor wall and embeds in the hardened concrete, his vision turning dark as the impact nearly knocks him unconscious.

"Aaaaa..." Bael grunts.

"Bael!" Yadrat exclaims, directing his rage toward Gressil. "Swarm him! Kill the Emperor of Chaos!"

A roar of righteous fury goes up among the other Emperors as they see their favorite best buddy Bael collapsing to the ground. Like a wave of flesh, they rush toward Gressil, intending to overpower him with the force of numbers.

Gressil's body flickers.

Bang!

Bang!

CRACK!

He begins disappearing and reappearing amidst the horde of incoming Emperors, delivering gut-busting punches and bone-shattering kicks to their vital areas. Even the fastest-reacting Emperors only manage to protect themselves a little, and they still go flying when his strikes land.

Amidst these figures, two Emperors hold their own against Gressil..

Crow and Rhesus!

As the two tankiest and most durable Emperors, when Gressil tries to attack them, his crushing offense immediately crumbles! Crow easily deflects Gressil's punch with her steel-like feathers, then slaps him toward Rhesus, who swipes his claws across Gressil's torso.

Riiiiip!!

Rhesus rakes a massive chunk of flesh out of Gressil's chest, making Gressil cry out in pain.

He quickly flickers away, teleporting to safety. He reappears with blood pouring out of the four gashes across his chest, and appears to be in agony. But despite this, Gressil doesn't whine or cry. He merely watches as the horde of Emperors -those who survived his initial attacks- come charging toward him.

Gressil smiles.

"You're too late."

He disappears.

A moment later, the intensity of mana rushing out of the laboratory core explodes!

It doubles, triples, and even quintuples!

Yardrat's pupils shrink to pinpricks. "No! Dammit! We can't be too late! We can't!"

From deep within the facility, a familiar voice begins to laugh.

"HEH, HEH, HEH..."

Mephisto's words travel up the corridor from his unseen ascension location, making the hair stand up on every Emperor's neck.

Serena's face turns pale. She peers through the walls blocking the other Emperor's vision, and she easily sees the swirling mass of souls that are beginning to combine into one.

"We still have a chance!" Serena exclaims. "Everyone, make a run for it!"

The uninjured Emperors, those Gressil failed to knock down, dart forward at maximum speed. Nothing hinders their paths. They take a right, then a left, then another right...

A brilliant light illuminates the corridor ahead. They shield their eyes as they rush toward the laboratory core, their feet splattering against a floor covered in sticky, viscous blood.

Inside the center of a large chamber, they witness the strangest sight they've ever seen. Emperor Glinch stands with his back to the newcomers, gazing at a giant bone revolving rapidly above a field of blue and white demonic light. A multitude of powerful Emperor souls, those belonging to Mephisto, Yama, Lupus, Zamiel, and others, all swirl uncontrollably within an orb placed at the base of that giant bone.

"Beautiful, isn't it?!" Glinch cackles maniacally. "Behold! My greatest creation!"

Yardrat wastes no time. Without Gressil's aura to suppress his magic, he tears the Void to send a wave of crackling spatial energy toward the orb containing Mephisto's gathered souls.

But it fizzles away!

Yardrat's attack does nothing to stop Mephisto's rapidly congealing magical power!

Crow snarls angrily. She rushes toward the center of the room, along with Rhesus. They launch themselves at the orb to swing their claws and fists at it, but the moment they do...

ZOT-ZOT!

Two beams of pure demonic energy fire out of the orbs, lance into their chests, and send them flying away!

Their backs crash against the walls and they fall forward, landing on their faces. Both mighty Emperors cough several times, having had the wind knocked out of them. They even vomit up blood and bone fragments, discovering that the raw impact of that beam nearly caved in their chests.

"Too late." Mephisto says, his voice emanating from the orb. **"YOU CANNOT SSSTOP THISSS DEITY. MY PLANSSS HAVE FINALLY BORNE FRUIT!"**

"Mephisto, let us go!" Lupus's voice screams from within that same orb. "I don't want this! You're a monster!"

"Boss, boss, I thought we were buddies!" Zamiel also exclaims. "Someone save us! Don't let him eat us!!"

"You betrayed us!" Yama hisses. "We'll never bow to you! Never!"

Mephisto chuckles sinisterly. **"HEH HEH. You don't have a choicce! Be grateful, for you ssshall combine with me to form the mightiesst demon that hasss ever exisssted! HEH HEH HEH HEH!!"**

The assault force watches helplessly, unable to do anything to stop Mephisto's ascension process. Too late, they realize they never stood a chance. The combined powers of several Emperors inside Mephisto's strange soul-orb device allows him to create a barrier no individual Emperor could hope to bypass, even if they desperately wanted to kill him.

A ray of light beams up from the orb into that strange, giant bone levitating above it. Then the ray of light fires into the ceiling, blasting into the sky with a thunderous explosion.

BOOOOM!!

The roof of Glinch's laboratory detonates with the force of fifty tons of TNT, deafening all of the Emperors present and making their hearts leap into their throats.

The souls inside the orb spin faster and faster, and the protests of Mephisto's unwitting allies weaken.

Then, they merge together, transforming into a single, shining, multicolored rainbow of a soul.

"Yes!!" Glinch howls, the disfigured Emperor dropping to his knees while tears of joy well up in all of his eyes. "My ultimate creation, it is HERE!"

* * *

Elsewhere in the Milky Way, a certain female Volgrim frowns.

Dosena, the Second Founder, turns a cold, emotionless gaze in the direction of the world of Numaria.

However, she remains sitting in place, merely observing with her galaxy-spanning psionic sense, as she observes the arrival of a new Cosmic Entity within her domain.

[...So it was a demon after all.] She thinks. [I'll keep a careful eye on this one. *Just in case.*]

Part 496: The Cosmic Truths

Inside Glinch's laboratory, the powers swelling within Mephisto's soul and those of his helpless victims all swirl together into a single cohesive orb of light.

"HEH HEH HEH!"

Mephisto cackles gleefully. His aura rises to the apex, and a beam of energy fires into the sky!

The beam disappears as it races toward the Void. It tears through the fabric of reality, and Mephisto's vision fades away.

An unknown period of time passes.

Mephisto awakens!

The Emperor of Legions opens his spiritual eyes, finding himself careening uncontrollably through the sky of a realm filled with painfully brilliant golden light. A massive mountain looms, a golden peak so vast that he cannot see the top, not even with his incredible eyesight.

Mephisto's soul rockets toward the base of the mountain. He howls in fright as his figure crashes onto a landscape of golden dirt and bounces twice before grinding to a halt.

After ten seconds of whimpering and wheezing, he lifts himself up a little, momentarily marveling as a thin layer of skin begins to grow across his bones. Though still rotten and corpse-like, this is the first time in a hundred thousand years he has ever had such a feature present on his body.

But he ultimately pays little attention to his appearance. Instead, he cranes his head to gaze around himself, a mixture of wonder and awe present on his face.

Trees made of silver and copper grow all across this wondrous realm. Fruits dangle from their branches. They are not made of biological material, but instead rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and countless other jewels. Most fruits appear multicolored, as if plucked from rainbows. Some are comprised of singular colors, such as red or blue.

All of them glow with immeasurable spiritual power.

A look of greed enters Mephisto's eyes.

A look of *hunger*...

"Where have I landed, I wonder?" Mephisto mutters out loud.

He slowly stands up, but grimaces as he realizes his body feels far heavier than it ever has before, as if he has stepped foot on a world with fifty times the gravity of a paradise-class planet like Earth or Numaria. He groans, and his legs shudder as he barely manages to stand upright.

Ultimately, he only manages to take a step forward after hunching his posture. His body's weight is simply too great for him to be able to walk normally.

Mephisto makes his way toward the closest tree. A bevy of ruby and sapphire-fruit hang from its branches, well within his reach. He shakily lifts an arm to try and pluck one of these wonderful holy fruits, but when he grabs onto it, his half-flesh, half-bone fingers slide right off.

"Grr... you cannot resssisst thisss Emperor." Mephisto growls, only to cock his head. "No. Not thisss Emperor. Thisss DEITY! Yesss... I musst have asscended. But where have I arrived? What placce iss thisss?"

Mephisto's eyes flick around. He gazes at the trees for a moment before returning his attention to the delicious-looking fruits hanging within arm's reach.

He grabs one of the fruits again, and this time he manages to barely get a grip on the blue-colored sapphire-fruit. He pulls, he tugs, and he yanks with what strength he can muster...

...but he fails to break it from the branch. He doesn't even manage to wiggle it a little!

The fruit stubbornly clings to the branch, defying his desires.

"Bassstard! Don't think I can't take you for myssself-"

Suddenly, a voice speaks from behind Mephisto.

"Don't bother."

Mephisto nearly jumps out of the little skin that has formed on his bones. He whirls around, only to see a strange, hazy bipedal figure standing a short distance behind himself.

Mephisto's eyes widen.

"You! Who.. who are you?"

The hazy figure appears indistinct, little more than a faintly glowing white aura in the shape of a human, or perhaps a demon, and maybe even a Volgrim.

This figure stands idly, its faceless body looking only in Mephisto's vague direction.

"You want to know who I am?" The figure asks.

Mephisto glares at the speaker, only able to tell that its voice is vaguely masculine, but little else.

"That'sss right! Identify yourssself!"

The illusory man nods.

"I'm the Creator, baby."

Unarin stands with his back to the Second Wordsmith. He turns his head to look over his shoulder at Hope out of the corner of his eye.

"Tell me, Hope. What do you know of the event your people once called the *Big Bang*?"

Hope frowns upon hearing the First Founder's words. Unarin's aloof posture makes the intent behind his question difficult to follow.

"It was... the... creation of the universe." Hope says slowly. "The moment a singularity detonated and created everything."

Unarin inclines his head, pondering for a moment before he speaks again. He returns his head to looking forward at the table before himself, hiding his expression from the Wordsmith.

"Do you believe in the existence of an all-powerful God?"

This time, Hope's gaze becomes much more intense as he tries to figure out if Unarin is screwing with him.

"I'm an atheist." Hope says eventually. "There's no evidence God exists. Unless you mean the Creator, but supposedly he died, so he doesn't fit the bill of an all-powerful 'God.'"

"The metaphysical world presents many conundrums." Unarin says, as he reaches toward a figurine on the table before himself, a golden statue of some four-legged

exobeast from one of the Volgrim's privately-controlled worlds.

He picks it up and absentmindedly rolls it around in his palm, not truly inspecting it, but allowing his eyes to rove across its pristine white marbled surface.

"The existence of a God must seem silly to an 'atheist' like yourself." Unarin continues. "I know the world you came from, and I've taken the time to study up on the cultural, religious, and political situation of the time period in which you lived on ancient Earth. You must have had many bad experiences with religious people, experiences which drove you away from even contemplating God's existence."

"I contemplated it just fine." Hope retorts, feeling slightly miffed by Unarin's accusatory tone. "What, are you saying God does exist? Was the Creator this 'God' you refer to?"

Unarin fiddles with the figurine for another moment before placing it back. He waves his hand, and a pair of chairs pop out of the floor, unfolding on opposite sides of the table. Then, he gestures for Hope to come and sit with him.

As Unarin takes his seat and Hope walks over to join the First Founder, they pause their conversation for a moment so they can relax, ever so slightly.

"The Creator you're thinking of was not 'God.'" Unarin begins to explain. "He was merely the Ruler of the Milky Way. He reigned over its inhabitants for several Eternities. He was not all-powerful, but his abilities would certainly have put your Wordsmithing to shame."

Hope blinks. "What does that mean, 'several Eternities'? An Eternity indicates an infinite amount of time. You can't have multiple infinities. That isn't how numbers work."

Unarin closes his eyes. He sighs quietly, a faint smile playing upon his face as he begins to reminisce.

A Universe is born. It exists for a long, long time. But what eventually will happen to that Universe, Hope?"

"I'm not knowledgeable in the field of Astronomy, so I'm about to sound awfully ignorant," Hope says hesitantly. "I think... Heat Death?"

"Explain this term." Unarin says, keeping his eyes closed. "Heat Death. What does that mean to you?"

"Well, eventually, the galaxies will run out of star-forming gasses." Hope says. "Then the stars themselves will burn out, leaving only red dwarf stars. Eventually, those will fizzle away too, leaving only black holes. And then... through Entropy, the universe will dissipate to nothing."

Unarin opens his eyes. He smiles at Hope.

"After that?"

"Uhh..." Hope grunts, then scratches the back of his head. "Eternal... nothingness?"

Unarin's smile fades. He purses his lips and shakes his head.

"No. After the Entropy comes the Contraction. The Contraction leads to the Collapse. The Collapse leads to the end of the Cycle. And the Cycle... begins... *anew*."

Unarin deliberately pauses for three seconds.

"...The Cycle begins anew, Hope. Because that is one of the Truths of our existence. We live in a Cycle. The Cycle is never-ending. It has Always existed, and it will Always continue. It is the thing that gives us purpose, but it is also the trap which we cannot escape. In the end, all of our battles and wars will amount to cosmic dust. Everything shall fade to memory, and our memories will dissipate into the nether."

Mephisto blinks his eyes several times. He squints at the figure -the man- who has just given himself a presumptuous title.

"Creator? Of what?"

"Life." The Creator replies. "Life within the Milky Way, that is. I created the angels. The angels created the demons. And in that way, I'm sort of like... your grand-daddy."

"You don't sssound like much of a *Creator*." Mephisto snarks, grinning evilly at The Creator. "You're trying to trick me. Pisss off!"

"You don't have to believe me." The Creator says. "I don't often get to talk to my kids, these days. It's been pretty dull for the last umpteen-billion years. But by all means, if you don't believe me, you can continue yanking on that fruit until you run out of time."

Mephisto's smile vanishes. He feels a chill in his bones.

"Time? What time?"

"The time you have left in the Cosmic Realm." The Creator answers, his faceless head giving no hints as to his emotions. "You've just now ascended to the rank of a Cosmic entity. Congratulations, Mephisto. You've taken the first step on your true journey."

The Creator pauses, then slowly shakes his head.

"It's just... it's too bad. With that weak foundation, you're not a Candidate. I suppose I'll have to wait for someone better. That Wordsmith fellow is looking promising, as is the Second Founder."

Mephisto's blood-red eyes bug out. He glares psychopathically at The Creator, momentarily desiring to rip that smug, arrogant bastard to pieces.

"You dare mock thisss Deity?" Mephisto asks.

The Creator holds up his palms in a mock gesture of fear. "Oh no, don't use your scary powers to attack a feeble half-dead Ruler! I'm just an old man, don't hurt me! Haha."

Mephisto starts to walk toward The Creator, but he realizes the sense of weight pressing on his body has grown minutely more powerful since he arrived. He thinks to himself this fellow might be a real jerk, but he might also be telling the truth.

"Why have you come to ssspeak to me?" Mephisto asks.

"Because it's my duty." The Creator answers, reverting to a manner of speech somewhat like a wise sage. "It is the duty of every Ruler to guide their children up the Akashic Mountain. Even the ones with no future prospects, such as yourself."

The Creator gestures with his arm. He points at the massive golden mountain in the distance.

Mephisto follows the gesture with his eyes.

"That mountain... what isss sssso ssspeccial about it?"

The Creator lowers his arm.

"You'll have to climb it to see."

The Second Wordsmith's expression becomes grim.

"A Cycle. The universe... exists in a Cycle. So after the Heat Death, everything... collapses back into a singularity? And then it explodes again, in a new Big Bang?"

"Tens of trillions, even septillions of cycles pass between the two events." Unarin says, unsmiling. "These incomprehensibly long periods of time are known as Eternities. An Eternity is how long it takes the universe to complete one Cycle. I believe you should understand now."

Hearing Unarin speak in such relatively plain words, for a brief moment, fills Hope with a deep sense of existential dread.

In the Wordsmith's mind, he struggles to wrap his head around the concept of trillions and septillions of years.

He imagines the birth of the universe, its different rates of expansion, its eventual cooling, and its collapse back into a singularity which will explode into a new universe.

"So.. the Creator..." Hope says, his heart feeling chilled, "...he... he isn't a God. He's a... a Ruler, you said?"

"A Ruler, yes." Unarin affirms. "Every Galaxy has one. This was not always the case. Countless Eternities ago, there existed a few unclaimed galaxies, and in the Eternities before then, even more galaxies beyond that. But those Eternities have long passed. Now, the only way to become a Ruler is by deposing one who already exists. And that, dear boy, is easier said than done."

"Slow down, hold on!" Hope exclaims, waving a hand at Unarin while massaging his forehead. "What are you even saying? So the universe is full to the fucking brim with other sentient species? And each one is controlled by a Ruler... a God??"

"Perhaps, with your feeble, ant-like view of reality, they would seem as Gods." Unarin retorts. "But make no mistake, they are only Rulers."

"Hoooh, *Jesus*." Hope moans, resting his elbows on the table, and his face in his palms. "Fuckin'... what are you even saying? Just speak plainly for me, Unarin. I'm about to have a mental meltdown."

"I don't blame you." Unarin says. "I've had millions of cycles to digest the Truths that surround us. Throwing it all on you like this... it's a little discourteous. But unfortunately, the Game is well underway now. It's not so simple for me to take my time, introducing these concepts to you bit by bit. A certain level of expediency is... appropriate."

He continues. "Rulers are not Gods. There is only one God. He, or she, or they, are the one that truly controls everything. This God is known as the First Ruler. The Most High.

The Supreme. The Alpha and Omega. And other such lofty titles."

Hope peeps his eyes out from between his fingers. "So there is a God?"

"There is." Unarin says hesitantly. "But... that does not mean there always *was*."

"I just want to slap the crap out of you right now." Hope complains.

"The Eternal Cycle has always existed." Unarin states. "The universe has cycled through its phases of existence for an infinite number of Eternities. There was no Beginning, and there will be no End."

Mephisto follows The Creator. Together, the two of them walk toward the base of the Akashic Mountain. The closer they draw, the more impressive and imposing it appears. Its peak hides behind a thick layer of clouds. Mephisto's demonic senses can't pierce even an inch of that otherworldly veil.

"Have you ever heard of the Cosmic Realm?" The Creator asks.

Mephisto nods. "Sssatan onccce fought Archangel Raphael there. He wrote down a sssecret record of that battle for the Demon Elites to perusse."

The Creator shakes his head.

"No. That was not the Cosmic Realm. That was merely Raphael's poor imitation of it. The place you stand now, this is the True Cosmic Realm. What my son created was an attempt to mimic the Akashic Energy contained within the True Cosmic Realm, so that he might someday ascend to the rank of Ruler. The silly boy even thought he might someday stand against the First Ruler himself..."

The Creator's words contain a hint of melancholy, as well as nostalgia.

"It's my fault. I told him tales of the other Rulers. I thought it would be a good idea to begin grooming a successor. All that nonsense must have gone to his head. He thought he could defy the Akashic Laws if he discovered a workaround. He failed, as have all who tried."

Mephisto turns his head to look at The Creator's ethereal body. "He failed? Ssso the Cossmic Realm issn't-"

"We're here." The Creator says, interrupting Mephisto, and clearly not interested in answering any further questions about Raphael.

Mephisto swallows his words. He returns his attention forward, and his jaw drops as he comes to observe a truly massive staircase rising straight up the mountain's side, a staircase that ascends up to that peak, tens or even hundreds of miles above.

"Wha... what?" Mephisto asks. "What isss thiss? How many sssteps are there?"

"Millions. Perhaps billions." The Creator says. "This is the Staircase of Ascension. The Akashic Truths state that if you can reach the final step at the very top, you will become worthy of the title 'Ruler Over All Creation'. But don't bother lusting over that title. There's no place in Existence lonelier than at the top. And nobody can reach it anyway. It's just part of how He toys with us in The Game."

The Creator casually hops up the first step, and the second. He saunters up them with ease, then turns back to Mephisto.

"Your time's running out, brat. Get on up here already."

Mephisto blinks twice, then nods.

He walks toward the steps, then lifts his leg to take his first Step of Ascension.

BOOOM!!!

A tremendous wave of Cosmic Energy crashes onto Mephisto's back, causing him to fall forward and collapse against the first step. He screams in pain, and his eyes burn as that energy enters his body.

"Alright, alright, that was step one!" The Creator says impatiently. "Come on, then. Don't just lay there like a useless bag of bones! The more steps you take, the greater the benefits!"

Mephisto's watering eyes burn like fire. He grits his teeth and hisses painfully, still reeling from the Cosmic Energy that entered and empowered his body, but which also badly injured his soul.

"Ugh... one... one moment... give me one moment to catch my breath..."

The Creator sighs.

"Fine. It's only *your* time you're wasting."

Unarin looks Hope right in the eyes.

"But the First Ruler is not the same. He had a beginning. He rose, alone, at some point. He was the first Existence to reach the apex of power during one Eternity, a countless number of Eternities ago. He became the *First Ruler*. And in doing so, he became capable of annihilating any who opposed him, and preventing any competitors from challenging his rule."

Unarin's expression becomes deadly serious.

"None now live who witnessed the First Ruler's First Eternity. However, one thing was absolutely certain. No matter how powerful He became, the Alpha and Omega could not defy the Cosmic Truths. He could do nothing to stop the expansion of Entropy, and the collapse of the universe in which he was born."

Unarin slows his speech. He pauses for several seconds, a forlorn look on his face.

"It's the greatest tragedy, you know. It's not a pain many can understand. The loneliness. The crushing despair."

He inhales quietly, then exhales...

"The First Ruler discovered that he had obtained the ability to cheat death. Through a mechanism unknown to even me, those who become Rulers can defy the law of entropy. When one Cycle ends and the next begins, they will not perish, and will instead maintain their Existences, rebirthing with all of their memories and powers intact. And so, that is what happened to the First Ruler."

"But... he was alone." Unarin says softly. "All alone. In a universe where his species, the one that had ultimately given birth to his existence... no longer walked the mortal coil. Any loved ones he may have grown attached to, they had perished. Any familial ties, romantic bonds, or other mortal trappings had dissolved at the end of the Cycle."

Hope lifts his head out of his palms. He rests his arms in his lap and stares at the ground, suddenly feeling a deep, existential anguish on behalf of the First Ruler depicted in Unarin's story.

"That is... well... 'tragic' doesn't even cut it." Hope mutters.

"It doesn't." Unarin mutters softly. "The Alpha and the Omega lived for an untold number of Eternities in despair. He was alone. Well and truly alone. He contemplated ending his existence. He sometimes raised up civilizations identical to the ones from his formative Cycle, but in the end, they gave him no joy. After all, even if he could perfectly

duplicate the people that he loved, and even if he could recreate their memories and souls... it would not truly be them. They would only be copies, shadows of their original selves. And he would *know*... he would know that the original versions of his mortal friends had perished. He had been unable to save them from the unending, unfeeling, uncaring Entropy."

"What did he do next, then?" Hope asks, finding himself deeply invested in Unarin's tale.

"It's simple." Unarin says. "His despair gave way to apathy, and then boredom. He stopped caring about anything. Life itself had no meaning. He began waging ugly and hideous experiments with his powers, creating monsters, freaks, and mutants across worlds to battle one another. He watched idly as these creatures fought and killed one another. But that did nothing to alleviate his infinite boredom. And eventually... he formulated The Game."

"The Game!" Hope exclaims, finally beginning to tie everything together. "Then... all of this, the wars between Rulers...?"

"It is all part of the First Ruler's Game." Unarin affirms, lazily blinking his eyes. "He could have ensured no Existence would ever rise up to equal him by snuffing them out. Instead, perhaps due to his infinite loneliness and boredom, he allowed new Rulers to emerge, sometimes even forcing their ascensions along. He formulated unbreakable rules, shackles he placed on all of His Creations. He etched in the fabric of reality... the Akashic Laws."

Unarin looks at Hope with an intensity unlike any he's expressed until now.

"The First Ruler's name is... **Akasha**. He gave order to the chaos of the Cycles, imprinting upon them the name of the Akashic Cycle. He gave order to The Game by creating the Akashic Barriers and Akashic Laws. And He formulated unbreakable Truths upon the universe, granting them the name of the Akashic Truths. All of Existence now dances within His palm."

"Akasha..." Unarin says, enunciating each syllable one by one, "...is *God*."

Mephisto coughs up blood. When it expels from his mouth, it lands on the golden steps and immediately fizzles into nothingness, unable to leave a stain on the Staircase of

Ascension.

After much effort, Mephisto manages to crawl up the second step.

BOOOOOM!!!

Another violent blast of cosmic energy bombards his body, empowering his soul while also causing it even more grievous damage.

"Aaaargh!" Mephisto cries out pitifully.

"Don't be such a baby." The Creator complains. "Raphael managed forty-two steps the first time he visited. Dosena climbed twenty-three. Even Siddhartha made it up five. You can't be weaker than a human!"

Mephisto cries in a manner most pathetic. He spends a full minute collecting himself, before he manages to lift his head to look up at The Creator.

"Hurtsss..." Mephisto hisses. "Going... to die?"

"The Staircase of Ascension can't kill you." The Creator says, his tone growing more impatient by the minute. "The pain you're feeling is only temporary. When you leave here, you'll be stronger than you can imagine! But that's only if you KEEP climbing the steps!"

Hearing The Creator's assurances, Mephisto feels a little bit better. His fear of death, once causing him great concern, eases up a little bit.

"If it'sss only a matter of a little pain... I... I can manage!" Mephisto proclaims.

With a burst of renewed energy, Mephisto pulls himself to his knees, then he drags his thousand-ton body up to the third step.

BOOOOOOOM!!!

A third blast of violent cosmic energy, ten times greater than before, all but annihilates his existence.

Mephisto slams down against the third step, releasing a scream that would curdle the blood of even the hardest listener.

This time, he doesn't move.

He remains frozen in place, unable to crawl an inch further.

The Creator gazes at the child, his expressionless face betraying no emotions.

He sighs.

"Your foundation is just too awful. You tried to cheat the process. You sloppily threw together a bunch of mere Emperor souls to forcibly raise your foundation. Nothing worse than a lying, cheating Soul Manipulator. Your kind always thinks you can beat the Akashic Laws, but you can't."

Suddenly, The Creator's posture becomes more alert. He raises his head upward, where he sees various figures descending from the mountaintop.

"Damn..." The Creator murmurs.

The vast majority of these figures appear as mere orbs of glowing light. Formless, neither bipedal nor possessing any particular limbs or extrusions from their souls.

However, one of them does appear bipedal, like the Creator himself. Its body has wings sprouting from its back, and an evil, blood-red aura instead of The Creator's pure white one. Talons grow from its fingers. Its head appears somewhat ominous, with various writhing masses extruding from its mouth.

"Heh." The winged figure says, looking down upon Mephisto's collapsed body with no expression. "So this is the latest Candidate for the Milky Way. Fallen after three steps."

One of the nearby glowing orbs speaks, its voice lacking any gender signifiers, and coming off as... somewhat robotic.

"Not a Candidate. The soul foundation is unacceptable."

"Agreed." Says another orb, with a similarly robotic voice. "Rarely would a New Cosmic only reach the third step."

"Looks like it's a Soul Manipulator." The winged figure says, its faceless visage barely hiding its disdain for The Creator's latest child. "It tried to cheat Akasha's Laws. Now it will never ascend a step further."

"Not all are lucky enough to be born with a high spiritual foundation." The Creator says emotionlessly. "Some of us had to struggle to earn our titles. Are you any different, Dark One?"

The winged figure chuckles. "I did not cheat. I stole. There is a difference."

"The Akashic Barrier will not protect the Milky Way forever." One of the glowing orbs states. "When it falls, so too will you."

"One of my Candidates will ascend before then." The Creator vows. "Do not believe you will obtain easy gains from my kids."

The Dark One turns away. He flies back up into the clouds, laughing all the way.

"Don't be such a boor, Creator! It's all just a Game! HAHAAHAHA!"

The other orbs grow bored of looking at Mephisto's fallen form. They also depart, not bothering to say anything to The Creator.

After they leave, The Creator walks down to Mephisto's trembling figure. Mephisto gasps weakly, barely able to stay conscious.

"You did what you could." The Creator says. "But... only three steps. *Sigh*. I'll send you back, now. Just remember... you might feel like you're a shark once you leave, but in Akasha's Game... you're little more than a minnow."

Mephisto's vision becomes darker and darker. Slowly, he loses consciousness.

The last thing he sees is The Creator's hand reaching toward him...

"How do you know all of these things?" Hope asks. "How do you know about Akasha, the Rulers, and all the rest of it? Isn't the Creator dead?"

"Dead, yes. He no longer lives in the sense of wielding His awesome power." Unarin says slowly. "But... when one becomes capable of grasping the Truths, when they reach a certain... level... they may find that Truths of a Cosmic nature are not always what they seem."

"You're being cryptic again." Hope grunts. "Just speak plainly."

"Dosena." Unarin says. "She is not like you and me. She is a 9th Level Psion. She is... a Cosmic Entity. Her power is beyond your comprehension. And she is not the only 9th Level Psion that has existed in the Milky Way's history. There were a half-dozen others, long, long ago."

Hope nods. Having spent some time infiltrating the Volgrim Empire, he's learned some of this information himself, though he wasn't able to uncover any hidden or classified details.

"So you found out through Dosena?" Hope asks.

"She, her predecessors, and... other individuals." Unarin clarifies. "Once, during the Age of Ignorance, there existed a certain Ascended. A powerful individual, a seer and prophet... and my blood-brother. His abilities allowed him to peer across time, to discern Truths others could not. It was he who gave us many great prophecies, including one which has yet to pass."

"Which one would that be?" Hope asks, leaning forward intently.

Unarin's tone becomes somewhat distant and mystical.

"It is not an event he described in any detail. Merely one he called... *The Great Shattering*. An event that would surely reshape the cosmos."

Hope nods. "So this prophet, he told you about the Rulers?"

"Those who properly ascend, those who learn the Truths and reach a certain rank of power, they can obtain Answers." Unarin explains. "And those in my Empire who succeeded ultimately passed their knowledge on to me."

He pauses to add, "As for those who cheat the Truths, they are unworthy. They will earn no Answers."

Hope leans back in his chair and touches his lips thoughtfully. His desire to kill Unarin has long faded away, replaced instead with a deep fascination for the First Founder's revelations.

"You spoke to Jason." Hope says. "Did you tell him any of this?"

"Bits and pieces." Unarin says with a smile. "But he's... not at the same intellectual level as you. I could see that the so-called First Wordsmith was having too much trouble following along. You are clearly more capable of digesting these Akashic Truths than he was."

Hope sneers.

"It's obvious you're playing me, Unarin. But you *do* have a way with words..."

"Haha," Unarin laughs lightly. "Was I too obvious? Forgive me, Mighty Wordsmith. But it is true, you're a much more formidable existence than your other self. I'm growing to like you more and more the longer we talk."

"HEH HEH HEH..."

The fifty gathered Demon Emperors feel chills wash across their skin. They watch in horror as a beam of cosmic energy fires up into the sky, blasting the roof off of Glinch's laboratory and sending thousands of tons of soil into the upper atmosphere.

An instant later, that cosmic energy reforms. It pools together in the sky and begins rapidly spiraling, as a series of demonic faces appear, one after the other.

Lupus.

Zamiel.

Yama.

Mephisto.

And many others!

These faces converge together, swirling and melting until a figure made of flesh and blood begins forcing its way into the material realm, tearing out of a gap in space while golden light floods through the tear, momentarily blinding all who gaze upon it.

The Emperors cry out in pain. Serena is the only one who, for the briefest of instants, manages to make out a faceless figure formed wholly out of cosmic energy, hidden inside that divine realm.

But then the gap closes, and Mephisto's body remains.

"YESSS... YESSS!!!" Mephisto howls, his mere voice causing hurricanes to erupt and earthquakes to rock the world of Numaria. "WE HAVE DONE IT! WE HAVE ASSCCENDED!!! KEKEKEKE!"

Mephisto's voice no longer sounds like him alone.

Now, it carries a mixture of tones. Those who listen to it can't help but feel as if a thousand people are speaking in unison; all the souls Mephisto used to create this Cosmic Body of his.

Waves of power surge through hyperspace.

Inside the Volgrim Empire, Dosena pays close attention to the ascension process. The moment Mephisto materializes, she relaxes, sinking back into her chair.

[Mmm. Low Cosmic.]

On the world of Tarus II, Raphael stands up alertly, gasping in shock.

"What is this? I sense something... a successful ascension? Within the Milky Way? But by whom?"

At the same time, Emperor Glinch gazes up at Mephisto's body, but his smile fades away.

"Bah. That's all? What a disappointment. I expected better!"

Mephisto has no idea of the thoughts running through the minds of these figures. And even if he knew those thoughts, he would not care.

Cosmic power floods through his body. He stands at the same physical size as ever before, but now his spiritual aura, and his magical powers, have grown absolutely monstrous. A casual wave of his hand could sunder mountains. The full force of his abilities could easily crack planets.

Mephisto vaguely feels that if he were to battle Wolfram, who had falsely ascended to the rank of Demon Deity, he would have a huge advantage and would ultimately defeat his former friend.

"HAHAHAHAHA!" Mephisto laughs. "GAZE UPON THISSS DEITY! Gaze upon thisss divinely mandated God of Demonsss!!"

If The Creator were to hear Mephisto's words, he might facepalm. Mephisto completely ignores the warning he received, opting instead to gloat over his planet-busting capabilities.

But to the Emperors below him, they do not sneer or laugh. They feel only a sense of unending despair.

Emperor Yardrat falls to his knees, a sensation of defeat already weighing on his chest.

"He's... almost as powerful as the Cherubiim." Yardrat mutters. "Maybe even stronger. We can't win. It's over."

Mephisto looks down on the pathetic, crying, sniveling weaklings cowering within his cosmic aura. He grins delightedly, reveling in the despair upon their faces.

"Lisssten well, insssectsss!" Mephisto proclaims, his voice booming across all of Numaria. "Your new Firsst Emperor isss none other than usss, Mephisststo!"

"And our new title isss..."

"...THE MYRIAD DEITY!"

Part 497: Myriad Deity

Many of the Emperors lose their fighting spirit as they gaze upon the monster levitating in the sky. Numaria's atmosphere begins to thicken, and clouds swirl in the distance as they become drawn to Demon Deity Mephisto's aura of cosmic power.

Turbulent winds rock the world beneath him. Despite his body being the same physical size as every other demon in the vicinity, his demonic aura practically surges into the heavens, giving those with mana-attuned senses the idea that he actually stands ten thousand meters tall!

"HEH, HEH, HEH..." Mephisto laughs slowly, his voice audible inside every nook and cranny of Numaria's surface. "Do you feel fear? You, who spent millennia mocking uss? You, who thought you were better than usss? You, who now bowsss limply at our feet?"

Mephisto's mouth curls up into a cruel grin. Half of his skeleton has now grown skin across its surface, and bits of muscle also cling to it as well, but overall he only appears half-complete as a flesh-and-blood entity, and his regrowth doesn't continue any further. This makes him appear like a ghoul resurrected from the Great Beyond, a creature clinging to life through sheer strength of will.

But that doesn't matter.

To the Emperors below him, he might as well be a reincarnation of the Cherubiim; their worst nightmare.

Even Yardrat can't help but look up at the Myriad Deity, a creature born by stitching the souls of half-a-dozen Emperors together, with anything more than utter hopelessness.

"We've lost." Yardrat whispers to himself.

"Mephisto!" Emperor Melody exclaims, not allowing defeat to enter her thoughts. "Don't go too far! We have no choice but to acknowledge your rule, but we're still your demonic brothers and sisters!"

"Our brotherssss? Our sssisssterssss?" Mephisto challenges, narrowing his eyes. "Oh, we think *not*. Ssstupid wench. For one hundred thousssand yearsss, you mocked uss. You

treated usss ass a weakling worthy only of disssdain. You even came here intending to kill usss. You sssold usss out to the Wordsssmithsss. Your fatesss are sssealed."

Mephisto crooks a wicked smile.

"But worry not. You will not die pointless deathsss here. Innsstead, you ssshall merge with usss. We ssshall devour your sssoulsss to empower our body! And in thisss way, we will amasss INFINITE POWER!"

Suddenly, Mephisto snaps his hand out. Before anyone can react, a wisp of cosmic shadow-energy races toward one of the recently ascended Emperors, grabs them, and yanks them toward Mephisto's smiling face.

The Emperor, a female of some renown, shrieks in fright. "Nooo!!!"

Her begging goes unanswered. Mephisto casually slaps her face, breaks her neck, and kills her on the spot.

Before her soul can escape, he grabs onto it, using the power of Valac's Lantern, now imbued into his very essence, and tugs her soul into his mouth.

Mephisto greedily slurps out her soul, then crushes her body into meat paste and splatters her remains onto his half-grown skin and bones.

They regenerate slightly, absorbing her remains into his body!

This shocking sight terrifies all of the other Emperors, making their blood run cold.

"H-he ate Emperor Komi!" One of the male Emperors shrieks. "And he's going to eat us next! What do we do?!"

Emperor Serena grits her teeth. Unlike the others, she clearly sensed the changes to Mephisto's soul after he devoured Komi's remnants.

Mephisto's ability is practically a cheat! He gains power by eating the bodies and souls of other entities! Doesn't this mean he could become unstoppable, given time? We can't hold back!

Mephisto grabs another Emperor at random, simply picking the closest ones to himself.

"Nooooo!" The male Emperor shrieks, clawing at the ground as his body begins to lift at the sky. "We can bargain, Mephisto! Please, NOOOO!!!"

Mephisto tears that Emperor apart as well, slightly increasing his power further. By now, the other Emperors have shaken from their fear and entered fight or flight mode. Several Emperors take up defensive stances and activate their powers, but even more run away, fleeing the battlefield as fast as they can.

Before they make it 500 meters, Glinch's minions emerge from the ground to cut off their paths of retreat!

Glinch's chimeras slap those Emperors back, knocking them on their asses while preventing them from running away. With their battle-lines and minds in disarray, none of them can form proper strike forces to escape Mephisto's radius of revenge!

Emperor Crow's gaze hardens. She receives a message from Emperor Serena and nods.

She stands up to her full height and puffs out her chest.

"Ca-CAW! Hear me, allies! Believe in the plan! The time is now! I will face Mephisto! I will defeat this menace myself!"

Mephisto pauses his feasting to look at Crow with interest. He starts to reach toward her, but halts, some of the arrogant souls within himself becoming interested in the challenge issued by the protesting ant before him.

"Kekeke! You wisssh to battle thisss deity? Oh, we would very much like to sssee you TRY, Crow!"

The other Emperors suddenly remember the plan Auger told them about.

If Mephisto should successfully ascend, then all of the demons across all of the Hells should volunteer their magical energy in an attempt to uplift Crow to the rank of Demon Deity through the Ritual of Sacrifice!

But...

Even if they take this plan, the conversion rate of their energy won't be high, and Crow won't be able to stay in her empowered state for long. Perhaps only a few hours at best.

Those who give Crow their energy will become weakened to the point they won't be able to fight back at all. They'll be helpless to protect themselves!

In the end, it's only when they truly see Mephisto's awe-inspiring power for themselves that the Emperors realize they're already helpless. None of them can offer the slightest challenge to the Myriad Deity.

It's better to put their hopes on a slight chance than to be slaughtered like pigs!

With that, the sense of fear around the battlefield becomes partially obscured. The weakest-hearted Emperors grit their teeth, then they hold their palms up to the sky.

"Begin the Ritual!" Crow declares.

* * *

Across the Labyrinth, a series of secret commands transfers across tens, hundreds, and even thousands of hidden messenger's mouths. With orders sent to them through Emperor Auger's special methods, they quickly send word to every demon living within four of the Hells, including the First Hell of Damnation, the Third Hell of Blood, the Fourth Hell of Punishment, and the Fifth Hell of Calamity.

The lesser demons receive their orders and spread the word. At once, they lift their arms up and send weak but vital bursts of demonic energy into the sky, energy which races to the world of Diabolus, occupied by the Hell of Calamity. There, Crow's trusted subordinates manage the frightening influx of power and transmit it to their leader, the Emperor of Sacrifice herself.

Emperor Crow roars with pain. Her body immediately swells to the point of bursting, and her physical form inflates dramatically, raising her from seven feet tall to fifty feet!

On Numaria, Crow's screams of pain cause the other Emperors to wince sympathetically, but also cause them to fret nervously.

What if the Ritual bursts her body like a balloon? What if she cannot handle the amount of power rushing into her blood vessels and soul, and she implodes on herself like a poorly-made submarine four thousand meters beneath the ocean's surface?!

Crow's roars cause Numaria to shake. The blue-feathered birdlike Emperor becomes more and more powerful, but as she does, Mephisto doesn't show the slightest fear.

"Ah, a weak opponent to tessst our new ssstrength..." Mephisto chuckles to himself. "But Crow isss no true deity. Ssshe isss only a pretender. She has not been blessed by the Akassshic Mountain, and neither wasss Wolfram!"

As Mephisto mentions Wolfram's name, a part of himself suddenly feels inexplicably sad. One of the major souls comprising his body, the one belonging to Emperor Lupus, winces at the mention of her husband's name. But that feeling passes. Mephisto quickly

wrestles his emotions back under control, pushing those odd feelings away. They don't mean anything to him anymore, now that he has achieved the pinnacle of demonic power.

"Come, Crow. Give thiss Deity a challenge!" Mephisto exclaims.

Crow fights against her mind, body, and soul. She forces herself to condense the horrifying energies rushing into her vessel, realizing that if she fails to contain them properly, she'll die a death more gruesome than has been seen in the Milky Way for several tens of millennia.

The planet rumbles and shakes.

The mountains tremble.

The very tectonic plates beneath her feet grind together in protest!

Crow opens her eyes and gasps for breath.

"Cough... not... enough! I can't... aargh! S-Serena! SERENA! DO... IT...!!"

Emperor Serena's heart jumps.

"The Ritual wasn't enough?!"

Her thoughts turn cold.

It's possible I could boost Crow in the same manner that I did Wolfram, but then she would surely die afterward, whether she won or lost against Mephisto. That result is unacceptable! Rather than one giant burst of soul energy, I'll try slowly increasing her limits. Then she might still recover after battling Mephisto!

Serena assesses Crow's deteriorating situation in an instant. She raises her palms and sends soul energy into Crow's body, slowly increasing the power she can contain.

As Serena does this, Mephisto remains in the sky, crossing his arms and watching intently. Now that he's an ascended Cosmic Entity, he has become capable of seeing soul energy in much the same way as Serena can.

"Oh, how interesssting..." Mephisto says to himself quietly. "Ssso it'sss like that. When thiss isss all sssaid and done, we musst... *acquire* Ssserena'sss sssoul for ourssselvesss. Sssuch a ussseful ability... it would be a ssshame to leave it in the handsss of a mere Emperor. Kekeke..."

The other Emperors watch, their bodies weakened, as they lay on the ground. Their spirits remain sharp as they wait, hope, and pray for success on Crow's part.

"Uuuuaaargh!!" Crow roars, her aura increasing as her soul's maximum power inflates.

All of the gathered demonic energy rapidly fills the expanding void within herself, and this in turn causes her aura to explode with power!

WHOOOMPH!

A blast of mana erupts from Crow's body, flattening the wasteland around herself and causing every Emperor, including Serena, to fall flat on their asses or backs as the oppressive wave crashes into them.

Crow ascends!

In much the same way as Wolfram before her, but in a more controlled manner, Crow barely manages to shakily step across the boundary between Emperor and Deity, making her the third known demon to ever break this barrier.

"UUUAAAHHH!!" Crow shouts, her voice blasting the clouds out of the sky. "I'VE... DONE IT... AHAHAHA!!"

Crow, like Mephisto, becomes utterly intoxicated by the energy flowing through her veins. She snaps her head in Mephisto's general direction, feeling a sense of urgency as she realizes her power-up has put her on equal footing with the Myriad Deity.

"Wolfram was the Deity of Space Shattering!" Crow declares. "And you are the Myriad Deity! But I am... the DEITY OF DENIAL! I DENY you the right to kill any other demons!"

Crow takes a step forward. The planet rumbles when her foot strikes the rotted dirt. She looks up into the sky at the Myriad Deity, who stands haughtily with his arms crossed.

"Kekekeke!" Mephisto cackles. "You've barely managed to reach the sssame ssstrength asssss! But unlike ussss, you're on a timer! Do you think you can teach thissss Deity a lessson of humility? THINK AGAIN!"

Mephisto conjures a wall of shadow between himself and Crow, tapping into Yama's empowered magic. He flickers out of sight, then appears beside Crow with his fist raised.

BOOOM!

Mephisto smashes Crow's body with the full power of his Deity-body...

But Crow remains unmoved!

Like a mountain before a hurricane, Crow lifts her wing up and absorbs the full power of Mephisto's strike while merely digging her clawed-feet into the dirt!

Her feathers have now become harder than demonstone. Her defense rises well above Mephisto's physical striking power, allowing her to turn a cold grin toward him.

"You were saying?"

Crow balls her right talons into a fist, then snaps a punch at Mephisto's chest.

BOOOOM!

She slams Mephisto with her full strength, launching him backward like a cannonball!

Mephisto's body contorts into the shape of a 'U' as he flies away, heating up the air around him as he rockets across the Stitched Wasteland at the speed of sound. He rapidly reaches the distant forest, where he crashes into the trees, tears apart the foliage, and leaves a ten-kilometer ravine in the wake of his flight.

Eventually, he grinds to a stop and lands in a crumpled heap.

Then, he casually hops to his feet and lightly coughs after dusting himself off.

"Tsssk. Good ssstrength..."

Crow launches into the sky, then flies toward Mephisto's newest position at an even greater speed than she sent him flying. With the two of them now far enough away from the other Emperors to avoid collateral damage, the Deity of Denial can take on the Myriad Deity without holding back.

"Don't try acting tough!" Crow declares, as she pulls back a fist and flies toward Mephisto's motionless form. "I'm ten times the fighter you'll ever be!"

This time, it's Mephisto who looks up at the sky towards the scary threat rushing toward him below.

A faint smile spreads across his face.

"Ssstupid Crow. Ssshe hasss no idea how futile her effortsss truly are. We put everything into thisss body."

* * *

While Crow and Mephisto begin their battle for the ages, the other Emperors left behind clamber slowly to their feet. With their mana and soul reserves sapped, they feel

like dishcloths wrung completely dry, or perhaps humans trapped in a desert for one long week without water.

Completely drained, utterly parched.

These Emperors wince as a cataclysmic explosion erupts at the distant edge of the Stitched Wasteland. Whatever is happening between Crow and Mephisto, they don't dare get close enough to observe the situation.

Melody coughs. "Will... will Crow win?"

"We can only... hope so..." Yadrat wheezes.

The Emperors move to form a large group, checking one another for injuries.

But then, they notice Glinch's chimera slowly moving toward them.

"Shit!" Melody curses, as she has a terrible premonition.

"Heh, heh, heh." One of the winged bipedal chimeras, a gargoyle-like creature, laughs in a cruel voice identical to Glinch's. "All fattened up and ready for *stitching*. This was part of the deal with Mephisto. We'd split the Emperors fifty-fifty. Hehehe."

The chimera cocks its head.

"But you're all pretty weak, and Mephisto seems to be tied up. Oh dear, I wonder, can he hurt me if I renege on our agreement? Ah! It seems he can't. So maybe I'll just *gobble you all up* for myself, eh?"

Emperor Dagon stands up straight, despite his exhausted body. "Glinch! You little... you lowest of the low! You're playing right into the Wordsmith's hands! And the Volgrim!"

Glinch's gargoyle laughs softly. "Heh heh. Is that so? You think the person who handed out such valuable Soul Pellets like candy would *care* if all the Emperors of all the Hells died? I can just make more of you. You're nothing to me but *research material*."

A distant explosion sunders a mountain. Pieces of the peak rocket into the atmosphere to later rain down upon Numaria like meteorites. Crow and Mephisto's battle continues regardless of the actions of the Emperors left behind.

Emperor Rhesus grits his teeth. "I ain't afraid of you! You're a coward! You only wanna fight us because we can't fight back! A dickless prick like you can't beat a true man like me!"

The chimera laughs again. "Hah. Imbecile. My chimeras tore you apart when you were fighting at your full strength. If I wanted to kill you, I could have done it hours ago. But I wanted to make sure certain events happened first. Now that Crow is keeping Mephisto busy, I can do as I please."

The chimera rolls its eyes.

"Bah. This talking is so tedious. Just shut up and let me kill you quickly."

It begins stomping toward the closest Emperors, making their hearts skip a beat, but abruptly, it pauses its charge, jumps back, and looks up into the sky.

"What? You... you've come too?"

The other Emperors, bewildered, follow the chimera's gaze.

There, they see a figure they never expected to meet again, someone they thought was surely dead.

Emperor Yumagi!

The Glyphmancer's majestic, youthful, handsome form levitates high in the sky, his eyes looking down upon the army of Chimeras with disdain.

"Hello, Glinch. Up to your usual underhanded methods, I see."

Serena's eyes widen, because unlike the other Emperors, she can make out the overflowing vitality contained within Yumagi's body.

He isn't exhausted. He didn't give any power to Crow!

And while this might have resulted in a minuscule weakening of Crow's final form, it also means the Glyphmancer is fresh and ready for a fight!

"Ugh." Glinch's gargoyle grunts in annoyance. "Such a showoff. One Emperor cannot defeat my creations."

Yumagi's body disappears, then reappears amidst all the other Emperors.

"I don't like people who cheat at games, Glinch. I always play fairly. That's the difference between you and I."

Yumagi snaps his fingers, and a pair of Tarot cards appears in his grasp.

"Aspect of the Infinite Dragons, **EVOKE!** Temporal Cricket, **EVOKE!**"

Abruptly, Yumagi reverses the conditions of every single Emperor in the area, undoing all of the energy they lost, all of their soul vitality, and any injuries they may have sustained in the last five minutes.

Suddenly, all of the weakened Emperors gasp with excitement as the strength in their bodies immediately returns, leaving them ready for round two. They jump to their feet and grin delightedly.

"Holy shit! Way to go Yumagi!" Emperor Fae exclaims. "You kick ass!"

"Damn right!" Melody adds. "I'm ready to beat Glinch to a pulp!"

Other Emperors chime in, whooping and hollering as they feel a chance of survival arriving for the first time since Mephisto's ascension.

But Yumagi frowns at them.

"Quiet, all of you. I've only restored the strength you had from five minutes ago. You're not in peak condition. You were already worn out before Mephisto succeeded in becoming a Deity. Now, we'll have to work together to defeat Glinch's minions!"

Glinch's gargoyle laughs. "Smart, Yumagi. You do pay attention. I guess you're not going to make this easy on me, but it doesn't matter. I've been preparing for this day for a long time..."

"You can prepare all you want..." Yumagi says, as he produces a Tarot Card from his Mind Realm.

"...but I'd rather rely on the *heart of the cards*."

Part 498: Battle Across Numaria

Recommended Listening

The Myriad Deity.

The Deity of Denial.

Mephisto and Crow engage in a battle that rocks Numaria's foundations!

Each of the two has ascended to a power level comparable to a 7th, 8th, or perhaps even a 9th Level Psion! The sheer impacts of their blows render all life in the immediate vicinity extinct, no matter how strong and resilient they might be.

Crow races around at dizzying speeds, chasing after Mephisto while *cawing* at him in her bird-like speech. Her fists meet his face, chest, and arms with aggressive intent as she beats and batters him into mountains, rivers, and oceans.

"Quit running away and FACE ME!" Crow exclaims, as she chases Mephisto across Numaria's surface.

Within the first five minutes of their battle, they completely annihilate two of Numaria's mountains, the ones nearest the Stitched Wasteland.

Ten minutes later, they've carved a long, zig-zagged ravine through Numaria's forests.

Crow's feet plant against the planet's surface with enough force to rattle its tectonic plates. She storms after Mephisto while firing her demonstone-like feathers at him, some striking Mephisto's bones like cannonballs, while other miss and spread death across Numaria's landscape.

At the same time, Mephisto continues running away, only occasionally punching back at his pursuer.

Crow's initial excitement at how much stronger she seems to be than Mephisto becomes duller as the minutes pass. Unlike her opponent, she's on a time limit, and it doesn't take much thought on her part to realize he intends to run out the clock.

"You're such a COWARD!" Crow declares, as she catches up to Mephisto and lands a vicious punch on his smug half-skinned face. "Stop running and fight like a man!"

Crow's fist slams Mephisto down into the dirt, sending a shockwave throughout the forest and uprooting hundreds of giant trees nearby. She inadvertently conjures a giant circular clearing, reminiscent of a fighting ring.

Just like the last fifty times she's landed a solid hit, Mephisto easily jumps to his feet, not appearing injured in the slightest.

"Hehe. You want usss to ssstop running? Are you cccertain?"

Crow scowls at him as she raises her fists.

Are all Demon Deities as durable as us? She wonders. I've struck Mephisto with blows that would turn any Emperor to a mass of pulped blood, but he looks like I've barely slapped his face. Is it possible he hasn't suffered any injuries up to now?

But she doesn't voice her concerns. She merely crooks her frown into a fierce smile.

"Ca-caw! That's right! We both know you'll beat me easily once I run out of time, but do you really want your 'glorious rise' to be tainted by such a *pathetic* win? Even if you kill all of the demons that exist, you'll still have to live with the fact you're a little sissy coward!"

Mephisto appears unmoved by her words. He smiles cruelly.

"You have provided usss with an adequate measssure of our new ssstrength. We did not want to crusssh you too easssily, but... if you INSSSISST!"

Abruptly, Mephisto launches himself at Crow.

The Myriad Deity summons blackened shadows onto his body.

He splits in three!

Two shadow-copies of Mephisto charge at Crow alongside his original body, clearing the gap in a split-second. They each tackle and body slam her, catching her off-guard and pinning her to the ground. The True Mephisto lifts up his fists and begins smashing them into Crow's face, while his duplicates pin her arms, making her unable to protect her head.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

"Aargh!"

Crow cries out in pain. Mephisto bashes her face from left to right, striking her beak with his skinless knuckles.

For ten seconds, he whales on Crow, laughing as her cries become more and more slurred.

"You assksd for thisss!" Mephisto declares.

Crow's legs suddenly bend in a normally impossible manner. Her bird-like feet grab onto Mephisto's exposed spine, then yank him off her body. She tears Mephisto off herself and flings him into the distance, then quickly plants her feet into the dirt and pulls herself up, using her superior strength to smash the shadow-copies together that are trying to pin her arms in place.

SPLAT!

Crow breaks their bodies with ease. They aren't nearly as powerful, nor as durable, as Mephisto himself. It's only when they work in tandem with his main body that they can become a real threat.

"Huk!"

Crow takes a second to cough up some blood, which she casually spits on the ground.

It's at this point in the battle that Crow begins to feel more wary.

I'm more powerful than Mephisto. My stamina is higher. My feathers provide me unparalleled defense, and my physical strength is certainly greater. But in terms of magic, he has the powers of four different deities at his disposal. I'll have to assume I'm facing Mephisto, Lupus, Zamiel, and Yama all at the same time!

Mephisto jumps to his feet. He motions with his hands to conjure magic.

While he does, Crow's mind becomes a blur. She quickly thinks about her ascension to Demon Deity and what abilities she might use to turn the tide of battle.

As a seasoned veteran of the Energy Wars, Crow has fought and killed innumerable opponents. She's become adept at the art of combat, but has always faced issues with her lack of magical talent. Like Bael, she tends to rely solely on brute force.

But in the instants between seconds, Crow investigates her overwhelming power and uncovers a shocking discovery.

My feathers! What has happened to them?!

Having put all of her attention on trying to kill Mephisto as quickly as possible, she hasn't spared even a second since the moment she ascended in truly inspecting her new

self. Now, as she does, she finds that every individual feather on her body, as well as those she's fired off and forgotten about, all possess incredible amounts of mana!

Embedded deep within their stems, each of Crow's feathers possesses a primitive level of sentience, allowing them to act on instinct... and even to control themselves!

Mephisto's hands rapidly weave dozens of magical signs. But at the same time, Crow calls out to the dozens of feathers she's fired, causing them to lift out of the ground, soar into the sky, and fly back to their master.

Crow plucks out another of her feathers at random, then narrows her eyes.

I don't know what I'm capable of... but I DO know my magic has grown immeasurably after my ascension!

Crow starts to press her feet into the soil. She bends her knees, ready to lunge at Mephisto, but she pauses.

"What? A tail?"

A bone-tail grows out of Mephisto's rear. His fingers sharpen into claws, as do his toes. The teeth in his mouth sharpen, and his body increases in size to ten feet tall as he assumes a four-legged posture, resembling some sort of half-skeletal exobeast predator.

"You look... TASSSTY!" Mephisto howls, before launching himself at Crow.

Right before he can close the gap, Crow waves her feather.

A wall of air fires out of the feather, momentarily summoning the winds of a Category 7 hurricane to rush at Mephisto!

The Myriad Deity makes a noise of surprise as Crow's storm reverses his momentum and sends him flying backward, but he easily recovers by digging his claws into the ground and enduring the gale's might.

"Bahaha! Thisss barely even tickless usss!" Mephisto taunts, his feral teeth making him twice as menacing as before. "Leave it to a woman to blow wind ussselessly!"

The hurricane rapidly subsides. Crow ignores Mephisto's taunts to focus on her own abilities as she hurries to dig up her new potential.

Electricity crackles along the tips of every feather on Crow's body. The amount of energy rapidly escalates until it explodes into a maelstrom of lightning! Crow becomes bathed in electrical power, transforming into a yellow-and-white Deity of Thunder.

Zip-zip!

Crow zaps her body at an accelerated speed, dancing from left to right as she accelerates toward Mephisto with her fists raised.

THOOM! THOOM!

She socks Mephisto with lightning-empowered fists, sundering him into the crater and causing its diameter to triple in size. She pounces on him and continues battering him with all her strength, only for Mephisto to eventually knock her aside, then retaliate with his own brutal attacks.

Ten minutes pass. Thirty minutes. An hour.

Crow and Mephisto battle from one side of the planet to the other. Every single cloud in the sky vanishes due to the shockwaves traveling across the horizon. Countless mountains become convenient pillars useful for bashing one or the other Deity against, and after just one and a half hours, Numaria's once lush forests have become so devastated that it will probably be downgraded from a paradise-class planet for the next hundred years.

Finally, Crow reaches the peak of her rage. She grabs Mephisto's neck, or rather the spine beneath his skull, and leaps into the sky.

Mephisto claws at Crow's arm, but her feathers provide unparalleled defense. Mephisto can't force her to loosen her grip, so he instead wiggles and wriggles, trying to squirm free.

But to Mephisto's shock, Crow doesn't leap into the sky with the intent of falling back to Numaria's surface, perhaps to smash him against the soil as she has so many times before.

She continues climbing in altitude!

Up, up, up...

Crow races out past the lower atmosphere, and then the upper atmosphere. Her speed doesn't slow, but instead increases as she easily breaches ten times the speed of sound, and even a fraction the speed of light.

Mephisto's face contorts into worry. He watches helplessly as Numaria grows more and more distant, but even so, he can't free himself from Crow's grip!

[Let usss go!] Mephisto roars telepathically, since his voice can't transfer across the vacuum of space.

But Crow doesn't answer him. Her expression merely hardens as she peers at something distant.

Mephisto cranes his head around and becomes momentarily startled as he observes the slowly-approaching visage of one of Numaria's moons, a barren orb of rock, dust, and dirt, incapable of harboring life.

[What are you doing?!] Mephisto exclaims.

But again, Crow does not speak to him.

She merely increases her speed further, using the power of electricity to accelerate herself like a railgun shell to five percent the speed of light!

Within just two minutes, Numaria's moon becomes bigger and bigger, to the point of swallowing the horizon.

Mephisto's pupils shrink to pinpricks as he grasps her intent.

[Ssstop! You imbeccile!]

But Crow doesn't stop. She races straight toward the moon, holding Mephisto out in front of herself.

An instant later, a silent explosion detonates in the vacuum of space.

Shockwaves spread throughout the Void.

Crow slams Mephisto's body directly into Numaria's moon with all the strength and speed she can muster. So powerful is the impact that the entire body of the barren, lifeless world splits asunder, breaking into five giant pieces of rock and dirt.

Crow shatters Numaria's moon, using her and Mephisto's bodies as instruments of destruction.

For the next minute, the Void becomes still.

Plumes of dust travel into space. The moon begins to slowly drift in five separate directions as its remnant pieces lose their gravitic cohesion.

But in the center of the planet, two bodies stand up, with Crow's eyes full of shock.

[No! Impossible!] Crow roars telepathically. [How could you still be alive? How could you be fine?! What are your bones MADE OF?!]

Mephisto levitates in the center of the moon's core while its five pieces slowly drift away. He smiles at Crow.

[Kekeke... we took ssso many precautionssss. Making thisss body wasss not a one-day effort, you poor, uneducated sssimpleton. In fact, we began our plansss for asssscensssion the day we became an Emperor...]

Crow looks at Mephisto's exobeast-like body, with its flicking tail, its razor-sharp teeth, and its rending claws. She gazes at him in confusion, while a sense of dread wells up in her heart.

[What does that mean?] Crow asks.

[You ssstill don't underssstand? Let usss give you a hint.] Mephisto says coldly. [A sssingle word...]

The corners of his mouth crook upward. His eyes turn into mischievous saucers.

[*Polarisss...*]

Crow frowns, uncomprehending. [Polaris?]

But then, her eyes widen.

She abruptly levitates backward, looking at Mephisto in horror.

[That's the world where the Wordsmith fought Satan! Where Diablo became the Archdemon! Where you... where you-!]

Mephisto cocks his smiling head.

[Underssstand now? Everyone thought thossse bonesss were lossst. Even we did. But upon becoming an Emperor, we detected the faint sssensssationssss of the remnant bonesss. Even better, they were not like they were previousssly. No...]

He continues.

[Bathed in the heat of a sssupernova. They endured for sssix years, melting down into a purer, denser, far more durable form. And we *recovered them*. Kekeke.]

Mephisto caresses his skeleton lovingly. Then he motions with his hands, and a pair of giant bone-wings begins to emerge from his back.

[Seven devils...] Crow whispers, horrified. [You... that's how you ascended! You... used... the bones of a dragon! The last dragon!]

[Leviathan'ssss bonesss.] Mephisto says, as his body transforms into its true appearance.

No longer does he appear like his original self, a mere Demon Emperor.

Instead, Mephisto assumes the figure of a smaller and more compact version of Leviathan, the dragon which once fought the Archdemon on Polaris.

The very same dragon which granted demonkind its current power.

Mephisto's eyes glow red in a manner more evil than ever before. He cackles sinisterly at the frightened Crow.

[Do you underssstand now, woman? You cannot harm usss. We are invinccible. No matter how many planetsss you throw usss againsst... it mattersss not. Our bonesss sssurvived a sssupernova. Your ssstrength... isss inssufficient.]

Crow's body shakes with a sudden feeling of exhaustion. While she might normally have plenty of energy left to chase after Mephisto and beat him to death, the fact of the matter is that she can't actually kill him. Someone else might, but not a newly ascended Deity like herself. She feels sapped of her will to fight, like a man who has gazed upon an impassable wall he can never hope to bypass.

On the other hand, it's also clear that Mephisto can't kill her, either. He lacks the strength to beat her back.

But that doesn't matter.

Crow won't be a Demon Deity forever. In fact, she might not be one for much longer in the first place.

Now, she realizes her attempt to equalize the playing field never meant anything to Mephisto. She never was a threat to him.

[Truth be told,] Mephisto says, [we weren't entirely cccertain of the durability of our body. But you have given usss... a delightful esstimate of what we can accomplisssh. Our ssstriking forcce isss a little weak, but our defenssssesss are quite-]

In the middle of Mephisto's speech, Crow turns tail and flees!

WHOOSH!

She blasts off into the horizon, racing back to Numaria as fast as she can!

Mephisto chokes and coughs, caught off-guard by her abrupt flight. He gazes in shock for three seconds before shaking off his daze.

[Kekeke! Ssso much for calling usss a coward! Look at how the wench runsss for her life!!]

Mephisto launches himself after Crow, attempting to chase her. However, his speed of acceleration is much slower than hers due to her lightning-infused feathers. While he could eventually catch up to her given enough time, the distance to Numaria isn't particularly far. She reaches it in only two minutes, while he requires five.

Crow rushes to Numaria as swiftly as she can. She breaches the upper atmosphere at terrifying speeds, deliberately arriving above the area where the other Emperors have continued fighting Glinch's forces. She finds herself momentarily bewildered by how all of those Emperors have managed to revitalize their energies, at least until she senses the aura of Demon Emperor Yumagi.

She barely gives half a thought to Yumagi's unexpected survival. Instead, she flies down to Numaria and unleashes a terrifying attack upon Glinch's forces, obliterating all of his chimera with a wave of her claws.

Their bodies burst like blood-balloons!

All of Glinch's chimera that were oppressing the Emperors until that point explode, startling the Emperors and making them look up into the sky. There, they see their comrade glowing with a fierce electrical energy as storms of lightning ripple across her feathers.

"Crow!" Yadrat exclaims in delight. "You're back! You defeated Mephisto?"

"**NO!**" Crow barks, her voice striking the Emperors below with concussive force. "You have to flee! Escape before it's too late! We can't defeat Mephisto! He's invincible!"

The other Emperors freeze in place, staring up at the visibly frightened Crow in horror.

"What? Invincible?" Kristoff asks. "But how-"

"**NO TIME TO EXPLAIN!**" Crow cries. "Run, you idiots! Get out of here! I'll hold him off as long as I can! **GO!!**"

The other Emperors panic. They begin running toward the edge of the Stitched Wasteland in a hurry, while Crow turns her gaze toward the sky, sensing the imminent arrival of Mephisto as he chases after her after-image.

Mephisto crashes into the upper atmosphere like a meteor, his body igniting with flames as he descends toward the fleeing Emperors.

"NOT SSSO FASSST! You are our PREY! You are but SSSNACKSSS before thisss Deity!!"

Mephisto hungrily tries to grab Emperor Yardrat, making Yardrat piss himself in fear, but Crow throws herself into Mephisto's path, blocking him with her body.

BOOM!!

Mephisto collides with the Deity of Denial, while Crow uses all of her strength to mitigate the power of the shockwaves so they won't kill her friends below.

"Kekekeke!!" Mephisto cackles. "We sssee! You were trying to warn our old friendsss of our arrival! But now you have to protect them from our clawsss! Hahaha!!"

Mephisto makes a game of zipping around Crow to restrict her movements. Multiple times, he pretends to grab at or attack the fleeing Emperors while they shit their pants, only to sneakily land attacks on Crow's body instead.

Like a cat playing with a mouse, Mephisto revels in the fear and terror on his victims' faces, savoring their negative emotions.

"Oh, what fun! What joy!" Mephisto laughs again and again. "Thisss isss what it meansss to posssessss true power! Kekeke!"

Crow cries out in pain, making the hearts of the Emperors turn cold with fear. They look up at her with a mixture of gratitude and depression. Many of them gasp as they witness Mephisto's true form, immediately piecing together the truth.

"Mephisto! That spawn of a broodmother!" Melody hisses. "He didn't lose the last dragon's bones at all! He used them to ascend to Demon Deity!"

"He had us all fooled." Fae bites off, looking up at her former colleague with envious eyes.

Crow continues to hold Mephisto back, but with her movements restricted, she can't protect herself as well as she would like. Minor injuries start cropping up under her feathers. She suffers scratches and scrapes, minor bone fractures, and lacerations as she shields her comrades all the way to the Warpgate.

The Emperors rush through the gate as fast as they can, but Emperor Serena pauses at the end.

"Crow! Come quickly!"

Crow wrestles with Mephisto in the sky, holding him back from entering the Warpgate. She barely spares a thought toward Serena's words.

[JUST GO!] Crow commands telepathically.

Serena flinches. She senses the faint weakening of Crow's life-force. Already, the power of her Ritual has begun to fade, as well as the empowerment Serena granted her soul.

Serena's eyes well up with tears. She clenches her teeth, and her throat constricts.

"Thank you, Crow. We won't forget your sacrifice..."

She steps through the Warpgate, and it closes behind her.

Unfortunately for the many remaining Barons, Lords, and other lower demons living on Numaria, they won't be so lucky. Mephisto will surely devour them in bunches and batches without restraint.

Emperor Auger borrows Yardrat's power to usher his nearest Duke elites off-planet, but he doesn't dare stay behind any longer. He and his comrades step into the Labyrinth along with the rest, sealing themselves off from Numaria, where they hope Mephisto won't be able to easily reach them.

Inside the Labyrinth, Melody snuffles and cries, feeling despondent over the current situation. Already, she's lost the majority of her own hell, and now a calamity will befall the Hell of Punishment when Crow runs out of strength to oppose Mephisto.

The other Emperors don't feel much better. Their plan to destroy Mephisto failed utterly, and now an enemy as frightening as the Cherubiim wants nothing more than to rip their bodies apart and devour their souls.

Amidst the sobbing and crying of the heartbroken Emperors, Emperor Fae remains mostly unmoved.

"Eh. Life sucks, and then you die. Guess this is it for us demons. If we're lucky, we'll get to be live on as one of Mephisto's crazy alter egos."

Nobody responds to her words. She glances around the darkened Warpgate room in this remote corner of the Labyrinth and frowns.

"Huh." Fae mutters. "Strange. Feels like we're missing someone."

Emperor Hamir, standing not far away, shrugs. "If we forgot someone, then they're probably not important."

"Yeah, you're right." Fae nods.

* * *

Meanwhile, back at the Stitched Wasteland.

"Yaaawn! Oh man, that was a good nap. Huh? Where'd everyone go? Hello?"

Bael stands up, having finally awoken after being nearly knocked unconscious earlier by Gressil's punch.

In truth, he found the feeling of falling into a coma to be quite pleasant, so he ended up taking a nap while everyone else fought for their lives.

As Bael stands up, he realizes he can't quite remember what he was doing before he took a power-nap.

"Huh... let's see... I was gonna... eat something... right? Eat something. Mmm. I could go for some cake."

Bael saunters down the halls inside Glinch's complex. He finds a few other Emperors who actually were knocked unconscious, but they don't wake up when he taps them.

"Damn. Must have been a heck of a party." Bael mumbles. "Everyone's got a hangover! Bahaha!"

Inside his Matriarch Armor, Ose stirs.

[Bael! You're finally awake! You imbecile, I've been shouting at you for almost two hours!!]

Bael nods. "Ah, that's why my nap was so annoying. See, I dreamed there was a puppy I was gonna pet, but then it started talkin' bout science stuff, and it was all like 'bla-bla-bla.' Come to think of it, the puppy sounded a lot like you..."

[Pull your head out of your ass and listen!] Ose growls. [Mephisto ascended. He's a Demon Deity now!]

"Oh, word?" Bael says, as he finds the ramp leading up and out of Glinch's laboratory.
"What's a Demon Deetey?"

[It's an Emperor. But stronger.] Ose says, feeling deflated. [The other Emperors ran away. They probably made it back inside the Labyrinth while we were stuck here. Mephisto is going to return soon, so you need to flee while you still can!]

Bael yawns. He waves his hand lazily. "Ehhh... *nah*, that sounds like a total drag. I'll just sit here and wait for Mephisto to come back. He can gimme a lift with his fancy new powers."

[Bael, he's going to KILL you!]

"Whaaat? Don't be silly. Me and Mephy go way back. We're cool."

Bael plops down on a rock, tuning Ose out as she screams and berates him to hurry up and move his fat ass.

"Mmm... guess the sun went down while I was asleep." Bael mutters to himself, looking up at the sky. "Hehe. The stars are so pretty."

On this night, one of those stars seems especially bright compared to the others...

Part 499: Summoning The Devil

On the world of Numaria, Demon Deity Crow battles for her life against the dragon-shaped Mephisto, who revels in the fear lurking within her eyes. Mephisto trades blows with Crow, acting in a berserk manner where he slaps and punches her around while not even bothering to block Crow's strongest attacks.

It doesn't matter to him!

No matter how much strength Crow puts behind her fists, she can't hurt Mephisto in any way, shape, or form.

Even if she batters him hard enough to send him crashing into a mountain, he hops right back up and charges back at her, landing a hit that hurts her far more than it does him.

While Crow may have once felt as if she were invincible, the truth is that her feathers might be as hard as demonstone, but they are incomparable to Mephisto's body made out of Living Moldanium; the bones of a dragon.

Beneath her feathers, her skin begins to bruise and tear, causing blood to flow freely. Some of Mephisto's punches land on her chest, causing her heart to beat erratically, or her lungs to catch, making her cough up blood.

"Kah, kah!" Crow wheezes, one of her eyes swollen shut. "Muh-Mephisto! Stop this! Why are you trying to kill all of the demons?! We're your kin!"

Mephisto pauses his onslaught to grin toothily at the visibly weakened Crow. Already, he can sense that the powerup she received earlier has begun to lose its efficacy. It won't be long before she reverts to the level of a top-grade Emperor, at which point she won't be able to maintain even a paltry resistance against him.

"You're not ssso bright, Crow." Mephisto chuckles, holding back from attacking her again. "We've sssolved all the problemsss plaguing demon sssocciety. Don't you sssee? We need the demonsss to evolve. Merging with usss iss the perfect sssolution."

"What? Merging with you?" Crow asks bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"Mephisssto, Zamiel, Lupusss, and Yama. Currently we posssesss the sssoulsss of many Emperorsss. All of usss pilot thisss body ass a sssingle entity."

Mephisto taps the side of his head.

"Oncce we devour you, you will join usss. You will join your comrade, Duke Raven, ass part of our perfection."

Crow's eyes turn hateful. Raven was a good friend of hers, and the mention of her name sours Crow's mood even further. Having heard from the humans about Raven's appearance in Mephisto's army, she already knows Raven must have died, but to end up inside Mephisto? That thought churns Crow's stomach.

"You devoured other Emperors too." Crow points out. "Earlier, you ate Emperors Zagan and Moris. But you didn't mention their names. What happened to them?"

"Well..." Mephisto says slowly. "Thossse who were not part of our founding ritual do not dessserve the ssstatusss of those who were. Don't you agree? We will take their powersss, but they will not have a sssay in how we run thiss body."

"So you're going to EAT other demons and take their powers for yourself?" Crow exclaims. "You're even worse than Satan was!"

"The demon ssspeccciesss isss dying." Mephisto says. "Rather than trillionsss of ussseless maggotsss, thiss body represssentsss the future of our ssspeccciesss. Not many demonsss, not demonkind, but one Demon, singular... USSS!"

"You're mad." Crow hisses. "You're just chasing your ego, you devil-damned tyrant!"

Mephisto shrugs. "And what if we are? Do you think you can ssstop usss? The other Emperorsss... they think they essscaped usss. But we have within our bonesss the powersss of numerousss Warpersss. We can enter the Labyrinth with eassse. They've only delayed the inevitable."

Crow's expression sinks. She realizes Mephisto is right.

The other Emperors didn't escape. They only managed to hide from their hunter for a short time.

But soon, he will pursue them, once he's taken care of Crow, and he will devour their bodies and souls.

Can the Wordsmiths stop him?

Considering his indestructible bones and his ascended status... maybe not.

Perhaps not even the Psions can hurt him.

Crow's expression ultimately turns to despair. She has no concept of Low or High Cosmics, and only feels that Mephisto is so powerful nothing can defeat him now.

She turns to run away, hoping that she can at least get some distance from him, or maybe find a way to escape, but she knows in her heart the effort is useless. Hardly has she started to make her mad dash before Mephisto jumps out of the darkness in front of her and sends a fist flying at her face.

Crow tries to avoid the hit but fails. Mephisto batters her into the ground, then conjures dozens of shadow tendrils to leap out of the soil and bind her limbs. He pounces on Crow and starts bashing her head from side to side, laughing madly as he revels in dominating her with his dragonbone body.

"Kekeke! Sssuffer and dessspair! Thisss Deity will never lossse again!"

It doesn't take long before Crow's strength runs out. Mephisto beats the tar out of her, only slowing down and finally stopping when her Demon Deity transformation runs its course. Her figure sags helplessly within Mephisto's shadow bindings.

Finally satisfied, Mephisto grabs her by the neck as if she were a chicken. He motions with his free hand, reverting his figure back to his original body to no longer maintain the appearance of a mini-dragon.

Mephisto doesn't immediately kill and devour Crow. Instead, he takes to the sky and levitates through the air using only his cosmic energy. He flies back to the Stitched Wasteland and lands nearby the entrance to Glinch's laboratory.

"Ksss. GLINCH! Come out. I've brought the sssubject you wanted."

Bound and helpless, Crow can only let out a muffled cry as Mephisto throws her to the cracked, blackened dirt, where she lands face-first with a thud. She slumps to the ground, unable to move due to the agony wracking her body.

Glinch emerges from his laboratory. His disgusting, misshapen figure appears quite hideous, even by Mephisto's standards. He walks up to Crow and grabs her face with one of his arms, then smiles.

"Good. She even has a bit of remnant cosmic energy left in her. She'll do. But don't forget the rest of what you promised! You'd better deliver it soon!"

Mephisto grimaces. "Of coursse. I will hold to my word."

He maintains a polite expression before Glinch, but in his heart he feels quite angered.

Hahaha! Lupus laughs, her soul communicating with the others inside Mephisto's body. The almighty, all-powerful Mephisto can't raise a hand against the weak little Glinch! You're stuck doing his chores! It would be funnier if I weren't caught up with the rest of you morons too.

Yama also laughs. You betrayed us, Mephisto, but now you're little more than a lapdog for a mere Emperor.

QUIET! Mephisto shouts into his mind. I only have to do ass Glinch sssaysss for one thousssand yearsss. Then I'll be free to do asss I pleassse. Compared to my immortal life, it iss but a blink of an eye.

If you think it'll be that easy, boss, you've got another thing coming. Zamiel snarks. Even if you do ride shit out, the Death Promise says you can't hurt him for the rest of eternity. So he can humiliate you all he wants for the next thousand years and you'll never be able to get back at him, not even once you're free.

A fitting fate for a vile little snake. Lupus snaps.

Mephisto looks at Glinch silently, feeling resentment within his bones.

The Death Promise he signed, much like the one Zamiel signed with Blinker, ensures he can never go against Glinch in any meaningful way!

But unlike the relatively 'equal' Death Promise Blinker used, Mephisto's is much more one-sided and unfair to him.

In exchange for Glinch helping him reach the rank of Demon Deity, Mephisto also has to do anything Glinch commands for the next thousand years, aside from self-harm. And even after those thousand years, he can never raise a finger to hurt Glinch in any way, shape, or form. The contract's terms were very careful in this regard.

Despite his resentment, Mephisto doesn't mind too much.

If Glinch doesn't give him any orders, he can still act autonomously. He can do as he pleases in his 'free time.' He can wield his power as he likes.

Kekeke. Mephisto chuckles internally, feeling a little better about his fate. A thousssand yearsss of ssservitude in exchange for power I'd never have attained myssself. It'sss not a bad deal at all. Now, I've become invincible.

Lupus's smile fades away.

Indeed, Mephisto has attained a body the gods themselves couldn't hurt.

Who cares if he has to wallow around for a thousand years? It won't affect his overall ambitions. And he'll most certainly come after the Seven Hells in short order.

There is only one thing we do not understand... Yama murmurs. *Why did Glinch make that one odd request of you? Doesn't he know he can just...?*

Mephisto internally rolls his eyes. *Glinch is an aberrant. Do not try to undersstand hisss thoughtsss usssing common logic.*

After Glinch investigates Crow's condition, he shakes his head and clicks his tongue.

"Oh, how annoying. All of my chimera have been destroyed. I'll have to make more soon. But Crow's body will make a good vessel for my new tests! Hehehe."

One of his arms points into the interior of his complex.

"There are a couple unconscious Emperors inside. You can eat those."

Mephisto's eyes light up. "Oh? You would give them to usss for free? You're more generoussss than we expected."

"Bah!" Glinch grumbles, waving seven of his hands. "They're useless to me. They only became Emperors through my pills. Their bodies are too polluted with Exobeast Essence. When you find and capture the rest of the Emperors, just bring me the purebloods. You can eat all the Tainted Emperors you want."

Mephisto frowns. "Will they harm usss?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that." Glinch replies, rolling his eyes. "They're as strong as normal Emperors, but my goal is to mass-produce Deities. I need pure subjects for my research. I can't be using exobeast slop or it'll ruin all my equipment!"

Seeing Mephisto's confused expression, Glinch rolls his eyes yet again. "Never mind! Why am I trying to explain my genius to an ego-driven, simple-brained retard like you?! Just eat the tainted ones down below and get them out of my sight! I can't stand them stinking up my lab!"

Mephisto glares at Glinch, annoyed by his insults. But he can't hurt Glinch, so the point is moot.

"Ksss. Fine."

He starts to take a step toward the lab, but as he does, a voice calls out from the distance.

"Hey you! Bub! What the hell do ya think you're doin'?!"

Mephisto blinks twice. He turns around to see none other than Bael walking out from behind a mound of Glinch's dead chimera. Their bodies just happened to land in a pile big enough to obscure Bael's sitting form. Somehow, Mephisto missed him when he landed.

Mephisto's face turns to an expression of delight.

"Ahh! Bael! Oncce, we were incapable of controlling your sssoul because we were only a Duke. But now that we are a Deity, the matter will be ass easssy ass pie! Kekeke! You ssshould have ssstayed hidden from usss..."

Mephisto immediately changes course and starts flying toward Bael, who plants his feet in place and gazes defiantly at Mephisto.

"You little fucker." Bael says. "Eatin' my friends. Killin' my friends. Today, you done screwed up."

Bael waves his hand, conjuring the mighty Big Bonk into his grasp. The ten-ton flail materializes in midair and falls to the ground, its spiked head and chains attached to the handle in Bael's grasp.

Underneath his helmet, Bael smiles. He starts rapidly spinning the flail around himself as Mephisto flies toward him, then he lets it loose with a mighty toss.

WHOOSH!

The flail's chain extends magically as it races straight toward Mephisto's incoming face!

* * *

Plap.

The flail ineffectively smacks against Mephisto, deals no damage, and flops to the ground.

Mephisto pauses for a moment and laughs.

"Kekekeke! Wasss that all?!"

Bael's smile vanishes.

"Uh. *Oh, shit.* Uh. I didn't think... I mean... damn bro, you been eating your veggies?"

Mephisto grins from one ear to the other. "Actually, we prefer the taste of EMPERORS now! Kekeke!"

He rushes toward Bael and closes the gap in an instant. He lifts his hand overhead and sends a slap at the Master of Mjölnir.

WHAP!

With just one move, Mephisto strikes Bael so hard that Bael loses his grip on Big Bonk and goes flying! He slams into the dirt and bounces off the ground ten times as his body careens away.

Bael bounces and flops across ten miles of the Stitched Wasteland before striking a boulder and coming to an abrupt stop.

CRASH!

"Aaahh!"

Bael cries out in pain, his head dizzy and his brain foggy. Luckily, he managed to survive that attack, but any casual observer would easily see Mephisto had no intent to kill him in the first place.

Mephisto flies over and stops twenty feet from Bael's collapsed figure.

"How sad. Once the greatest Duke in all the Hells, a powerhouse who could put the fear of God into the Emperor. Now you're trapped inside a useless body. That armor means nothing to a Deity like me, a being with a body forged in dragonbone and the flames of a dying star."

Bael shakily pulls himself to his feet. He wobbles visibly, clearly suffering from a concussion. Luckily he doesn't have much going on inside his head, so the damage is minimal.

"Ugh... damn... you PRICK! That hurt! How could you pick on a pretty gal like me, huh?!"

Mephisto sneers. "That body of yours... it does indeed tantalize us. The Yama inside us yearns to mold Osse's figure into a servant of shadow. We shall acquiesce."

Bael shakes off his disorientation. He looks up defiantly once again at Mephisto, hovering off the ground in his usual superior manner.

"Man! You think you're big shit? Nah! I know you ain't nothing compared to the First Emperor. And I ain't talkin' about that lil' chode slinkin' around these days. I mean the REAL first Emperor. Satan would kick your ass in a heartbeat!"

"Sssatan wasss merely an Emperor. We are a Deity. He could never harm usss." Mephisto states matter-of-factly.

"Oh, we'll see about that!" Bael says, as he turns his eyes to look up at the night sky.

Like before, he sees one star that seems especially bright compared to the others.

"Hey, Satan! The hell are you doin' sittin' on your ass? Get down here and show Mephisto who's the real OG!"

Mephisto's face suddenly become visibly more anxious.

Wait. Yama thinks. Would the soul contract Satan placed on us still be effective?!

Who cares? Zamiel replies. I'd like to see how badly we trash that old bag of bones. Me and Satan had some beef back in the day.

I say we let Bael summon Satan. Lupus adds. It'll be funny if he manages to break this body like a twig.

Mephisto shrugs internally. *Sssatan never placced a proper contract on me, and I am the primary sssoul. I have nothing to fear. Even better, I can finally take control of all of Sssatan'sss awesssome powersss for myssself! Then I'll truly become unssstoppable!*

In the end, Yama's fears get vetoed by the other three souls. As the three controllers of the Myriad Deity, these four can choose what actions to take or not to take, though the votes of the lesser three former Emperors are only about as strong as Mephisto's vote. If all three vote against him, none can say who would win in that moment.

Ultimately, Mephisto stands back and watches as Bael yells at the sky, trying to summon Satan once again.

"Come on, boss!" Bael shouts. "We need you to teach this punk a lesson! Get down here!"

Suddenly, the sky begins to brighten. A faint golden light coalesces in the upper atmosphere, drawing Mephisto's attention.

Hm? Is that... Bael's new power? Lupus asks.

Having only heard secondhand from Yama what Bael can apparently do, Mephisto, Zamiel, and Lupus are all in the dark about the exact mechanics behind Bael's seemingly inexplicable ability to conjure demons from the Great Beyond.

Satan died six years ago. Not only did his body crumble to dust, but his soul did as well.

Therefore, any person in the know would conclude that either his soul entered the Great Beyond, or it completely ceased to exist.

Yet, despite these facts, Bael somehow conjured Satan to beat ten flavors of shit out of Yama, scaring the pants off the Shadow Emperor.

As the sky begins to change, Yama frowns.

This energy... it's strange... it doesn't feel demonic. If anything, it feels...

Abruptly, a violent thunderous **BOOM** explodes in the upper atmosphere.

A beam of light plummets down at a speed too fast for a human's eyes to follow.

Mephisto's heart skips a beat as that beam of light races toward a spot directly between himself and Bael.

BOOOOOM!!

The Stitched Wasteland explodes as if a hundred tons of TNT detonated all at once!

Bael flies backward, and Mephisto gets thrown away.

Mephisto easily stabilizes himself and snaps a look at the creature that has just arrived.

But when he does, his bones lock up in place.

A look of pure terror spreads across his face.

"No... NO... NO!!" Mephisto screams. "B-Bael! What- WHO have you summoned?! That'sss not a demon... that'sss... THAT'SSS...!!"

The winged figure stands up, her long, glowing white hair billowing in the night breeze. Her aged and wizened eyes sweep the landscape.

"Hm? Whereabouts am I?"

On the world of Volgarius, Hope Hiro continues to sit and talk with First Founder Unarin.

"Why are there no other 9th-Level Psions?" Hope asks. "Can't you raise more?"

Unarin immediately shakes his head. He takes a sip of his drink, a delicious sparkling beverage procured from the world of fairies.

"Oh, Hope. We're not good enough friends for me to answer that. But rest assured, there's a good reason for why Dosena stands alone."

"From what I've learned, there used to be half a dozen other 9th Level Psions." Hope points out. "Did Dosena... kill them?"

Unarin's eyes become sharper.

"You've learned more than I expected, Wordsmith."

But he relaxes his gaze.

"I suppose if you know that much, it won't hurt to tell you. Indeed, we once had a handful of protectors for our Empire. But that was only until we created the Sentinels. The last Great War was more brutal than all the ones before, combined. Ninety-five percent of all Volgrim were killed in that war, and that includes the 9th Level Psions."

He pauses.

"We could have raised more Psions in the aftermath of that war. But Dosena had a different idea. Instead, she decided to 'raise the standard' for what should be expected from our mightiest Psions. Let's just say... in the past, it used to be much easier to climb the ranks, but she made it much harder."

Hope glances around the room, as if looking for Dosena's figure. "Sounds like she's scared of competition."

"On the contrary." Unarin says softly. "Dosena is a killing machine. She was the strongest of all the Psions. She has also ascended to the 9th Level... *twice*."

"Huh?" Hope grunts, blinking in confusion. "Wait, what do you mean? She stopped being a 9th-Level Psion? She had to regrow her Psionic Seed?"

"I've said enough on that matter." Unarin says, cutting off any further chance of feeding Hope more information. "Just rest assured. Dosena would love nothing more than to have an Empire filled with 9th Level Psions. But if we used the old ways, it would

result in yet another series of Great Wars. Better to proceed slowly and stably than to place our bets on unfettered, random acts of violence."

Suddenly, in the middle of Unarin's sentence...

Every light in the Founder's Tower turns off!

Hope's heart metaphorically leaps out of his chest. The sudden plunge into darkness catches him completely off-guard.

But an instant later, the lights turn back on.

There's only one difference.

They've become blood-red.

A deafening alarm begins to blare. The Founder's Thumb shudders as a strange sensation of gravity grabs hold of Hope and presses him against his chair. The tower begins descending down into the planet's bowels, sealing itself off from the surface so as to protect the lives of its inhabitants.

"What the fuck?!" Hope blurts out, looking at Unarin with suspicion.

But Unarin's expression gives Hope another shock.

The First Founder's pupils have shrunk to pinpricks. He looks ahead blankly, as a visible expression of fear appears on his face.

Before Hope can ask what the hell is going on, Dosena's voice telepathically communicates to every remaining individual on planet Volgarius.

[APEX COSMIC DETECTED.]

Unarin jumps out of his chair, his face slick with sweat. He quickly runs away from the table, no longer paying the slightest attention to Hope's presence.

He grabs a datapad off a nearby desk and begins tapping on it furiously. Then he holds it up to his face to broadcast a message across every star-system in the Volgrim Empire.

"Attention, all Volgrim citizens! An Apex Cosmic has been detected inside the Milky Way's barrier. This is a Founder Level emergency. By decree of myself, First Founder Unarin, I am placing every world under martial law. All citizens must report to their battle stations. Begin preparations to evacuate your worlds when I give the command. Founder Dosena has left Volgarius to intercept the threat!"

Hope's heart turns to ice. He stares at Unarin's back, uncomprehending. The uncontrolled terror on Unarin's usually-reserved face scares him even more than the First Founder's words!

Before he can ask any questions, Unarin pivots on his heel to look at Hope. The expression in his eyes has become a little more controlled, but he still appears visibly terrified.

"Return to Tarus II at once. Use your Wordsmithing. Begin placing your people on ark ships. If you don't have any, conjure them. Do whatever you can to save as many lives as you can. If Dosena falls to the Apex Cosmic, we will have to flee the galaxy before it kills us all. If you can't flee, then hide yourself as deeply as you can."

Hope's hands begin to shake. "What... what is an Apex Cosmic, Unarin? What is it? Something stronger than Dosena?!"

"Far stronger." Unarin says quietly, his expression becoming more controlled as he manages to push his fear down. "It means... the end of our petty existences."

On planet Earth, deep beneath its crust, Marie Becker frowns as she receives the Volgrim's emergency broadcast.

"An Apex Cosmic? That can't be right. The Akashic Barrier is still intact. How could one step foot inside our voidspace?"

She fidgets with her fingers, but does not appear to be as terrified as Unarin was. She remains calm and in control of her emotions thanks to her cybernetic mind and body.

"Has the Akashic Game begun early?"

Emperor Gressil roams around the world of Tarus II as usual. He keeps an eye on the humans, watching from afar through his invisible body.

He also frowns and looks up at the sky.

"What's this? An anomaly. Haha. Seems something interesting is about to happen."

He rubs his chin thoughtfully.

"Mephisto. You really screwed up this time. Looks like your Luck has become quite foul."

On the world of Grimvolas, the Matriarch of Dolgrimites hastily summons a meeting of her elites.

"I have received a communication from Volgarius. An Apex Cosmic has arrived inside the Milky Way."

Unlike Unarin, the Matriarch appears completely unbothered. Her subordinates, including Fifth Founder Cinculu, also remain calm.

"An Apex Cosmic. Grrrgh. He cannot harm our god." Cinculu growls confidently.

"Dolgris guides us." One of the other Dolgrimite elites says. "Dolgris protects us."

"Dolgris is not yet strong enough to emerge. He is still injured." The Matriarch says. "But he has spoken of a new development. Emperor Mephisto has arisen using a most unusual method. Dolgris greatly desires the bones Mephisto used to step into the realm of Lowest Cosmic."

"Are we able to recover those bones for our god?" Cinculu asks.

"We still lack the strength." The Matriarch replies. "But worry not. Mephisto will fall into our god's claws eventually. And when he does... Dolgris will be reborn anew!"

"All praise Dolgris!" The elites chant.

"Dolgris guides us to greatness!"

On the world of Tarus II, Archangels Uriel, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael all stare up at the sky, gazing at a distant point imperceptible to our eyes.

Michael's emotions are the most mixed. "Our sister... how hath she returned?"

"Verily, this art no coincidence." Raphael says calmly. "First, Mephisto arose to the rank of Cosmic. Then Crow. And now..."

"Should we go there?" Uriel asks. "Seeing our sister again would be..."

"I fear we would disappoint her." Gabriel rumbles with his deep voice. "Whence she hath wiped out the demons, she shalt come to us afterward. We shalt reunite then."

Raphael sighs. "But will she call herself friend or foe, I wonder?"

Part 500: APEX COSMIC

Bael's mind momentarily spins. The impact of his summoning sent him flying away, so he recovers with a complete lack of elegance and grace. He yanks himself back to his feet and stumbles around woozily, trying not to throw up inside his helmet.

He fails.

Bael opens up the Matriarch Armor's helmet and wrenches all over the ground, making an awful mess at his feet. After blinking his eyes, he lifts his head and blinks in surprise.

Not far away, an elderly woman stands with her back to him, her white wings revealing her clear angelic heritage. She wears a set of plain white robes, simple and basic with no added frills or ornaments. Her body glows with incredible power, but Bael is too spiritually stupid and dull to notice this fact.

The woman slowly looks around, paying no attention to the demon standing behind her. She appears to be in a daze, occasionally looking up at the sky, back at the planet around her, and then up into the sky again.

"...so strange. Whereabouts am I? The last thing I remember... the last thing..."

Bael licks the inside of his mouth. He curls up his lips due to the aftertaste of puke, but forces himself to smile.

"Grandma? Is that you? Hey, grandma!"

The angel seemingly doesn't appear to notice Bael's words, neither does she pay the slightest attention to Mephisto, who remains frozen in place before her, not daring to move a muscle. She simply continues muttering to herself, clearly confused about a great many things.

"Grandma!" Bael says, reaching out to touch her shoulder. "Grandma Camael! Helloooo!"

Just as Bael is about to touch the angel, she abruptly spins around to face him. But the face he sees, while certainly elderly, is not the one he expected.

A mature Archangel, visibly older than most, but slightly younger than Camael as far as looks go, gazes at Bael in surprise. Her eyes possess a deep wisdom, and the circlet

around her forehead makes her appear almost like a princess of sorts. She even wears a pair of ruby-red earrings made of some unknown exotic mineral.

"What didst thou refer to me as?" The angel asks, frowning. "Camael? Sister Camael?"

"Oh! Shucks. Sorry, miss." Bael says, feeling awkward. "I, uh, saw ya from behind, so I kinda assumed you were Grandma."

The angel blinks. No hostility resides in her eyes, and she instead examines Bael with a bit of curiosity, acting as if he were some odd specimen placed inside a museum.

"Art thou referring to my eldest sister Camael? The Archangel of Divination?" The woman asks.

"Yeah. But I don't know you." Bael says. "What's your name, ma'am?"

The woman doesn't answer him. Instead, she looks up at the sky, once again falling into a daze.

"The last thing I remember... I was fighting... a dragon... and then... and then!"

She frowns, pauses, and mutters something under her breath Bael can't quite make out.

"...but how did I arrive here? And why can I not sense any of my siblings?"

She returns her attention to Bael.

"Little girl. What manner of creature art thou?"

"Oh, I'm a demon." Bael says. "Demon Emperor, to be specific."

The woman doesn't register the name in her memories. She cocks her head and frowns.

"Dost thou hail from an adjacent galaxy? Perhaps Andromeda?"

Bael shrugs. "Nope. Just the Silky Bay."

Inside Bael's helmet, Emperor Ose remains completely silent, terrified out of her wits by the immense danger radiating from the angel in front of her. Unlike Bael, she can fully sense every iota of power this angel possesses, and then some. She has never in all her years encountered a being as frightening as this woman, and that includes Second Founder Dosena herself.

The only good news that Ose can use to comfort herself is that Bael is maintaining an unfazed facade in front of this woman, assuredly due to his immense stupidity and lack of

magical talent. Thanks to his mighty soul, Ose's remnant sliver remains shielded, like a lightbulb in front of a star, so the Archangel can't sense her. And as far as Bael is concerned, she might as well be any common angel from the Energy Wars, rather than a monster more powerful than all of the Archangels combined.

Ose listens to the conversation.

She rapidly and strategically thinks about every clue she can infer regarding this woman's heritage.

I know the names of all seven Archangels. Was there another I've not heard of? Ose wonders. Impossible. After the Energy Wars, I made sure to read and scour every record we could obtain from Heaven. No other Archangels were known to us!

But just as Ose is about to mentally scratch that thought away, her heart freezes to ice.

She suddenly pieces together an important clue.

Wait. This woman fought... a dragon? But that would mean... if the records we've recovered are correct, the Dragon Wars came well before the angels relocated on Earth, and even before the Titan Wars. It was an era so ancient, no written record remains!

Her very soul starts to sweat as she comes to a conclusion.

This woman must be an Archangel from that ancient time! It's the only explanation! I have to make sure Bael doesn't screw up and blabber something that'll get us both killed!

The angel rubs her chin. "How dost thou knoweth my sister Camael? Is she alive? Is she well? Why can I not sense her presence?"

Bael starts to open his mouth, but pauses when Ose screams into his mind.

[BAEL. Wait! Don't speak just yet. Pause for a moment and rub your chin. Try to look thoughtful.]

Normally Bael would answer with some sass, but he senses the urgency in Ose's voice, so he follows her order. He does a big frowning motion and then looks away, trying to act as if he's thinking.

It comes off as making him look constipated more than anything. He's not a good actor, and he certainly doesn't know what it even means to 'look thoughtful', but god damn if he doesn't try his best.

[Listen, Bael.] Ose says quickly, speaking at the speed of thought. [This Archangel is dangerous. She's extremely powerful. She could kill you with a twist of her wrist. We don't want to piss her off. Tell her this:]

Ose quickly gives Bael a simple order, making him nod along to her words, but he doesn't say anything out loud.

"Hmm. Uhh, let's see. Right, so, Grandma Camael. You wanna see her huh?"

The angel woman immediately nods. "Yes! And all the rest of my kin. Where art they? Art they in hiding?"

Bael shakes his head slowly, putting on a mock look of dismay.

"Well, uh. It's nothin' like that, ma'am. It's just... you know the uh, the dragons?"

The angel's eyes flare with visible hatred. "The dragons. Of course I know about them."

"Well, there was this whole war, ya see, and things got a little dicey..."

Bael begins regaling the angel with a tale filled with lies and misinterpretations, slowly telling her everything Ose tells him to say, while trying to focus so he doesn't screw up Ose's orders.

"And then when the war ended, there uh... there weren't many angels 'n dragons left. So the Titans kinda killed 'em all."

"The Titans did?" The woman asks. "Those BASTARDS! Servants of Uzziel! I should have known they wouldn't turn against my kin! And what of the Seraphs? What fate did they meet?"

While she and Bael talk, behind the angel, Mephisto slowly, almost imperceptibly, begins to lower his body and slink away. Just by being in the woman's presence, he feels as small as an ant, so weak that he even fears his supposedly invincible bones won't be able to save him if she moves to attack.

So he slowly, carefully, deliberately moves backward.

Luckily for Mephisto, the angel doesn't even register his 'incredible cosmic power' at all. Perhaps in her eyes, the difference between a magic-less Bael and a bottom-tier Cosmic like Mephisto might as well not even be worth differentiating.

"To think the angels would be all but dead now, living only as faint wisps of souls." The woman says, her countenance becoming slightly dimmer. "It appears I've somehow

stepped into a dystopian future era. I know not the reason how or the mechanism why, but I must have come here for a reason."

Bael pauses for a moment to listen to Ose's next order. He quickly puts on a smile.

"Hey now, don't be all sad, grandma! There's still angels around and stuff. We demons are workin' real hard to try and help the ones still alive. The angels made us to serve 'em! It's kinda our job!"

She smiles weakly, clearly not feeling too good about Bael's 'encouragement.'

"Well. It is good to see that some Sentients still live to carry our torch. Whereabouts is this world, I wonder?"

"Oh, this place is Numaria." Bael says. "Sorry it looks like a dump. There was a BIG battle today. Yeah, this real bad demon, Mephisto, he was beating up all my friends a bit ago. That's why I summoned ya. I was hoping you could help me fight him. He's too strong for me to fight. I'm so weak now..."

The angel frowns. She looks around once again, this time taking special note of the recently shattered mountains, the flattened forests, and the general state of the planet.

Then she turns her attention to a life force not far in the distance, barely a stone's throw from her current position. She notices a half-skeletal figure coated in rotting flesh who appears to be trying to slink away from her, but when her gaze meets the skeleton's, he freezes like a deer in the headlights.

"Hmm? What in the damnation is that creature?" The angel asks, curling her lips up in disgust. "And why is its soul energy in such disarray?! How have the galaxy's standards fallen so low after my people's fall?"

Ose quickly transmits a message to Bael. He nods, then crosses his arms.

"Oh, that's Mephisto. He's the bad guy I was tellin' ya about. He ate a bunch of my friends. Thinks he's tough shit. Mind helpin' a sister out?"

The angel narrows her eyes.

"Where dost thou think thou art slinking away to, coward? Come here and stand before this ancient one. I intendeth to judge thy sins."

Mephisto's pupils shrink to pinpricks.

Without warning, he abruptly turns tail and races away!

Bael's eyes widen as he sees Mephisto practically shit his pants as he beats the hastiest of retreats.

"Oh no! He's gettin' away!"

But the angel woman merely looks at Mephisto's flight with disinterest.

"With that speed? Nay. The creature shalt not travel far."

She returns her attention to Bael, not giving half a damn about Mephisto's rapid departure. It's as if she doesn't fear he'll escape her grasp no matter how far he runs.

"The demons, thou art allies of the angels?" The woman asks. "What about that corpse-like creature?"

Bael listens to Ose's words before replying.

"Well, most demons are good guys." Bael lies shamelessly, more than happy to twist the truth if Ose tells him to. "We were friends with the angels during the Energy Wars. But there are bad demons out there. Mephisto's one of 'em."

The angel nods sympathetically. "Of course. Even among my people, there were vile individuals. T'would be unbecoming to judge an entire species based on a minority of its worst elements. But I am quite interested in how the Demons came to be. Thy red skin, thy weak magical capabilities, and thy formidable soul! Tis' quite a contrast. In fact, I've not seen a soul as mighty as thine outside that of my brother Raphael. Art all demons like thee?"

"Nah, I'm kind of a big deal." Bael immediately brags. "Yeah, I'm one of the stronger ones. Mephisto's tougher than me now, but he did cheat after all."

The woman blinks. "He cheated?"

"Yup. See, he had this corpse of a dragon, and he did some mumbo jumbo stuff to merge a bunch of demon souls together. So he's basically invinci- ULP!"

Bael suddenly swallows his words as the angel abruptly radiates an aura of violent hostility.

"WHAT." She says, grinding out every syllable through clenched teeth. "THAT BASTARD. MERGED. WITH A **DRAGON?!'**"

Bael maybe slightly pees himself when he senses the rage behind her words. Even a spiritually dull nimrod like him can tell she's about to blow her stack.

"Y-yeah!" Bael cries. "It's j-just Mephisto though, ma'am! Just Mephisto! The rest of us demons don't do stuff like that!"

She nods aggressively. Her pupils dilate and begin to glow as she turns her head in the direction Mephisto fled.

"No dragon mayeth remain among the living." The angel says, with an intensity that chills Ose and Bael both to their cores. "They killed my people. If I have come to this era for any reason, tis' for the purpose of SLAYING that progeny of the Winged Serpents."

Bael doesn't get a chance to respond.

Before he can say a word, the woman stomps her feet against the ground, causing the entirety of Numaria to rumble. She launches herself forward like a missile, blasting after Mephisto with a speed that makes her instantly vanish into the horizon.

For a few seconds afterward, Bael remains frozen in place. Then, his idiocy kicks back in and he wipes his forehead.

"...Whew! Glad she's pissed at Mephy and not me!"

[We're lucky.] Ose says quietly. [That woman is most assuredly an ancient Archangel. Her power is too frightening. Mephisto might possess dragon bones, but he's no True Dragon. She'll rip him apart with ease.]

"At least she's on our side!" Bael chuckles nervously.

* * *

Meanwhile, the angel races after Mephisto at twenty times the speed of sound. The shockwave from her flight across Numaria's skies leaves earsplitting sonic booms in her wake, causing the debris scattered across the planet to shake and rattle.

Up ahead, Mephisto senses the chasing figure pursuing him. He realizes with a fright that not even a two-minute headstart will allow him to keep away from her. She is MUCH faster than the Myriad Deity, and she will catch up to him in less than a minute.

"Dammit, dammit!" Mephisto cries. "Bael, you bassstard!! Ah, that'sss right, I'll have to jussst..."

Mephisto continues fleeing, but he hastily conjures magical signs with his hands. He summons the power of a Warper, then opens a portal to a world ten thousand lightyears toward the Southern Quadrant of the Milky Way.

Mephisto leaps through the portal, then hurriedly closes it.

After arriving, he opens another portal, this time to a world on the eastern side of the galaxy, thirty thousand lightyears away. He jumps through it and seals it shut.

Finally, he breathes a sigh of relief, paying little attention to the rocky world he's arrived on that appears to be covered in moss and primitive plant-life. It is but a minor world ruled by demonkind, after all.

"E-essscaped..." Mephisto hisses, trembling in fear. "Ssso powerful... who the devil ISSS that Archangel?! Why have we never heard of her before?!"

The souls inside of him have a quick but heated debate. In the face of this Cosmic threat, even Lupus can't help but indulge her curiosity.

[She must be from an era before the angels landed on Earth.] Lupus says thoughtfully. [Angels leak mana over time. That means the older they are, the more powerful they must be.]

Zamiel frowns. [Yeah, I think you're onto something. She's so powerful that I can even sense her from here. She also said she fought dragons. Isn't that a bit ridiculous?]

Yama grimaces. [Our body is formidable, but in the end it is merely made of a dragon's corpse. We are not nearly as strong as Leviathan himself was.]

[How did Bael sssummon sssuch a powerful angel?] Mephisto asks. [You sssaid he could only sssummon demonss!]

Yama throws his shadowy hands up uselessly. [We have no idea. Perhaps his ability is more frightening than we expected.]

Mephisto licks his lips hungrily. [If we could capture Bael'sss sssoul, we could harnesss that power for ourssselvesss. Imagine how ssstrong our ssstrength would become! We could sssummon primordial monssstersss to asssssst usss!]

[Or we could summon another Archangel to beat the shit out of us.] Lupus says blandly. [Maybe even the same one chasing us now.]

That stifles Mephisto's greed, if only by a little.

[True. Hmm, we will have to consssider the-]

Suddenly, Mephisto freezes. A cold chill washes over his body. He spins around to look at the empty space behind himself, and what he sees scares every semblance of

superiority out of his bones.

There, in the open air above the muddy plant-life on this remote world, an invisible *crack* tears across the Void. The place where Mephisto stepped through a portal begins to widen as the female Archangel uses her bare hands to re-open the portal Mephisto thought he closed.

Eyes filled with bloodlust peer through the gap as the angel sets her sights on the boned monster in front of her.

"HEH HEH." She laughs in a manner most frightening. **"DIDS'T THOU THINKETH THOU ESCAPED THIS ANCIENT?"**

Founder Dosena races across the Milky Way. Unlike Volgrim Battleships, a High Psion can use their formidable abilities to travel great distances using pure psionic power.

For Dosena, this takes the form of entering the higher dimension known as P-Space for brief periods of time. She 'steps' in and out of the material realm, traveling tens of lightyears with a single movement of her feet.

Unbeknownst to Dosena, P-Space is the dimension the ancient angels once used to travel the Milky Way, and they were even better at manipulating its laws to their benefit than she is. Camael's Cube uses the same method to move through space, a fact she unfortunately has no way of inferring.

But none of that matters to Dosena. With twenty thousand lightyears separating Volgarius in the Southern Milky Way Quadrant from Numaria in the Western Quadrant, Dosena can only hope to reach it in two or so hours at her top speed, assuming she takes no shortcuts through Jumpgates.

However, using Jumpgates simply isn't the Second Founder's style. Ever since she began ascending to the 9th Level, she has never taken a single shortcut in all her life. Dosena has always worked tirelessly, even rebuilding her entire foundation from the ground up when she suffered a terrible defeat to a group of 9th Level Psions in her youth.

That trauma shook her to her core. It wiped away her naivete and forged her into a violent but controlled individual, someone who always kept her rage contained below the surface.

To the current Dosena, nothing is more revolting than a lazy individual, a cheater, or someone who takes shortcuts to get ahead in life.

If one does not act with integrity, they are lower than dirt.

This is the Second Founder's guiding principle, and the reason she ultimately rose to become the mightiest of all Psions.

But today, as she rushes toward the Apex Cosmic that has intruded within the Milky Way's Akashic Barrier, she feels a sense of wariness, as well as more than a hint of bloodthirst.

Dosena knows she will not be a proper opponent for this new enemy.

She has also noticed that this entity is actually an angel, a being who might possibly be an ally.

But that doesn't matter to the Second Founder.

For an unfathomably long time, Dosena has not fought a single individual on her level. She hasn't even met someone who came close. Not one entity has given her a challenge, and she has grown to believe this lack of opponents is what has stalled her advancement to the 10th Level.

When she thinks honestly, Dosena isn't even certain if the 10th Level exists, or if she can reach it. But intuitively, she feels it must. She knows stronger Cosmics exist in other galaxies, and they once existed in the Milky Way's distant past.

Angels, Titans, and Dragons were all at one point far above Dosena's level. Compared to them, she feels like how a toned athlete might feel if they were placed in a boxing ring against a heavyweight champion.

She simply can't compare.

[I must improve.] Dosena says to herself. [I must face this intruder. Whether they are friend or foe... I must fight them!]

Ostensibly, Dosena's role is to protect Volgarius, the Volgrim people, and Unarin from Cosmic threats. Any other threat typically isn't worth her effort to intervene.

But in truth, Dosena is quite self-centered. She cares more about her own improvement than the lives of her fellow Volgrim. She certainly possesses plenty of

lingering attachments to them, but she has long since withdrawn from mortal activities, small talk, and other pleasantries.

Dosena rips across the Void, traveling at a speed that would leave even some of the greatest Volgrim warships in the dust.

She scans the entire Milky Way, projecting her Psionic Sense across it with ease. While she cannot make out fine details, keeping an 'eye' on a Cosmic Aura as mighty as the interloper's could never prove a problem to the Second Founder. In her eyes, it's like child's play.

But then, just a few minutes after racing away from Volgarius, Dosena abruptly stops, freezing in her tracks. She senses Mephisto's aura disappear for a moment. Then it reappears somewhere much closer to herself before disappearing again, this time reappearing tens of thousands of lightyears away, in the Eastern Milky Way Quadrant.

Invisible question marks pop up over Dosena's head, but she quickly solves the riddle.

[Mephisto is fleeing. Naturally, the angel would be his enemy, and the enemy of all demons. He must possess Warper magic if he can travel so far, so fast.]

Dosena momentarily feels annoyed, perhaps even a bit stifled.

Psions can tear the Void and cause ripples throughout time. Their spatial and temporal powers are quite frightening.

But even weak demons like Wapers possess the power of Magic. They can accomplish physics-defying feats the Psions cannot. While weak individually, the variety of abilities they can employ grants them a unique utility niche that sometimes makes up for their lack of battle-power.

Dosena starts to resume her movement toward Numaria, but she pauses again when she senses the angel's Cosmic Energy signature vanish, then reappear at the same place Mephisto had just traveled, before disappearing once more to chase him again.

[The Apex Cosmic must be able to tear open Mephisto's sealed portals.] Dosena thinks out loud.

Indeed, while Dosena can not open portals to travel all the way across the galaxy in an instant, if a demon were to open one in front of her and then reseal it, she could force it back open for a brief time afterward.

That much isn't impressive in Dosena's eyes, but it does reinforce the idea that the Apex Cosmic is much stronger than herself and will likely be capable of killing her if she doesn't play her cards right.

Dosena feels no fear.

She relishes the challenge.

[Strength is not necessarily what wins a battle.] Dosena says confidently to herself, before changing direction to race toward the Eastern Quadrant instead. [I possess a formidable array of powers. I will not fall easily to the Archangel. Perhaps I may even defeat them and ascend to the 10th Level!]

The Second Founder pursues the intruder with deadly intent.

She will not falter.

She will not fail.

She is a weapon.

Her purpose is to kill.

Part 501: PRIMORDIAL PREDATOR

Recommended Listening

On a world lacking in terrestrial life, a pair of cosmic entities race across its sky at blistering speeds.

Lower demons live on this world. A few Demon Lords. One or two Barons. They manage the world's resources for the Seven Hells. In the past, it was a world intended for human camps and food for those humans.

But after Jason Hiro teleported the humans to Tarus II, only lower life forms remained behind.

The Myriad Deity screams in fear as he tries to flee his pursuer, an angel from the Cosmic Era. His flight through the lower atmosphere leaves sonic booms in his wake that deafen the creatures below him. But when the elderly angel follows after him, her aftershocks blow out their eardrums and rupture their brains, killing them on the spot.

"THOU SHALT NOT ESCAPE, DRAGONSPAWN!" The angel roars, her voice sundering the world below.

Mephisto says nothing. He offers no witty quips or observations, only guttural cries of fright as he uses every tool in his arsenal to try and evade his pursuer.

While Mephisto is assuredly far too weak to even cut the angel's robes with his claws, he still possesses a reservoir of abilities, ones he tries using to evade or slow her down.

Mephisto wields Yama's power. He jumps into shadows and leaps across the planet, appearing here and there as he pops out of patches of darkness whenever the angel draws near.

But she has a solution for that. Much like Archangel Uriel, she conjures phantasms of light to race in different directions, spreading across the planet in equal distances. When Mephisto pops out of the ground, these ghost-like versions of herself rain violent blows on the dragonbone-deity, battering him into the soil and forcing him to flee elsewhere.

"EVIL WOMAAAAAN!!" Mephisto screams.

In a blind panic, Mephisto opens a portal to another world, then jumps through and seals it behind himself. At best that portal will buy him mere seconds.

He emerges on a world in the Western Milky Way Sector belonging to the Goblins. Not their former homeworld, Gollax Prime, but a world they obtained after the Plague ruined their former refuge, Gollax II. Mephisto dives under the soil using the power of Zamiel's earth manipulation to swim a dozen miles underground, where he quickly opens another portal to jump to a second world in the Eastern Sector.

This time, he arrives on Pixiv, the world of the Fairies, where countless magical senses lock onto him. For a brief instant, Mephisto pauses. Then, he grins sinisterly.

He closes up the portal behind himself, while racing toward the fairy's capital city, Spackle.

Dozens of female fairies outside the city look up at the undead creature racing toward them with expressions of horror. Mephisto slams into the magical barriers surrounding the city without hesitation, ripping them open with contemptuous ease. No matter how powerful the Fairy Queens might be, they don't stand a chance against a Cosmic Entity.

Just as Mephisto makes it inside the barrier, he senses the portal he closed up behind himself starting to tear open. Mephisto's grin widens as he calls out to the fairies.

"Help usss, friendsss! Ssslow thisss angel down! Ssshe isss your mortal enemy!"

He makes sure to yell as loudly as he can so his pursuer will hear. When the ancient angel breaks past Mephisto's portal, she narrows her eyes in a rage.

"Verily, this world belongeth to the dragonspawn's allies? No matter. I shalt erase it from existence!"

She flies toward the capital city, eliciting screams of terror.

"NO!" One of the fairy queens cries. "ARCHANGEL! WE'RE NOT-"

She doesn't get to finish her sentence.

The ancient angel releases a violent wave of holy magic, detonating it around her body in a nuclear blast of solar energy.

All the fairies within five hundred miles open their mouths, but no screams escape their lips. The light washes over their bodies, turns them to ash, and erases their souls.

The city of Spackle disappears in an instant. In its place, a crater ten miles deep remains.

For a brief moment, the angel frowns.

"The allies of this dragon were too weak. The galaxy has lost much of its cosmic energy in the eras after my demise."

But she pays no more attention to the matter, caring little for the destruction and genocide she's caused. In her eyes, these 'fairies' were barely as significant as ants.

Mephisto escapes through another portal, and the angel chases after him. Shortly after they leave, a group of fairy soldiers from elsewhere rush to the scene. They arrive to find their crown jewel capital reduced to ash, with not even a speck of its pure white marbled stone remaining behind.

"A-assemble the Queens!" One of the fairy captains exclaims. "Gather anyone who's still alive! We've lost the protection of the Shielding Crystal! Pixiv is no longer hidden from the Plague!"

* * *

Mephisto flees through another portal to the edge of the Eastern Sector. This time, he arrives on a Volgrim hunting world, where they train their 3rd and 4th Level Psions to prepare them for the path to becoming military elites.

The moment Mephisto arrives, Psions all across this world recognize his presence. The strongest Psion, a 7th Level named Praetor Revan, immediately recognizes that neither he nor any of the Lower Psions beneath him stand a chance against Mephisto. Luckily, they have already received scattered reports in real-time through their quantum-nodes regarding the Myriad Deity's movements. They feel no fear. Instead, they focus on weaving Psionic Webs to combine their power.

[Activate the Defensive Grid!] Praetor Revan declares, as he pours his vast psionic energy into a barrier surrounding the defensive facility built specifically for resisting a Plague incursion.

This complex is not particularly special, as the Volgrim have taken to building many of them on their training worlds over the last 20,000 years. It sports a demonstone exterior, with special nodes placed around it to allow for efficient buildup and transfer of psionic energy.

Having already received a warning from the Founders just thirty minutes earlier, most of the Psions on this world have already assembled inside the great shelter. They rapidly

build up a barrier of hardened psionic energy, grimacing as they sense Mephisto's soul signature racing toward them.

"Our Pssion friendsss!" Mephisto calls out again, as loudly as possible. "The Archangel isss chassing usss! Sssave usss!!"

In Mephisto's wake, the ancient angel tears open yet another portal. She rips across space in pursuit of Mephisto, but this time, as she draws near to him, she senses a somewhat weak but still surprising amount of energy building up in the distance.

Hmm. She thinks. The creatures on this world aren't as minuscule as the ones before.

Every Psion on the training world pours their energy without restraint into the barrier. However, its power lies not only in defense...

...but in offense as well!

A small, highly concentrated beam of psionic power bursts out of the barrier, firing directly at Mephisto.

Even as a Cosmic Entity, this unexpected attack catches the Myriad Deity's swift senses off-guard. The beam travels at the speed of light, crossing a hundred miles in an instant and blasting him right in the face.

BOOOOM!!

Mephisto cries out in pain as the psionic attack not only strikes his body, but injures his multitude of souls as well!

His momentum abruptly halts and reverses, like a fly being swatted out of the air. Mephisto goes hurtling backward, screaming in pain, where he crashes into the dirt.

The angel behind him momentarily pauses. She frowns, realizing something important.

The creature called out to his allies, but they attacked him. Perhaps they are not allies after all?

A disturbing thought occurs to her.

Then what of the creatures on the previous world? Were they not the dragonspawn's comrades either?

Her eyes ignite with rage. She realizes the truth of the matter.

He TRICKED me! Wretched little-!!

Mephisto shakes his head in a daze. He grimaces, realizing the Psions must have already prepared for his coming.

But before he can escape again, the angel pounces on him and grabs his skull.

"LYING LITTLE DRAGONSPAWN!" She roars, lifting him overhead.

The Psions watch from afar, fixating their senses on the battle. However, the power of an Apex Cosmic is simply too brilliant. In their eyes, they can only make out a blinding mass of holy energy, obscuring her features. They vaguely sense her advanced age, as well as the fact that she competes with their Second Founder in raw power. But beyond that, they aren't certain of what her identity is.

[Is that Archangel Camael?] One of the lower Psions asks.

[The voice seems to match up.] Praetor Revan says calmly, showing no fear in spite of the immense danger less than a hundred miles from his position. [I can't get a good look at her, but Archangel Camael is indeed one of the Archangels we gave to the demons during the Energy Wars. She must have revived, like her siblings.]

The lesser Psions are much younger than Revan. Unlike their superior, they were not alive during the Energy Wars, so they only know of that era due to studying the historical records.

[Is the Second Founder on her way?] One of the 4th Level Psions asks.

[She is. But she will require many Standard Time Units to arrive. That is only assuming the Archangel and Demon Deity remain in the area.]

As the Psions talk, they maintain their focus, not lowering their guards for a millisecond. The angel beats the hell out of Mephisto, slamming him into the planet's soil like a bull thrashing its matador in a violent rage.

"WORTHLESS! DRAGONSPAWN! LIAR! DECEIVER!"

Mephisto screams in pain. He tries to flail his arms, to scratch at the angel, to fight back, but nothing works.

When he conjures dark energy, she nullifies it with light.

When he tries to twist and bend to escape her iron-grip, she sends a punch flying into his head.

Finally, the angel rears her arm back and hurls Mephisto with all her strength. She flings him at a nearby mountainside, which he crashes into at five times the speed of sound. The impact of his body sends a wave of destruction cascading to the west, rendering all life in that direction utterly extinct. Luckily, she had the foresight to aim in the direction opposite the Psion command center.

But the moment Mephisto crashes into the mountain, he regains his wits and dives underground. He conjures a portal and flees all the way back to the furthest, westernmost-edge of the Milky Way, on the complete opposite side of the galaxy.

Naturally, the angel pursues him.

They tear across the Void in an instant, emerging on a planet covered in lush greenery, with beautiful trees and flowers dotting the landscape as far as the eye can see.

Mephisto closes the portal like before, but when he arrives on this planet, he pauses for a brief instant, visibly confused.

"What? Thisss isssn't the right world- no, never mind that!"

He becomes momentarily disoriented, not recognizing a single location around himself. He isn't even certain how the Warper soul inside of him knew of this place, since it doesn't match up at all.

He rushes westward across the planet, scowling as he senses that familiar emergence of the angel behind him.

"Dammit, dammit, DAMMIT!" Mephisto roars. "Where are we?! What planet isss thisss? Thisss isssn't Okania! Okania isss sssuppossed to be a desssert wasssteland! But why do the two moonsss ssseem correct? Wasss it converted into a Paradisse-Classs world recccently?"

Mephisto truly can't afford to pay the matter any attention. But in the back of his mind, an ominous feeling sprouts.

Only five thousand years ago, this world was all but devoid of life. It was simply another Psion training facility, intended for teaching their Invocators how to survive in low-danger hostile environments.

He glances around one last time before returning his attention to the angel chasing after him. Swallowing his fears, he spins around to face her.

"That'sss it. NO MORE PLAYING AROUND!" Mephisto roars.

He conjures magic into his bones, then begins to reshape his body.

As the angel tears through the trees during her approach, she slows down for a moment, pausing to investigate the changes occurring to her opponent.

Hmm? What is the fiend doing now? She wonders, more curious than afraid.

Mephisto lifts his head to the sky and roars primally. His skull reshapes itself as it takes on a draconic appearance. His hands morph into claws. A tail grows from his rear.

But unlike when he fought Crow, he does not remain the same size. He unleashes the full power of his dragon-form, increasing in size from six feet tall to ten, twenty, and even a hundred feet!

Mephisto gigantifies himself, allowing every drop of his power to explode. In doing so, he greatly increases the capacity of his Cosmic Energy, strengthening himself in all the ways that matter!

The angel doesn't feel threatened, but she does notice his danger level has increased a bit. She nods.

"I see. So that is thy true form, Son of Wyrms!"

Mephisto grins. He looks down at the diminutive figure, sensing he has brought himself to a level where he now stands a chance.

"Thiss isss where the tablesss turn!" Mephisto proclaims, lunging at her.

The two once again engage in a mighty struggle.

Mephisto's speed drops a little, but in exchange, his leverage, size, and striking power amplify dramatically. He swings his claws down upon the tiny angel as if they were fifty-ton hammers. He smashes her into the soil, but she easily maintains a barrier of holy energy to protect herself.

Then she leaps out of the ground and rockets up into Mephisto's chest.

WHAM!

The impact of flesh and bone flattens the forest for miles around. She sends Mephisto rocketing into the sky, only to zip above him and throw another punch at his back.

WHAM!!

This brutal strike reverses Mephisto's momentum, sending him screaming to the surface once again.

But when Mephisto is about to hit the ground, he materializes a portal below himself, one which opens up in the sky above the angel.

He falls through that portal and attacks her from behind, catching her off-guard!

With a slash of his claws, Mephisto lands his first successful attack, striking the primordial angel's wings with every ounce of strength he can muster.

She screams. She plummets to the planet below, crashing into it to send another shockwave across its surface.

"Aaahh..." The angel coughs, clearly taken aback by Mephisto's strength. Until now, she hasn't even suffered a scratch from him, and while this blow is far from causing her any mortal danger, it does cause her to take him more seriously.

"Tricky... little... dragonspawn." The angel coughs, before jumping to her feet.

She looks up at the sky, where Mephisto looks down at her, not pleased at all with his failure to end her in one strike. A single glance is all she needs to see that he had hoped for a quick end to the fight.

"Thou art going to need to fight better than THAT if thou intendeth to kill me." She says cockily.

The angel coils strength into her legs.

Just as she's about to pounce at Mephisto from below like a panther, she pauses.

She senses... a certain gaze falling upon her body.

"Huh?"

Slightly confused, the angel snaps her eyes to the left, where she easily picks out a tiny bipedal creature with mottled green skin, its faceless head aimed in her direction.

A Kolvaxian.

It hides behind a recently uprooted tree, but its insignificant stealth capabilities can't avoid her sharp senses.

"What... in the Creator's name...?" She whispers, shocked by the creature's appearance. "That..."

She doesn't get to finish her thought. Mephisto senses her moment of confusion, flaps his boned wings, and races down at her from above.

BOOOOM!!

He smashes the angel like a nuclear bomb, causing the crater to quadruple in size and flinging thousands of tons of debris back into the upper atmosphere to rain down upon the other side of the planet over the coming months.

Enraged, the angel ignores her intrusive thoughts to focus on the enemy before her. She slams her fist into Mephisto and sends him hurtling away.

"I tire of thy pathetic antics!" She roars.

Mephisto flaps his wings to reorient himself in the air above. He gazes at her with undisguised hatred.

"Filthy pigeon! Why? WHY are you sssso ssstrong?! What isss your true identity, Archangel? Why wasss Bael able to ssssummon a monssster like you from the Primordial Era?!"

The angel blinks her eyes. She looks at Mephisto in confusion.

"What? Thou thinketh me an Archangel?"

"Of coursse!" Mephisto rages. "What elssse could you be if NOT an Archangel?!"

For the first time since the angel started chasing Mephisto, the two of them don't immediately engage in hostilities. Instead, she looks up at the bone-dragon with an expression of pity.

"Fool. I am no Archangel. Art thy eyes blind? Compared to my siblings nine, I am but a speck of cosmic dust in the Creator's eye. My weakest sibling, Muriel, is a thousand times stronger than I. If thou thinketh me an Archangel, thou hath no concept of what *true* Cosmic Power is."

She stands up straight, then looks at Mephisto haughtily.

"My name is Anaelle. I am but a common member of the Seraphs. Were I an Archangel, my first blow would have shattered thy body into fragments. In fact, my frail body is the only reason thou hath survived this long."

Mephisto's eyes lose some of their color. He looks at Anaelle in horror.

"What? You're... an ordinary angel? Not an Archangel? LIESSS! You musst be lying!"

Anaelle shakes her head. "There is no lie, undead creature. The galaxy hath changed since my fall to the claws of that ancient dragon. The Cosmic Energy present hath become too thin for my tastes. The Akashic Barrier hath weakened, and shalt soon disappear

altogether. But in the era of my memory, millions of my brothers and sisters towered above me. I was quite weak by all accounts. As for thy strength..."

She pauses, assessing Mephisto's draconic figure with contempt.

"Thou doth not meet the bare minimum of my expectations. I senseth no other dragons, yet despite possessing the bones of one, thy strength is lower than the weakest ones in my memory. The children of today art too pitiful."

Mephisto's metaphorical stomach sinks. The Seraph's words rock him to his core, making him feel as if becoming a Demon Deity meant even less than becoming an Emperor.

For the first time, he begins to understand the true heights Cosmic Entities can ascend to, and how frightening the angels of old were.

If he had lived during those times, he'd be about as intimidating as a gnat to an elephant.

Anaelle cracks her neck. Abruptly, she launches toward Mephisto, catching him by surprise as she drives a punch straight toward his rib-bones.

BOOM!

Then another punch.

BOOOOM!!

And another one!

BOOOOOM!!

Mephisto tries to scream, but his voice catches. His soul shudders from the impacts, and he momentarily loses control of his body.

Each strike launches Mephisto into the sky, but this time Anaelle dogs him closely, pursuing him without letting the gap lengthen. She keeps pummeling Mephisto's central bone, and as she does, Mephisto hears a sound more alarming than all of the ones before.

Crack.

A soft sound. A sharp sound. He only hears it because of his highly attuned senses, but it makes his souls shake with fear.

His eyes lower.

He looks at the place where Anaelle has repeatedly struck him.

There, a small spiderweb crack has appeared on his ribs.

No! NO! Mephisto cries, as Anaëlle delivers another debilitating punch to his sternum.

BOOOOM!!

The crack enlarges. And yet another punch enlarges it further.

Agony rocks Mephisto's senses.

No, not here! NOT NOW! Mephisto cries out in his head, unable to catch a breath.

Anaëlle grins evilly.

"I always hated dragons. It made me an outcast among my Seraph brethren. But I knew... thou art all **SCUM!**"

The primordial predator sends one last punch racing toward Mephisto's cracked bones, hellbent on blasting them into powder and severing his body in half.

But then, just before the punch lands...

She disappears.

Anaëlle vanishes, leaving not one molecule behind.

For the briefest instant, Mephisto remains motionless in the air, his trembling eyes locked on the position where she was flying in front of him a second before.

He anticipates her punch.

He expects it to leave him crippled and debilitated.

But it never comes.

Mephisto slows to a stop in the sky, now levitating a dozen miles above Okania's surface.

He blinks once, twice, three times.

"Wh....what?"

Slightly dazed, Mephisto looks around. He stretches out his senses, fearing this must be some sort of elaborate psychological prank Anaëlle is pulling to strike the fear of God into him.

But it isn't.

No matter where Mephisto looks, he doesn't find the Seraph hiding anywhere on Okania.

The souls inside of Mephisto finally piece the puzzle together. Yama is the one who comprehends the truth.

[It's the same.] Yama says slowly. [When Bael summoned Satan, we feared Satan would stay among the living forever, but... he did not. He disappeared shortly after.]

[The angel is gone, then.] Lupus whispers. [We somehow survived. She must have... returned? To the grave?]

Mephisto stares blankly ahead.

Then, he begins to chuckle.

"Heh... hehe heh..."

His chuckle increases in intensity.

"Hehehe... kekeke... KEKEKEKE!!!"

He bursts into a full-throated laugh, roaring to the heavens with glee as he realizes the truth of the matter.

"The ss summon dis appeared! KEKEKE! We're sssaved! SSSAVED!"

He slaps himself, fearing he might have simply passed out in delirium due to being beaten unconscious. But in fact, he is still as awake as ever.

Mephisto touches the broken bone, his laugh fading away as he realizes how close he came to total defeat. He could have died to Anaelle, and if she had truly been an Archangel, he probably wouldn't have lasted five seconds.

"The anccient Archangelsss... were they truly ssso powerful?"

A sense of despondency overwhelms him.

He momentarily feels tiny, insignificant.

Despite all the power he has amassed, he's nothing at all in the cosmic scale of the universe.

He is merely a speck of a speck of a speck...

But those feelings fade.

His resolve reforms, and a sense of urgency replaces it.

"We musst become ssstronger. There are too many enemiiesss out there."

Mephisto turns his beady eyes toward the direction of Numaria.

"We musst conssume more ssoulss."

"Bael... hisss power will make a **fine** addition to our collection..."

Part 502: Future Protagonist

Two hours earlier.

Amelia Greyheart, the former Black Queen, finds herself absentmindedly wandering around Tarus II, inside the middle of the capital city, the Fortress of Retribution.

With Hope gone, she can't bear to sit idly in the Hall of Heroes, waiting hundreds of hours for news of his return... or worse. She'd much rather come out into the real world to speed things up. The problem is, she finds she just doesn't have much to do.

So, to pass the time, she wanders over to the special facility she helped Blinker build; the Queen Network.

Dozens of giant trees glow with magical energy. They appear much taller than a week before, having continued to gently feed on the energy of humans, demons, and monsters that have been using their power. Amelia approaches the Network, thinking she might pop in to work some aggression out in this special soul-simulator, but she finds a huge line stretching away from the entrance, consisting of at least 500 humans, demons, and monsters all waiting to train in the Queen Network's special soul-space.

Amelia blinks. "Wow. It's... more popular than I expected. Maybe we should expand the system's capacity."

She scratches her head, feeling slightly annoyed. She could jump the line and nobody would have the right to complain, given she was one of the Network's inventors, but that just wouldn't sit right with her.

As Amelia stands away from the line, not sure of what to do, she hears a voice speak up behind her.

"Ah-ah-ah! Amelia, I've fin-ally found you! What luck, meet-ing you here!"

Amelia blinks. She turns around to see a familiar female demon a stone's throw away, walking toward her. The demon's horns appear a bit larger than in the past, and her spiritual energy, substantially greater.

"Dawn." Amelia says. "Haven't seen you in a while. Not since you led me to.. the... well, you know."

"To Gressil's pris-on, yes." Dawn says. She doesn't smile at Amelia, and appears noticeably less bubbly than usual. "I need to spe-ak to you. Can we... go somewhere more priv-ate?"

"Uh. Sure." Amelia says slowly. "Why? Is something... wrong?"

The black-haired demoness looks around, as if searching for something, or perhaps someone.

"Well. Yes. You will see. Emperor Kristoff wouldn't want me to spe-ak about the matter public-ly."

"Oh, alright then." Amelia says.

She and Dawn make their way back to the city's interior, where they visit the *Horned Maître* and take up a private booth on the second floor. Here, the meals are cheaper, and the floor is more crowded, but finding a magically-soundproofed privacy screen is plenty doable.

Amelia starts to reach into her pocket for a Merit Token, but she feels a bit of surprise when Dawn casually tosses two out, paying for the private booth herself.

"You have tokens?" Amelia asks.

"I have been contri-buting to humanity's cause." Dawn explains, as they head upstairs to grab a booth. "I am a Baron now. The Baron of Quiet."

"Not a very intimidating title." Amelia says absentmindedly.

"It is not supposed to be." Dawn says, finally baring a faint, toothy smile. Her vampire canines poke out of her mouth for a moment before she retracts them.

Her smile evaporates, and she remains sitting in silence for a moment.

"Something big is happen-ing." Dawn says quietly. "An... oper-ation. Emperor Kristoff is a part of it. So are most of the other De-mon Emperors."

"Huh? I haven't heard anything about this." Amelia replies.

"I would imagine not. It is being kept on the down-low." Dawn whispers conspiratorially. "Because they did not want the Wordsmiths to know... Emperor Mephisto... is alive."

"WHAT?!" Amelia exclaims, nearly jumping out of her seat. "He IS?! Oh, of *course* he is! That piece of shit is like a cockroach! He just keeps coming back!"

Amelia's words don't escape the privacy barrier, nor are her actions noticed by anyone outside the booth.

Dawn remains calm on the surface, but her eyes tell a different story.

"Things did... not go well. They went poorly, in fact. Mephisto discovered... a se-cret. He uncovered some method of as-cending to the rank of Demon Deity. Like Wolfram did. Only, this as-cension is... stable. It would not be temporary, but permanent."

Amelia calms down. Her blood runs cold as she realizes what Dawn is implying.

"He... wait... so the other Emperors attacked him in secret? They didn't tell Jason or Hope? But why not? Unless..."

Dawn lowers her eyes in shame.

"They wanted that se-cret. They wanted to steal Mephisto's know-ledge. But the operation failed. Mephisto worked with Emperor Glinch. He held them back long enough for Mephisto to as-cend."

Dawn pauses.

"As we speak, Mephisto is doing bat-tle with the Emperors. But things are not going well. They will likely use Crow's abili-ty to temporarily become a Demon Deity herself. If she cannot defeat Mephisto, all will be lost."

"How do you know all this? Why didn't you tell anyone sooner?" Amelia asks, glaring at Dawn. "We have to tell Neil! Or Phoebe! The Wordsmiths need to act fast!"

Dawn shifts in her seat uncomfortably. "The Emperors... would not like me saying anything. And I... I am... in con-flict. You may not realize this but... Emperor Fenrir was kil-led. She was my Lady. I served her for thousands of years. Now, I... don't know what to do. Mephisto has Lupus's soul. Kristoff is fighting, too. I should follow my or-ders, but it does not feel right."

"Well, we have to do *something*!" Amelia exclaims. "We can't just sit on our butts."

"But what do we do, then?" Dawn asks. "I follow or-ders. I do not give them out. That is why I came to you. I hoped you could help."

"We... should go find Phoebe." Amelia says decisively. "She's reliable. She can contact Jason. Unfortunately, Hope is occupied right now. But we need to alert the First

Wordsmith. Oh, and we have to tell Neil, too. If Mephisto has ascended, he should be stronger than any Emperor, right?"

Dawn shrugs helplessly. "I do not know. The Emperors spoke of Wolfram as being weaker than the Cherubim, but still impossibly strong. If Mephisto is similar, perhaps we will need the help of the Arch-angels?"

"Yeah. Asking them for help might be a good idea too." Amelia says. "Let's go alert Phoebe first, though. I trust her a lot more than any of those old pigeons."

Amelia and Dawn hastily get up and leave. Dawn shoots a look of surprise at Amelia.

"I forgot you have bad blood with the angels."

"I'll never forgive them." Amelia says quietly. "They made my best friend suffer. Especially that Raphael. He's the worst one of all."

"Well. I will not disagree with that statement." Dawn mutters appreciatively.

Cassiel, the last living Lazarite, walks with her companion, Soleil, the sentient Construct. The two of them happen to simply be wandering around Tarus II on this fine day, letting the sunshine warm their backs. Given their human disguises, they don't stand out from the crowd.

While Cassiel's disguise relies on her Heaven's Shroud, Soleil can simply change her appearance by morphing her body. The two of them draw no attention.

"I don't like this feeling." Cassiel says to her companion quietly. "Can you feel it, Soleil? There's a strange 'power' somewhere in the galaxy. It's demonic."

"I cannot detect any noteworthy energy signature." Soleil responds.

"Mmm. We should see if Raphael knows anything." Cassiel mutters, looking around the plaza. "His senses should be sharper than mine."

The two of them continue walking the streets, heading toward the eastern side of the city, where the last church remains standing. But before they can draw within eyeshot of it, a man steps out in front of them.

Cassiel doesn't flinch in fear, since she recognizes him. But she does appear slightly surprised.

"Siddhartha?" Cassiel asks.

Buddha nods at her unsmilingly. "Daughter of Heaven. Am I correct in assuming you can sense the distant Threat?"

"Yes. Why? Do you sense it too?" Cassiel asks, shooting Soleil a relieved look. It isn't just her general jumpiness acting up again.

"A great danger approaches. A causal anomaly." Buddha says quietly. "Were you planning to ask Raphael about this matter?"

Cassiel nods slowly. "Yes. Why?"

Buddha purses his lips.

"The old man. Do not trust him. Raphael knows more than he says. He has a... hidden agenda."

"Huh? Aren't you two friends?" Soleil asks, frowning at Buddha suspiciously. In her eyes, Soleil views herself as half an angel, so she tends to mentally align herself with their interests.

"I am friendly with Raphael when our goals converge." Buddha says quietly. "But that creature... that old monster... he is not humanity's ally. He only uses our strength to advance his agenda."

Buddha glances around the town square. Too many humans and demons stand within earshot, so he dares not speak too boldly.

"I've said what I needed to say. But keep your wits about you, Daughter of Heaven. Your karmic threads indicate a future of great significance may yet play out, so long as you survive. Do not cast yourself onto any blades, for the importance you may yet play in the Creator's scheme is more significant than you realize."

Cassiel blinks twice, uncomprehending. Just as she is about to ask what the heck Buddha means, he steps toward her and leans in close to whisper in his ear.

"The old man. He may grow to fear you. He views you as a child he raised. But that fact will not shield you forever. Do not forget... Raphael is not your ally."

Cassiel looks at Buddha strangely, as if gazing at a stranger. He pulls away from her and folds his hands together.

"The four forces will converge. Karma. Chaos. Luck. Destiny. Even I cannot presume how they will ultimately play out. The Great Shattering is approaching. It will change

everything."

"So... what should I do, then?" Cassiel asks.

"Keep to yourself. Focus on yourself. Stay true to yourself." Buddha says softly. "Right now, you must focus on becoming the best 'you' that has ever existed. I sense that in the future, a billion beings will come to rely on your strength. If it is insufficient, countless sentients will die."

"I... I don't know." Cassiel mumbles, feeling disheartened. "Me? I'm just a Lazarite. I'm nothing special."

"You and I both know that isn't true." Buddha murmurs quietly. "If you were 'only' a mere Lazarite, Raphael would not have devoted so much attention to training you. You have a potential even he cannot fathom. I fear that if he truly grasped its depths, he might..."

Buddha pauses, allowing the implication to linger.

He turns his attention to the Construct.

"Soleil. You are a Sentient, but your existence is unnatural. Neither Karma, nor Chaos, nor Destiny, nor Luck can bind you. The same is true of your sister. Do not underestimate your potential. I look forward to seeing what you can accomplish alongside your charge."

Soleil snorts. "Of course I'm amazing. I have a duty to perform. I have to *kill* the *bad man*."

She flicks her eyes to the side of Cassiel's head for a brief second before returning her attention to Buddha.

"But I don't like the way you talk about Raphael. He's done nothing to deserve your slander."

Buddha snorts contemptuously. He narrows his eyes to slits.

"If you had *any* idea of how wretched that Archangel was, you would not speak such words."

He turns away from them, then starts to walk away.

"I've said my piece. I hope you'll both take care of yourselves and await the coming changes. Don't throw your lives away needlessly."

Cassiel and Soleil remain silent, watching as Buddha departs. When he rounds the corner, they remain standing in place for a minute or two.

"Are you feeling alright?" Soleil asks, turning her attention to Cassiel.

Cassiel gazes into the distance, appearing a little dazed. She reaches her hand up to massage her eyelids, then looks at Soleil.

"I... I'm fine. I just... find it hard to follow along with Buddha's logic. I knew Raphael for 600 years, until the end of the Energy Wars. He trained me, guided me, mentored me. And now... Buddha tells me... this? I don't understand."

"Well. Who do you trust more?" Soleil asks. "Buddha? Or Raphael?"

"If it were only a matter of the time spent together, the answer would be Raphael." Cassiel replies. "But... Buddha was my friend for multiple reincarnations. Before I died, when I was a sick little girl, he came to comfort me and ease my passing. He was the Reverend of my church at the time. I knew him before I even knew Raphael."

"And after you became an angel?" Soleil asks.

"I ran into him on several occasions." Cassiel explains. Raphael used to dispatch me to Earth to hunt lesser demons as a part of my training. He rarely did that for other angels, but he always did it for me. Buddha had a way of popping up whenever I came down to Earth. It's almost like... like he knew where I'd be."

"He's an odd fellow." Soleil says. "Bit of a stalker, if you ask me."

"Oh, Soleil. It's not like that." Cassiel mutters.

"Maybe not." Soleil acknowledges. "But looking back, it seems odd, doesn't it? Almost like Buddha was looking to make friends with you. And all that weird talk... why does he act as if he can see the future? What's all this about a *Great Shattering*?"

"He's mentioned it a few times, but he's never told me." Cassiel says. "Maybe he can see the future after all. I just don't know."

She pauses.

"...Well. I think I'll hold off on talking to Raphael. Let's just wait and see what happens next."

Soleil shrugs. "You're the boss."

At a lake east of the Fortress of Retribution.

"I didn't know you could be such a romantic."

"Well. I've been out of the game for a long time. I don't have much idea what I'm doing."

Neil Adams and Linda Hurent sit in a rowboat in the middle of the lake, side by side, with fishing rods in their hands. Linda smiles at Neil, enjoying the moment.

After asking Neil out a few days earlier, she was surprised when he agreed. Knowing Neil, she expected him to shut her down. After all, the man lost his entire family when Bahamut took over his body and turned him into an immortal monster-slave.

But now, on their second date, Linda and Neil sit in the boat, staring out at the beautiful placid water. She can't help but feel happy, especially when she notices he's been smiling a bit more than usual.

"That's where I disagree." Linda says. "This was a good date idea."

Neil sighs, but says nothing. He looks out at the distant shore for several long seconds, becoming lost in thought.

"...So many matters demand my attention these days." Neil says quietly. "It's nice to take a day off."

"You don't ever stop working under normal circumstances, do you?" Linda asks, nudging his ribs gently with her elbow. "Revenge against the demons is fine and all, but if I might be so bold... you should stop and smell the roses once in a while. If you don't have anything to live for, or anything you enjoy doing, then what reason do you have to keep fighting?"

A pair of absurdly-colored pink birds with dark purple heads land in the lake and splash around a hundred feet from the boat, animals native to Tarus II. Neil watches them idly.

"I'd argue revenge is good enough for its own sake." Neil says. "But... you're right. I have felt a certain emptiness for the past six years. A loneliness of sorts."

He turns his head to look at her.

"That's why I... wanted to thank you, Linda. Thank you for asking me out."

Linda blushes. She coughs awkwardly, feeling a little intimidated by his soft gaze.

"I just couldn't bear to see you doing what you do, all alone, Neil. Besides. I'm not really an expert on these matters, either."

"Never dated before?" Neil asks, returning his eyes to the lake.

"Well. 'Dated' isn't really the right... I mean..."

Linda trails off.

"I'm just a random woman from one of the worlds you liberated. Before you came along, my life was... rough. The demons would frequently come to my village. They'd... take men and women away. Sometimes they'd perform vile acts toward my friends and family. My sister, for example..."

Neil's expression doesn't change.

But his heart tremors with a flicker of rage.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. I'm sorry anyone ever did. It's not right."

Linda nods. "But that's why I respect you, you know. The Wordsmiths are powerful, yeah. It's great they have the strength to cow the demons, but they're like gods. They have powers none of us could imagine."

She sighs.

"I respect the work Jason and Hope have done. I do. But if I can be honest? Hope is just Jason, in essence. It was you who molded him into a demon-killing machine. He'd still be a dope like his original self without you whipping him into shape. It's you who has been gluing humanity back together this whole time, not the Wordsmiths. That's why I... like you... the most."

Neil accepts the compliment graciously. He smiles.

"It's easy to act superior when one is born superior. It's easy to think of oneself as brave when one has the strength to fight back. But it's when you don't have strength, or capital, or resources to defeat a superior opponent, yet you keep standing up to them... that is what makes a person brave."

Linda nods. "I agree. That's why I've decided to follow you to the very end. Even if you leave the Wordsmiths behind, I'll have faith in you and you alone, Neil."

"I appreciate your confidence in me." Neil chuckles. "But I'm only a man. In a universe of demons, monsters, and aliens... a single man can't do much."

"That's where we disagree." Linda says, before leaning to the side and resting her head on his shoulder.

The two of them share a little laugh. They look into each other's eyes with big smiles, Neil having the best time he's had in years and feeling some of his worries fading into the back of his mind, while Linda bats her eyes at him, happy she decided to take a chance on asking Humanity's Commander out.

But.

All good things eventually come to an end.

Neil's communicator beeps. He ignores it, but then it beeps again, souring the mood.

The man clears his throat, then reaches into his pocket.

"Sorry. One second. Let me deal with this." Neil says rolling his eyes. "I told them not to bug me today..."

Linda pulls away from his shoulder. "It's fine, Neil. You're a busy man."

"Not THAT busy." Neil grumps, as he lifts the communicator to his ear. "Neil speaking."

He falls silent for a moment, but his expression begins to change.

"He did *what*? Without telling me? And now... you're sure? That goddamned idiot... *fuck*."

Neil bites the last word off, then mashes his thumb against the 'end call' button before shoving the communicator back in his pocket.

For a brief moment, he says nothing. Linda also remains silent, waiting to see if he'll explain.

"...FUCK." Neil says again, half-yelling, half-expelling the word from his mouth with a look of rage to back it up. "Hope, you dumb, stupid bastard."

Linda blinks. "Hope? What happened?"

"Wordsmiths. That's what happened." Neil hisses through clenched teeth. "Hope went to 'visit' Founder Unarin. I remember him telling me about some disgusting things he saw on Moonbase Serris- you remember Serris?"

Neil glances at Linda, looking for confirmation. She nods.

"You told me he blew up the Volgrim moon."

"Right, he sure did." Neil growls, looking away. "Anyway, Hope found out the Volgrim were experimenting on humans in a manner most disgusting. I told him not to take any action without consulting me, but now he's gone to Volgarius to confront Founder Unarin directly. It seems he's just returned and brought 'extremely bad news.'"

Neil reaches into his other pocket and pulls out a small palm-sized device, then hands it to Linda.

"Here. An emergency teleporter. I'm sorry, Linda. We have to cut this short. Put it on your chest and push the button. It'll take you back to the Northern Base."

Neil pulls out his own E-Teleporter and attaches it to his chest, while Linda gazes at the object in her hands with a look of dismay.

"Like I said." She murmurs. "I follow you, Neil. Not the Wordsmiths."

"I look forward to a future when we no longer need to rely on them." Neil says, before pressing the button on his teleporter.

Foop!

Neil vanishes from the boat, leaving Linda behind.

Linda doesn't immediately activate hers.

She sits there for five long minutes, staring out at the water in silence.

Eventually, she does activate it. Then she disappears.

Part 503: The Spynet Sphere

Three days before Mephisto's ascension, Jason Hiro created a folded space, a higher dimension where time flowed 250x faster than in the galaxy outside.

A space named *Chrona*.

When Mephisto began his rampage, over 750 days had already passed inside that dimension.

Two full years, nearly three, have raced by for the First Wordsmith.

He remains aware of the situation unfolding in the galaxy outside.

Indeed...

Jason Hiro has made many advancements.

* * *

The First Wordsmith takes a rare break from his work. He walks arm-in-arm with his spiritual wife, Fiona, who has now become substantially more corporeal thanks to certain devices she and Jason have built over the last years.

The land of Chrona has changed drastically over the past two years.

Previously, it was surrounded by a spinning vortex of spatial turbulence that made anyone sick if they looked up at the sky for too long. But thanks to a special magical mechanism, Chrona has slowly inflated in size as time passed by absorbing the wasted ambient energy of the galaxy outside.

Black holes eject matter and radiation.

Stars dissipate energy into the cosmos.

Solar winds travel slowly across the Milky Way.

Chrona can absorb these otherwise-wasted energies to enlarge itself.

Through a series of carefully tuned, highly complex spiritual mechanisms, Jason has created an isolated folded space not dissimilar to the Labyrinth of Hell, one which grows larger every day. Unlike Hell, Chrona does not feed off the wasted energy of its inhabitants. Instead, it transmits some of the ambient background radiation more

densely into its interior, a feature Jason deliberately designed to try and help one of his closest friends recover from his injuries...

Jason and Fiona walk across the beautiful, grassy, flowery field west of Chrona's sole city. Outside the city, which only houses a dozen people in total, a huge network of forests, rivers, and mountains stretches for several miles in every direction.

Chrona is not a large folded space. Indeed, it's far smaller than Earth's moon, Luna, ever was.

But for the dozen people who reside within it, it is more than big enough for them to all live in secluded spaces if they wish.

On this day, Jason decides to pause his work because he wants to take a small break and hang out with his good friend...

Kar.

Jason and Fiona hear the sounds of giggling and laughter as they approach the western end of Chrona's mega-forest. There, they spot several tiny crocodile whelps playing tag as they run between the trees, yelling childish things at one another. Each sibling taunts, teases, and provokes the others while sometimes tripping and falling over their tails.

"Already running around." Fiona murmurs. "Croco-kids grow up fast."

Jason nods. "They sure do."

He turns his attention away from the kids, where he spots Kar and Blinker sitting on a checkered blanket with some food strewn across it. They sit and enjoy a quiet picnic while keeping their eyes peeled for boo-boos and injuries.

"Hurgh. Turtle." Kar says, his body propped up against a rock behind him.

"Heya, Kar." Jason says with a smile. "Nice weather, huh?"

"Always is." Kar replies, giving Jason a thumbs-up.

"Mind if we sit?" Fiona asks.

"I'm making sandwiches." Blinker says. "Tuna-fish. You guys want some?"

"Sounds good to me!" Jason answers, laughing.

He and Fiona plop on the blanket. Jason accepts a sandwich, and surprisingly, so does Fiona.

In the outside world, Fiona can only manifest as a faint spiritual apparition, but thanks to the magical technology inside Chrona's biosphere, she can become almost as materialized as Phoebe herself!

She and Jason quietly munch on their sandwiches, while Blinker calls over the kids.

"Asher! Zagan! Lunch-time!" Blinker shouts.

The eight crocodile kids perk their ears up. They all come toddling over, their differently-colored shades of skin a useful tool for Jason to remember them.

A green-scaled boy and a red-scaled boy politely take their mother's offered sandwiches and throw them in their mouths, devouring them in single bites.

"Nom! Mmm! Mama, that's good!" Asher, the red-scaled one says.

"Can I have more?" Zagan, the green-scaled one, asks.

"Remember the rule. Everyone has their first before anyone has seconds." Blinker admonishes sternly.

She turns to the other kids. "Kallista, Astrid, Selene, Gideon, Remus, and Ragnar, you get sandwiches next, in that order."

A grey-scaled boy starts to pout. "Aw, mama! Why do I hafta go last? That's not fair!"

"Ragnar, you went first last time." Blinker explains patiently. "Now you go last."

"But-!" Ragnar starts to protest.

"If you'd like, you can wait until everyone has had seconds before you get your first." Blinker warns, turning an evil motherly eye on the whining brat.

That shuts him up. Ragnar decides it's better not to push his luck, and he falls silent while Blinker continues slapping tuna-fish onto slices of bread before handing it off to the children in the order she listed.

"Turtle," Kar says, while Blinker is occupied. "What are you doing here? Isn't Smokey out causing chaos?"

"Yeah. Mephisto is up to some bullshit right now." Jason says. "But we have time. I needed a break from all the monotony."

"Have you made any new breakthroughs?" Blinker asks, after handing out the 8th sandwich.

Jason scratches the side of his head.

For a moment, he hesitates.

Where to start? He wonders.

In the last 750 days, the First Wordsmith has not sat on his butt idly. He has worked hard to advance his understanding of Wordsmithing.

But sometimes he finds it hard to summarize the mess of incomplete projects he constantly ping-pongs back and forth between.

"Well," Jason begins to explain. "After Mephisto's ascension, I set up a Cosmic Energy Detector that can pinpoint the movements of entities like him. I discovered that another demon also ascended, and it turned out to be Emperor Crow. So that's fun."

"Mmm. Fun." Kar says casually. "The demons are ascending a lot lately. Yet in the last 100,000 years, they never once broke through to 'Demon Deity.' Seems strange."

"Wolfram was a special case." Jason says. "I investigated the happenings on Hell Harbor. Emperor Serena used her magic to forcibly shove Wolfram past the Emperor barrier, but it ultimately caused his death. Now she's done the same for Crow, so Crow is probably going to die, too."

"And Mephisto?" Blinker asks, her expression turning slightly angry as she remembers all the horrible trauma Mephisto inflicted on her and Kar.

"I'm not entirely sure." Jason says slowly. "But Mephisto somehow ascended without Serena's help. He did it all on his own. It seems he's merged his soul with Lupus, Zamiel, and Yama, among others."

"Are you going to do anything about it?" Blinker asks.

Jason strokes his chin thoughtfully.

"I... don't know."

He pauses.

"To be clear, I'm not sure if I *can*, or if I *should*. I have a way of making situations worse. And right now, the only entities Mephisto is directly threatening are other demons."

Fiona snorts. "They reaped what they sowed."

"He'll come for us next." Blinker points out.

A brief silence fills the space. Blinker makes sandwiches for the kids until she runs out of tuna, then her gator-babies run back to the trees to keep playing together.

"Your kids are barely two years old." Fiona says idly. "But they can run around and talk and all kinds of other stuff. When Daisy was that age, she barely even babbled words, and she was still crawling around."

"Most monster types learn faster than humans." Blinker explains. "Humans are actually pretty slow to develop. Your whole species is odd like that."

"And you aren't immortal either." Kar points out. "Such weirdos. Hurgh."

After another moment of silence, Blinker, Kar, and Fiona turn to look at Jason when they see his expression change.

"Wordsmithing is a power that can express the concept of 'infinity.'" Jason says slowly. "But the problem with infinite possibilities is that I, as a simple-minded man, have trouble locking onto any one of them. When a giant school of fish swims in front of you, reaching out and grabbing any specific one can make your head spin. They melt together into a blob of samey-ness."

Jason clears his throat.

"Mephisto is a problem. The demons are a problem. The Volgrim are a problem. The Plague is a problem. Hell, even Neil's ambitions present a problem. So many issues I have to solve, and so many ways I might go about doing so. It makes my head spin."

Blinker nods. "It sounds like you came to a decision, though."

"Sort of." Jason says. "I've been developing a broad series of possible solutions, while also narrowing in on the most effective ones. You two have been pretty busy with your kids... have you paid any attention to my work?"

Blinker shrugs, as does Kar.

It's not that they haven't idly glanced at some of Jason's research projects over the last two or three years, but more that after the battle against Mephisto, neither of them wants to jump back into the war. They've grown to enjoy the quiet life inside Chrona, watching their spawnlings grow up, and living as simple parents.

For Blinker, the mere thought of fighting Mephisto again makes her depressed.

She has grown tired of seeing Kar suffer. He's become a cripple, unable to walk, forced to float around with hovering tools Fiona developed specifically for him. His body has weakened, making him no longer capable of fighting anyone at all.

But still.

Blinker has her husband back. His memories are fine. He's the same loving crocodile he always was.

And that is enough for her.

Jason observes her and Kar's reactions. He sighs lightly.

"I won't bore you with the details. I'll simply give you a broad overview of what I've been working on."

"That would be for the best." Fiona says with a nod.

Jason, Fiona, and Blinker all stand up. Kar activates a light metallic exoskeleton attached to his back. He levitates a couple of feet in the air, allowing his paralyzed legs to dangle below him.

Despite Jason's best efforts, he still hasn't been able to repair Kar's body. Even when Jason sent a request to Marie Becker, her response came back negative.

Kar's body is fine. His brain is fine.

But his soul has lost all of its energy.

He cannot walk again, at least not for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps, in time, his soul might slowly recover. But Jason has not been able to cook up a solution, outside of hoping his scheme with Chrona's internal energy diffusion might help speed up Kar's regeneration.

Blinker waves her hand. The picnic cloth vanishes, along with the remaining utensils. She waves to the kids.

"You stay here. Mommy and daddy are going to go with Uncle Jason and Aunt Fiona for a bit. Don't get into trouble."

The boys and girls turn and shout affirmations at their mother. They won't dare assume she isn't watching. Even if she leaves, she can easily leave energy projections behind to keep an eye on them.

Not that she needs to. Chrona has more than enough internal monitoring tools to ensure the kids won't fall off a rock and crack their skulls open. Dozens of safeguards have been built to protect the last progeny of the Crocodiles.

The group heads into the central area of Chrona. While Jason has not built an actual 'city' by any means, he has constructed several dozen giant buildings above and below-ground, each one pertaining to his research interests. As for the living arrangements, Kar and Blinker's family lives in a building on the western outskirts, while Jason and Fiona live on the opposite side, mainly for privacy reasons.

Inside this city, a certain futuristic aesthetic plays out. Designed visually by Fiona in her down-time, glass-encased buildings with tinted windows keep prying eyes out, though bright computer monitors can still be faintly seen if one looks hard enough.

Most of the buildings are square or rectangular. But a few others have more interesting shapes, such a small group of pointed spires shaped vaguely like Earth's fallen Eiffel Tower.

One interesting building, though, is a large sphere the size of a house, its exterior made purely out of hexagonal-shaped panes of glass, all interlocked together.

This beautiful dome is where Jason takes Blinker and Kar.

It's not the first time the two monsters have seen this building by any means, but it is the first time they've entered. While they may live on Chrona, as far as they care, they are merely Jason's guests. It's not their place to go wherever they desire without permission.

A single door rests at the base of the sphere. As the group enters, Kar and Blinker look around, becoming momentarily surprised as they realize why they couldn't see inside this dome at all.

Thousands of monitors light up when Jason enters. They rise from the floor to the ceiling, each one playing a different video, or perhaps a recording, in total showing off a dizzying number of scenes from an unknown number of places. The panes of glass, seen from the outside, are in fact those very same monitors but pointed inward.

"This is the Spynet Sphere." Jason explains. "I built it only a bit over a year ago, but it's come in handy in more ways than I ever thought it would. It allows me to keep an eye on the status of almost the entire Milky Way."

Jason points at one monitor.

"Tarus II. This screen watches Neil and follows him wherever he goes."

Then he points at another.

"This one watches Phoebe."

Blinker frowns. "Huh? You're peeping on Neil and Phoebe? Jason! That's screwed up."

"I'm not watching them." Jason says, turning to look at Blinker. "Centurion is. I don't have the time or the attention span to follow 8,000 different points of interest. But an Artificial Intelligence does. If something happens to any important figure, including my wife, I want to know about it immediately."

A deep, robotic voice speaks inside the chamber.

"AFFIRMATIVE. CENTURION IS CONTINUING TO MONITOR THE GALACTIC SITUATION. DO YOU HAVE ANY COMMANDS TO ISSUE, FIRST WORDSMITH?"

Blinker can't help but flinch. Centurion's voice is simply too intimidating. Even Kar appears impressed.

"Tell me about the First Founder's situation." Jason says, turning to the monitors. He gestures toward the only screen in the room that has been placed at eye-level in the center of the floor. "Is he still talking to Hope?"

Blinker and Kar are given quite a shock when that monitor activates, revealing an image of Hope Hiro and Founder Unarin sitting at a table, having a polite chat with one another. They speak as if slowed down by a factor of 250x, each tiny movement of their lips seemingly taking an eternity to complete.

"Seems they are." Jason mutters to himself. "They've been talking for nearly two hours. Centurion, play back the conversation from the spot I placed a marker at, forty-five minutes ago. Replay it at normal-speed for us."

When Centurion follows Jason's command, the video rewinds, providing Jason and the others with a clip of Unarin speaking.

"The Alpha and the Omega lived for an untold number of Eternities in despair. He was alone. Well and truly alone. He contemplated ending his existence. He sometimes raised up civilizations identical to the ones from his formative Cycle, but in the end, they gave him no joy..."

Unarin continues to speak. Jason listens intently, as do the rest, while Unarin begins to reveal some truly shocking Cosmic Truths that Jason may never have heard without the help of the Spynet Sphere.

"You have the ability to spy on the First Founder?" Blinker asks, visibly shocked. "But... but how is that even possible?"

"Wordsmithing." Jason says simply, pausing the video. "I came to realize I have one major deficiency. I lack information. I lack knowledge. These things cannot be easily made up for. I can't just Wordsmith 'brain be smart' to turn myself into Solomon."

He pauses, a look of embarrassment momentarily crossing his face.

"Trust me. I've tried."

Fiona chuckles. "It was worth a shot."

"Y-yeah." Jason laughs awkwardly. "Anyway."

Jason licks his lips. He returns his attention to the Spynet, silencing the dialogue between Hope and Unarin with a wave of his hand.

"Centurion alerts me to important changes in the galactic order. I've been planting Spy Nodes everywhere I can think of, and I still don't feel as if I've hit more than a fraction of the spots I need to. But I did uncover one particularly interesting secret..."

Jason motions with his hands, and the viewscreen shifts to show some truly strange and monstrous creatures, even more powerful and intimidating-looking than Kar was at his prime. These reptilians appear vaguely dinosaur-like, with elongated snouts and mouths filled with teeth. Their hulking, muscular arms and legs end with talons capable of tearing through steel.

"What the heck are those things?" Blinker asks.

"Dolgrimites." Jason says. "I first met them when I was with Unarin. I've been looking into them more carefully and... I think I've uncovered something even the First Founder doesn't know."

Jason massages his chin. He turns to look at the other two.

"The Dolgrimites worship a so-called god named Dolgris. The thing is, I thought it was just some stupid religion, but after doing some investigation, I've come to believe Dolgris might be... more than a mere rumor. I'm not entirely sure, though. The Dolgrimites seem

WAY too confident in Dolgris's power for him to be a mere apparition. I'm even beginning to think their Matriarch has met Dolgris in person."

"Alright." Kar says. "So. 'Dolgris.' What is he? Or she."

"I don't know." Jason says slowly. "But... well. I do have a suspicion. I think Dolgris... might be... a dragon."

"A dragon?!" Blinker asks, her eyes widening. "Are you sure?"

"No. Not at all. I've searched everywhere." Jason explains. "After observing Mephisto's ascension to Demon Deity, and after listening to Unarin's description of Cosmic Entities... I feel as though a Dragon being alive is a bit unrealistic. Considering dragons historically shared power between themselves, and considering I thought Leviathan was the last dragon, it would mean that after his death, if there was even one more dragon, Leviathan's power would have transferred to that one."

Jason directs a serious, solemn gaze at Blinker and Kar.

"If there really was a dragon still alive, he would probably be twice as powerful as Leviathan. He'd be way mightier than the Archangels when they became the Cherubiim. It wouldn't even be close. Yet I can't detect a trace of cosmic power."

Jason shrugs.

"So, I'm beginning to wonder if the Dolgrimites are just *completely* deluded. They believe fervently Dolgris is alive, but maybe he's not."

Blinker sighs, feeling some tension disappear.

"Maybe Dolgris was alive in the past." She says. "Maybe he died a long time ago. The Dolgrimites may have only been fooled by their Matriarch into believing he's still protecting them."

"That's my theory as well." Fiona affirms. "I find it *extremely* hard to believe Jason's Wordsmithing can't find a whiff of a cosmically-powered dragon. Mephisto's soul is like a lightbulb in the darkness. A living dragon would be more like a supernova, by comparison."

"Yeah. So it's probably all smoke and mirrors." Jason says. "Still. I'm thinking about telling Unarin. Better to be safe than sorry."

Blinker scrunches up her face.

"Hmm. I wouldn't be so sure about that, Jason."

Kar nods. "Hurgh. Same, Turtle. Do not be so eager to act."

"Oh? You two have a different idea?" Jason asks.

Blinker and Kar share a knowing look, then return their gazes to the Wordsmith.

"Knowledge is power." Blinker explains. "You know something Unarin either does not know, or *might* not know. The more tidbits you have in your pocket, the more power you have over him. That can translate to leverage in the future."

Kar nods. "Besides. Big Head is certainly not stupid. He runs the entire Volgrim Empire. Do you think he has not investigated these Dolgrimites? I bet he has Changeling spies there, working for him."

Fiona nods. "Unarin may already have guessed what Dolgris is. He just wouldn't tell *you*, Jason."

"That's true." Jason says. "Unarin is the type of guy to deceive someone through a lie of omission. His Administrator, Muuxunuu, seems to believe Unarin would never lie, but I'm not so sure."

Jason pauses.

"Speaking of Changelings. I still don't have a reliable way to sniff them out. I've been investigating their hierarchies through my Spynet, and I've uncovered lots of details regarding how they-"

"ALERT." Centurion suddenly booms, his voice violently interrupting Jason mid-sentence. **"EXTREME COSMIC ENERGY SIGNATURE DETECTED IN THE MILKY WAY. ANGELIC AURA MANIFESTED. ASSUMED IDENTITY: ARCHANGEL."**

Jason coughs, swallowing his words. He spins to face the monitor, rapidly taking in the data being displayed.

"What? What the hell?!" Jason asks, as he swiftly starts searching the monitors for the creature. "Centurion, where is this entity? Show me!"

Centurion's monitors light up, revealing a blinding white light touching down on the surface of Numaria. Mephisto's soul, formerly incredible by Jason's previous standards,

immediately becomes drowned out by the unfathomable power radiating from this newly appeared entity.

Jason zooms in on the scene, but he becomes baffled when Centurion's 'camera' node teleports to the angelic-class entity, yet is unable to resolve the angel's face.

Instead, as if distorted by power from a higher dimension, the camera's viewport becomes drowned out by this new arrival's cosmic energy.

"**Clarify!**" Jason shouts. "**Resolve! Sharpen!** What the hell? Why can't I get a good look at the angel's face? Who is this?"

He scrutinizes the entity on the monitor, but no matter what Jason tries, he can't resolve the camera's visuals. Even their body appears indistinct, like a blob of light.

At that moment, Centurion alerts Jason to a galaxy-wide broadcast from the heart of the Volgrim Empire. Unarin begins speaking, his voice agonizingly slow and ponderous.

The one-minute broadcast takes two hundred and fifty long minutes to conclude. Jason spends much of that time trying to obtain a visual on the Archangel, but he continuously fails, despite his best efforts.

"Fucking hell!" Jason exclaims. "What is going ON out there?! Do I have to walk up and say 'hi' to the Archangel in person?"

"I wouldn't." Fiona immediately replies. "This timing is too coincidental. Don't you find it odd, Jason? Mephisto starts rampaging, and then an unknown Archangel materializes out of thin air?"

The Wordsmith listens to his wife. He stops talking, calms down, and begins to think.

"An unknown Archangel." Jason says slowly. "In the history of angelkind, there were nine of them. But two of them were killed by Michael during the Primordial Era. For one to suddenly appear here, now..."

His expression darkens.

"...Did Raphael lie to us again? Is it possible Cassiel or Muriel survived in secret?"

"It seems unlikely..." Fiona mutters, though she sounds far from certain.

Everyone falls silent. They watch for tens of minutes while the situation outside proceeds at a speed unbelievably slower than their patience can endure.

"Let's keep an eye on the situation for now." Jason says quietly. "I want to see how things shake out. We'll pay careful attention to Raphael, Unarin, and Mephisto's movements."

"That sounds like a good decision to me." Fiona replies.

Part 504: Jason's Experiments

Jason moves quickly and efficiently. With Fiona's help, he manages to piece together a solution to his dilemma. It takes him a while, but thanks to how much faster time revolves inside Chrona, less than a minute passes in the real world before Jason finally works out a way to bypass the ancient angel's cosmic energy.

He resolves the 'camera' image, allowing him to finally get a good look at her.

"Huh? Who the hell?" Jason asks, invisible question marks popping up over his head. "I was almost expecting to see Camael. Who is that old-lady angel? And how did she appear?"

The Wordsmith squints at the image. He watches as the angel gazes up at the sky, seemingly dazed and confused. The world around her appears to have been recently annihilated, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out Mephisto was the culprit. Jason picks out Mephisto's slowly-slinking-away figure as he tries to evade the angel's notice.

Fiona shrugs. "I've never seen her before. But neither of us are experts at identifying angels."

"Me neither." Blinker chimes in, while Kar silently nods. "Maybe we should ask Raphael?"

"Hah. I don't think so." Jason mutters. "No way I'd trust him to tell me straight. **Identify!**"

He casts a Word of Power, aiming it across the intergalactic reaches of space at the angel on his monitor.

But he expresses shock when his Word of Power fails to produce any results. In his Mind's Eye, a single word appears.

Unknown.

"...Unknown?" Jason repeats quietly. "My Word of Power can't identify her?"

The First Wordsmith scrunches up his face in thought. He ponders the implications of the events slowly unfolding in realspace.

"This angel's magic is insanely powerful. I can't identify her. I even had trouble getting a look at her face. It's like she's ascended to a level where her very existence breaks the rules of reality."

"Let's refer to her by a codename for now." Fiona suggests. "How about 'Camilla'? It's simple. Kinda sounds like Camael."

"Sure, sure." Jason mutters absentmindedly. "Camilla, it is."

Jason keys several buttons, rewinding time so he can see the events before Anaëlle materialized on Numaria. While he may not know who she is, in his eyes, her sudden arrival can't be a coincidence.

He receives his answer.

"...Bael? He summoned Camilla? But how?"

Jason rewatches Bael's summoning ritual, becoming more and more confused as he tries to figure out what the heck Bael was thinking.

"He kept calling out to Satan. Why would he do that? Satan's dead, isn't he?"

Jason glances at his mind-wife.

"Isn't he?"

Fiona raises an eyebrow. "Why are you looking at ME like that? I only know what Samantha told me. Satan crumbled to dust in her arms. It's possible his soul completely perished. It may not have even entered the Great Beyond. As far as 'dead' goes, Satan should be a tier below even that."

Blinker coughs. "Erm, you know Bael is a colossal moron, right? Maybe he was just begging Satan to save him in his last moments. He probably went crazy from fear."

Kar nods. "Hurgh. Thick-Skin is an even bigger idiot than Turtle. He is incapable of using magic. I find it hard to believe he could summon Satan or this Archangel."

"That's a... good point." Jason says hesitantly. "Not the part about me being stupid. The other one. But anyway..."

He pauses to collect his thoughts.

"This probably has nothing to do with Bael. He doesn't have any magical abilities. If we rewind a bit earlier, he was getting slapped around by Mephisto. Someone else must have conjured Camilla."

Time continues to progress at a snail's pace. Jason and the others brainstorm for a bit, but they don't come any closer to uncovering the truth.

"It can't be Bael." Jason emphatically concludes. "He's too dumb to use magic. Maybe this angel was in hiding, and Mephisto's 'ascension' woke her up."

"Or maybe Raphael had another trick up his sleeve." Fiona points out.

"Yeah. You might be right." Jason says, feeling suspicious.

"Look!" Blinker exclaims. "Camilla is about to talk to Bael!"

Everyone falls silent. An agonizingly slow discussion begins to take place in realspace. With a single minute of dialogue between Bael and Camilla taking 250 minutes to complete, Jason's group can't help but start to grow bored as they wait.

"Christ. Time acceleration is usually fantastic most of the time." Jason complains. "But at times like these, it's like we're watching a movie in super-slow-mo."

Two minutes in the real world. Five hundred inside Chrona.

Put another way, two minutes in realspace takes nearly eight and a half hours for Jason's group to see play out in their frames of reference.

Blinker yawns.

"Hey, um, Jason? This is *suuuper* exciting and all, but Kar and I need to get back to our kids, so..."

"Oh! Sure, no problem." Jason says, suddenly feeling silly for forgetting. "Don't worry. Fiona and I have this under control."

"Awesome. Thanks." Blinker says with a smile.

"We will speak later, Turtle." Kar grunts, giving Jason a light swat on the back. "Hurgh. I look forward to the exosuit project you're working on. It would be nice to walk again, even if it is only for pretend. Having my legs dangle below me is a bit... embarrassing."

"I've got you, buddy. Don't even worry." Jason says, smiling warmly at his best friend. "See you two later."

* * *

After Blinker and Kar leave, Jason and Fiona resume their observation. Fiona ends up fiddling idly with her experiments, not wanting to spend too much time observing the

angel when she could review that footage in a few days instead.

As for Jason, he begins flipping around his different observation nodes, looking for activity from the prominent creatures he's learned to keep an eye on.

With only a few minutes having passed since Anaelle's revival, the Dolgrimites have not yet reacted.

Founder Unarin certainly has. He sends out a galaxy-wide broadcast, alerting all the Volgrim-controlled worlds to the so-called Apex Cosmic's existence, a term that makes Jason feel uneasy.

Hmm. Jason thinks. Even when the Archangels merged into the Cherubiim, they didn't possess a fraction of 'Camilla's' power. They looked like a lightbulb hovering beside a star, and that star is this sister of theirs. Could she be a creature from the Primordial Era?

Jason hesitantly comes to the conclusion that Anaelle probably didn't 'revive,' but rather, she was in hiding for all these eons and has only chosen now to reveal herself.

But why now? Jason wonders. Because of Mephisto? She doesn't seem to care about him at all. And she looks confused. Wait, what is Bael telling her?

Jason rewinds the last minute of realspace broadcasting time. He gets a good listen as Bael begins to feed Anaelle some of the most outrageous lies he has ever heard.

"What the fuck?! Bael, you piece of shit!" Jason exclaims. "The dragons killed the angels, *my ass*! It was the DEMONS! Who gave you the guts to lie so smoothly? And here I thought you were a good guy!"

Jason fumes. He rages. He curses at the monitor, shouting all sorts of profanities at the slowly-enunciating Bael, who obviously doesn't hear a single thing the Wordsmith is shouting.

But eventually, Jason calms down.

"Whatever. It won't be hard to convince 'Camilla' of the truth later on. Bael's just trying to save his skin. He wants her to chase after and kill Mephisto. Considering the beating Mephisto gave Crow- wait, where *is* Crow anyway?"

Realizing he forgot to pay full attention to the happenings on Numaria over the past week or so, Jason 'rewinds' the footage, skimming through it to pay attention to how Crow and Mephisto's battle played out.

But when he does... he receives a terrible shock.

"HOLY **SHIT!!!** Fiona! FIONA! Get in here!!"

Fiona, only a building over, hastily drops what she is doing and barges into the Spynet Sphere, visibly startled. "What is it? What happened, Jason?"

"Mephisto! He fucking- he merged his body! He ascended using the bones of a DRAGON!" Jason shouts, his eyes widened in horror. "And not just any dragon. Leviathan! We thought those bones were destroyed, but they weren't! In fact, they became even more durable after the Polaris Supernova washed over them!"

Jason replays two minutes of footage for his mind-wife. She frowns deeply, disturbed by the implications.

"That's alarming." Fiona mutters. "His body must be practically indestructible by now."

"Founder Unarin called Camilla an Apex Cosmic." Jason points out. "We shouldn't underestimate her. She might be able to beat a dragon's ass."

"We'll find out soon enough." Fiona says. "Look."

Jason and his wife watch as they return to the real-time feed, where Mephisto leaps away and races off into the distance, fleeing for his life. Even with time slowed to a snail's pace, Jason feels impressed, and a little frightened, by Mephisto's pace.

"Even a bottom tier Cosmic Entity like Mephisto is still unbelievably strong." Jason says. "How much more powerful is Camilla, by comparison?"

Eventually, even Jason grows tired of watching the events on the monitor play out. He maintains contact for a full day, but that only amounts to a few minutes of realspace time. He activates Centurion's active alert mode in case the situation drastically changes, then he returns to his work outside the Spynet.

Fiona has two dozen projects she's been working on. So does Jason.

Together, the two of them have made a surprising amount of headway in their respective projects.

Jason heads into his lab alone. He travels underground, to a bunker-laboratory reinforced with Wordsmithium, walls capable of protecting against a nuclear blast. The

walls glow bright enough to provide more than enough illumination as needed, a product of his Wordsmithing.

Jason isn't here to make any serious headway today.

In fact, he's only here to pass some time as he waits for the battle between Anaelle and Mephisto to come to a resolution. There's no way he can focus enough to do any real research with his stomach threatening to jump out of his throat.

Once he closes the bunker door, Jason plops down in a rolling chair off to the side of the room. Dozens of half-finished projects litter the floor, consisting of various magical devices he's experimented with over the past six months.

He wheels his chair over to a large anvil made of Wordsmithium. On that anvil, a two-foot longsword rests across its length, the blade and hilt's appearance both deceptively ordinary.

Jason picks up the sword.

A crossguard separates the hilt from the blade. This sword's crossguard takes the form of feathery, bird-like wings, colored red to match with the crimson blade and hilt. Embedded at the bottom of the hilt, a shining green gem contains a shocking amount of mana visible to the naked eye.

Jason smiles at the sword.

"Phoenix. How are you doing today?"

He releases his grip on the sword, but instead of clattering to the ground, it levitates into the air, and a projection of energy begins to swirl around it.

Seconds later, the figure of a red-haired little girl *pops* into existence. This girl, a human-like embodiment of the Phoenix, waves at Jason.

"Hey, friend! Cheeeeurp!" The Phoenix says. "I was sleeping, but I'm awake now! Are we going to play?!"

"Sure. I've got time." Jason says with a smile.

The Phoenix levitates away from Jason, her blade hidden by her child-sized body. She casually spins 360 degrees in the air, turning upside-down, then rotating back around once again.

"Whee!"

Jason conjures a ball of light in his hands. He tosses it toward the Phoenix, and she lifts her palm in return.

Slap!

"Haat!"

The Phoenix bats the ball back to Jason, who stands up and slaps it right back at her.

Then she slaps it back to him, laughing happily as she gets to engage in a bit of play with the Wordsmith.

"Think fast!" Jason shouts, slapping the ball off to the side, far from the Phoenix's current position.

Instantly, the Phoenix flickers into the orb's path and bats it toward Jason, but at a tricky angle low to the ground.

Jason kicks his foot at the orb, but he narrowly misses, and the ball hits the floor.

"Hah hah!" The Phoenix proclaims smugly. "I win again! I always win! I'm the best! Neener-neener!"

Jason throws his hands up and sighs dramatically. "Damn! How are you so good at this game? I can't ever beat you, it seems!"

"Maybe if you practice for a bajillion years, you'll win someday! Hehehehe!"

Jason pats the Phoenix on the head. "I should bring Shana here to play sometime. Why don't you go hang with Blinker and Kar's kids until then, huh?"

"Okay! Bye-bye then, friend!" The Phoenix chirps.

The apparition of a little girl fades away, transforming back into the crimson sword. She teleports out of the room, leaving Jason alone once more.

The Wordsmith smiles. Then his expression turns serious.

"Recall." Jason says.

Abruptly, a dark-skinned woman wearing only a furred bra and a loincloth appears in the room, just a stone's throw from Jason. Intricate white tribal tattoos and war-paint follow the contours of her body, matching the color of her waist-length hair and giving her a ferocious but alluring appearance.

"Hm? Oh, Jason Hiro. Can I help you?" The woman asks.

"Brunhilda." Jason says to the leader of the Felorians, smiling at her. "I finished that work I told you about last time. I'm ready to begin the experiments. Have you picked out any candidates for me?"

Brunhilda straightens her back, assuming a professional posture. She candidly meets the Wordsmith's gaze with an equally fierce one.

"I have six people I can recommend." She states. "As requested, three of them have had their bodies strengthened to the maximum through the Belial Booster. The others have not yet used it to enhance themselves."

"And what about you?" Jason asks, directing an appreciative gaze toward her six-pack abs, as well as her arms and thighs. "You look like you've hit your limit, too."

"I have." Brunhilda says neutrally. "You like what you see? I took you for a faithful man."

"There's no lust in my gaze. I love my wife far too much to ever cheat." Jason chuckles lightly. "But hey. I'm a guy. You look great. And you also look like you could twist me into a pretzel. I respect that."

Brunhilda exposes a toothy smile.

"Let's get down to business, Wordsmith. I am very much looking forward to this experiment of yours. If it makes me stronger, I will worship the ground you walk upon."

"No need for any of that. I'm only a man blessed with the powers of a god, not God himself." Jason says, taking a seat in his rolling chair. "Let's start with a few possible tests of my powers. Who should I invite here?"

Brunhilda quickly rattles off a half-dozen names of women from her tribe. Jason teleports all of them into the underground laboratory, startling them. But when they hear from their leader why they've been summoned, each one becomes visibly more eager to go along with Jason's wishes.

"All hail the Wind Mother!" One of the Felorians cries out happily. "Wordsmith, I am Sariah. I have long followed your path! You are truly a child of the Wind Mother!"

Jason coughs awkwardly. "Sure, uh, thanks. So, let's start by looking at the options, alright, ladies?"

All seven Felorians quiet down, waiting to hear what Jason has to say.

"To date, I have only made the Belial Booster and the Beauty Booster." Jason explains. "But it has recently come to my attention that I've been overlooking the more metaphysical aspects of humanity. Humans are inherently capable of wielding magic, like the demons and angels. We're simply... a little bit deficient. We have a harder time getting off the launching pad and into the air, so to speak."

He continues. "The Power Gloves have had a surprising effect on their users. People have slowly become capable of keeping the abilities used by their highest-compatibility transformations. Recently, I found out Samuel Baker perished to Mephisto, but when he revived as one of The Respected, he had become capable of permanently maintaining his Fairy Magic."

Jason looks at the faces of the seven beautiful women standing before him.

"I've decided to try and develop other metaphysical ways of empowering humans. And you Felorians are the ideal test subjects, because you already possess certain magical capabilities."

Brunhilda nods.

She glances around the room, spots a long pole sitting against a wall, and picks it up. The pole starts to glow as she channels her Qi into it, empowering it with a bit of magical energy.

"We Felorians can temporarily strengthen ourselves to become capable of battling Demon Barons." She explains. "Higher strength, swifter speed, and more acute senses. For myself, I've become even stronger after reaching my limits with the Belial Booster. I might even be able to fight a Demon Duke for a short while."

"Good, good. That's good." Jason says three times in approval. "So, here are three things I'd like to try to boost your abilities further."

"First, I want to place 'enchancements' onto your bodies, minds, and souls, with the intent of leaving them there permanently. I need to know what sorts of effects this will have on each of you."

"Second, I want to try giving a few of you powerful artifacts I've made. They may or may not be capable of resonating with you, and slowly improving your power over time."

"Third, I'd like to try and turn the rest into pseudo-Wordsmiths. Or rather, give you powers that would allow you to 'upgrade' the abilities of other people."

Jason observes the excitement on their faces before continuing.

"In the future, I want to be able to travel around the Milky Way without fearing some bullshit will hit Tarus II and kill my species without me being able to react in time. If I'm not here, humanity needs to be able to defend itself. Not only from Demons, or the Volgrim... but from the Plague as well."

The Felorians become noticeably less excited. Their emotions turn dull as they remember the horror stories that they've heard from the Hell of Isolation's remnant survivors. The massacre at Sharmur was not one the demons have downplayed in the slightest.

"Will you do all three on each of us?" Brunhilda asks, changing the subject.

"No. Since you've brought me six subjects, I'll try boosting two girls at a time with one effect each."

Jason points at one of the three girls who has not been enhanced by the Belial Booster. Then he points at a girl who has.

You two. I'm going to enhance your reaction speeds permanently. I'm going to also try and enhance your thinking speeds, your vision, and some other attributes. What I want to know is if you will suffer any negative effects over the next week, month, or year. I suspect the stronger of you will have fewer negative effects happen, but then again the opposite might occur. Perhaps by entering the Belial Booster you've 'used up' some of your body's natural limiters, so you might become exhausted more easily. I don't know."

Jason points at another two of the woman.

"I've only made two artifacts so far, and I don't know if there will be any 'compatibility' issues, but I want you to try training with them. Practice using them in combat, try meditating with them, do other stuff. I theorize that human souls are surprisingly malleable and you might be able to pull off some neat tricks if you can synergize with these artifacts well."

Then he points at the final two Felorians.

"I'm... not entirely sure how I'll give you two 'upgrading' abilities. I think I'll need to muck around with your souls, but... let's call this a longer term project."

He finishes his speech.

"In conclusion, the six of you are going to stay here, on Chrona. You will train and practice in this time-accelerated realm, trying to quickly improve your capabilities. If we're lucky... maybe a miracle will occur. Maybe I'll figure out new ways to strengthen human civilization through your combined efforts."

Brunhilda thumbs her collarbone. "What about me? Don't I get any fancy new abilities?"

Jason shrugs. "Sure. What do you want?"

"Power." She replies immediately, without hesitation. "Enhance my body. Enhance my soul. Do anything you want. I will go along with even your most wicked experiments."

Jason blinks, slightly surprised. He glances at the other six women, none of whom take any notice of Brunhilda's odd words.

"Uhh. I mean, sure I guess..." Jason says slowly. "But that seems a little extreme. Why are you so desperate?"

Brunhilda snorts air from her nose. "I am a Felorian. Compared to other humans, I am strong. But compared to a Demon Duke, I am still weak. In the past, the demons... took advantage of that fact. They liked that we were stronger, more difficult to 'break.' They derived pleasure from... hurting us. It was a game to them. I never want to suffer such humiliation or degradation again."

The atmosphere in the room becomes noticeably heavier.

The other Felorian women, including Sariah, gently touch their leader's arm, looking at her with sympathy.

"We have all suffered." Brunhilda says quietly, lowering her gaze. "That is why I must ask of you not to abandon humanity, or to broadly accept the demons. They are evil, Jason Hiro. They are creatures filled with rapacious greed and desire. They may hide their claws for a time, but they will always seek to pursue their own interests. I only hope that you shall do the same for your species, us humans."

Jason remains quiet for a time.

Then, he nods.

"You know... I've been having similar thoughts, lately."

Part 505: Jason's Decision

Three time-accelerated hours later.

Jason Hiro departs his laboratory, satisfied with the start of this new strain of research on empowering the Felorians. After building them a small dwelling on the northern side of Chrona's main city, he finds himself with a surprisingly rare moment of free time.

Alone time.

As he steps out of his underground laboratory into the open air, the First Wordsmith feels a slight sense of disorientation. He glances around, realizing there isn't anyone at all in the immediate vicinity.

No birds chirp in the sky.

No wind blows in this false reality.

Instead, a pure, almost oppressive silence hangs in the air.

The Wordsmith stands in place, looking up at the slowly-swirling Void Barrier surrounding the Chrona domain. He enjoys the fact that there aren't any voices talking in his head, not even his mind-wife, Fiona. She's performing important work in her specialized lab.

The Phoenix is off playing with Kar and Blinkers' children.

The Archangels haven't been around for several years.

Even Shana and Lorent are on Tarus II...

The Wordsmith is well and truly alone. This thought makes him feel a strange relief.

Quietly, he walks toward the southern edge of Chrona's main city. He travels past the last building, and then continues to walk.

For fifteen minutes, he plods along until he reaches the edge of Chrona's great forest, where he quietly summons himself a pair of angelic wings, then flies over the foliage into the center of the forest. He mutters a few Words of Power to create a soft bed atop that tree, then he plunks onto his back with a sigh, using his feathery wings like a pillow.

Once more, silence takes him.

Jason lays on his back with his hands on his stomach. He gazes up at the sky, his eyes becoming unfocused.

It's been so long. Jason thinks. *I've had voices in my head for years now. I've even started to feel like I have to perform for others. Live a life for others. Act in a play for others.*

He sighs softly.

I have so many enemies. And they're all smarter than me. Ose, Unarin, Gressil, Raphael, even Marie.

Jason mentally slots the last two into the 'enemy' category purely because he doesn't see them as true allies, but situational companions. He intuitively feels they're simply using him for his power, and that if he didn't wield the power of Wordsmithing, they'd step on him like an ant.

They're not innately good people.

At least Ose's finally gone. Jason thinks. *But now Mephisto is on the loose. Gorn seems pretty intelligent. Auger is going behind my back to try and steal Mephisto's power... he could become a problem in the future.*

Naturally, thanks to his Spynet, Jason has not overlooked the events which transpired in Auger's 'secret' meeting with the other Emperors. He overheard everything Auger said, and thus knew well in advance that Mephisto might awaken.

Even so, Jason did nothing.

He simply continued to observe events in the greater galaxy from the comfort of his time-accelerated domain.

Over these last two and a half years, the Wordsmith has had two hundred and fifty times more time to think than he usually does. The galaxy outside crawls along at a snail's pace, giving him weeks to ruminate where before he'd have less than an hour.

His mindset has begun to subtly shift.

He thinks about his dead daughter.

He thinks about all the times he's failed humanity.

He thinks about his laziness, his morals, and what sort of a person he's ultimately become.

What am I? What is a 'Wordsmith'? Jason ponders. Should I empower myself to become a beacon of strength? Should I uplift humanity to fight their own battles? Should I do anything at all?

Jason recalls Marie Becker's anger toward him when they first spoke.

Marie seemed to have a plan, a plan that I mucked up by flippantly using my abilities. There was a delicate balance between humanity, the demons, and the Volgrim, along with the Plague slowly creeping toward the Milky Way's interior. Have I accelerated the Milky Way's demise by thrusting myself into a situation I knew nothing about?

His expression becomes troubled. He closes his eyes to think more deeply.

It doesn't seem as if the Volgrim have any way to stop the Plague. It's too prolific, too difficult to destroy or slow down. It consumes entire worlds, turning every creature living within into new Plaguehosts. It's like a zombie virus on steroids...

Then there's that touch of Chaos within each Plaguehost. Could Gressil have something to do with the Plague? What about Glinch? Perhaps the Volgrim lied to me, and they were in fact the creators of the Plague? Unarin could be playing the long-con. But then again, maybe it really is from another galaxy...

The Wordsmith lifts his hand up to massage his forehead. A trickling sense of dread clutches at the bottom of his brain, making him feel dizzy.

What am I supposed to DO? Something? Anything? Nothing at all?? Do I empower the demons? Genocide their species? Leave them to their own devices? What about humanity? Am I being presumptuous by simply asking these questions? Do I deserve to have any say when I did nothing to earn my powers in the first place?

Jason's thoughts increase in intensity.

What does it mean to be 'moral'? Am I a moral man? I killed a million demons in a fit of rage because of my daughter's death. I can never bring them back from the dead.

But the demons DESERVED to die. They attacked humanity! They killed my daughter! Shouldn't I have the right to kill them? Maybe they should learn not to PISS me off!

He pauses his thoughts for a moment, causing their intensity to die down.

Maybe I've been going at this the wrong way, all along. Maybe the 'no killing' thing is stupid. Maybe Hope, of all people, has the right idea. But I don't like the wanton way he goes about it. He slaughtered an entire planet of Volgrim, for Christ's sake! There has to be some sort of in-between...

Jason sits up. He rests his elbows on his knees and hunches over, falling deep into thought.

Have I been too childish in my way of thinking? It seems that way. This is a violent future I've fallen into. It's survive or die. I need to adapt my ethics.

Batman has a no-killing rule. But he's a fictional character. He's a literal cartoon. What if I simply... decided not to kill 'in general'? What if I decided only to kill if I felt the situation required it?

The Wordsmith raises his eyebrows.

That would sure help me rest a little easier at night. Some demons deserve to die. Why should I go out of my way to spare every little bastard who needs a beatdown? What if I simply do as I please, based solely on how it feels, morally? Why should I twist myself into knots worrying about some evil dickhead who kills children for fun?

Jason's thoughts sharpen as he realizes the crux of the issue.

I don't need a 'code.' I need to do what's right. Usually, that means sparing someone. But other times, it doesn't. My entire species is counting on me. I can't afford to worry so much about my enemies when they sure as hell won't worry about me.

The Wordsmith relaxes. He plunks back on the bed and sighs.

That's it, then. No more fucking around. If a demon wants to cause trouble, I'll punish him. And if a demon kills someone, I need to set an example. I need to start acting more ruthlessly. My enemies need to learn to respect me, or at the least, to fear me.

Hope kills demons because that's what Neil told him to do. I will kill them only if I feel it's deserved. There's a difference.

Jason closes his eyes and smiles, feeling strangely content with his thoughts for the first time in ages.

An hour passes as he dozes off.

Five hours.

Eight...

Eventually, Jason blinks his eyes open, returning to reality. He yawns and pops his back, checking the time with a Word of Power.

About two minutes have passed in real-time. Jason thinks, sitting up in his tree-canopy bed. *Hmm. Hope's imminent arrival caused the Volgrim to evacuate their homeworld. Then the 'Apex Cosmic' made them panic even more. It seems the Volgrim are in disarray right now.*

He smiles faintly, a wicked gleam in his eye.

Once we deal with Mephisto... maybe I should take advantage of the situation, eh?

On the world of Numaria, Bael remains behind after Anaelle's departure. Bored, and not sure of where the heck everyone else went, he starts wandering back toward Glinch's laboratory, only to pause when he spots the Stitched Emperor in the distance.

"Yo! Glinch, what's up, man?" Bael asks, waving at the somewhat baffled-looking multi-limbed monster.

Glinch stares at Bael warily, no longer willing to take the so-called 'dumb goof' lightly. On the ground before him lays Emperor Crow, beaten and battered, unable to move.

"Bael." Glinch says coldly. "Yama told me about you. You seem to have awakened a new ability since your transfer into Ose's body."

He pauses.

"...So how did you accomplish this feat? How are you able to summon horrors from the Primordial Era?"

Bael pauses his footsteps. He slows to a stop a few hundred feet from Glinch, and his face morphs into a scowl.

"Seriously, bro? *That's* how you talk about your elders? She wasn't even dressed slutty at all! How dare ya call her a WHORE!"

Glinch's wary expression deflates slightly. He realizes Bael is still as big a moron as ever.

"That's not what I- oh, never mind. How are you able to summon dead demons and angels back to life?"

"Oh! Uh. I don't got any clue." Bael says, shrugging. "They can't be all THAT dead though, right? Grandma was walkin' and talkin' just fine. Silly Glinch, mixin' up dead people with not-dead people. Hehe."

Bael's gaze falls to Crow's body.

"So uh. What'cha gonna do with Crow? Seems like she went on quite the bender. She's all sleepy and stuff!"

Glinch doesn't answer for a few seconds. He mulls over the last thirty minutes worth of happenings, unsure of how to proceed. If Bael can summon insanely powerful creatures from ancient times, then he's become a real threat.

But at the same time, he's also become... *valuable*.

That's right. Bael's value has increased immensely, perhaps even beyond Mephisto, the weakest Cosmic in the Milky Way.

Glinch begins to think carefully on how he might convince Bael to collaborate with him.

That is, until Bael's facial expression changes.

The former Duke of Pain scrunches his face together, as if having realized something.

"Hey! Wait a minute! Are you plannin' to hurt Crow? Cuz that AIN'T okay, buddy! You sick fucker, you were thinkin' about trickin' me, weren't you?!"

Huh? Glinch thinks. *Why did Bael suddenly put the dots together? That isn't like him at all.*

"Ah, ehehe..." Glinch laughs softly. "I'm thinking of abandoning my prior field of research. Your ability seems... much more *interesting*. It has a great deal of untapped potential."

"So you ain't gonna hurt Crow?" Bael asks, his expression suspicious.

"No. Not anymore." Glinch says. "Here. You can take her."

He nudges Crow's collapsed body with one of his multiple feet, then carefully steps backward, putting distance between himself and Bael. All the while, he keeps his senses

locked on the extremely faint but still-perceivable cosmic energy signatures of the 'Archangel' Bael summoned, as well as Mephisto.

For his part, Bael walks over to Crow and kneels down.

"Yo. Crow. Wake up, sleepy."

He slaps her across the face, but she doesn't respond.

"Crowww! C'mon girl, wake up, haha. Nap time's over."

Slap, slap!

Inside Bael's mind, Ose growls in annoyance.

[Bael. She's not SLEEPING. She was BEATEN UNCONSCIOUS.]

"Sounds made-up." Bael mutters under his breath. "Silly Ose. You can't grow a conscience from beating your meat."

Ose rages at him again, unable to handle his stupidity, while Glinch continues to keep watch from a distance.

Hmm. Glinch thinks to himself. All my Chimera are dead. Mephisto is going to die to the Archangel. Then she'll come back and kill me. What to do, what to do...?

Glinch frowns. He lifts his head to look into the distance, where he becomes surprised to see all the Emperors who fled Numaria returning to the Stitched Wasteland, visible confusion on their faces.

Bael notices their arrival mere seconds after Glinch, though this is only because Ose alerts him to the unexpected circumstance.

"Huh?" Bael says, standing up and turning around to look at the approaching Emperors. "Ohh! There you guys are! Man, I must've had some bad gas while I was conked out for y'all to ditch me like that, hehe."

With Glinch's chimera all dead, the spatial turbulence in the area has dropped precipitously. The Emperors arrive through one of Yadrat's portals, glancing around in confusion as they sense the unmistakable remnants of holy energy.

"I knew it." Serena says. "I sensed the sudden appearance of an Archangel on Numaria. Bael, what happened while we were gone?"

Glinch remains in the same spot, unworried about the other Emperors attacking him. Considering the value he's demonstrated, they'd be fools to want to execute him on the

spot, even if they do have bad blood between them at the moment.

Some of the newly ascended Emperors look at him with a mixture of fear, anger, and appreciation. If it weren't for his 'miracle pills,' they might never have ascended to Emperor, or it might have taken much longer even with the help of the Belial Booster.

Glinch says nothing, opting to leave the explanation to Bael. As expected, Bael is all too happy to tell the others what 'really' happened.

"Aw man, it was so crazy, you guys!" Bael exclaims. "So I was sitting over there on that rock, right? I was doing like I always do, scratching my butt, pulling some dingleberries out-"

Serena crinkles her face in disgust. "You can skip the nasty details, Bael."

"Right, but sometimes they stick to my fingers and don't wipe off easily," Bael enthusiastically explains. "Plus they stink real bad. Like poop, if I'm being honest!"

"Bael. Focus." Yardrat growls. "The Archangel. Why do we sense an Archangel's energy? Did Uriel come to save us?"

Bael shakes his head. "Nah, not Uriel. It was Grandma! Uhh, sorry, I don't remember her name. I called Grandma here to help me out, and she popped over, started beating Mephisto's ass. He'll be toast pretty soon."

The other Emperors, upon hearing it wasn't Uriel who showed up, become visibly more surprised. They murmur amongst one another, exchanging conspiratorial glances.

"Grandma?" Melody repeats quietly. "Bael always called Camael that. Has she revived too?"

"Must be the case." Kristoff affirms. "She's found some way to Ascend to the highest reaches of power. But why would she help us?"

Emperor Serena massages her chin as she talks with the other Emperors. "Remember? We gave Ose Camael's ring, shortly after the Energy Wars. We never told the Volgrim, either. This must be part of Ose's contingency plans. She befriended Camael, or found a way to force her to work for her, like Glinch did with Mephisto."

Yardrat nods. "It all fits perfectly. Bael's always going on about Ose-this, Ose-that. Maybe Ose left contingency plans for him, too. That's why he has that fancy armor. It's all interlinked."

"Have you noticed?" Melody asks in a hushed voice. "Bael's been acting a bit smarter, recently. He really pitched in during the fight against Glinch's chimeras. You think maybe Ose worked a little magic on him? Maybe some techno-whatsamajigger tool? She injected his brain with something special?"

"Could be." Yardrat nods. "But it's funny... he's an Emperor now, right? He's properly ascended? Yet I haven't the faintest idea what title he should have. I look at him, and I don't hear the 'voice' in my head."

"It does feel weird to keep calling him the Duke of Pain when he's an Emperor now..." Serena says slowly. "Let's wait and see. Maybe his proper title will formulate once he makes bigger moves, like Gressil's did."

While the other Emperors debate among one another, Bael stands awkwardly in the distance, scratching his head.

"The heck are those guys mumbling about?" He wonders.

Yardrat eventually pulls away from the group to walk toward Bael.

"Bael. We owe you a great debt. Ose clearly put a lot of trust into you. I look forward to seeing what you will accomplish as you better integrate into her body."

Bael blinks. "Uhh... right. Well, thanks for the nice words, bud. So what do we do about Glinch?"

Bael jerks a thumb behind himself to point in Glinch's general direction.

The Stitched Emperor remains standing, fearless and unbothered by the return of the other fifty Emperors.

"Glinch..." Yardrat says coldly, walking past Bael to approach the Stitched Emperor. "Your plan failed. Now you've pissed us all off."

Glinch rolls his eyes. "I lost one gambit. BIG DEAL! Hah. Mephisto will die, and that's that. But when that Archangel returns, do you actually think she'll let you all live?"

"She's on our side." Yardrat says confidently, having 'figured out the truth' about 'Camael.' "Ose planned this all out from the beginning. Even dead, she still works tirelessly to protect our species."

Bael raises an eyebrow as he looks at Yardrat's back. "Eh? Ose ain't dead, man. I can still talk to her."

Yardrat directs a soft look toward his poor, deluded brother, a demon suffering from grief. "...Of course she is, Bael. I must have used the wrong word accidentally."

"Oh, okay!" Bael says, giving Yardrat a huge thumbs up. "As long as you get it!"

Yardrat's smile becomes more pained as he returns his attention back to Glinch.

Poor Bael. We'll need to place him in grief counseling after this. He must have seen a hologram of Ose and thought she was really alive. He'll need more time to grow that seed of intellect she left for him...

"Anything to say for yourself? Any defense?" Yardrat asks Glinch.

"Pft. None at all." Glinch answers without missing a beat. "Don't even try to threaten me. Kill me or leave! Maybe I'll continue sharing my special Pills if you don't annoy me!"

Yardrat shrugs. "Your gambit nearly worked. You almost killed us. But in the end, you failed. Now our Hells have a tremendous number of newly risen powerhouses. If anything, what happened today was... exceptionally *good* for demon civilization. I'm in a better mood than I thought I'd be."

"So why are we talking then?" Glinch asks. "Get to the point!"

"I just want to know what Mephisto offered you." Yardrat says. "You elevated him to the apex of power. You turned him into a Demon Deity instead of yourself. Why?"

The other Emperors lean forward, intent on hearing Glinch's reasoning. But he merely scoffs.

"Are you stupid? I'm a scientist! Not some meathead swinging my fifty-fists around!" Glinch proclaims. "I don't care about 'ascending.' Being an Emperor simply makes my abilities more convenient. I'd much rather dispatch an idiot like Mephisto to deal with the mundane matters or to fetch me new research material."

"Right. But why would you elevate him specifically?" Yardrat asks. "Why not one of us? Why not Auger? Are you afraid he might overpower you? Surely, Mephisto must have offered you *something*."

"Overpower me? BAH!" Glinch laughs. "As if. You think far too highly of that upstart! Auger is nothing to me at all, HAH HAH HAH!"

Glinch pauses.

"As for what Mephisto offered me... that's none of your business! You couldn't offer anything comparable anyway."

"So he *did* offer you something." Yardrat says. "Try me. Auger's wealth is vast. Surely, outside of the dragonbones themselves, there's no boon Mephisto could grant you that my liege couldn't..."

The other Emperors scowl, realizing Yardrat's plan.

"Hold on a minute! Stop trying to cheat, Yardrat!" Melody shouts. "Plenty of us would like to make our offers too!"

Before anyone else can chime in, Glinch raises seven of his hands. "Shut up, all of you! You wouldn't be able to make it the way we like anyway! Dragonbone and the Sphinx were necessary for the ascension process too, and I doubt you've spares of those lying around! Stop wasting your breath!"

Yardrat blinks. "Wait, what do you mean, 'we wouldn't make it the way you like'? Make *what*?"

Glinch rolls his eyes. "What else could it be, you insignificant fool? PIZZA, obviously! I told Mephisto if he wanted my help, he'd need to give me a pizza every single day for the next thousand years!"

For a brief moment, all of the Emperors fall silent, digesting this incredibly idiotic piece of information.

"...You're kidding." Yardrat says. "You must be."

"Kidding? Why would I be kidding??" Glinch asks. "He makes it JUST the way I like it! Me and Mephisto go way back!"

"You gave away ultimate cosmic power to Mephisto... for *pizza*?" Bael asks, as baffled as the rest. "...Well damn! Good trade, Glinch!"

"I know, right??" Glinch asks rhetorically. "Anyway, the deal's done, and I don't want your sloppy, unevenly-cooked pizza. None of you can make it the way I like it except Mephisto. So that's THAT. And I can't elevate you anyway, because I'm fresh out of Sphinxes and Dragonbones. Hmph!"

Yardrat's mind momentarily blanks out from the stupidity of what he's heard. Much like the way Ose has come to know true suffering through co-existing with Bael, Yardrat nearly has a stroke from Glinch's words burrowing into his ear.

But before he can say anything, Glinch lifts his head up to the sky.

"Eh? What's this? She's gone?"

He squints, as if looking at something unseen.

The other Emperors frown, uncertain of what he could be reacting to.

That is, until Glinch begins to smile in a manner most unsettling.

"Oh, dear. The Archangel just vanished. Looks like I WIN after all! HAH HAH HAH."

He tilts his head down to look at the other demons. His pupils dilate ominously.

"Mephisto will return shortly. You'd all better start **RUNNING!**"

Part 506: Curiosity Killed Mephisto

On the world of Okania, on the westernmost edge of the Milky Way...

Mephisto, the Myriad Deity, levitates in the sky, using Cosmic Energy to effortlessly keep himself aloft.

The 100-foot-tall dragon-demon hybrid stares into the distance, his fear and rage slowly cooling off following the disappearance of Anaelle, the Seraph from a period of history not recorded in any historical ledgers.

He thinks about the fight he just completed, as well as its greater implications.

He begins to hunger for Bael's power...

But, at the same time, he can't help but pause to glance around Okania and notice how drastically it has changed. The Warper whose memories he plundered to open a portal to Okania never knew of it looking like such a beautiful and lush world rich in life. Indeed, as Mephisto looks around, he spots all manner of strange flying creatures far in the distance, and he even detects the sounds of distant animals roaring or making other predatory noises to intimidate their prey.

He lowers his gaze to the crater far below, where he sees a creature he's come to learn of only in recent years. A creature with mottled green skin, lacking any facial features on its face, standing bipedally like any human or demon...

A Kolvaxian.

Mephisto frowns. He levitates downward slowly, not particularly fearing the lone Kolvaxian, but not wanting to take any risks, either.

The Kolvaxian, for its part, 'stares' up at Mephisto with its blank face. Lacking any eyes, or a mouth, or a nose, it subtly creeps Mephisto out, or at least, two of the souls comprising his united mind.

[Eugh...] Lupus says, shivering. [That's a Kolvaxian in the flesh, huh? Disgusting!]

[Boss, maybe we oughta high-tail it outta here, huh?] Zamiel asks.

Yama looks on with interest. [We saw this creature ravage the world of Sharmur. We watched as tens of thousands of Plagueborn yanked humans and demons alike into the

bowels of that planet, only to emerge later as Kolvaxians themselves.]

Mephisto strokes his rotten-skinned chin. [Sssomething about it makesss me feel wary. It cannot possibly possse thisss body a threat, yet it ssstandsss there ssso fearlessly. Why doesss it not ssshink back and run away? Why doesss it ssseem ssso... *familiar* to me?]

The Myriad Deity levitates downward, just a little bit closer...

Abruptly, the Kolvaxian's posture stiffens. It flexes its legs and slightly crouches down, looking at Mephisto as if only now identifying him as a threat.

A faint noise vibrates in the air, like the sound of a distant cicada, but distorted and warped by unknown environmental factors.

Weeeeeeee...

Mephisto pauses, his finely-tuned senses easily detecting the oddity. At that moment, a cosmic energy signature materializes deep beneath Okania's surface!

"What?!" Mephisto asks, startled by this intrusion. He freezes in place as that energy signature begins rapidly burrowing toward the surface from deep underground, rushing toward his position.

Lupus's soul turns as cold as ice. "Mephisto, RUN!"

But Mephisto doesn't. He merely levitates backward, keeping his attention trained on the rapidly approaching cosmic signature. His eyes narrow as Okania's surface bursts open and a bipedal figure flies toward him from the dust.

"A Pssion?!" Mephisto asks, startled when he gets his first glimpse at the faceless Kolvaxian racing through the air toward him.

The intrusion into Mephisto's airspace doesn't particularly frighten him, as he recognizes that the level of cosmic energy contained within the rapidly approaching Kolvaxian is only about equal to his own, and perhaps even a little weaker.

The Kolvaxian aims both of its hands forward as it rushes at Mephisto, conjuring electrical energy into its palms.

KZZZAT!!

A bolt of psionic lightning instantly traverses the gap between the combatants, blasting Mephisto's bones before he can react.

But it has no effect on him!

The lightning explodes harmlessly, and Mephisto grins.

"Ssstrong, yesss, capable of killing Emperorsss... BUT NOT THISSS DEITY!"

He waves his hands to release a mighty explosion of Dark Mist, far more powerful than the kind he unleashed when battling humanity's forces. The paradise world experiences total blackness as Mephisto's mist scatters to cover more than a hundred miles of the planet in every direction, from the ground all the way to the upper atmosphere.

Not a single speck of sunlight pierces the magically-imbued fog. But Mephisto's bloodthirsty red eyes do.

He rushes at the Kolvaxian, weaponizing Yama's powers to summon a greatsword of darkness. With Zamiel's perfect control of weapons, he wields it like a legendary warrior and slashes down at the Kolvaxian Psion.

Right before he can slice his opponent in half, the Psion teleports to the side, evading the attack. It follows up by clapping its palms together and blowing away a portion of the mist in the nearby area, creating a small patch where the light can pass through.

"Hm? It'sss weak, but a little sssmarter than we expected..." Mephisto mutters to himself, while continuing to pursue the creature.

He manifests a layer of Qi around his shadow-greatsword, allowing it to remain stable even when he charges back into the light.

Over the next ten seconds, Mephisto executes fifteen slashes, comboing them together while the Psion expertly evades and deflects his attacks. His guard raises with each failed execution, elevating his evaluation of this tricky enemy.

"Why can't we sssimply kill thisss creature?" Mephisto hisses. "DIE ALREADY!"

Mephisto reverses course and races back into his Dark Mist. Once there, he reshapes the greatsword into a plasma cannon, firing off magically-charged bursts of ultra hot liquid-fire at the Psion.

This time, the Psion takes great care to evade his attack, going out of its way to not come into contact with the plasma shots as they race past and bombard the planet below, sparking massive uncontrolled wildfires.

Mephisto does not miss this details.

"Sso you fear fire, fool? THEN YOU SSSHALL BURN!"

He dissipates the plasma cannon, instead opting to imbue his body with Flaming Qi. A thin barrier of 1000F (537C) flames ignites on his draconic bones as he launches his gigantic body toward the comparatively insignificant speck of a Psion below him.

Mephisto's claws slash outward in huge sweeping moves. He rakes at the Psion, forcing it to continually retreat due to its visible fear of flames.

Within just ten seconds, Mephisto finally lands a powerful blow, smashing his claws against the Psion like a flyswatter against a cockroach.

BOOM!

Mephisto splatters the Kolvaxian in a single strike, sending its bones and organs spraying in all directions!

Just like that, he kills the creature, only exerting himself a little. Compared to the battle against Crow, the Kolvaxian proves no threat to him at all.

Even so, Mephisto frowns.

"How worrying. That Kolvaxian would have destroyed uss with a ssingle ssslap if we were only an Emperor. Sssince when is Cosmic power sso easssily obtained?"

Hardly has he finished speaking before Mephisto once again senses the arrival of cosmic energy beneath Okania's surface. But this time, he's even more shocked when not one, but two energy signatures appear!

"What? More?! And they're coming ssstraight for usss!"

Lupus shivers, even more nervous than before. "Mephisto, we have to RUN! I have a terrible feeling about staying here!"

As before, Zamiel backs her up. "This ain't smart, boss! The Volgrim are super powerful, but they're LOSING to the Plague. It's not like they don't have a Cosmic or two of their own! Don't you think we ought to take these creatures more seriously?"

But Mephisto, emboldened by his previous win, doesn't take that warning to heart. "Kekeke. Thisss isss the firsst proper opponent we've fought. Crow wasss nothing. Anaelle wasss too fearsssome. We musst practice on a worthy opponent if we wisssh to increassse our power."

As he speaks, those two signatures rush toward him from underground. When they burst out of Okania's surface, Mephisto is momentarily startled when he vaguely recognizes one of the incoming Psions.

"How isss thisss possible? That'sss the sssame one we jussst killed. It revived??"

The two Kolvaxian Psions rush toward him again, but now they spread out to travel to opposite sides of the Myriad Deity while conjuring different Psionic abilities.

The Psion from before fires off twin lightning bolts at the draconic-demon, but the other one tears ten massive trees out of the planet's surface and levitates them beside itself while waving its arms in a manner most ominous.

Mephisto ignores the lightning bolts. They crash against his body harmlessly. The second Psion's strange movements seem to follow some goal he hasn't yet determined, so he follows it with his eyes.

Under the control of the second Psion, the trees change colors from brown and green to grey. The Psion slams all the trees together and begins rapidly compressing them together, making Mephisto's eyes widen.

"What isss thisss...?" Mephisto asks nobody in particular, as he witnesses an incredible phenomena.

The wood-and-leaves of those ten trees transform into a metallic compound, as if magically transmuted through a Philosopher's Stone! And even more stunningly, the metallic compounds begin to harden even further, approaching the hardness of Demonstone!

"Thisss one isss more dangerousss!" Mephisto immediately concludes.

He charges toward the second Psion, imbuing his bones with superheated Qi like before. But this time, when he slams his claws down on that second Psion, it doesn't attempt to dodge.

Instead, it pauses its transmutation activities, snaps one of its arms up, and catches the massive dragon claw falling upon its body.

BOOM!!

Mephisto's claw crashes against the Kolvaxian's raised palm and instantly becomes trapped, as if locked within a vice. His cold undead heart skips a beat.

Before he can react, the second Psion spins around while maintaining its grip on one of his five dragonbone claws. Mephisto shouts in alarm as he becomes uncontrollably yanked from where he was levitating.

"Aaaah!!"

The Psion spins 180 degrees in the air, rotating Mephisto over its head before releasing its grip and flinging him violently toward the planet's surface below at the speed of sound.

BOOOM!!

Mephisto instantly crashes into the soil, tears up the forest, and rips open a ravine one mile long as his body slams and drags across Okania's surface.

Luckily, he doesn't end up injured. Despite the Psion's shocking strength, Mephisto's Living Moldanium body is far too durable to take damage from a mundane attack of that level.

The Myriad Deity jumps to his feet and leaps back into the sky, watching the one-mile-distant Psions with significant worry. No longer do they seem as weak as they did before.

[Mephisto.] Yama says. [Below us. More...]

Mephisto quickly lowers his gaze to the planet below. There, he senses an immense buildup of Cosmic Energy as more than three dozen much weaker entities begin to climb toward the planet's surface from the Core below.

"What isss HAPPENING?!" Mephisto shouts, more afraid than ever. He senses the approach of the two powerful Psions from before as they begin flying toward him once again. Now, the second Psion clutches a 200-foot-long cord of flexible metal that dangles from below, its purpose unknown but worrying for the Myriad Deity.

[Mephisto.] Lupus says, her voice chillingly calm. [Leave now. We have to go. I don't want to find out what all these incoming Psions can do to us. Let's not test our strength in such a foolish way.]

Mephisto hesitates.

[But... weren't you the one who wanted to die?]

Lupus nods.

[Dying is preferable to being stuck as part of your body. But what worries me is... *I am not so sure we would die if the Plague ensnared us.*]

That finally elicits the response Lupus wanted.

Mephisto backs off and begins flying toward the upper atmosphere, racing away as dozens of weaker but far more numerous Psions erupt from the ground below him.

"Tsssk! That damned Creator!"

Mephisto now finally understands the true weight of the warning the Creator gave him.

...you might feel like you're a shark once you leave, but in Akasha's Game... you're little more than a minnow.

Before, Mephisto felt powerful, unstoppable.

Now, he begins to feel that he truly is not as strong as he thought he would be.

He is not some apex powerhouse in the Milky Way.

He went from being an Emperor of trillions to a gnat among giants.

That thought both enrages *and* dismays him in equal measure.

With regret in his heart, Mephisto opens up a portal directly to Numaria, leaps through, and seals it shut behind himself. He emerges in the Void a million miles from the world itself, but remains in the same spot, waiting to see if those two High Psions will perform the same feat as Anaelle, pursuing him across the reaches of space.

Luckily, they don't.

Unable to tear the void as expertly as they perhaps should, the Plagueborn Psions remain trapped behind on Okania, leaving Mephisto by himself for the first time since his ascension.

The Myriad Deity breathes a metaphorical sigh of relief.

[Perhapsss my bonesss would not have been consssumed.] Mephisto thinks. [But... better to not take a chancce.]

[Yeah. You said it, Boss.] Zamiel groans, leaning back against an invisible chair in the Myriad Deity's Mind Realm. [So, what next? We gonna eat some Emperors now?]

Mephisto gazes hungrily at the world of Numaria. He senses the distant mana signatures of many juicy morsels.

[Yesss...]

Mephisto flaps his wings and rockets toward Numaria. Within two short minutes, he impacts the upper atmosphere, but he finds that the Emperors have not fled as he thought they would.

Surely, knowing how much danger they're in, they would want to run away and spread apart, perhaps running to the Wordsmiths to protect their sorry lives?

It couldn't be that they have another trick up their sleeve, could it?

Mephisto receives the answer to that question when he senses the approach of a powerful, somewhat familiar energy signature.

He becomes more alert.

The Myriad Deity levitates in the upper atmosphere, directly above the Stitched Wasteland, and the Emperors below. They in turn look up at him with obvious fear, yet remain stubbornly standing in place, as if having been commanded to do so by a higher power.

And that higher power does indeed begin walking toward Mephisto, their footsteps 'blinking' them across the airspace to the Myriad Deity's position, multiple miles at a time.

Mephisto narrows his eyes.

"Another gnat. He'sss finally ssshown himssself."

A hazy, indistinct figure walks through the air, stopping half a mile from Mephisto's current location. It gazes at the Myriad Deity with a face as blank as any Kolvaxian, and a body as indecipherable as the Creator himself.

Mephisto. Lupus. Zamiel. Yama. Myriad Deity. You intend to commit a grave crime against demonkind, and the Milky Way. You will cease your hostile activities immediately.

Mephisto says nothing for several seconds as he gazes at the inscrutable figure before him, the figure known as The First Emperor of Transience.

When Mephisto was only an Emperor himself, the First Emperor appeared and spoke to Ose. But Mephisto lost those memories due to the First Emperor's strange state of existence.

Now that he and the other three core souls of his body have ascended to the rank of Cosmic Entity, those memory suppressions have vanished, and they no longer feel as stumped by the so-called 'First Emperor's' existence.

"You..." Mephisto says slowly. "You're no demon at all. We cannot ssenssse a drop of demonic mana within your vessel!"

The First Emperor neither confirms nor denies Mephisto's accusation.

I am what I am. I protect demonkind. I protect the Milky Way. My Calling is higher than yours. If you intend to proceed on your course, I will educate you on that which you are ignorant. This lesson will not be pleasant, but painful.

"What are you?" Mephisto questions directly. "You're no Emperor. You're a Cosssmic like usss. Why are you sso 'helpfully protecting' the Demonsss? What have you to gain?"

The First Emperor remains unmoving, unyielding, like a mountain before a storm.

My existence is temporary. My identity, unimportant. What is important is that I show up here, now.

You will cease your hostile actions. You will cease attempting to bring about Chaos to the Order I maintain.

The First Emperor issues several declarative statements that truly enrage Mephisto!

"You... you dare look down on usss? Your Cosssmic Energy isss faint and weak! We do not fear you!"

I maintain the balance. I have prepared counters to many Threats that may emerge. I have long known demons possessed the capacity to break past the boundary of Cosmic. Your ascension was not beyond my capability to predict.

Mephisto sneers.

"We'd like to SSSEE what counterssss you've prepared!!"

He charges at the First Emperor and swipes his claws, but his attack *whiffs* through the First Emperor's body uselessly, as if trying to attack a bit of congealed mist with one's bare hands.

The First Emperor reappears a short distance away, its gas-like body possessing little substance.

You have eyes but cannot see. Have you not noticed the anomaly below you, Myriad Deity? Your fate is already sealed. You will make no further progress in killing your fellow demons.

Mephisto becomes more alert. He looks downward, at the planet below. Uncertain of what the heck the First Emperor is talking about, he directs a cursory glance toward each of the Emperors present.

Abruptly, his undying heart stops beating.

Alarm crosses his face.

"WHAT?!"

For the first time since Anaelle's disappearance, Mephisto feels a genuine explosion of shock detonate in his mind.

On Numaria's surface, one Demon Emperor stands amidst the rest, unassuming in appearance, but a source of courage for his comrades.

"Mephisto. Long time, no talk. Seems you've advanced a lot since I went to sleep. But you know what they say... an old Hellhound can't learn new tricks."

Mephisto points one giant dragon-claw at that Emperor.

"No! NO! Diablo, how could you have awakened?! You ssshould have remained assssleep for another thousssand yearsss!"

Diablo, the Emperor of Annihilation, smirks evilly.

"Oh, I've been awake for a *while*, training under the First Emperor. Fools like you ruined all the work I put into keeping the Seven Hells intact. Now I'll have a chance to show everyone the *true* power a 'mere' Demon Emperor can reach."

Diablo inhales deeply. He swallows a breath, and the other Emperors who were crowding around him quickly back away.

"He's doing it!" Yadrat shouts. "Stick to the plan! Disperse!"

The fifty uplifted Emperors run away from Diablo in all directions as an ominous amount of power begins to swell within his chest.

BOOM.

BOOM!!

Thunderous noises detonate outward, sending soil flying.

Diablo's muscles crack and split as his body enlarges.

All the while, the First Emperor levitates in place, its featureless face betraying no emotions.

Your enemy is the Archdemon now. He will not be as he was before.

Part 507: Archdemon's Return

For the briefest of moments, Mephisto's body seizes up in terror. His eyes flick from the First Emperor to Diablo, then back to the First Emperor again.

The moment Diablo begins to explode with power, all four of the souls inside the Myriad Deity move at once.

[WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!] Zamiel shrieks. [GO!!!]

Mephisto moves on instinct. He practically teleports toward Diablo, moving so fast he leaves a streak of afterimages in his wake as he lifts his palm overhead.

BOOOM!!!

Mephisto slams his massive dragon-claw against Diablo's body, only to cry out in fear as a magical force-field enveloping the Emperor of Annihilation repels his attack.

"NO!" Mephisto roars, shooting a vicious look at the fleeing Emperors. He quickly realizes he's been had. This field was made through a combination of Serena's soul-sharing magic, the combined energy of the other Emperors, and Yardrat's spatial manipulation.

The mighty magical-spatial field prevents Mephisto from killing Diablo in a single slap!

But that doesn't stop the Myriad Deity. He shrieks in rage and begins whaling on the force-field with a fury that sends cataclysmic shockwaves outward in every direction, splitting the planet's tectonic plates and summoning 200-foot-tall tsunamis across Numaria.

All the while, Diablo's energy continues to go berserk at greater and greater levels.

"The field won't last much longer!" Yardrat shouts as he runs away. "Shit!"

With the full power of a Demon Deity whaling downward, not even the magic of fifty combined Emperors can protect Diablo long enough for him to complete his ascension. In just ten short seconds, Mephisto finally brings down a strike capable of bursting the shield.

CRACK!

A thunderous BOOM explodes as the shield gives way. Mephisto's palm continues pressing downward until it crashes against Diablo's body, exploding his figure in a horrific mess of blood and gore.

Diablo perishes instantly.

Crushed under the full power of a Demon Deity, his comparatively fragile Emperor body cannot withstand even a single strike.

But Mephisto's expression does not change to one of relief. In his eyes, the accumulation of Cosmic Energy only continues to increase, alarming him further.

"No... NO! Why can't we kill him?!"

He continues attacking the soil, attempting to rip apart the very air itself. But no matter what he does, that horrid magical power only elevates further and further...

"YOU... HAVE... LOST..."

A voice speaks from the air itself, chilling Mephisto's dragon bones as if he were being drenched by a bucket of ice water.

Abruptly, an explosion of demonic red energy erupts mere feet from Mephisto's face, blowing up with the power of a stack of dynamite. Mephisto cries out in alarm as that explosion sends him flying to the side. He slams into the dirt and grinds along the ground, quickly flipping himself upright and launching back toward the giant body materializing a short distance away.

"No! NOOO!!"

Mephisto's body seems to move in slow motion. His perception of time freezes to a crawl as, before him, the body of the Archdemon rapidly constructs itself from raw Cosmic Energy.

The Emperor of Annihilation roars to the heavens. His eyeless head materializes first, followed rapidly by his torso, his four arms, and more than a thousand tentacle-legs that end in heads filled with teeth.

The Archdemon successfully materializes.

Mephisto tries to swipe his claw at the enemy before him, but he moves too slowly. A fist as big as his own comes rushing toward his head.

Thump.

Stars dance in the Myriad Deity's eyes. The world spins around him, and he awakens moments later, stunned and jarred by the power behind that punch.

Mephisto clambers to his feet, dizzy and sick to his metaphorical stomach. His vision blurry, he looks around until his eyes fall upon the full majesty of demonkind's mightiest warrior.

Emperor Diablo, the Archdemon.

"HEH, HEH, HEH." The Archdemon says, its eyeless head aimed at Mephisto's staggering form. **"I AM NOT AS I ONCE WAS. I AM STRONGER. I AM IN CONTROL."**

No longer a rampaging creature hellbent on causing wanton destruction, the Archdemon stands atop its thousand tentacle-legs and looks down at Mephisto with a posture indicating his intelligence.

Mephisto no longer charges at the Archdemon blindly. Instead, he hangs back, a hint of fear on his face.

"Impossible... impossible..." He says twice. "How can an Emperor become a Cosssmic Entity? Did the Archdemon alwaysss sstand at the Cosssmic level...?"

"YES. I DID." Diablo says proudly. **"BUT I LACKED CONTROL. I LACKED CONSCIOUS THOUGHT. THE FIRST EMPEROR SOLVED THAT PROBLEM. THANKS TO HIS HELP, I HAVE MASTERED THIS BODY'S TRUE POWER."**

Mephisto's expression turns truly glum. No longer does he have a chance of easily gobbling up all the Emperors on Numaria. Instead, they have hidden themselves within the Archdemon's protective coverage, returning shortly after Diablo's ascension to lurk in the vicinity.

If they leave the Archdemon's aura, Mephisto could pick them off. But why would they? The old monsters are far from stupid. They know their survival is only possible due to Diablo's return.

Mephisto glances around. He frowns as he searches for someone.

"Where isss Glinch?"

"SOMEWHERE SECURE." Diablo says grinning evilly at Mephisto. **"NO LONGER WILL I CONTINUE TO ALLOW HIM TO DO AS HE PLEASES. HE IS TOO BIG A THREAT TO DEMONKIND."**

"Ssso you've returned to take back control of the Sseven Hellsss..." Mephisto says slowly. "You've come to fight me."

"THAT IS WHERE YOU ARE WRONG." Diablo retorts. "THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US IS GREATER THAN YOU KNOW. I CAN FULLY SENSE YOUR WEAKNESS, MEPHISTO. YOU ARE NOTHING BEFORE THIS ARCHDEMON. YOU ARE BARELY EVEN A COSMIC. IF WE BATTLE, YOU WILL PERISH, AND NUMARIA WILL BE RUINED. THAT IS NOT SOMETHING I WISH TO SEE HAPPEN."

Diablo raises one of his four arms, holding up a palm in a peace offering.

"I WILL GIVE YOU A CHANCE. BEND THE KNEE. SWEAR A DEATH PROMISE TO OBEY MY ORDERS. IF YOU DO, I WILL IGNORE YOUR PAST CRIMES. YOU ARE A DEMON. I AM A DEMON. THE TIME FOR OUR KIND TO RISE IS NOW. BEFORE THE WORDSMITHS REACH THEIR PEAK. BEFORE THE VOLGRIM WISE UP TO OUR TRUE POWER. BEFORE THE PLAGUE SWALLOWS THE MILKY WAY..."

Mephisto narrows his eyes. "You want thissss Deity to become your ssservant?"

"HMPH. 'DEITY.' YOU ARROGANTLY CLING TO THAT TITLE, BUT WE BOTH KNOW IT MEANS NOTHING. YOU ARE NO LONGER AN EMPEROR OF MORTALS, BUT A GNAT AMONG GODS. THE RULES CHANGE ONCE YOU ENTER THE LEVEL OF COSMIC."

The First Emperor's apparition materializes beside Diablo, its body minuscule compared to the Titan-sized Archdemon.

Emperor Diablo speaks truth. There are many Cosmics in the universe. When you ascend, Akasha's restrictions become more stringent. The more power you amass, the heavier the shackles become that bind you.

"THE DUTY PLACED UPON YOU BECOMES GREATER AS WELL." Diablo clarifies. "THERE ARE ONLY TWO WAYS A CONFLICT BETWEEN US CAN END. EITHER YOU SUBMIT, OR YOU DIE. CHOOSE YOUR FATE, 'MYRIAD DEITY.' I WILL NOT WAIT LONG."

Mephisto's countenance clouds over.

In his mind's eye, he compares the power wafting from Diablo's body to the power demonstrated by Anaelle.

In his eyes, Diablo does not match her at all.

However, Diablo certainly stands far above the Kolvaxians Mephisto fought only a short while before.

And, judging by the aura of the slowly approaching Second Founder, Diablo must be about her equal...

"I AM WAITING." Diablo says coldly.

Mephisto presses his teeth together.

Submission. Unacceptable. For too many years, he lived in the shadow of Emperors. Now that he has ascended, why must he immediately bow his head before yet another greater power?

It isn't fair!

All those millennia he spent groveling while others mocked him, but now that he has become capable of towering over demonkind, another Cosmic Demon pops up, just like that?! How absurd!

The worst part is, Diablo isn't even a proper Cosmic. He's only an Emperor!

"You... cannot... remain in that form forever..." Mephisto says icily.

"OH, BUT I CAN." Diablo says, his grin widening. **"THINKING YOU CAN OUTLAST ME? KILL ME ONCE MY POWER RUNS OUT? IT WON'T GO AS YOU PLAN, MEPHISTO. THIS BODY IS NO LONGER SOME UNCONTROLLABLE WEAPON HELLBENT ON MURDERING MY ALLIES. IT IS AN INSTRUMENT OF DOOM I PILOT WITH PERFECT CONTROL. I HAVE THE FIRST EMPEROR TO THANK FOR THAT."**

Mephisto's anger deflates even further. He glowers at the Archdemon, uncertain of what to do.

Diablo could be bluffing about not having a time limit. If he is, then Mephisto has the better hand in their little dance of death.

Then again, perhaps he isn't, in which case Mephisto has no hope at all of defeating him.

One thing is for sure. Mephisto will never willingly accept bowing his head to another entity again!

The 100-foot-tall dragon-demon and Archdemon face one another in equal measure, their giant bodies towering over the landscape. Diablo, fearless and unafraid of Mephisto's so-called 'cosmic power', and Mephisto, chomping at the bit to finally establish himself as the God he has always desired to become.

"We will NEVER bow to you." Mephisto finally says glowering sinisterly at Diablo. "Thiss body is perfect. We do not think you are capable of caussing usss harm. Let usss sssee who will lassst the longessst if we battle!"

Mephisto claps his palms together. His Dark Mist explodes outward, blanketing the entire Stitched Wasteland in impenetrable blackness from the ground to the sky, turning him all but invisible to the eyes of those below the Cosmic level.

At the same time, he conjures a pair of dual shadow-copies, neither of them remotely as powerful as his main body, but possessing another unique function he hopes will give him a unique edge in this battle...

The two clones race away in opposite directions, while Mephisto throws himself at the Archdemon!

"WE WILL NOT FAIL!!" Mephisto roars.

Within two seconds, another massive battle erupts on the world of Numaria. Mephisto and the Archdemon become entangled in a brutal melee, with Diablo relying on the formidable regeneration and physical strength of his Archdemon form, while Mephisto uses his diverse arsenal of abilities and his indestructible dragon bones to hopefully pressure his adversary.

At the same time, Mephisto's two shadow-copies ignore Diablo entirely. They charge through the mist in hunt of Emperors to consume instead!

"**COWARD.**" Diablo says, as he sends a fist flying into Mephisto's head, battering him into the ground. "**I HAVE ALREADY PREDICTED YOU MIGHT TRY THIS. YOU ARE NOT AS CLEVER AS YOU THINK.**"

Diablo's body possesses not two, but four arms, with a pair attached to his shoulders, and another attached at his sides.

Two of those arms focus on grappling and punching Mephisto, while the other two manipulate Diablo's vast internal mana for a few moments before firing atomic beams of destruction at the shadow-copies racing at his allies.

BOOM!

BOOM!

Diablo's nuclear fission-beams strike the shadows and detonate, shredding Mephisto's copies.

But at the same time, Mephisto dives underground, yanking Diablo beneath the planet's soil while re-summoning new shadow copies once more.

"THOSSSE EMPEROR SSSOULSSS ARE MINE!"

Diablo grunts. The Archdemon wraps one of its hands around Mephisto's neck so he can't escape, but doing so also prevents Diablo from moving freely. Mephisto successfully drags him underground to restrict his movements, while the new shadow-copies resume their charge at the Emperors.

"Shit!" Emperor Fae exclaims, as she senses the approach of powerful energy somewhere within the Dark Mist. She conjures explosive orbs, then lobbs them at the rapidly-approaching shadow-dragons, but her pitiful Emperor-level attacks don't leave a scratch on their targets. "We're screwed!"

Just before the shadows can snap her up and drag her back to Mephisto, the First Emperor of Transience takes action.

A suppressive field swallows the area, targeting Mephisto's summons and plunging their bodies into a pit of metaphorical quicksand.

Their speed plummets to rock bottom, making their previously lightning-fast agility become no better than a turtle.

This field does not affect the Emperors. They decide to nope-the-fuck out of there and start running away, no longer happy to stand back and watch Diablo engage the Myriad Deity.

Mephisto's shadow-copy roars silently, its incorporeal body incapable of making any sounds, but its primitive mind frustrated by the mana-bog that has wrapped around it to slow its movements.

Diablo does not fight alone. The First Emperor states, still levitating in the sky.
Forgetting my existence was yet another of your mistakes.

The battle has only just begun.

Hope Hiro teleports into the Hall of Heroes while visibly agitated. He quickly runs to Solomon's Library, where he flails his arms.

"Solomon! Solomon! There's an emergency! A cosmic-"

"I already know." Solomon says calmly, turning away from his books while looking unperturbed. "Calm down, Hope. A good leader must make sure to appear strong in the face of any adversity, no matter how impossible the odds appear."

Hope's heart continues to race. "Yes, yes, I know all of that! Now's not the time for a goddamn lecture! Do you know what an Apex Cosmic is? Unarin looked like he was about to shit his pants!"

Solomon remains silent for exactly three seconds, deliberately allowing that silence to germinate so as to demonstrate calmness on his own end. Perhaps he even thinks this might prove a good demonstration for the Second Wordsmith.

"Once again. Calm down." Solomon says. "Unarin only momentarily panicked. The moment he learns the identity of that 'Apex Cosmic,' he will school his emotions. The situation is nowhere near as dire as you think."

Hope's heartbeat slows down a little, but his adrenaline remains through the roof. "What... what do you mean?!"

"Deep breaths." Solomon says patiently. "Cosmic Entities balance on a scale of power, Hope. As long as you understand that scale, you won't panic as much as you are right now."

Finally, Hope takes his mentor's advice. He inhales deeply, then releases a shaky breath.

"...Fine. Alright. What is this 'scale,' then?"

Solomon smiles. "That's better. Cosmic Entities range from Bottom Cosmics to Apex Cosmics, and every kind in between. Specifically, the scale goes: Bottom, Low, Mid, High, and Apex. Once you reach the Apex, you can continue to amass quantitative power, but a

qualitative increase will no longer allow you to be a Cosmic anymore. You will become a Ruler instead. And, as Unarin has just finished informing you, Rulers are the true players in Akasha's Game. Every other entity is merely a piece on a game-board, and no more."

Hope blinks twice. "Wait... you... you heard what Unarin and I talked about?"

Solomon chuckles. "Heh. I'm the Knowledge-Seeker, Hope. I have my ways."

"But-!" Hope starts to say.

"Don't waste your breath." Solomon immediately interrupts. "I keep my eye on you for your own sake. And now I'm informing you of something important. Isn't this what you wanted me to do?"

"Once again, you kept information from me." Hope replies, narrowing his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me about Cosmics and Rulers?!"

"Because you weren't ready. And now you are." Solomon answers. "Tell me. Does it make you feel 'good' to know that your entire existence is a lie?"

"A lie? What do you mean?" Hope asks.

"You've been fighting for years to achieve some modicum of power." Solomon says. "You push back against Jason, you even think to try and assassinate Unarin. But in the end, you're merely a player in Akasha's Game. All these petty disputes mean nothing in the grand scheme of things, but they define your petty existence."

He pauses.

"Does it not make you feel... insignificant?"

Hope hesitates. He lowers his eyes and reflects on the Truths Unarin told him, and the existential crisis he suffered in the aftermath.

"But you're no different." Hope says, looking at Solomon. "All you care about is a pointless revenge against the demons! Doesn't THAT mean just as little as any of the things I care about?"

"Oh, certainly." Solomon acknowledges. "Killing all of demonkind means nothing. They will fall to ash when the universe enters Entropy. Like all of Akasha's other creations, they will perish in the end."

He smiles.

"But the difference is, I've known about The Game for a long time. I simply don't care that my ambition means nothing. Killing the demons will make me *feel* a great deal better. And then, once they're dead, I will be at peace. I can die, as my purpose on this mortal plane will be complete. It's that simple."

"It's that simple." Hope repeats blandly. "Then what about me? What the hell am I accomplishing, running around like a chicken with my head cut off? What is my purpose if none of this crap actually matters?"

"Your purpose is whatever you decide it to be." Solomon answers, spreading out his arms. "The truth is, life has no inherent meaning. You live. You eat. You procreate. You die. Your evolutionary purpose is to survive and evolve. Beyond that, there's no meaning beyond the meaning you give your existence. In your case, you might try aspiring to become a Ruler. An undying player in The Game."

Solomon chuckles.

"But I'm not so sure that would give you any sort of eternal happiness either. Ah, well, perhaps you'll figure it all out someday. But that will be up to you, not me."

* * *

A long, uncomfortable silence follows.

Hope wrestles with everything Unarin and Solomon have told him over the past few hours. His mind reels from a mixture of shock and disorientation. He struggles to put his entire life into the context of this strange, grand Akashic Game.

Killing the demons means nothing.

Rising above the Volgrim means nothing.

Defeating the Plague means nothing.

Perhaps even living eternally as a so-called Ruler means nothing.

There is no inherent meaning to his existence. No great ambition to which he can rise. No purpose for which he was created.

This thought... deeply disturbs him.

Hope slumps to his butt. He leans against one of Solomon's nearby bookshelves and crumples into a heap, resting his face against his palms.

"What... I... I don't even know what to say..."

"You'll have plenty of time to sort out your feelings later, Hope." Solomon says, turning around to resume writing his books. "But if you'd like, I can perhaps give you a helpful analogy."

Hope nods dumbly while still resting his face in his palms. "God, give me anything Solomon. This is all just... just so *heavy*."

Solomon smiles while he writes. "When you were younger, didn't you like to play video games? Before you froze yourself in that cryopod, I mean."

Hope lifts his head to peek at Solomon's back.

"...Yeah? What about them?"

Solomon turns to glance at Hope for a second before returning his gaze forward.

"There's no meaning in playing a video game, is there? Oh, you could delude yourself into thinking that you're 'improving your reflexes' or marginally improving your math skills. But most of the time, it's like junk food. You simply fill time doing something you enjoy."

He continues. "Hedonism is a fun activity. It is one way to enjoy your time on the mortal plane. It gives you something to do. But helping other people, standing for a principle, pursuing a revenge, all of these things can be enjoyable in their own way as well."

"If life has no greater purpose, then why not simply become the man you've always wanted to be?" Solomon concludes.

Hope listens in silence. He lowers his eyes in thought.

"I... I can do anything? If there's no meaning in life, I simply have to make my own?"

"That's right." Solomon says. "I have decided that the activity which will give my existence 'meaning' is *slaughtering all the demons*. But yours can be *anything* else. Marrying Amelia. Saving humanity. Becoming a man others can look up to for inspiration. And heck, you can even consider helping this old man kill the demons, too. Everything is possible, so long as you fortify your heart."

Hope bobs his head slowly.

Seconds pass as he dwells more and more on the meaning behind Solomon's words.

A fog begins to lift from his mind.

Slowly, he stands up and leans back against the bookcase more casually, his expression becoming contemplative.

"I can do anything I want."

"You're a Wordsmith." Solomon says. "You always could."

"Yeah... yeah." Hope says. "I can. Huh. I always thought that way, but at the same time... I didn't. It's... it's so hard to put into words."

"I can do anything I want." Hope repeats again, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Become anyone. Live the life I *desire*."

Solomon smiles, but then frowns. Something about Hope momentarily makes him feel uncomfortable.

...The moment passes.

"Right." Solomon says, turning to examine Hope more carefully. "Anything you desire. Now. About the Cosmic Scale. Are you interested in learning more?"

Hope blinks his eyes twice. He looks at Solomon and nods.

"Sure. Sorry for before. I'm ready now. Fill me in on why Unarin nearly shit a brick."

Part 508: Mephisto, Outmatched

One week ago, Numaria was one of the most beautiful worlds in the Milky Way galaxy.

A paradise-class planet covered in lush forests. The demons of the Fourth Hell lived beneath its treetops, and they took great care to treat its woodlands with reverence and respect. One of the Emperors of their Hell, Nymph, happened to be a lover of forests, and her powers synergized well with them, so that much was natural.

But that was then.

This is now.

Following the cataclysmic battle between two Cosmic-level entities, Mephisto and Crow, much of Numaria's forests were flattened and ruined. Vast tsunamis and hurricanes uprooted millions of trees. Wildfires ravaged continents. Chunks of mountains rained down from the skies, flattening even more of Numaria's paradise into little more than green-colored mulch.

No doubt, if the Volgrim were to assess Numaria post-Mephisto and Crow, they would shake their heads and downgrade it to a mere 'habitable' class planet.

But Numaria's woes have only just begun.

Mephisto's Dark Mist shrouds the Stitched Wasteland. The Emperors trapped within find themselves completely lost, unable to even see their hands when waved in front of their faces.

Demons may possess incredible eyesight, particularly in light-lacking areas, but the power Mephisto has obtained as a Cosmic makes his Dark Mist far denser than ever before. It actively burns the senses of those trapped within, making their eyes water and snot flow from their nostrils. Their ears ring, and even their sense of direction becomes impeded, making them stumble about blindly within its confines.

Yardrat finds himself in the same situation as all the other Emperors. Due to the subspace suppression created by the Dark Mist, his ability to teleport around has once again disappeared, filling him with regret.

"...knew it!" Yardrat hisses, while tripping over a stray body part from one of Glinch's murdered chimera. "I should have left when I still had a chance! Now I'm stuck here! This

is awful!"

He waves his arms futilely, trying to tear at the space around himself in the hopes of ripping through the oppressive pitch-black smog, but nothing he tries has the slightest effect.

Suddenly, a hand grabs Yardrat's shoulder, startling him. He screams in surprise and whirls around, ready to attack whatever was surely about to behead him.

"It's just me." A female's voice says from the mist, though Yardrat can't make out who she is.

He does manage to recognize her voice.

"...Serena?"

"I appear to be the only person capable of seeing inside this mist." Serena says, coughing between her words. Mephisto's corrosive mist hampers all of her senses except for her already-blinded eyes. "But I can only see the souls of other entities, such as yourself. I cannot divine their exact identities until I draw closer. Come with me! We must gather the others and find a way to leave this place!"

Yardrat rubs his watering eyes and nods, looking vaguely in the direction he hears Serena's voice coming from. "Fine, fine! Let's get a move on, then!"

Serena grabs his arm, runs her hand down to his, and places a long string in his grasp.

"Here. I've fashioned a thread you can use to follow my movements. If you can make something similar, we can lead the other Emperors around, too. But it's possible many of them have already been killed!"

The roars of the Archdemon and the Undead Dragon rattle their ears, but the noises are so loud and distant that Yardrat's muddled senses can't even pinpoint the direction they're coming from. He ends up just nodding.

"Go, then! Go!"

Yardrat and Serena begin making their way toward whatever distant soul-blobs she can see. As they walk, Serena explains the situation to him.

"Mephisto was sending shadow-dragons to attack us, but then the First Emperor intervened. I can't tell where all the fighting is happening, but it's closer than you'd think.

The other Emperors can't see a thing, so they've mostly bunkered down in the hopes they'll go unnoticed."

"Mostly?" Yadrat asks.

"Well. I can see Bael's soul from a hundred miles away. He's pretty hard to miss. As for what he's doing... I don't know! But he appears to be moving quickly. Maybe he's running from something."

"Let's hope he and the rest manage to pull through." Yadrat says.

"As long as some freak attack doesn't kill us, I should be able to slowly gather everyone." Serena says. "Let's keep our heads down."

* * *

As Serena and Yadrat slowly fumble their way through the Dark Mist, Bael battles for his life.

Decked out in the Matriarch Armor, its advanced sensor and life support systems filter out the corrosive effects of Mephisto's signature ability.

Bael can see inside Mephisto's miasma perfectly fine!

Indeed, the Matriarch Armor highlights enemies in red and friendlies in green, a concept that took Bael several minutes to fully comprehend, especially as he wasn't sure what the names of those two colors *were* until Ose 'helpfully' reminded him ten times.

But now, Bael faces a serious challenge. Undead creatures rise out of the soil, summoned by Mephisto to try and create chaos on the battlefield. For some unknown reason, they ignore all the other Emperors and head for Bael, forcing him to fight them all!

"Man, this shit's ridiculous!" Bael complains, as he swings Big Bonk around, splattering undead demons, harpies, and minotaurs by the dozens. "Why're they all comin' for ME?? What'd I ever do to Mephisto?!"

Ose uses the Matriarch Armor's sensors to peer through the fog, mostly ignoring Bael's complaints as he mows down undead creatures one after the other.

"Now that Mephisto has Ascended, he must desire powerful souls for some unknown reason. Yours would likely grant him some level of strength to help fight against the Archdemon."

"What, so he wants to EAT me?!" Bael asks.

"That would be my guess."

Bael swings his flail overhead and smashes it in a downward arc, splattering a hundred undead in a single attack and sending a concussive shockwave out that momentarily disturbs the Dark Mist. It quickly reforms, sealing the area in pitch-blackness again.

"This is such bullshit." Bael complains.

While the Emperors struggle to pull themselves together, Mephisto fights for his life against two highly competent enemies: The First Emperor of Transience, and the Emperor of Annihilation, Diablo, the Archdemon.

Diablo acts as the most obviously terrifying enemy. With his super-massive body equaling the size of Mephisto's, he can easily go toe-to-toe with the Myriad Deity without issue.

The Archdemon always keeps one hand dedicated to grabbing the Myriad Deity. Whether holding onto Mephisto's neck, or his tail, or even his spine, Diablo never allows Mephisto to run away. With his cowardly personality, it's only a matter of time before the dragonbone-thief does whatever he can to escape.

Mephisto's shadow-copies become temporarily incapacitated by the First Emperor, as the genderless, androgynous, gas-like entity uses some strange spatial powers to envelop them in restrictive fields of energy.

At the same time, the Archdemon pounds Mephisto's bones with brutal punches and headbutts, occasionally empowering its attacks with nuclear energy. Like Beelzebub, the Archdemon can harness the power of raw annihilation.

BOOM! BOOM!

"Aaargh!"

Mephisto cries out in pain as punches explode against his body, battering him from left to right.

But Diablo doesn't gloat over the ease in which he is trouncing his opponent.

Despite Mephisto's lower Cosmic status, his body has become so durable that Diablo can only cause him pain, not actually begin the process of killing him!

And so, an awkward stalemate begins to play out in real time, over the course of one long hour.

The hardness of Living Moldanium simply cannot be overestimated, especially after it was reforged and purified in the heat of a massive supernova. The bones of the ancient dragon, Leviathan, have become even more attuned to the element of fire than they previously were, and any impurities they once contained have long since vanished.

Diablo punches Mephisto. He lifts the dragon overhead and slams him against Numaria's soil. He unleashes nuclear cannon-blasts from his mouth, striking Mephisto with his full power.

But he never succeeds in so much as making a hairline crack form on Mephisto's undead body. Unlike Anaelle, Diablo lacks the level of striking power required to shatter Mephisto's body to dust.

As for the Myriad Deity himself, he doesn't take the beating passively. He taps into Yama's varied abilities to conjure all sorts of elemental attacks. Fire, lightning, wind, water, air, and even ice. These attacks strike with varying levels of effectiveness, but all of them ultimately lack the potency to finish off the Archdemon. Diablo's regeneration is just as formidable as Beelzebub's, allowing him to regenerate ripped-off limbs or heal huge bloody holes in his body within seconds.

Mephisto snaps his jaws at Diablo, growing more pissed by the minute that he can't escape the Archdemon's clutches.

"LET GO OF USSS!!"

"I WILL NOT."

Mephisto bends his long neck around and chomps down on one of Diablo's arms, the one currently holding tightly onto his spine. He uses the full strength contained within his Living Moldanium dragon-bones to cleanly bite through the Archdemon's flesh, severing that arm and pressing his legs against the ground to jump away...

But one of Diablo's other arms grabs Mephisto's tail, lifts him overhead, and slams him into the dirt!

BOOM!

"Aargh! Confound you!"

Desperate for a way to escape his tormentor's vice-grip, Mephisto speaks with his inner selves, all of them coordinating mostly with Yama to try and come up with solutions.

[I need SSSOMETHING!] Mephisto roars in frustration.

[Boss, Deebs has four arms! They regenerate too quickly even if you tear 'em off!] Zamiel points out.

[We lack the ability to kill Diablo faster than his regeneration can heal him up.] Lupus says. [But he cannot even damage our body. We have an advantage in this battle, in terms of physical durability.]

Yama appears less convinced. [Our powers of darkness have always been our most potent abilities, with second place going to the gem-powers of Orias. As for my other copied abilities, they are much weaker. They will not assist us in a Cosmic-level battle.]

Mephisto snarls in frustration. [Looksss like it's up to ME to sssolve thisss assusual!]

After Diablo sends another brain-busting punch at Mephisto's head and causes him to reel in shock, the Myriad Deity shakes off the pain immediately afterward. He claps his claws together and growls under his breath...

"Become... formless!"

When Mephisto was still an Emperor, he possessed the ability to turn his body into a mist so fine and gaseous that his soul became untraceable and invisible, even outright undetectable.

However, after becoming a Deity, that power has lost much of its potency. Not because its effectiveness has weakened, but because turning dragon-bones as hard as Leviathan's into a mist-like substance is simply too difficult!

But even so, he does manage to reduce their hardness, making himself more slippery and water-like.

Delighted, Mephisto quickly begins wriggling around like a fish covered in mucus. The Archdemon's grip loosens as he tries to place more hands on the struggling bone-dragon, but Mephisto finally succeeds after ten minutes of struggling, yanking his tail out of the Archdemon's grasp and racing away.

"YESSS!!" Mephisto shouts gleefully, solidifying himself after he beats a hasty retreat, putting distance between himself and his nemesis. "We've broken free! Finally!"

Mephisto does not flee too far from Diablo. He merely puts a healthy distance between himself and his opponent, flying into the sky to hover in the lower atmosphere.

Diablo, meanwhile, stays on the ground. He aims his head at Mephisto, his eyeless face following the Myriad Deity's unmistakably shaky multi-soul foundation to guess at what Mephisto is planning.

"RUNNING AWAY, ARE YOU?" Diablo asks.

"We ssseem to be at a bit of an impasse..." Mephisto hisses, glaring defiantly at his opponent below. His eyes flick hungrily to the Emperors below, desiring greatly to reach out and devour them.

Unfortunately, Mephisto's shadow-copies proved utterly ineffective at sneakily hunting for his prey. The First Emperor trapped them in some sort of strange prison made of an unknown energy type, forcing Mephisto to disperse their bodies back to shadow-fragments.

"Ridiculousss." Mephisto mutters. "We require Emperor sssoulsss to increassse our power, but thissss Diablo won't make it easssy on usss..."

"THIS WORLD IS UNDER MY PROTECTION." Diablo states, as he looks up at Mephisto. **"DO NOT EVEN THINK OF TOUCHING THE DEMON EMPERORS HERE."**

Mephisto snarls at Diablo. He longs to seize the prizes being denied to him.

While Mephisto does not know the exact strength he could obtain if he devoured more Emperor bodies and souls, he did manage to eat two of them before Crow ascended. The jump in power was not entirely insignificant.

[If I could only devour all fifty sssoulsss below, I might obtain the strength needed to finish off Diablo. Then I could devour him ass well...] Mephisto thinks to himself.

[Wait.] Zamiel says, as a strange look appears in his eyes. [Boss! I've got it!]

[Hm? You do?] Mephisto asks, looking inward at Zamiel's soul-figure.

[Yeah. It's pretty obvious if you think about it. We need Emperor souls to power up, right? Have ya already forgotten?]

Zamiel smirks evilly.

[These ain't the only Demon Emperors in the cosmos, boss.]

Mephisto's breath metaphorically catches, making him quietly gasp.

[Ah! That'sss it! You're right, Zamiel. HEH HEH HEH... we don't need *thesse* Emperorsss ssspecifically...]

Diablo's face scrunches up in worry as he sees the emotions playing across the dragon's face change from confusion and outrage to sinister glee. Mephisto smiles cruelly at Diablo, then gives him a long, slow nod.

"KEKEKE! You have beaten usss for now, Diablo. You and the Firsst Emperor are more than our match here. But do not be ssso cccertain thisss will remain the cassse forever..."

"WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?" Diablo asks, not exactly afraid Mephisto is about to pull a fast one on him, but a little worried by the implication in his opponent's words. **"REMEMBER, MEPHISTO. WE ARE DEMONS. WE DO NOT NEED TO BE ENEMIES. WE SHOULD WORK TOGETHER TO SUBJUGATE THE PLAGUE, THE VOLGRIM, AND THE HUMANS."**

"Well, you sssee, that iss where our opinionsss differ." Mephisto says softly. "You are a falsse Deity. We are a true Deity. You are but a mere Emperor, ssso we will never ressspect your authority. And sssoon, that meager 'power' you posssesss will not be enough to contessst usss, either."

Mephisto calmly levitates backward. He waves his hand, conjuring a portal across the galaxy.

"We will meet again, Diablo. When we do, we will tear you limb from limb. We will devour your mind, sssoul, and body... we will merge you into ourssself, making you jusst another pieccce of our power. KEKEKEKE!"

Diablo watches with concern as Mephisto steps through that portal and closes it behind himself, his cackling laughter cutting off abruptly as the portal closes.

Numaria falls silent.

Diablo waves his hands, causing the remaining Dark Mist to disperse. It fades away, allowing the Emperors and other creatures within the mist's radius to finally see and breathe the open air once more.

Bael slaps the remaining undead attacking him to death, freeing himself up to look around.

"Eh? We won?"

Yardrat and fifteen other nearby Emperors regain their senses. They look around in confusion, not certain of what events transpired deeper within the mist.

"Mephisto left?" Yardrat asks, suspicious. "Why?"

The Archdemon turns to face the remaining Emperors. With a casual sweep of his senses, Diablo identifies every living Emperor and confirms that none fell to the Myriad Deity.

"MEPHISTO WAS UNABLE TO ACHIEVE HIS GOALS." Diablo states. "HE HAS LEFT NUMARIA. HE OPENED A PORTAL TO TRAVEL ELSEWHERE IN THE MILKY WAY."

Emperor Fae steps forward. "Well shit, that's great! Beats having him eat us alive!"

Bael nods. "You said it, sister. That Mephisto's turned into a real creep after he dragoned-up himself. I'm sure glad to see him go."

"DO NOT REJOICE YET." Diablo says sternly. "I HAVE NOT TOLD YOU THE REST OF THE NEWS. MEPHISTO'S PORTAL... IT LED OFF NUMARIA, AND ITS DESTINATION WAS... TARUS II."

The Archdemon pauses for half a second.

"HE IS GOING TO THE WORDSMITH'S WORLD. THERE IS ONLY ONE COSMIC ENTITY CAPABLE OF DOING BATTLE AGAINST HIM ON THE HUMAN'S WORLD, BUT THE CHERUBIIM IS STILL EXHAUSTED. IT WILL NOT BE ABLE TO PROTECT HUMANITY."

Serena frowns. "The Myriad Deity wanted to devour our souls to empower himself. But there are other Emperors on Tarus II! What if Mephisto devours Emperors Kiari, Belial, or even Beelzebub?!"

"I AM NOT ENTIRELY CERTAIN. BUT THE RESULT WILL LIKELY BE A STRONG EMPOWERMENT OF MEPHISTO'S STRENGTH. HE WILL RETURN AND BE ABLE TO MORE EFFECTIVELY DO BATTLE AGAINST ME."

"Then, don't you think you oughta go to Tarus II and help?" Fae asks.

"THIS BODY IS FORMIDABLE. IT IS MASSIVE. IT IS POWERFUL. BUT IT IS SLOW AND DIFFICULT TO MOVE." Diablo states matter-of-factly. **"I AM UNABLE TO OPEN PORTALS AS FREELY AS MEPHISTO CAN. IN TERMS OF MOBILITY, HE FAR EXCEEDS ME. FURTHERMORE, IT WOULD NOT BE A GOOD IDEA FOR ME TO INTRUDE UPON HUMANITY'S STRONGHOLD."**

Yardrat snorts. "What, are you afraid of the big bad Wordsmiths? You're a Cosmic now! You should be more than strong enough to defeat them now!"

"A COSMIC, YES. AFRAID OF THE WORDSMITHS, NO. I AM SIMPLY UNWILLING TO GO AGAINST THE FIRST EMPEROR'S COMMANDS..." Diablo says turning his gaze to the side.

Abruptly, a figure materializes in the air, its body hazy and distorted, as if existing between multiple dimensions.

Mephisto must fall. But the balance must also be maintained. The first Emperor says. **The Milky Way is a living organism. Its cells are comprised of humans, demons, and Volgrim. All are essential for competing in the upcoming interstellar war. All have a role to play. Diablo will not travel to Tarus II. The Wordsmiths will need to prove their strength if they are to survive the upcoming war.**

"That runs counter to what you just said." Yardrat points out. "If the humans are so important to keep alive, then shouldn't we intervene to help them? I can open a portal for the Archdemon if I channel enough mana to increase its size..."

There is no contradiction. The First Emperor says, continuing to levitate in the sky like a god. **The balance is only maintainable if all the participants rise to their peak. Humanity will not fall, because they have begun to rise to their status as an Apex Species, like the Volgrim. Rather, it is the demons who have begun to fall behind.**

"I see." Yardrat says, looking at the other Emperors contemplatively. "We have Diablo now, but he is only one piece of our ultimate strategy. We should find more methods to uplift ourselves further..."

Diablo is capable of protecting you against certain Cosmic Threats. The First Emperor clarifies. **But as a true Cosmic, he is no longer capable of shielding you from Mundane Threats. This is why we desired to draw Mephisto to our**

side. He would have become a powerful ally if he had only shed his old desires for power. Sadly, he is too small-minded to do such a thing.

"What do you mean?" Serena asks. "Why can't Diablo protect us from so-called 'mundane threats'? Isn't he terrifyingly powerful now?"

Diablo lifts his head slightly. **"POWERFUL. YES. BUT BY STEPPING INTO THE REALM OF COSMIC, I HAVE BECOME SHACKLED BY THE AKASHIC LAWS. THIS IS A NECESSARY TRADEOFF TO ALLOW OUR SPECIES TO FINALLY BECOME A PLAYER IN THE AKASHIC GAME."**

All shall be revealed when the time is ready. The First Emperor states. **I will travel to Tarus II now. My existence is transient. I am unable to affect the material plane as readily as I would like, but I shall attempt to assist the humans in some small, perhaps insignificant way.**

The First Emperor's body slowly begins to fade, and along with its presence, so too do the memories of its words begin to evacuate the minds of the demons present.

Diablo lifts his hand and waves it around, causing those memories to stop disappearing.

"THE FIRST EMPEROR OF TRANSIENCE." Diablo says, his tone ambivalent. **"HE IS... POWERFUL. BUT ALSO WEAK. HE CANNOT SOLVE ALL OF OUR PROBLEMS."**

Some of the smarter demons frown at Diablo's words.

"Be honest, Diablo." Serena says. "The First Emperor. Is he a Deity? Or is he even a demon at all?"

"NOT EVEN I AM CERTAIN."

Part 509: Cosmic Levels

Solomon pauses his work, opting to stop writing books for his library for a while. He rests his palm on Hope's shoulder and smiles.

"Come. Walk with me."

He leads Hope out of the library, down a few halls, and into the forest Hope conjured for the Hero known as the Mountain Hermit.

"I've been coming here a lot, recently." Solomon says, as they wander over to the edge of the forest. "I've even had a few chats with that oddball, Jeremiah. Nice chap. A man of few words."

Solomon and Hope walk over and sit down beside a beautiful placid lake. Above them, a false sun glows in the sky, its presence intended to give this fake world the illusion of being a part of Old Earth. Distant birds chirp, and across the lake, a pair of deer lap at the water...

"You wanted to know about the different types of Cosmics." Solomon says, after he and Hope have sat down for a short while.

"I do." Hope says. "Can you enlighten me?"

Solomon nods. "I don't want you thinking I've withheld information from you again. I did not tell you about this because, at the time, there was no point in you knowing. But it will become necessary to keep in mind, very soon. Mephisto has Ascended, and the Archdemon has returned. Things won't be as simple as they were before."

"I find that hard to believe." Hope says, frowning. He tosses a stone out across the pond, skipping it across the water. "Why would you hide the existence of Cosmics from me? What purpose would me not knowing that information serve?"

Solomon remains silent for a while. Perhaps thirty seconds.

He looks out across the lake and sighs.

"Hope. What is a puddle to an ant?"

"I don't think I follow." Hope replies.

"An ant. An insect. When it encounters a puddle, what do you think it imagines the puddle to be, from its perspective?"

"Uh. I guess... a small lake?" Hope says hesitantly.

"That's right." Solomon confirms. "To an ant, a puddle is a formidable obstacle, one it cannot cross easily. But imagine you were in the position of that ant. What would you think, with your advanced brain, when you learned that actual lakes existed? What about seas? What about entire oceans? Could you even mentally fathom such vast bodies of water?"

Hope scrunches up his face.

"I suppose it would be difficult. But compared to an ocean, ants and humans are practically the same size. Oceans are still huge to me."

"That's missing the point." Solomon says, waving his hand casually. "To you, a rock on the ground fits in your palm. But to an ant, that rock is a massive boulder. If an ant were to look up at you, it might perceive you as a 'god.' Some incredible entity capable of manipulating the environment in ways no mere ant ever could."

Solomon continues. "In the same way, you as a human might look up to a Demon Emperor as an indestructible god of destruction. And to a Demon Emperor, a Cosmic Entity is the next step up that ladder. To a Cosmic, a Ruler is the next step up... and to a Ruler, the First Ruler is the ultimate authority of all reality."

"So what's above Akasha himself?" Hope snarks. "Don't tell me. There's ten more levels after him? A super-giga-ultra Ruler??"

Solomon appears unamused. "Not as far as I know."

"That isn't a 'no.'" Hope retorts.

"I have no reason to believe there is anything beyond Akasha." Solomon says. "More importantly, you're missing my main point. You never needed to know anything about Cosmics, because none of them were going to affect you, and even if they did, you didn't have the capital to stand against them. But now, both of those variables have changed."

Hope ceases his snarking to look at Solomon more seriously. "I take it this is a big deal."

"Oh, it's bigger than you can imagine." Solomon says. "I'll tell you the truth, Hope. Until recently, the only Cosmics I knew of in the Milky Way were the Volgrim, and the

Archangels, once they ascended. I had my doubts regarding the Archdemon, and the First Emperor's arrival was certainly suspicious, but I couldn't confirm anything."

Solomon waves his hand, conjuring an image of Numaria, slowed down one-hundredfold, where Mephisto and the Archdemon engage in a brutal struggle for dominance.

"Diablo is no longer a rampaging monster hellbent on destruction. The First Emperor has somehow pacified and taught Diablo how to fully control his Archdemon form. The overall power output seems a bit weaker than what I observed during the War in Heaven, but it's also become much more consistent and focused. Diablo is a serious threat now."

"If we end up fighting, can I beat him?" Hope asks.

"Honestly? No. I don't think you can. And the reason for that is why I need to tell you about Cosmic Entities in greater detail."

Solomon sits up straight, assuming a solemn teaching posture.

"The rise from a non-Sentient to a Sentient creature is a qualitative increase in intelligence. The ability to craft tools and think with long-term strategy in mind is extremely significant. This sort of qualitative powerup is what allowed humans to dominate their animal ancestors."

"Similarly," Solomon continues, "the difference between a human and a Demon Duke, let alone an Emperor, is also qualitative. The mightiest human is but a gnat before the weakest Emperor. An Emperor can lay waste to millions of humans effortlessly."

"Sure, but humans can build machines to fight back." Hope points out.

"That's correct. Humans can somewhat level the playing field by relying on our technological superiority." Solomon says. "But only the ignorance of demons prevents them from usurping that so-called 'innate' power of ours. Demons think little of technology, but if they were ever to harness it, they would become untouchable. They would have all our benefits, and none of our weaknesses."

"That's not going to happen soon." Hope snorts. "Demons are dumber than *Boomers*. You show them a screen and they start raging about how incomprehensible such a basic piece of technology is."

"Right. That's true for now." Solomon warns. "But it might not be forever. Anyway."

He continues. "Cosmics are another qualitative step up. Once you become a Cosmic, even a bottom level, piss-poor, weak little shitstain like Mephisto, you possess unimaginable power compared to even an army of elite mortals. It doesn't matter if 100 Demon Emperors use human technology to reach their apex of power. They simply cannot stand up to Mephisto at all. This is why the First Emperor was forced to use Diablo to counter Mephisto. The only way to beat a Cosmic is with another Cosmic."

"Seriously?" Hope asks in disbelief. "The situation doesn't seem all THAT dire. His body's stronger, his magic is stronger, and his souls too, most likely. But what makes you call him 'invincible'?"

"It is impossible to become a Cosmic unless one obtains a power that defies reality." Solomon says quietly. "To become a Cosmic is to quite literally break the rules of reality. Mephisto obtained his status by relying on unbelievably durable dragonbones forged in the fires of a supernova, along with the power of the Sphinx to meld all his souls together. And even with all those advantages, he only barely managed to step into the very bottom of the Cosmic rankings. This may seem terrible, but he now possesses a certain advantage that perhaps he has not even yet realized himself..."

"And that would be?" Hope asks.

"All Cosmics are restricted by the Akashic Laws." Solomon states authoritatively. "All of them. From the ancient Archangels to the Archdemon to every other Cosmic in between. And the punishments for breaking those laws can be extreme, to say the least."

Metaphorical question marks pop up above Hope's head.

"What laws can't they break?"

"It's easier to explain a different way." Solomon says. "If you wanted, you could reach out with your magic and slaughter a million people effortlessly. In fact, King Arthur once did that very thing by accident. You are a mortal, bound by mortal laws. But Cosmics are so powerful that they can destabilize the universe itself. As such, Akasha placed down laws upon Cosmics to ensure they would not be able to do this."

Solomon pauses for a moment to let his next words sink in.

"Cosmics are not allowed to 'interfere' in the mortal realm. The definition of 'interfere' varies. But essentially, the more powerful a Cosmic is, the more restrictive this definition

becomes. At higher levels, Cosmics may only do battle with one another, lest they suffer a terrible backlash."

Hope closes his eyes to ponder this revelation for a few seconds.

"So... if Mephisto slaughters the Demon Emperors, he'll receive a backlash from the Akashic Laws?"

"No. That's the thing. He won't." Solomon continues. "Mephisto is actually such a weak and pathetic Cosmic Entity that the Akashic Laws barely apply to him. He can continue lording his existence over us mortals with ease. But at the same time, he is unable to contest against basically any other Cosmic. This makes him an *extremely* useful pawn, since he would be capable of devastating entire planets where High Cosmics could not. Diablo is heavily restricted by the Akashic Laws, because *he* is a Middle Cosmic."

"That's right..." Hope says slowly. "You told me before that the five tiers of Cosmic Entities are Bottom, Low, Middle, High, and Apex."

He cocks his head.

"...So what level is Founder Dosena? A High Cosmic?"

Solomon sighs.

"No. She is also a Middle Cosmic, like Diablo. And for your information, when the Archangels combined to become the Cherubiim, they only attained the level of Low Cosmic."

"I see!" Hope exclaims. "So if Dosena had shown up, she could have destroyed the Cherubiim with ease!"

Solomon's expression becomes contemplative.

"Not... exactly. Things aren't that simple. Remember when Ose, as a mere Demon Emperor, unleashed a powerful attack that smote the Cherubiim? This meant she somehow managed to combine Bael's indestructible body with her lightning-enhanced speed to achieve a power capable of rivaling a Low Cosmic. It's even possible she could rival Dosena, though we weren't able to confirm as much."

"But you said mortals couldn't rival Cosmics." Hope says, pointing out the contradiction in Solomon's words.

"Akasha's Game has Laws. But Laws are made to be broken. Akasha is neither all-seeing, nor all-caring." Solomon explains. "Sometimes, anomalies can appear. And Bael... he does indeed appear to be one of those anomalies..."

Hope nods, recalling what Solomon told him about Bael's strange ability to conjure creatures from the Great Beyond. While Solomon has not managed to set up as robust an observation system as Jason has around the Milky Way, the powers of the Heroes Hope recovered have proven quite effective at supplementing Solomon's abilities.

He can spy nearly as well as the First Wordsmith...

"So." Solomon concludes. "Let me reiterate. Cosmics are not allowed to harm mortals. If they do, they will suffer backlashes. The stronger a Cosmic, the greater the backlash, up to and including their death. However, Mephisto is such a pathetic, weak little pissant of a Cosmic that he is not presently bound by these restrictions."

"So that would make Mephisto a great ally for Diablo." Hope observes. "Diablo should be around Founder Dosena's level, right? That means he can restrain her, while Mephisto could be like his attack dog, running roughshod over the rest of the Volgrim."

Solomon visibly winces. "Well... almost. Except, there's one minor detail you've overlooked."

He pauses.

"Regarding Founder Dosena. She's a Middle Cosmic. She's a 9th Level Psion. What do you suppose that makes the 8th Level Psions?"

Hope blinks. His heart skips a beat.

"No way. NO WAY! You're telling me... every single one of the Executors are Cosmics too?!"

"Low Cosmics." Solomon says. "And the 7th Level Psions... they're all Bottom Cosmics."

"Holy SHIT!" Hope exclaims, jumping up and staring down at Solomon in horror. "Just... just how many Cosmics does the Volgrim Empire have?! You're telling me a single 7th Level Psion is powerful enough to blast the entirety of Tarus II to kingdom come?!"

"Oh, certainly." Solomon nods. "But don't you recall? The Energy Wars of human myth, those frightening wars that nearly rendered our species extinct... during those wars, not a single Psion above the 6th Level showed their face. And the vast majority were 5th

Level or below. Most 5th Level Psions can obliterate Demon Emperors without breaking a sweat, barring aberrants like Emperor Ose, Gorn, or Auger. But even the mightiest Emperors usually can't harm a 6th Level Psion. As for 7th Levels? Forget it."

Hope remains standing for a full minute. He becomes lost in his thoughts as he gazes into the distance, his pupils expanding and contracting several times.

Eventually, he slumps back to his butt. He rests his face in his hands, while moaning quietly. "Oh, god. Oh my god. This is insane. I didn't realize- I mean, how can the Volgrim be THAT powerful? Are our human Heroes anything to them at all?!"

Solomon sighs. "It may seem pointless to struggle against them, Hope. But I assure you. Heroes are not as weak as you may now imagine. Arthur was, I would estimate, potentially at the level of a Bottom Cosmic, or even a Low Cosmic while he was alive. You and Jason both have an infinite potential for your growth. I believe reaching the level of Middle Cosmic should be within reach."

Hope lifts his head from his palms. "Then shouldn't that become my top priority?! Humanity is practically defenseless as we stand now!"

"Again, the situation is not as you think." Solomon says. "You've already defeated a 7th Level Psion, Hope. And not just any Psion, but an elite among her peers. That means you already possess the power of a Bottom Cosmic, at least when wielding Excalibur."

Solomon smirks. "We humans... we possess high potential. Our artifacts and technology will give us a fighting chance in the upcoming war. For right now, the Volgrim aren't even our true enemies. They don't want to fight us any more than we want to fight them. We need to work together to defeat the Plague."

"Yeah. But assuming we DO defeat the Plague, what *then*?" Hope asks.

"Well." Solomon replies. "Then it's time for the gloves to come off."

Solomon pauses to clear his throat.

"Anyway. You're not a true Cosmic, yet you have the capital to contend with Bottom Cosmics like Confessor Vulcanix. That means you're in a similar position as Mephisto, Hope. If you become any stronger, there's a high chance the Akashic Laws will start applying to you. And if THAT happens, you'll lose your ability to contend with the forces threatening humanity."

Hope opens his mouth to retort, but he stops before he speaks, then looks off into the distance.

"...Wait a minute. What if... what if Jason and I..."

"Hm?" Solomon grunts.

"Well. What if I ascended to become a Middle Cosmic, or perhaps even higher. But *then*, what if Jason *didn't*? He could remain a mortal to deal with the lower-level matters while I dealt with the higher-level ones."

Solomon raises his eyebrows. "That... is not a bad option. I'm surprised you'd lean toward such an idea."

"Only because it involves me taking the lead as the Milky Way's overlord." Hope says with a smirk. "Jason can stay my underling and shine my shoes. That would suit me just fine."

"Hah!" Solomon laughs. "And there it is, that ego of yours rears its ugly head. What if Jason is the one to ascend first, Hope? He might even be doing so in secret, as we speak."

"Jason doesn't have Excalibur." Hope says confidently. "Maybe I can harness the divine blade's power to boost myself to the next tier of strength."

"Sure. But Jason has Camael's Cube." Solomon points out. "He's not without similar options, Hope. Don't get cocky."

The Second Wordsmith doesn't like that thought. He glowers at Solomon, then looks away.

"We'll see who ultimately ends up on top. I'm betting it will be *me*."

A few minutes pass. Hope gazes into the distance.

"Say, what about that angel Bael summoned? The Apex Cosmic? Didn't she destroy an entire Fairy city without suffering a backlash?"

Solomon strokes his beard.

"Hmm. She did, yes. Strange. That shouldn't be possible. Unless..."

"Unless?" Hope asks.

"Unless Akasha's rules don't apply to her." Solomon replies. "She seemed to have died and traveled to the Great Beyond. How Bael summoned her, I'm not certain. Perhaps those who return from the Great Beyond... are no longer bound by the Akashic Laws? I

certainly pray that isn't the case. It would make Bael a more frightening enemy than even the Second Founder."

"Yeah..." Hope says, trailing off. "Bael. We're going to need to keep an eye on him."

The two men continue chatting for a few hours.

Eventually, Hope gets up to leave.

"I need to head back to Tarus II and help everyone prepare. See you soon, Solomon."

"Don't be a stranger, boy." Solomon replies.

"Return." Hope says, teleporting away.

Solomon remains seated by the lake, enjoying the beautiful midday view.

He waves his hand, conjuring an image of Founder Dosena as she races across the Void toward the world of Numaria.

"Hmm. I wonder what she'll have to say when she encounters Diablo..."

Part 510: Myriad Assault

In the Void half a million miles from Tarus II, a portal forcibly tears open space, and a 100-foot-tall dragon made entirely of bone and rotted flesh emerges.

Mephisto, the Myriad Deity, quickly closes the portal behind himself. He looks at the space where it dissipated for several long seconds, half-expecting Diablo to try and rip open one of his own.

But thankfully for Mephisto, the Archdemon remains behind on Numaria, content to allow Mephisto to escape.

[Hmm... Glinch hasss been captured, and we do not know where he wasss taken...] Mephisto says to the souls inside himself idly. [But it doesss not matter. There are Demon Emperorsss worth devouring on Tarusss II. We ssshould move with hassste! Kekekeke!]

His eyes glow with greed. The Myriad Deity rockets forward, racing across the Void while approaching the general area where he suspects Tarus II to be.

Unfortunately, the Wordsmiths have placed a powerful magical barrier around not only Tarus II, but its moon, Kelkin, as well.

The barrier turns the planet and moon completely invisible to the naked eye, and even shields them from spiritual and psionic senses, at least in theory.

Mephisto travels for a while, but invisible question marks pop up over his head. Through his connections, he has already learned of the Wordsmith's ability to hide humanity's homeworld from the observable universe, but even so, he shouldn't be *too* far off the mark...

Mephisto sweeps his Cosmic-level senses in a vast area around himself. But bafflingly, he detects faint remnants of Tarus II here, there, all around himself, seemingly in ten to twenty possible locations at once.

Mephisto metaphorically scratches his head. [What the... where isss it?! I ssshould have arrived clossse by...]

Lupus snickers under her breath. [The Wordsmiths might be young and inexperienced, but they aren't completely stupid. I'll bet the Volgrim warned them you were coming. They've put fake trails all over the place to confuse you.]

Mephisto's expression falls. [Gah! Then I'll jussst have to keep sssearching! I don't believe mere mortal Wordsssmithssss can hide anything from a Deity like me!]

He increases his speed, racing around to chase after the faint magical trails in the vicinity, hoping to slip through the field hiding Tarus II from his gaze. Unfortunately, he fails once, twice, even three times!

[Ridiculousss!!] Mephisto snarls. [WHERE THE HELL ISSS IT?! YOU CAN'T JUSSST HIDE A DEVIL-DAMNED PLANET!!]

[Boss, boss, calm down.] Zamiel says. [I've got an idea...]

Zamiel quickly enlightens Mephisto, making the Myriad Deity school his expression and nod.

[Ahh, not bad. Excccellent idea, Zamiel. I'll do that.]

Mephisto performs a few advanced hand-signs. He conjures the full magical might of the former Emperor of War and materializes a massive railgun made of pure demonic energy.

The gigantic cannon glows an ominous blood-red thanks to the Cosmic Energy powering its internal systems. Mephisto himself doesn't have the damndest clue how such technology works, but neither does he need to. Zamiel's abilities defy reality, allowing him to mimic any technology crafted for war so long as he's come into close contact with it before!

Mephisto begins quickly spinning around, silently firing massive, blinding bolts of blood-red mana into the Void. He targets the distant sensations of mana disturbances he believes to be Tarus II's locations, allowing his destructive weaponry to travel at lightspeed and do the tedious searching for him.

One bullet.

Ten bullets.

A hundred...

For thirty long minutes, Mephisto continues shooting his railgun without a care in the world. Thanks to his status as a Cosmic Entity, even the weakest level, his mana reserves have become practically inexhaustible, at least when considering such a relatively meager expenditure.

Fwip!

Fwip!

Mephisto's claws press the cannon's trigger again and again. He narrows his eyes as a strange feeling wells up in his chest when he aims at one of the trails he detected before. This time, purely on instinct, he targets a position three degrees to the left...

Whoomph.

The railgun shot silently detonates as it strikes something unseen in the void!

Mephisto's cold, undead heart practically leaps out of his chest in euphoria.

[THERE IT ISSS!] Mephisto exclaims. [The world of Tarusss- *huh?*]

Mephisto pauses. He frowns as the explosion's fiery aftermath dissipates, revealing a figure levitating in the Void.

Hope Hiro, the Second Wordsmith, emerges from a fold in space and smirks at Mephisto. A powerful force-field tightly engulfs his body, protecting him from the vacuum of space.

[Hello, Mephisto. I wondered if you'd ever come close, considering how many shots you missed.] Hope says, his tone smug. [That last one was a little scary. I decided to intervene.]

Mephisto starts to say something, but before he speaks, his eyes fall onto a certain object held in Hope's hand.

The united minds of the Myriad Deity all shudder in fear as they spot that object at the same time.

[Excalibur!] Yama cries.

[The Divine Blade! When did the Wordsmiths recover it?!] Zamiel asks, his tone turning to fear.

Mephisto's pupils shrink to pinpricks. He has been far too busy with his ascension to learn of Hope Hiro's recent successful assault on the Volgrim. He never learned of the secret operation Hope conducted to steal a thousand Heroic Artifacts back from the Volgrim. He certainly didn't learn of Hope creating the Hall of Heroes, nor of him learning to wield the full power of Excalibur.

But one thing is for certain. When Mephisto's eyes fall upon that blade, the same one that reaped millions of demon lives back on Ancient Earth, he cannot help but remember the terror Camael and Arthur brought to his species whenever they unleashed the Divine Blade's power.

Hope's smile turns feral when he sees the unmistakable fear in Mephisto's giant draconic eyes.

[Scared? You should be. I'm not like Jason. I don't hold back when I fight my enemies. You came here, so I'm going to kill you. It's as simple as that. Trying to attack my home was the last mistake you'll ever make.]

Hope's words burrow into Mephisto's ears, making the Myriad Deity shudder.

But, after a few moments, Mephisto's cunning rationality wrestles back control. The Myriad Deity shakes off his fear and grimaces, looking at Hope with bloodlust.

[That blade... it wasss once an unssstoppable weapon which reaped demon livesss like wheat. But thossse were mortal demonssss. We are a Cosssmic Entity. We are beyond you, *Sssecond Wordsssmith*. Excalibur will NOT be able to harm usss anymore!]

[We'll see about that.] Hope replies, his voice oozing confidence.

Mephisto dissipates the railgun and summons hardened Qi onto his body to reinforce his bones.

Their battle will not end quickly...

Recommended Listening

Hope and Mephisto launch toward one another in the blink of an eye.

The human, eight feet tall.

The demon-dragon, a hundred feet tall, and just as long!

A gnat versus a giant, David versus Goliath, the fight should be decided in an instant. But it isn't!

Hope's body begin flickering from side to side as he approaches Mephisto. He clutches in his left hand a magical bo staff belonging to the ancient Hero known as Jeremiah.

The All-Seer!

Jeremiah's vision is truly impressive. Hope channels the Mountain Hermit's power to not only make out every detail of his distant adversary as he closes the gap, but also because of a hidden ability Jeremiah himself barely used during his life.

The Hermit can see flashes of the future before they happen!

Mephisto's giant claw swipes toward Hope, but the Wordsmith easily sees it coming. He skips to the side a mere millisecond before the claw can connect, allowing it to tear through his after-image.

Then Hope teleports past Mephisto's chest, behind his back, and spins around while raising Excalibur and the Hermit's Staff overhead.

He swings them both down upon Mephisto's back like a meat cleaver and a megaton hammer, respectively.

Crash, boom!!

Hope smites the undead dragon's spine, but instead of the result he expected, he barely even manages to knock Mephisto a hundred feet away. He doesn't cause the Myriad Deity any perceivable injuries!

Hardly has Mephisto been knocked away before he rapidly spins around and lashes his tail at the diminutive Wordsmith.

Hope teleports, dodging the attack.

Abruptly, a second figure materializes around the dragon, the spitting image of a female King Arthur... Artoria Pendragon!

Artoria ignores the vacuum of space. She flies through the Void with her construct-body while wielding Pseudo-Excalibur, a weapon designed to cut through every material known to man.

She and Hope assault Mephisto from the front and back. They chop and hack at the Myriad Deity, but Hope becomes deeply shocked when the sword that has been able to pierce and hack past any defense finally meets a material it cannot harm.

Pseudo-Excalibur fails to chip even a single flake of Living Moldanium off Mephisto's bones.

The heavy impacts of the swords wielded by Hope and Artoria do cause Mephisto some mild pain, but the demon-dragon doesn't suffer any long-lasting injuries.

And as the battle continues, Mephisto's movements become faster, trickier. He snaps his fingers, imbuing himself with the power of lightning to accelerate and maneuver faster.

BANG!

Mephisto's claw violently slams against Artoria, sending her careening away. She fails to dodge the attack, but luckily her body is durable enough to take one hell of a beating.

Hope continues carefully dodging Mephisto's attacks. While he might act overconfident on the surface, he takes Solomon's warnings about Cosmic Energy seriously. Mephisto might be at the very bottom of the Cosmic scale, but he is still a genuine Cosmic nonetheless!

Mephisto roars in frustration. [SSSTOP DODGING! JUSSST DIE ALREADY! YOU ARE SSSLOWING THISSS DEITY DOWN! YOU ARE ONLY AN ANNOYANCCCE!]

The Myriad Deity slashes at Hope again, but abruptly, Hope stops moving and allows the claw to land on his body.

BOOM!!!

Mephisto gets the successful attack he wanted, but at the moment of impact, every ounce of his own power reverses back into his body, slamming him with the force of a planet-buster attack.

Mephisto screams in pain as Hope somehow directly counters his savage strike, causing Mephisto's soul to suffer a tearing pain.

[Aaargh!]

Hope's smirk deepens. [An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. This is the power of the Hero known as Hammurabi! You will learn to fear him, Mephisto!]

A necklace hangs around Hope's neck. Hammurabi's artifact, miniaturized, rests on the string, along with more than a dozen also-miniaturized relics Hope brought in anticipation of his battle with the Myriad Deity.

Mephisto's arm trembles with pain. He pulls back to get some distance from Hope while snarling at the Wordsmith. [Filthy HUMAN! You resssort to tricksss becaussse you have no REAL power! Compared to thisss deity, you are but a pain in our asses!]

Zamiel's heartrate spikes. [Boss! BOSS! Where's the dame?!]

As soon as he asks, Mephisto quickly scans the vicinity for Artoria, only to realize she's gone missing. Then he senses her approaching him from a great distance away.

Artoria races toward Mephisto, building up speed as she accelerates. She holds Pseudo-Excalibur overhead, ready to chop it down upon his bones.

"RESTRICT!" Hope shouts, aiming a Word of Power at Mephisto.

For a brief instant, invisible chains wrap around Mephisto's body, freezing him in place. Mephisto roars, angry that the Wordsmith has managed to trip him up.

But before Artoria can successfully clear the gap, Mephisto flexes his Cosmic power. He sends a surge of mana out of his bones and easily breaks Hope's pathetic, mortal-level restraints.

When Artoria arrives, Mephisto spins to the side and slams his claw down upon her, parrying her attack and sending her flying once more.

[Nicce try, Wordsssmith! Kekeke!] Mephisto laughs telepathically. [Your Wordsssmithing magic is ineffective againsst a Cosssmic!]

Hope's smirk disappears. He frowns, realizing Mephisto might be right. Even empowering his magic with Excalibur only grants himself a higher volume of mana, or a spell with more breadth.

But as for its qualitative strength, it still remains below the Cosmic level. Mephisto's superior existence allows him to ignore such weak restrictions or break them in less time than a mortal would require.

In the moment between moments, while Hope tries to think of a better way to fight Mephisto, the Myriad Deity suddenly waves his hands.

He conjures a pair of shadow-dragons, then sends them racing across the Void, ignoring Hope and Artoria entirely.

[Shit!] Hope exclaims.

He starts to pursue them when he recognizes the direction those two shadows have begun charging toward, none other than the general location of Tarus II!

When Hope turns to chase after the shadows, Mephisto makes a different move. He summons a Warper portal, then leaps through it, arriving thousands of miles further

ahead of his shadows. Mephisto reverses their direction to charge at Hope while himself resuming course to fly in Tarus II's direction.

[Thossse Emperor sssoulsss will be MINE!]

Hope wields Excalibur and the Hermit's Staff with practiced precision. He shreds Mephisto's pair of shadows, though he does find that each one is roughly as strong as a Demon Emperor. It takes him nearly thirty seconds to properly kill them, giving Mephisto precious time to widen the gap and draw ever closer to Tarus II.

Mephisto succeeds.

As he travels across space, the demon-dragon passes through some unknown boundary, some barrier of invisibility shielding Tarus II from view, and the Paradise-Class world ultimately reveals itself.

The moment Mephisto breaches the invisible boundary, a series of installations on Tarus II aim ground-to-space railgun cannons in Mephisto's general direction.

They fire, sending scraps of metal and precisely-molded bullets flying toward him at relativistic speeds.

Several shots slam against Mephisto, exploding against his bones uselessly, while others only manage to slow his momentum by a fraction of a percent. He barely notices these feeble attacks at all.

"KEKEKE!" Mephisto laughs as he breaches Tarus II's airspace. "HUMANSSS! DIE FOR ME!"

Mephisto waves his hands again. He summons more than a dozen underground Death Gates, causing undead of many types to spawn all over beneath Tarus II's surface.

Inside and outside the Fortress of Retribution, dead monsters and demons empowered by Mephisto's Cosmic Energy emerge from the soil, stronger than they ever were in life. Many end up blasted by nearby troopers who were alerted to Mephisto's imminent arrival ahead of time, but plenty emerge uncontested. They rush toward the civilian population centers, hellbent on causing a mass casualty event to further add to Mephisto's undead coffers.

At the same time, a targeted strike force consisting of Mephisto's former underlings, the undead necromancers named Ozzar, Azuth, and others, emerge from underground while being flanked by two of the Emperors Mephisto killed when he first ascended.

These two were previously mere Dukes who became empowered by Glinch's Soul Pellets, rising to the most glorious station of their existence, only to die immediately after to a casual wave of Mephisto's claws.

This specialized strike force goes on the hunt. Their targets: Any isolated Emperors, such as Belial, Kiari, Beelzebub, or any similarly powerful monsters that can bolster the strength of Mephisto's souls.

Perhaps he won't remain a Bottom Cosmic forever if he can get his claws on the former Second Emperor, Belial, or even the Emperor of Inferno, Beelzebub!

Kiari would be fine too, as Mephisto isn't terribly picky. Remembering how her annoying bugs helped beat back his undead before he ascended, he mostly only wants to eat her so he can enjoy a dish of revenge served cold...

Mephisto's assault on Tarus II does not end as abruptly as the one on Numaria did. Humanity lacks a Cosmic to protect them, aside from the Cherubiim, and the Archangels are still too tired to elevate their souls once more.

Even so, humanity's champions do not falter. Neil's military forces have long grown proficient at battling the demons. With the new advances in training fueled by the Queen Network, the Cube's internal time-accelerated spaces, and each Wordsmith's unique take on how to improve their capabilities, the battle has only just begun.

Amidst all of the chaos, a single Goblin quickly and efficiently slinks out of sight, traveling to a designated meeting area, where he finds a large boulder situated behind a building located two blocks from the Western Hospital. Without hesitation, that goblin steps 'inside' the rock, passing through it as if it weren't there and revealing a hidden space inside. The rock 'hardens' its exterior again, allowing the goblin to lift up a hatch in the ground and enter it, unseen.

He climbs straight down a ladder, where he arrives in an uncomfortably small and cramped observation post complete with top-of-the-line spying technology. Inside, another goblin sits in a chair while facing a small screen, only to turn and face the newcomer.

"Junior Kotori." The second goblin states. "Demon Deity Mephisto is attacking Tarus II. You were smart to come here."

"Informer Jin." The first goblin, Kotori, also known as Grima, says. "Have you informed the Founders of this incursion?"

"The Founders are aware." Jin states. "Operative Duugo has not reported to this one yet. I believe they may have fallen to Mephisto's attack. We are to remain inside the Observation Pod until we receive further orders."

The distant sounds of screams trickle inside the Changeling's underground bunker. Informer Jin quietly dials up the exterior's noise suppression system to improve its concentration ability.

"Founder Dosea." Kotori says. "Is she on her way here? To battle Mephisto?"

"Negative." Jin replies. "Founder Dosea is continuing to travel toward the world of Numaria. The Myriad Deity is a Bottom Level Cosmic. He is no threat to our Empire. It is more important for the Second Founder to investigate the origins of the Apex Cosmic signature that briefly appeared in the Milky Way. Its point of origination was on the world of Numaria."

"This one contemplates, and this one comprehends." Kotori says, nodding its head. "This one will take a seat at the Secondary Terminal. Which entity or location would you like this one to observe?"

"This one will focus on Mephisto." Jin says. "You will attempt to follow the movements of the Second Wordsmith, Hope Hiro. If the First Wordsmith makes an appearance, inform this one at once. We must report every available piece of data we can obtain regarding the Wordsmiths directly to the First Founder. Due to the magical field shielding this world, directly observing the two Wordsmiths has become much more difficult. We must continue to compile a profile for the Five Founders, as the Wordsmiths may become our greatest enemy should the Plague be successfully purged."

Kotori bows its head. It takes two steps and sits at the terminal beside Informer Jin.

"Understood. This one will monitor the Second Wordsmith's movements."

Both Changelings fall silent. They perform their work diligently and begin manipulating tiny, barely-noticed drones that buzz around at hypersonic speeds in Tarus II's skies, even entering the Void itself to try and catch Mephisto and the Wordsmiths in action.

Every piece of intelligence they can feed to the Founders will assist the Volgrim war effort.

After all.

Strength wins battles, but intelligence wins *wars*.

Part 511: Hidden Wordsmith

On the world of Volgarius, at the same time as Mephisto has begun his assault on Tarus II.

Founder Treyza, leader of the Changelings, sits inside a spaceship as it travels across Volgarius's skies. With Hope Hiro having been confirmed as 'dealt with' and pacified by Founder Unarin, the orders have been sent out to all the ships that evacuated the homeworld to return as soon as possible.

The Apex Cosmic appears to have vanished, or perhaps hidden its presence elsewhere in the Milky Way.

Hope Hiro is also no longer an imminent threat.

Thus, Founder Treyza is free to return at its leisure. Like all Changelings, Treyza does not assign itself any pronouns related to biological sex or gender unless currently undergoing an operation on a hostile world. However, the Third Founder has not stepped foot on any foreign locations personally in well over a million years. Since it possesses many capable subordinates, this much is to be expected.

"Hmm."

Treyza idly examines a datapad as its stealth-ship begins the docking procedure with the Founder's Thumb. Several reports scroll across the screen, showing images and video of the Second Wordsmith battling the demon-dragon hybrid known as the Myriad Deity.

Inside that shuttle, four other Changelings sit. Each of them appear to be exact duplicates of the Third Founder. Not only do their mannerisms perfectly mirror Treyza, but even their DNA is identical down to the molecular level. They are not clones, but instead high-level Changelings trained to act as the Third Founder's decoys. In the event of an enemy attack, determining which of the five Changelings is the true Third Founder would prove difficult, and so, they provide a certain level of subterfuge for Treyza's protection.

At the same time, half a dozen 6th Level Psions, and a single 7th Level Psion also sit inside the shuttle. These Psions provide security for Treyza, acting as the Third Founder's bodyguards in the case of an enemy attack. The 7th Level Psion, Praetor Kal, is an

especially talented member of his sub-species. While nowhere near as famous as Confessor Vulpanix, with her explosive rise following the conclusion of the Energy Wars, he is significantly older, at 300,000 cycles of age.

Praetor Kal's main specialties lie in two fields: Detection/Observation, and Subterfuge.

As a master of Investigative Psionics, Praetor Kal's ability to not only detect threats in the vicinity, but sense impending threats has reached the peak. He studied classified branches of Temporal Psionics to give himself a small edge in foreseeing threats which might arise within the immediate future.

Even better, he studied for millennia to learn how to shroud his Existence from the galaxy, as well as the Existences of others, a handy trick in case his charge ever came under threat.

While he is a formidable entity and difficult to deceive, his combat abilities are not to be underestimated either. He long ago mastered the forms of many different Psionic Combat disciplines, and even successfully obtained the approval of the Dolgrimite Matriarch, who gave him the ability to study a few fighting schools from her sub-species. Most non-Dolgrimites, especially among the Psions, would never be able to obtain such a boon.

As one of the most open-minded Psions among his people, Praetor Kal does not consider himself biased against any other species in the universe, be they friend or foe. While the Third Founder studies the images streaming from Tarus II, so too does the Praetor.

[The demons were not supposed to be capable of reaching the level of Cosmic.] Praetor Kal transmits to the Third Founder. [This revelation both worries and excites me.]

"Our species is losing the War." Founder Treyza states without any emotion. "Perhaps the demons could assist us if they became more capable of Ascending. But based upon the method this one has hypothesized Emperor Mephisto used, the other demons will not be able to replicate it."

[And what of the creature known as the Archdemon?] Praetor Kal asks. [Its strength appears to rival Founder Dosena's. It could become a fearsome adversary or a boon companion.]

"We will have to investigate whether or not there are other demons that have hidden methods to achieve Cosmic-level power." Founder Treyza states. "For two to appear at once, as well as an Apex Cosmic Archangel, this information implies the balance of power is not as stable as we first believed."

[It's a shame that by comparison, the humans aren't impressive.] Praetor Kal says. [The Wordsmiths possess vast untapped future prospects, but they are unlikely to accomplish much before the Plague reaches the Inner Systems. The rest of humanity is ordinary.]

Treyza blinks its eyes. It lifts its gaze from its datapad to look at Praetor Kal.

"This one disagrees. The human species is quite remarkable. They have an amount of latent potential equal to all of the Volgrim subspecies combined."

[With all due respect, I find that claim difficult to believe.] Praetor Kal says, contorting his face in disbelief. His six eyes blink slowly. [The humans may possess some magical talent as we have recently observed, but it is inferior to the ancient Titans, demons and angels. They possess no psionic prospects either.]

"This one performed many investigations of the humans during their short but explosive existence on Earth." Treyza says without judgment. "They are highly adaptive creatures, with biologies that grant them... interesting aptitudes the Volgrim cannot replicate."

Treyza continues. "Are you aware of the purity contained within the human genome?"

[I do not comprehend.] Kal answers. [To what 'purity' do you refer?]

"The human species appears ordinary." Treyza begins to explain. "But they are an Apex Species, like the Volgrim. It is only because they have yet to discover their special capabilities that they are not yet a threat to us. Among their biological traits is their remarkable reproductive compatibility with other Sentients."

[Reproductive compatibility?] Kal repeats. [You mean to imply they are sexually compatible with species beyond their own?]

"More than that." Treyza counters. "Human DNA is extremely dominant in its biological makeup. They are capable of impregnating and becoming impregnated by any other species that also reproduces sexually. Further, the percentage of human DNA that overwrites their partner's genomes is remarkably high."

Treyza continues. "In addition to their reproductive supremacy, they are also highly malleable to adverse environments. In fact, the more dangerous and traumatic an environment or situation, the more capable the average human is of dealing with it compared to the average Volgrim. Their superior neuroplasticity allows them to adapt quickly to new and unfamiliar situations."

[Forgive me, Founder, for I am truly ignorant.] Praetor Kal pleads. [But these 'traits' do not sound particularly remarkable. Compared to the overwhelming power of a Psion, what advantages would genetic supremacy or high neuroplasticity offer? These will not prevent humanity from being swallowed by the Plague, nor grant them any advantages in warfare.]

"There are several Founder-level projects regarding the integration of non-Volgrim species with Volgrim gifts, such as psionic potential." Treyza explains. "Only humans have shown the ability to wield psionic power at the lowest levels. We believe that, given time, humans could learn to harness psionic powers to a similar degree as your subspecies. We simply lack the funding and time required to prove this hypothesis correct."

[If you wish to form additional Psions, then we need to create and train more of them ourselves.] Praetor Kal concludes. [Apologies, but I see no value in empowering potential enemies of the Volgrim Empire.]

Only a high level Psion like the Praetor would dare disagree with a Founder's assessment, but Kal knows his limits. He always keeps his tone respectful, and he would only dare speak his thoughts in private, where it would not affect his or the Third Founder's reputation. So long as word never gets out about his disagreement, he won't suffer a social backlash. It helps that Founder Treyza is the most mild-mannered and logical of the Five Founders. Treyza enjoys engaging in robust debates, in order to sustain their intellectual curiosity.

"It stands to reason that the humans could become valuable allies." Treyza says noncommittally. "But they could also become dangerous enemies. We will not know until-"

[QUIET.] Praetor Kal suddenly shouts, as he stands up in his seat.

The abrupt silencing of the Third Founder does not annoy them. Instead, Treyza falls completely silent, its expression becoming more alert as it notices the alarm on the Praetor's face.

[We are being watched!] Kal states, swiveling around to look for something unseen. [I sense... I sense an intelligent mind probing our location!]

Kal quickly tries to pinpoint the alien sensation, but just as quickly as he sensed its arrival, the intruder vanishes, leaving him bewildered.

"Something was observing us?" Treyza asks out loud, glancing around the shuttle's interior without any emotion. "Or *someone*?"

[I am... not certain.] Kal says, his adrenaline lowering as he intentionally reverts his mental state. [I sensed something... distant. Something lacking malice, filled with curiosity. An observer. I am not certain of its origination point, nor its identity.]

Treyza remains silent.

But privately, one suspect comes to the Third Founder's mind.

Perhaps... one of the Wordsmiths...?

Mephisto's body tears through Tarus II's skies. He rockets toward the humans, monsters, and demons below with bloodshot eyes as fire explodes around his body. At the speeds the demon-dragon is traveling, the air resistance has superheated his bones to over a thousand degrees! But given their status as Living Moldanium, such paltry levels of heat don't cause the Myriad Deity any harm whatsoever.

Just as Mephisto travels within five miles of the Fortress of Retribution's airspace, a tiny figure suddenly *pops* into position before him.

So fast is Mephisto moving that he doesn't have the time to consider the figure's identity. He merely raises a claw overhead and slashes toward it, assuming the tiny form to be that of Hope Hiro, teleporting in front of him to stop his charge!

The instant before Mephisto can land his attack, his body abruptly and jarringly comes to a halt, as if compelled by the forces of the universe itself! Like a bird slamming against a bedroom window, Mephisto's attack stops at the last second, along with the rest of his body, making him cry out in surprise.

"Uuuack?!"

The Myriad Deity coughs in surprise, only now getting a look at the figure that has impeded his path.

"What?! You... little fairy wretch!"

Her arms crossed defiantly, Blinker, the Monster Queen, levitates in front of Mephisto with a confident smirk on her face.

"Woo! I won't lie, Mephisto. I was scared for a second! I didn't know if those Sphinx restrictions would still apply to ya, now that you're all strong and stuff. But it sure looks like they do!"

Mephisto snarls at the Fairy Queen. "GET OUT OF OUR WAY! SSSTUPID WOMAN!"

He flaps his wings to fly to the side, attempting to go around her.

Foop!

Blinker teleports directly into Mephisto's path, causing him to once again come to an abrupt and somewhat embarrassing halt.

Considering his appearance as a 100-foot-tall demon-dragon, and her size as a teeny-tiny fairy, the way he has to clumsily avoid her much nimbler and agile form to get at the humans makes him resemble a giant elephant terrified of a rat.

"Move!!!" Mephisto roars, attempting to skirt around Blinker again.

But once more, she teleports into Mephisto's path.

"Don't think so. This is as far as you go, Mephisto. End of the line."

Each time Mephisto tries to bypass the fairy queen, she teleports into Mephisto's way, body-blocking him. If he attacks her, his magic goes berserk, preventing him from causing her any actual harm.

For thirty long seconds, Mephisto tries again and again, but he just can't make it past Blinker, no matter what he does.

At the same time, Hope Hiro quickly dispatches Mephisto's shadow-dragon clones. He rips them apart with Excalibur, then teleports himself and Artoria down to Tarus II, arriving behind Mephisto, where he momentarily becomes confused by the strange 'dance' Mephisto seems to be performing in the skies.

"...*the fuck?*" Hope asks, before noticing Blinker. "Oh! So it's like that."

Hope immediately understands the situation. He stretches out with his senses to grab hold of Mephisto's Cosmic Energy signature, then he yells a Word of Power.

"TELEPORT!"

Intending to yank himself and Mephisto away from Tarus II, all Hope instead accomplishes is teleporting Mephisto backward a mere 500 meters! Instead of tearing the Myriad Deity out of the planet's atmosphere by force, Hope barely even changes his spatial position.

"What?"

Hope becomes momentarily befuddled before remembering what Solomon told him. Even a weak, pathetic Bottom Level Cosmic like Mephisto is still a monster Hope can't easily handle. The usual tricks he uses against Demon Emperors won't work here.

Mephisto, frustrated by his inability to bypass Blinker, sends a scowl Hope's way.

"Ksss... you caught up to usss... but we are not your punching bag, Ssecond Wordsssmith!"

At the mention of his least-favorite nickname, the 'Second Wordsmith' grows visibly angrier. Hope puts away the Hermit's Staff to focus all his attention on wielding Excalibur.

Then, he speaks another series of Words of Power.

"Enlarge! Solidify! Strengthen! Compress! Enlarge! Mass! Gravity..."

Having practiced for ten long hours before Mephisto arrived, Hope quickly fires off a string of thirty Words of Power, causing his body's size to enlarge, solidify, and condense as he grows from eight feet tall to the same size as Mephisto, at over a hundred feet tall!

The power of Excalibur flows through Hope's veins. He deliberately supercharges his body, hardens his skin, and makes himself 'invincible' for the sake of doing battle with this Demon Deity.

Mephisto senses the changes. He turns to look at Hope, then charges at the Hero while Hope is still enlarging himself.

"Not ssso fassst!" Mephisto roars.

But before he can slash at Hope, Blinker teleports in front of him, stymieing his attack and forcing him to abort before he can bite off the Wordsmith's enlarging head.

"GET OUT OF OUR WAY!" Mephisto shouts.

"Don't feel like it!" Blinker shouts back.

Hope completes his transformation, turning himself into a pseudo-Titan as he gazes at Mephisto with a look of glee.

"Time to see what this body can do. C'mere, Mephisto!"

Hope lunges at the Myriad Deity. Mephisto summons his two shadow clones to bite and scratch at Hope, but the enlarged Excalibur takes care of them, while the diminutive Artoria and Blinker harass Mephisto to keep him busy. Artoria uses her Pseudo-Excalibur to slash at any exposed joints Mephisto reveals, while Blinker continually gets in his way and annoys him, preventing the Myriad Deity from landing any full-power strikes.

Mephisto socks Hope in the jaw, snapping the Hero's head backward. Hope feels no pain thanks to his 'Invincible' Word of Power. He follows up with a brutal headbutt against Mephisto, followed by swinging the gigantic Excalibur against Mephisto's arm and sending him flying to the side.

Neither Hope nor Mephisto ultimately receive any injuries from their battle. Frustratingly, Hope's Wordsmithing only ends up making him equally as durable as Mephisto, resulting in a battle between two immovable objects as the two of them whale on each other uselessly.

But things are not so simple for the humans living inside the Fortress of Retribution. Before Mephisto even arrived, humanity had already been forewarned of his approach by Hope and Jason both. They put many of their civilians inside pre-designated disaster shelters and had their soldiers wait on standby, T-REX's activated and ready for battle.

Now, a scene much like the Stormbringer War from a few months earlier plays out once more. Undead burst out of the dirt and charge in every direction, attacking buildings and ripping them apart by their foundations.

Human, monster, and demon soldiers take up elevated positions, either firing their weapons into the swarm or attacking with magical and mundane means alike. Burner Grunts fight alongside humans and Harpies alike, with no discrimination between the three. In their eyes, this is a battle for survival!

Emperor Belial finds herself cornered as a pair of Cosmically-empowered Demon Emperors and three Dukes surround her outside the Western Hospital. The Emperors consist of Vexith, the Emperor of Sludge, and Malor, the Emperor of Oppression. As for the three Dukes, they consist of Ozzar, Azuth, and another of Mephisto's necromancer underlings.

Reborn through Mephisto's Cosmic power, their bodies no longer reek of rotting flesh, but instead glow blood-red with demonic miasma. They lick their lips evilly as they press in on Belial.

"Your body and soul will serve our master well." Ozzar says to her. "Die now."

Vexith pounces at Belial and turns himself into a thick, viscous liquid. He spreads his body out in a large area, intending to trap and restrict her movements.

Belial snaps a punch at his incoming form. She splatters a chunk of his body, spraying his sludgy form outward in a cone, then quickly turns herself into a skinny, pole-width version of herself to leap through that hole. Vexith fails to entrap Belial and instead slaps against the ground like a bag of wet concrete.

At the same time, Malor sends disorienting pulses of energy at Belial. He punches the air, sending soul-suppressing waves her way. Belial cries out in pain, and her body becomes destabilized as she returns to her bipedal form. Belial staggers for a moment, giving the three necromancers a chance to hurl magically enchanted bindings at her wrists and ankles.

Snap! Snap!

They clamp onto her joints like shackles, and the necromancers pull hard, trying to immobilize her so Vexith or Malor can get a kill.

Unfortunately, they are mere Dukes, and Belial is physically the strongest Emperor. She pulls with all her strength on the chains, yanking the necromancers into her range. They scream in fright as she sends punches flying into their skulls, exploding their heads and spraying their brain matter in all directions.

Belial kills all three of the necromancers without breaking a sweat!

But unfortunately, only seconds later, those same necromancers emerge from the ground, clawing their way back to Tarus II's surface to surround her once again.

"The hell?" Belial gasps. "You've become capable of defying death?!"

"Hahahaha! Something like that! Our master is truly peerless in the art of necromancy!" Ozzar declares.

Vexith pounces off the ground. Before Belial can react, his viscous body *splats* against her back and rapidly starts to expand, slithering across her figure too quickly for her to escape. Belial whirls and jumps around, trying to peel the sludge-like Emperor off herself,

but her body quickly becomes heavier and heavier, and nothing she does seems to be capable of pulling him off!

Just when all seems lost, a massive fireball shoots out of the sky and slams into Ozzar's body, blasting him to smithereens and killing him once more.

Then two more fireballs rain downward, killing the other necromancers as well.

Beelzebub rockets toward Belial from above, summoning flames to engulf his body. He grits his teeth and unleashes a warcry. "Guaaah!"

The Emperor of Inferno deliberately crashes into Belial, knocking her against the ground and planting his superheated body against the sludge crawling up her back.

"Eeyyaah!" Belial cries out, as Beelzebub's flames badly burn her skin.

"Aaaaargh!" Vexith also shouts, his body rapidly being boiled alive.

"Shit! Fuck! Aaugh!" Beelzebub also cries, as the backlash from hurting Belial causes his soul to suffer unbelievable pain.

Despite his kamikaze-like tactic, Beelzebub successfully forces Vexith to abandon his strategy. The Emperor of Sludge pulls what remains of himself off Belial and leaps to the side, reforming as a badly-burned, horribly misshapen mess of a demon.

"Aaah! Beelzebub- *cough*! You burned me, you- you fucking fucker!!"

Beelzebub quickly pulls away from Belial, leaving her to twist and contort in agony on the ground. With much of the skin on her back badly melted and fused to her bones, the pain she feels is truly indescribable.

Even so, she doesn't blame Beelzebub. It's obvious at a glance that he had to do that in order to save her life. Belial starts trying to heal herself, but the pain is so excruciating that she can't quite summon the mana needed to do so.

Meanwhile, seeing as Beelzebub has arrived, Emperor Malor summons all the mana in his body to fire a devastating beam of Soul Destruction at Beelzebub, knocking him off his feet and causing the Emperor of Inferno to collapse into hysterics on the ground.

"Aah! You shithead!" Beelzebub shouts, before his migraine immediately subsides and his regeneration kicks in. He jumps back to his feet and directs a rage-fueled glower at the one who just attacked him. "Oh, you are going to *regret* pissing ME off!"

Beelzebub lunges at Malor. It doesn't take five seconds for him to atomize the other Emperor, blasting apart Malor with nuclear hellfire while his opponent screams like a banshee.

Malor dies, and Vexith follows soon after.

Beelzebub turns to say something to Belial, but when he does, he finds that... she's disappeared.

"...Huh?"

Beelzebub blinks twice.

"What the-?! Don't tell me Mephisto got to her after all?"

But then, Jason Hiro's voice speaks inside Beelzebub's mind.

[I've taken care of Belial. Good work, Beelzebub. I overlooked what was happening with her. Keep your focus on Ozzar and the others. They seem to be capable of regenerating from death repeatedly, like you and Satan could. I'm not sure how Mephisto accomplished this, but I suspect it might be due to the evolution of his Cosmic powers...]

"Wordsmith?" Beelzebub asks, looking around in confusion. "Where are you?"

[Not important.] Jason answers. [Keep up with what you're doing. If you want to prove you've changed over a new leaf, there's no time like the present.]

Beelzebub pauses for a brief moment, a strange feeling welling up in his chest. He nods.

"Right. I'll do that, then."

The Myriad War continues...

Part 512: Benny's Brain Battle

Hope Hiro, Blinker, and Mephisto engage in a dangerous dance of death as the human and fairy do battle to prevent Mephisto from drawing any closer to the single mega-city housing the vast, overwhelming majority of humanity's population.

While they fight, Mephisto's undead pour into the land beneath the city with reckless abandon. Their undead nature grants them the ability to travel up and emerge from the dirt anywhere they please, and with Cosmic power filling their bodies, every single Risen creature possesses twice the strength they did when they were alive.

Skeletons assault the hospital, but they're driven back by Emperor Belial.

Undead orcs and goblins attack one of the largest reinforced shelters, where the Minotaur known as Yamir works together with dozens of humanity's elites to fend off the attackers.

The Felorians put their skills to good use by hunting down the stronger enemies beneath the Duke level in groups of two and three soldiers each.

Commander Neil himself makes sure to join the fray. While protecting his life and commanding from a distance might ensure he would save his skin, he bravely dons his iconic red and blue exosuit to fight on the frontlines. Having been recently upgraded by Hans Wagner, it possesses much stronger defensive capabilities now, including a limited-use jumpjet engine for quick escapes.

Alongside Neil, a group of black-suited soldiers wielding anti-demon material rifles take up positions atop nearby buildings. Waves of undead spawn en-masse to climb the structures and tear out their foundations, but the troopers wearing Spectre T-REX's are no ordinary soldiers. They are Neil's hand-picked bodyguards, his elite protection force he assembled following his rescue from Ose's prison.

A single Hummer-wearing soldier, Linda Hurent, flies around in the skies, her exosuit's flight speed roughly 25% faster than when she fought Beelzebub a few months earlier, following his escape from the Southern Prisons. Linda wields a sniper rifle and levitates above Neil, taking potshots at any high-level targets he points out.

On the western side of the Fortress of Retribution, a platoon of soldiers operates under the temporary command of Benjamin Brown. Having mostly recovered from his battle with Gressil, and having also reawakened his primal sense of fighting spirit, the man formerly known as Humanity's Strongest Soldier fights Mephisto's undead with his one remaining arm. With his left arm torn off following Lucifer's attack, he's lost a good deal of his fighting strength. But even so, he can still use a Nanosword with his remaining hand.

Benjamin swings the Nanosword with a strangely ferocious rage. The other soldiers nearby keep their distance, awed and slightly afraid of his brutal killing methods. With every swing, Benjamin beheads and bisects one to two undead monsters the moment they pop out of the ground. Whether Mephisto sends ordinary monsters, demon grunts, or even Demon Lords, it doesn't matter. Benjamin slaughters them all with such fury that they eventually stop popping up in the immediate vicinity, too afraid to come within his reach.

As for Humanity's Strongest Soldier, he doesn't even breath hard. To him, this is little more than some light anaerobic exercise. His ocular implants scan the area for new threats, allowing him to locate blobs of demonic miasma while the undead travel underground.

"Fuck. Fuck! FUCK!" Benjamin shouts, seemingly for no reason. "Pieces of SHIT! I hate demons so much! God, I hate you all, every last motherfucker!"

Over the past few days, he's become more and more prone to random outbursts of rage. Those closest to him, even his daughter, have easily noticed the change.

But no matter who, what, or how they ask, he never gives them a satisfactory reason. Some come to assume he must have suffered PTSD from his loss to Gressil, but as for the Vanguard himself, nothing could be further from the truth.

Benjamin loves killing demons. It was one of the reasons he was selected for such a painful experimental procedure in his youth. At times, his lust for blood can even border on the psychopathic.

Over the past 100,000 years, Benjamin quietly resigned himself to a peaceful life. A life spent raising his children and watching them grow up.

He thought he had finally found simple contentment, if not outright happiness.

But the battle against Gressil changed everything.

Now, he has begun to feel that ancient hunger boiling his blood once more.

The reason he has started lashing out in rage is not because of shellshock or some mental trauma. No, rather, the reason is due to the manipulation of Gressil himself. The implanting of a devil-damned parasite inside Benjamin's mind.

All day long, Desire taunts him. Teases him. Pokes and prods him.

He wants to rip it out, to bare the ugly truth to humanity's leaders. It would be so simple, so effortless.

But he CAN'T!

Gressil has him by the balls. If he tries to tell anyone, Gressil can simply kill Lily at his leisure. Benjamin can't protect her 24/7, and even if he could, she'd surely grow to resent him.

Telling the Wordsmiths about Desire would doom his daughter to a slow and painful death!

So now, the Vanguard keeps his mouth shut. His slowly increasing adrenaline causes the blood vessels in his eyes to burst, only to be repaired by his internal nanobot reconstructors. He directs this unstoppable, unceasing rage at the demons attacking humanity, these minor, weak, pathetic, tertiary enemies that won't give him a drop of satisfaction.

Even worse, with each demon he rips apart, that ancient hunger for battle intensifies, bit by bit. He begins to recall with a certain nostalgia the way people used to look up to him, to fear him, and even to worship him.

When the Energy Wars were at their peak, Humanity's Strongest Soldier was more than an augmented supersoldier. He was a household name. An icon. A celebrity.

People saw him as their modern-day Hero.

But in the end, when the Volgrim brought down the hammer, Benjamin turned his back on his species.

He received a golden parachute. He went to live on Hell Harbor, along with his close family. He escaped the slave camps. He never had to suffer the way the rest of humanity did.

Benjamin beheads a demon, then pauses for a moment to collect himself. For some reason, tears of rage well up in his eyes...

I lied to myself. The Vanguard thinks. I wasn't satisfied. I wasn't happy with living on that goddamn planet! I wasn't happy playing grabass with demon whores. I wasn't happy knowing I betrayed everyone who stood up for me.

Desire stirs within his mind.

[That's good, love. You're starting to be more honest with yourself.]

[SHUT UP!] Benjamin roars mentally. [Get out of my fucking head, you PARASITE!]

[No need to sling insults.] Desire says. [Can you feel it, Benji-boy? The way the other soldiers look at you? The way your heart pumps faster when you kill a sentient creature? You're finally being true to yourself. And it's all because of me...]

"It's not because of you!" Benjamin shouts out loud, though his words go unnoticed in the din of nearby gunfire and monsters roaring nearby. "Aaaahhh!!"

Benjamin storms back into battle, trying desperately to close off his intrusive thoughts and focus only on the slaughter before him.

* * *

At the same time, Hope Hiro, Blinker, and Mephisto engage in a brutal melee only fifteen miles east of the Fortress of Retribution. The worryingly close proximity to the city gives Hope a constant source of anxiety. He deliberately places himself between Mephisto to ensure the demon-dragon can't get any closer.

The problem is, with how massive both entities are, and with the amount of power they necessarily have to output, it will only take a single accident to erase humanity's remnants from existence!

Any time Mephisto tries firing a random potshot at the humans to distract Hope, Blinker deliberately teleports into the path of his attack, forcing him to retract his energy. This constantly annoys Mephisto, forcing him into a stalemate where he just can't get an advantage against the Second Wordsmith!

"Ridiculousss!" Mephisto hisses. "You can't stop usss forever, Sssecond Wordsssmith!"

Hope doesn't reply. Instead, he jumps forward and feints with Excalibur toward Mephisto's shoulder. Mephisto falls for the bait, allowing Hope to suddenly snap a punch

at the Myriad Deity's sternum, sending him flying backward!

"Argh!"

Mephisto cries out in frustration as the Wordsmith's strength comes close to his own. Despite not technically being a Cosmic Entity himself, Hope can forcibly surge Excalibur's mana reserves through his body to put himself roughly on equal footing with his opponent.

Yama, inside Mephisto's Mind Realm, groans in frustration. [Mephisto! You suck at fighting! This is what a hundred thousand years of crawling around and backstabbing gets you! That Wordsmith is feeding you your tail! He's not even that good of a fighter, but at least he's practiced!]

[I KNOW!] Mephisto roars angrily. [Ssshut up, let me focuss!]

Mephisto backflips off the ground. He readies himself to charge at the Wordsmith, but at that moment, a giant portal opens behind himself.

"Huh?"

Mephisto blinks in confusion, only to realize Hope must have opened it...

"PUSH!!" Hope bellows at the top of his lungs.

A Wordsmith-level blast of wind and sonic energy sunders the planet in front of Hope and strikes Mephisto's body, catching him off-guard. Mephisto once again goes flying. He sails backward through the portal and arrives on the opposite side of Tarus II, in the skies above a densely wooded forest. He tumbles downward, becoming momentarily disoriented by the change in his surroundings, then crashes into a patch of trees, flattening them into moss and splinters.

"Oof!"

Mephisto coughs, but easily rights himself. Despite the disorientation he felt, he hasn't yet taken anything remotely close to a painful blow yet. The Wordsmith's attacks have done little more than annoy him.

"Trying to pull usss away from the cccity cccenter, huh?" Mephisto hisses.

He quickly motions with his hands to conjure a portal back to the other side of Tarus II, but Hope pounces through the portal he made and closes it behind himself, leaving Blinker behind in his haste. Then he barks a Word of Power at Mephisto.

"Seal!"

Mephisto's half-made portal instantly dissipates, trapping him here with the Wordsmith.

"You're not going anywhere!" Hope declares. "And now I don't have to hold back anymore! **EMPOWER! AUGMENT! SYNERGIZE! BLACKSMITH!**"

Hope's body blurs. In his place, a phantasmal image of a blonde Hungarian woman appears, then fades away.

"Reform!" Hope shouts, targeting a Word of Power at Excalibur. The Divine Blade changes shape, transforming from a sword into a massive 150-foot-long greathammer made of the same divine materials.

The weapon towers far above Hope and Mephisto's body heights. At the same time, Hope's eyes begin to glow a bright blue, and his movements change distinctly.

"Mephisto. Agent of Hell." Hope says, his voice sounding oddly feminine, yet equally authoritative. "It is my honor to face you in combat. You've certainly risen through the ranks as the ages have passed. You're not the sniveling little Duke I remember from my era. You have somehow become even more pathetic!"

Mephisto frowns. The female voice sounds slightly familiar to him, but in a long-aged, ancient, dusty, cobwebbed sort of way he can't place.

"Keh... who are you, woman, to ssspeak to thisss deity so?"

"You are no deity." She replies staunchly. "There is only one deity, the Creator on high! Compared to my God, you are a pale shadow of His glory! Hear me now, I am Elizabeth Kindelmann, the Flame of Love! Before me, all demons shall crumble to dust!"

Elizabeth manipulates Hope's body in the same way Joan of Arc did to King Arthur's body during the battle against the Black Queen, six years prior. She twirls the greathammer around her body rapidly to increase its momentum before lunging forward and snapping the twenty-ton hammer-head down at Mephisto's skull.

BOOOOM!!

Mephisto doesn't even get to scream before Elizabeth batters him straight down into Tarus's tectonic plates, sending violent shockwaves out in every direction.

An instant later, Elizabeth follows up with one strike after another.

Wham! Wham! Wham-wham-BOOM!

Her hammer slams against Mephisto's head, shoulders, and spine, pinning Mephisto in place with such a rapid flurry that he simply can't climb back to his feet. With each successive blow, she smashes Mephisto deeper and deeper into the rapidly expanding crater, pancaking him in a manner that might be comical if it weren't for the destruction she's causing to Tarus II's nearby ecosystem.

Mephisto's limbs splay out in all four directions. Every time he tries to move, another mighty hammer blow crashes upon him.

And even worse, waves of divine energy transmit into his magical pathways, attacking his soul!

[Aah! This is bad!] Yama exclaims, as he tumbles to the 'ground' in Mephisto's mind realm. [We... we can feel our grip on reality weakening! That she-Hero is going to break apart our soul bonds!]

[Mephisto, do something!] Lupus cries, her soul wracked with the equivalent of violent nausea. [I'd rather die than suffer like this a- GURRP... a moment longer!]

Zamiel, also suffering immensely, doesn't scream or cry out like the others. He merely grits his teeth and endures.

[Boss... BOSS! You suck at this! You fight like a braindead moron!]

[I know!] Mephisto protests, as he tries to stand up again, only for another mighty hammer-blow to crash upon him, denting one of his scales slightly. [I can't essscape! Ssshe'sss too powerful! What ussse isss being a Cosssmic if mortalssss can bully me?!]

[The problem ain't the Wordsmith!] Zamiel snaps. [It's you! You're a shitty fighter!]

Zamiel pauses.

[Boss. Let me take over! Let ME control the main body!]

[Oh no you don't!] Mephisto roars. [I know your tricksss, Zamiel!]

[Boss either we die here or we get embarrassed for the rest of eternity, but we don't have to go out like chumps!] Zamiel proclaims. [You're still in charge. If I try fucking us over, you can just take control again! Quick, while my soul ain't totally screwed up... lemme take over! I'll put that Hero-bitch in her place!]

Mephisto scowls. [There'sss no chancce in hell I'd-]

WHUMP!!

Another devastating hammer-strike causes all four Emperors souls to scream in pain, even Zamiel and Mephisto.

Mephisto panics. He senses his grip on reality starting to slip.

Shockingly, this one random human Hero, when paired up with her latent abilities and the might of Excalibur, can genuinely threaten his life. Not by attacking his body, but by attacking the connection between his Soul Matrix, the engine formed by the Sphinx Connection linking all four Emperors together.

With this realization in mind, Mephisto no longer hesitates.

Elizabeth raises her greathammer again, this time hefting her back into it as she prepares to slam it down in what might be the soul-rending blow that will finally kill Mephisto.

But at that moment, Mephisto closes his eyes. He temporarily passes 'command authority' from himself to Zamiel, granting his subordinate the full right to manipulate their draconic body.

The Myriad Deity's eyes snap open.

"Finally."

Instead of trying to stand up, Zamiel presses all his strength from his left arm and leg against the planet's soil.

Elizabeth swings her greathammer down, and Zamiel shoves himself to the right, narrowly avoiding the massive weapon, and causing the Flame of Love to miss him and sink her mighty hammer deep into the soil.

Elizabeth cries out in surprise. The unexpected change catches her offguard, making her tumble forward!

Zamiel continues rolling to the side, lands on all four of his legs, coils strength into his muscles, and pounces!

Like a tiger jumping at its prey, he leaps at Hope Hiro's massive body and releases a deafening dragon-roar that flattens the landscape. He slashes with his right claw to rake Hope's face, while his left aims for Hope's legs.

Slap-RIP!

He completely takes the Wordsmith by surprise, spinning Hope like a top as he sweeps the Wordsmith's legs with one arm and slaps him across the face in the opposite direction with the other.

In Elizabeth's eyes, not even a fraction of a second passes between her attack whiffing its target, Mephisto pouncing at her, and her world suddenly spinning as the dragon sends her tumbling against the ground.

THOOM!

Hope crashes to the side and hits his head.

But his Word of Power, **Invincibility**, is still active.

He doesn't suffer any serious injuries, and neither does Elizabeth.

She immediately kicks her free leg at the Myriad Deity, knocking him backward. She spins her lower body and snaps herself back to a standing position with gymnast-level athleticism. At the same time, she barks a Word of Power to her hammer. "**Come!**"

Excalibur, in its greathammer form, leaps back into her palm. She quickly assumes a defensive position while eyeballing the Myriad Deity.

"Good reaction times." Zamiel praises. "You're not half bad, wench."

Elizabeth frowns. "Who are you? You don't speak with the same cadence as Mephisto."

"No shit. That's 'cause I ain't him. I'm Zamiel. It's your misfortune to face me. I just so happen to be one of the best demons in existence when it comes to hand-to-hand combat... hehehe..."

His eyes flick to the altered Excalibur.

"Nice hammer. Let's trade blows, bitch."

Zamiel rapidly conjures a greathammer identical to Elizabeth's. Its appearance and weight mimic Excalibur's exactly, only possible because the divine hammer made contact with Zamiel's physical body.

While Zamiel might not be able to mimic the divine attributes of Excalibur, in particular its holy energy, he can take a different magical path by relying on the Cosmic power flowing through his bones.

And so he does.

The blood-red demonic greathammer contrasts with the steel-and-gold greathammer made through the enlarging and reforming of Excalibur. It glows and pulses with an evil energy, matched in equal force by the hideous grin that spreads across Zamiel's face.

"I haven't been able to enjoy a really good fight since I ascended, you know." Zamiel says. "It's too bad I'm gonna have to fight some dyke-looking dame in a dude's body."

Elizabeth slowly blinks. "I'm just glad I'll get to add a Demon Emperor or four to my heroic record. I wasn't able to kill any in my life, but that will change now."

"We'll see about that!" Zamiel exclaims.

Part 513: The Myriad War

Inside the Fortress of Retribution, undead continue crawling out of the ground. They attack humanity's troopers, but no matter what, the Wordsmith's allies always manage to beat them back and suffer only minimal injuries, with not a single casualty. Thanks to the forewarning from Hope, as well as some *unexpected* background interference by Jason Hiro, people who would suffer gruesome and fatal injuries instead inexplicably teleport a few feet to the side to evade deadly blows, instantly heal from any injuries suffered, and enjoy other such moments of 'good luck.'

Some people do understand what is happening, but in the heat of battle, they don't have time to dwell on those random 'acts of god.' They only realize one or both of the Wordsmiths must be playing defense to ensure nobody suffers.

At the same time, the lone church on the eastern side of the city remains untouched by the undead. Not one devil-damned creature comes within 250 meters of that building due to its frightening aura of holy energy, an aura which will vaporize them from their body to their soul.

Inside, Cassiel stands next to the door leading outside, looking at it longingly.

"You're in no condition to fight, my lady." Soleil says, standing just behind her. "When you saved those children, you nearly died from mana exhaustion. That was only a few days ago."

"My mana has recovered." Cassiel says softly. "More importantly, I can't stay inside. Don't you see, Soleil? Mephisto is an evil creature. He wants to reap the lives of Tarus II's innocents. It's my duty-"

"It's not." Soleil interrupts. "Raphael gave me strict orders. You are the last remaining angel. The Archangels are little more than souls trapped in containers. You alone still possess a full body. He doesn't want harm to befall the Daughter of Heaven."

Cassiel frowns. She turns to look at Soleil with an intense gaze.

"Whose orders do you follow? Mine, or Raphael's?"

"...Yours. Of course." Soleil says carefully. "But even above yours, I follow the Wordsmith's orders. Jason Hiro commanded me to safeguard your life. If you reveal

yourself, the demons will learn of your existence, as will the Volgrim. We're lucky word has not yet leaked out, though we can't be entirely sure..."

"I will not remain hiding inside this church forever." Cassiel says, her tone becoming more forceful. "I was a proud warrior once... before... before *Gressil*..."

She pauses, a wave of emotions washing over her face.

Those emotions come, then they go.

She blinks twice, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment before opening them once more.

"...I won't let myself become a victim again, Soleil. I won't let others be hurt while I am capable of protecting them. So what if the demons learn of my existence? Gressil already knows. Shall I wait for him to spread the news?"

"Well. When you put it that way..." Soleil says, trailing off.

"I am the Daughter of Heaven." Cassiel states authoritatively. "I was trained by Raphael to fight angelkind's mightiest foes. Barons, Dukes, and even Emperors. Rather than meekly waiting for my enemies to uncover my existence... I should control my own Fate. I need to... to get out there! I need to fight! To rediscover my purpose!"

Cassiel gently pokes her finger against Soleil's chest.

"I have you to protect me, don't I? As long as we stay together, if Gressil attacks, you can fight him. That's your true purpose, isn't it?"

Soleil nods. "It... is... my lady."

"Then that is that." Cassiel says. "Let's go. I won't stay in here a moment longer."

She turns to open the door. As she does, Soleil grabs her shoulder from behind.

"Wait."

"Hmm?" Cassiel asks, turning to look at her. "What now?"

"Raphael... he told me to give a certain item to you if you ended up doing something like this." Soleil says, reaching into her pocket. She extracts a tiny box, one which easily fits into the palm of her hand.

Soleil hands the box to Cassiel, who pops the top open, revealing a tiny bead of crystallized mana.

"Raphael helped Uriel make this yesterday." Soleil explains. "It's an augment for your Heaven's Shroud. It will give you a boost of mana in an emergency. It's a self-sustaining mana bead that can accumulate a bit of energy all the time until it reaches its maximum capacity. Think of it like a tiny, primitive version of Excalibur."

"Raphael did this for me?" Cassiel asks, feeling touched. "I understand. Thank you, Soleil. I can act with more assurances, this way."

"It doesn't contain a lot of energy." Soleil warns her. "Only enough to restore you if you faint again. We don't want you collapsing and dying to the demons..."

"I'll proceed with caution." Cassiel says, taking the mana bead out of the box. She presses it against the locket around her neck, and it melts inside, transforming the Heaven Shroud noticeably.

Cassiel smiles cutely at Soleil. "Alright. Are we ready?"

"As ready as we can be." The Black Hole Construct answers.

Both women step out of the church. They head outside and pass through the privacy field Jason Hiro made for the Archangels, where they immediately become capable of hearing nearby and distant roars and screams inside the city.

Cassiel spreads her wings and takes to the sky. Soleil launches after her, but quickly flies beside her charge.

"Stay low." Soleil says. "You might be okay with the demons finding out about your existence, but an inevitable discovery does not mean you should broadcast yourself to them."

"That's true." Cassiel acknowledges. "We'll keep near to the ground, then."

While they fly, Cassiel motions with her hands, causing beams of light to form around herself. As she weaves a spell, Soleil watches closely.

Armor made of light forms around Cassiel's head, torso, legs, and arms. A shield of light materializes on her left hand, and a sword in her right.

Her appearance becomes shrouded by blinding light, making her identity impossible to discern!

Soleil blinks. "What sort of magic is that?"

"It's called Holy Materialization." Cassiel explains. "In the old days, all Lazarites were capable of using it. I can materialize anything I imagine, so long as I'm competent enough to envision its full structure. Basic armor and weapons like these take little mental energy. It's only once I need to formulate more complex structures that the mana requirements, and the mental stress, begin to truly increase."

"I see. That sounds a lot like Uriel's ability to conjure Light Constructs." Soleil says.

"It's based on a similar principle, yes." Cassiel says.

Her eyes narrow as she spots a trio of troopers, as well as Samuel Baker above them. The troopers stand atop a large delivery truck and fire down into a swarm of undead as they scramble mindlessly over each other to slowly gain ground on the humans.

Samuel Baker releases powerful fairy magic attacks to blast and shred the undead, but they regenerate faster than he can kill them. He summons walls to try and slow them down, and even tries ensnaring them with chains, but always the undead rip his attacks apart or tank them without worry, owing to the Cosmic energy empowering them beyond normal means.

"This is fucking ridiculous!" Samuel shouts. "How many goddamned minions does Mephisto have?!"

Sensing these humans might soon be in danger, Cassiel narrows her eyes.

"Soleil! Help me save them!"

"Yes, my lady!" Soleil answers.

Cassiel falls from above and flaps her wings at the last second, landing at the front of the van. She slashes her sword wildly, sending waves of divine energy surging into the demonic horde to explode their bodies in bursts of blood and bone. Any undead who draw too close eats a shield to the teeth as she rams it into their mouths.

At the same time, Soleil simply treats her body like a battering ram. She doesn't slow her fall at all, and instead crashes directly into the largest mass of the horde, splattering them with reckless abandon. Within two seconds, the horde swallows her up as it rapidly engulfs her figure...

BOOM!!

Soleil punches these pathetic Grunts and Lords with fists of steel, blasting them with the force of a grenade. Each punch and kick she sends flying kills at least ten to twenty of

Mephisto's undead at the same time!

Even more startling, none of them manage to scratch her, no matter how hard they rain their fists and claws on her seemingly fragile body.

She is a Black Hole Construct. Her skin and bone are no less durable than Demonstone itself! If she can beat the crap out of Gressil, then a bunch of low-level mobs certainly won't cause her to panic.

Samuel Baker's eyes widen. "Wow! It's that angel girl we rescued, and the other one too. Thanks for the assist, ladies!"

Cassiel and Soleil don't answer him, but they do nod, having heard his words of thanks.

Their contributions to this battle have only just begun...

The Flame of Love and the Myriad Deity stare at one another for five long seconds.

Zamiel, now wielding the most power he has ever possessed in his life, grins devilishly at Hope Hiro before him, currently possessed by the ancient female Hero known as Elizabeth Kindelmann.

"There's nothing I like more than *breaking* a wench." Zamiel says.

He lunges forward, swinging his greathammer down at her head.

Elizabeth counters with a spin of her hammer to knock Zamiel's attack aside, but he conserves the momentum, spins on his heel, and swings the hammer around with even more force to strike at Elizabeth's right!

Elizabeth, not used to such smooth movements, quickly holds Excalibur's handle vertically to block the attack. But at the last second, Zamiel angles the hammer down at the ground, causing it to smash into the soil at Elizabeth's feet. A shockwave erupts, spraying tens of tons of debris against her legs and making her lose her balance.

"Ah!" Elizabeth cries.

Zamiel immediately sends a kick toward her chest, using his greathammer as a prop to balance on.

THUMP!

The Myriad Deity's sole crashes into Kindelmann's clavicle and sends her flying backward. She stubbornly holds onto Excalibur, but its added weight makes her flight even more chaotic.

The strength behind Zamiel's kick sends her tumbling end over end. She spins, flips, and twists helplessly until crashing face-first into a mountain, embedding deep in its foundations.

Zamiel chases after her. Not even a second after impact, Elizabeth breaks out of the mountain, a look of rage on her face.

"DEMON BASTARD!"

The two once again engage in a furious melee.

Zamiel maintains a cocky smirk, grinning smugly at Elizabeth as her previously smooth-seeming movements somehow seem childish and unpolished when compared to Zamiel. Many times, Elizabeth lunges at Zamiel, only for him to casually step aside, shoulder-check her, trip her with his tail, or even deliver a headbutt to her ear!

Elizabeth takes a beating, one hit after another.

For ten, twenty, and even thirty minutes, she futilely eats one punch and kick after another. Zamiel's greathammer rarely finds a mark, with him instead only using it to feint and deceive her.

As a master of hand-to-hand combat, Zamiel is one of the most accomplished demons in the art of melee warfare. Perhaps only Emperor Crow or Belial could beat him by relying on raw power, but when it comes to technique, if Zamiel were to call himself the second greatest, none would dare to claim first place.

Therefore, Elizabeth's former combat capabilities truly come up short. She begins to realize that Zamiel is far above her level to contest.

The only solace she feels is that Hope has Wordsmithed his body to be 'invincible.' But even that Word of Power has its limits.

Exhaustion quickly begins to set in. Elizabeth becomes more and more desperate as she feels her will to fight start slipping.

"You!" Elizabeth shouts helplessly. "How did you become so adept in all these different combat styles?!"

"Stupid woman." Zamiel sneers, driving an elbow into her mouth and sending her flopping backward. "I'm a hundred thousand years old. I've spent my whole life fighting. You're just some human who didn't live a hundred years before ending up in an artifact. How could YOU possibly compare to me?!"

Elizabeth scowls at him. She backflips off the ground while holding Excalibur in front of herself protectively, its presence not in the least comforting.

"You act cocky... but I know someone who could beat you!"

Zamiel pauses his assault to sneer. "Who? A Psion? I wouldn't doubt it."

"Not a Psion." Elizabeth hisses through her teeth. "A human. And not just any human... but the Master of Combat! If Buddha were here, he'd tear you limb from limb! He trained me when I was a little girl, and I never came close to seeing the pinnacle of his strength!"

"Buddha, you say?" Zamiel asks. "So you haven't heard, huh? Buddha's back, and he got his ASS handed to him by Gressil! Your so-called Master of Combat isn't much at all."

Unsure if Zamiel is telling the truth, Elizabeth can't help but feel a little dejected. She can't stand up to Zamiel, and at this rate, he might even succeed in killing her.

The glowing light dies off in Hope Hiro's eyes. Elizabeth gives up, returning her soul to her artifact and removing the soul-link she and Hope shared.

The Wordsmith, appearing visibly deflated, looks at Zamiel hatefully.

"You must think you're King Big Dick, huh?" Hope asks.

"Oh, I'm feeling pretty good." Zamiel says. "Got another trick up your sleeve, Wordsmith? Don't let me down now."

"Just one." Hope says quietly.

He takes a deep breath.

"ARTHUR!"

Once again, the image of a phantasm materializes behind Hope, its ethereal body swallowing his. Hope stands up straighter, his eyes glowing blue like before. He glances at the greathammer in his hands.

"Reshape. Sword."

Hope's voice changes noticeably as the power of the ancient Hero King takes control of his body. Excalibur reverts from its greathammer form into a single longblade possessing a hilt long enough to wield with two hands.

Arthur, the Saxon King, assumes a dominant posture as he faces the Myriad Deity.

"Hello, Zamiel. I don't believe we've met before." Arthur says. "But I have smelled Mephisto's stench on one or two occasions."

Zamiel's smile fades.

"Finally, a real threat. I've heard all about you, King Arthur. You're that guy the other Heroes called the Greatest Sinner. Heard you killed more than two million of your kind, back in the day."

"An unfortunate accident." Arthur says blandly. "One I've flagellated myself for, over the past hundred thousand years. After speaking to the Wordsmith, I decided I could redeem myself by fighting on humanity's behalf once again."

"You sure?" Zamiel asks. "It'd be a real shame if you cut loose again and... wiped out another city. From what I hear, there ain't too many of those left, these days."

Arthur blinks.

"You don't need to worry about me. Rather, you should be worrying about how you will survive this Hero-King's onslaught. I might not have my original body, but..."

He pauses to crack his neck.

"...this one will suffice."

Arthur clutches Excalibur with his right hand. With his left, he raises two fingers upward to touch his forehead...

Suddenly, he 'teleports' forward, transmitting from his current position to a spot directly in front of Zamiel, with Excalibur raised overhead.

BOOM!!!

Excalibur crashes against Zamiel's skull and slams him into his shadow, pounding him directly into Tarus II's tectonic plate!

Zamiel doesn't even get a chance to react before he ends up violently smashed 800 meters underground, the planet's soil rapidly collapsing upon and burying him alive!

An instant later, Zamiel begins rapidly digging upward, using the stolen power of Monster King Kar to manipulate the earth. He bursts out of the ground and swings his greathammer at Arthur, but the Hero-King transmits away at the speed of light, disappearing from sight.

A deep chill settles into Zamiel's bones.

[Holy shit! This Arthur guy is FAST!]

Mephisto, watching from inside his Mind Realm, nods. [Watch yourssself. Arthur defeated the Balrog. He might even be a match for the Archdemon. With hisss Wordsssmith empowered body, he will not be a sssimple opponent...]

An instant later, Arthur transmits beside Zamiel and swings his blade at the undead dragon's neck.

CLANK!

A grinding of metal on bone rings out in the air and Zamiel goes sailing to the side. He smashes into the ground, flips and spins, bouncing and skipping like a rock.

Abruptly, Zamiel smashes his hammer into the dirt, catching himself mid-flight to stop his momentum. Without wasting any time, he dives back underground, burrowing deeply to hide himself.

[That Hero-King is terrifyingly fast! But I'm not out of options!]

Zamiel desummons the greathammer. He conjures cosmic power along his bones, molding it with his mastery of Qi to create an elemental effect reminiscent of lightning.

His sense of the world accelerates. His eyes, vision, and brain all speed up, and he conjures a pair of longswords made of Cosmic energy in the hopes he'll be able to combat Arthur.

"This Hero King is troublesome. But... I bet I can still kick his ass!"

Zamiel jumps out of the ground, his bones crackling with electrical energy. When Arthur arrives again, Zamiel meets his attack and blocks it, using his left sword for defense and his right sword for offense.

A vicious flurry of attacks follow! King Arthur rains sword-slashes upon Zamiel, while Zamiel's enhanced speed barely allows him to cope with the dire situation.

Clang-clang-clang!

Zamiel tries to attack Arthur, but the Hero-King's perception of time, his raw physical strength, and his sword-arts are too profound. Zamiel ends up forced to go on the defense, biding his time while he waits for the opportunity to strike!

"I won't lose here!" Zamiel declares.

Only time will tell if that statement rings true...

Part 514: Wordsmith Mix-Up

Arthur's onslaught continues. The King of Camelot, still considered the mightiest Hero in history, proves that his capabilities are not limited only to his mastery of Excalibur, but his combat sense and quick strategic thinking on the battlefield as well.

Time after time, Arthur transmits toward Zamiel at a speed too frightening to comprehend, only to turn his attack into a feint, or to sweep Zamiel's legs, or to appear behind him and strike him from the rear.

Zamiel does not cry out in pain. As five minutes turn into thirty, and even a full hour, Zamiel endures.

Arthur smashes Zamiel's skull from behind, pounding the undead dragon into the dirt. He rocks the continent on the opposite side of Tarus II from the Fortress of Retribution, laying waste to anything in the vicinity.

He slams Excalibur against Zamiel's helpless form again and again, using all his strength to try and kill this undead dragon once and for all!

However, no matter how much strength Arthur puts into his attacks, and no matter how much trickery and deception he uses, the Hero-King begins to uncover one alarming fact...

...he lacks the ability to kill this dragon!

Indeed, even with his strength put front and center, and all his years of Heroic Combat at his disposal, Arthur simply lacks the raw destructive force needed to shatter Zamiel's dragonbone body. Perhaps if his bones were made of ordinary Living Moldanium, Arthur might have reigned supreme already. But his undead form is anything but ordinary.

Forged in the fires of a dying star, every last impurity has been extracted from the Myriad Deity's bones, leaving his skeleton two, three, and perhaps even four times harder than ordinary Living Moldanium.

Zamiel grins evilly, despite the humiliating beating Arthur is dishing out upon him. Even unable to strike at the Hero-King, he starts to notice a sense of desperation behind Arthur's sword-strikes.

Arthur uses the Wordsmith's powers as best as he can. He continually rejuvenates himself, never truly running out of breath. But while his physical stamina might appear inexhaustible, his willpower slowly begins to lose out.

A faint feeling of hopelessness swallows Arthur's soul. He uselessly beats Zamiel down, smashes him around, and thrashes him like a punching bag.

"You devil-damned dragon! Just DIE already!" Arthur roars, swinging Excalibur down yet again.

But at that moment, the electrical power in Zamiel's body activates, causing him to jolt slightly to the side, just enough for Arthur's slash to strike empty air.

Zamiel instantly spins around, using his tail as a flail. He slams it against Arthur's stomach, sending the Hero-King flying. Not expecting Zamiel to unleash this counter-attack, Arthur loses his grip on Excalibur, and the two entities momentarily separate.

The Myriad Deity senses this weakness. He ignores Excalibur and dashes toward Arthur, his body a blur as he reveals the true extent of his acceleration ability.

"Did you think you were FASTER than me?!" Zamiel taunts, as he flickers above Arthur's tumbling figure. "You fell for my trick, fool!"

WHUMP!

Zamiel punches Arthur in the sternum, battering him into the ground. Before the Hero-King can recover, Zamiel clamps his feet-claws onto each of Arthur's arms to force them apart, then spikes his tail into the Hero-King's mouth.

"No transmitting away! No Wordsmithing! Now you're going to SUFFER!" Zamiel roars.

Arthur's heart rate spikes.

Zamiel begins punching him in the head and chest, each blow accelerating faster and faster as he rains a beatdown upon him that would even make the formerly 'invincible' Bael wince in pain.

Boom-boom-boom-boom!

Zamiel hammers Arthur. He punches him with such ferocity that stars dance in Arthur's eyes. The Hero-King tries to move, to spit out the tail wedged between his teeth,

to wrestle an arm free, but his senses start to fade as each Cosmic-powered punch sends his brain spinning.

"Uhh..."

Arthur, and Hope as well, both lose their sense of time as one punch after another rocks their world. Without Excalibur, their mana reserves simply aren't potent in the slightest. Unable to break free, their 'Invincible' Word of Power begins to weaken, making them bleed and causing their bones to crack under Zamiel's beating.

"HAHAHA!" Zamiel cackles, as he smells blood for the first time in several fights. "We may have lost to that ancient angel, AND the Archdemon, but at least we beat you and Crow both! Maybe this day isn't going as bad as we thought! We're two for four!"

As Arthur and Hope's sense begin to slip, they sense the faint appearance of a familiar presence.

Foop.

"Hey, what the-?!"

Zamiel cries out in surprise. His punches abruptly stop, but it takes several seconds for Arthur to blink his eyes open and regain his equilibrium.

When he does, he becomes astonished to see Zamiel stepping backward, a strange writhing mass attached to his body. Made of a mixture of light and shadow, this mass vaguely resembles the limbs of an octopus, with more than ten of them wrapping around his gigantic body to constrict and constrain him.

A short distance away, donning a shiny silver-colored T-REX, is none other than the First Wordsmith, Jason Hiro. Unlike Hope, Jason remains at his ordinary height, eight feet tall, looking like an ant compared to his larger self.

"Hope. Are you okay?" Jason asks, looking down at the gigantic body of his clone.

Arthur coughs. Still in control of the Second Wordsmith's body, he hasn't much of a reaction to Jason's appearance beyond a sense of gratitude, but Hope certainly does. Trapped within his own body, Hope feels a deep sense of humiliation as he realizes his other half came to save him from an enemy he should have beaten with ease.

"Thank you." Arthur says, wincing as he pulls himself up. **"Heal. Restore..."**

He quickly Wordsmiths half a dozen spells to repair his fractured face and bruised body, but the phantom pain continues to linger.

In the meantime, while Zamiel wrestles with the strange mass affixed to his body, Jason tosses a gigantic item toward Arthur via telekinesis. "Here. Don't drop this again."

Excalibur!

Hope, watching from within his Mind Realm, audibly gasps as Jason casually tosses Excalibur back to him, almost as if it were some common trinket he picked up off the ground. Surely, while Hope was having the shit kicked out of him, Jason could have easily taken the divine blade back for himself. But he didn't.

Indeed, Jason shows no interest in Arthur's artifact, simply treating it like an ordinary weapon better suited to another wielder. He smiles at Arthur.

"I don't need it. You just stay back and rest for a few minutes. I'll see what I can do against this guy."

Jason's armored figure turns away from Arthur, allowing the Hero-King to continue restoring his condition. His eyes widen as he watches that strange mass trying to crush Zamiel's body with brute force.

But alas, all good things eventually come to an end. Zamiel roars angrily and sends a surge of electrical energy outward, forcefully frying the tentacular mass to ash and causing it to crumble apart. His head snaps toward the First Wordsmith.

"YOU!!"

He rushes forward, using his enhanced speed to fire a punch at Jason.

Jason's body flickers downward. He easily avoids the attack, almost as if Zamiel were moving in slow motion. Then he aims his palm up at Zamiel's chest.

In a single instant, an orb of light fires from Jason's hand, races at Zamiel, and crashes into his chest, sending him flying upward.

Zamiel disappears from sight, the orb seemingly attaching to the undead dragon's chest and lifting him into the sky, where he fires out of the upper atmosphere at greater than twenty times the speed of sound. The sonic shockwave that follows flattens the landscape, clearing away the debris in the area and nearly deafening the Second Wordsmith.

Before Arthur can even react to what just happened, Jason teleports, chasing after Zamiel at top speed.

"After him!" Hope shouts at Arthur. "Don't just stand there!"

Arthur heaves a sigh. "Give me a minute, kid. I'm exhausted from that beating we took. It seems your other half wants to... try something."

"Then give me back control." Hope says.

"Sure thing. I could use a rest. Knock yourself out." Arthur says, rolling his eyes. "Oh, and a 'thank you' would be appreciated."

* * *

While Hope regains control of his body, Jason materializes in space, following after Zamiel. Jason's thoughts dwell on dragging the Myriad Deity away from Tarus II so it will stop wreaking havoc on the landscape. The Wordsmith can't help but feel annoyed, even outright disappointed by how his clone stupidly kept fighting on Tarus II where one accident could have wiped out humanity's remnants forever!

The glowing orb he fired remains anchored to Zamiel's ribs like glue, holding itself inside of him while deliberately pulling the undead dragon out of Tarus II's gravity well at a speed defying imagination.

[Stupid piece of shit!] Zamiel screams telepathically, his voice unable to propagate in the vacuum of the Void. [Gahh! Get off me! What IS this thing?!]

Zamiel tries electrifying himself, but the orb simply absorbs the current and grows stronger, accelerating faster as Tarus II begins to grow more and more distant.

Sensing his current strategy isn't working, Zamiel changes gears. He changes the Qi engulfing his body to the element of flame, increasing the temperature of his bones at an alarming rate.

Before long, the glue-like orb begins to warp and deform. It ultimately breaks apart, allowing Zamiel to stop accelerating so madly. He spreads his bone-wings and screeches to a halt, directing a fiery gaze toward the tiny figure chasing after him.

[*First Wordsmith.*] Zamiel hisses. [You want to play dirty? Fine. I'll play your game.]

He directs his attention inward.

[Yama. Swap with me.]

The Shadow Emperor blinks, slightly confused. [Hm? Us? Why would you want us to pilot the body?]

[Let's just say I have a good feeling.] Zamiel replies. [Don't you see? We're in the darkness of the Void. The only thing illuminating us is the light of distant stars. You'll be in your element.]

Yama's shadowy eyes fill with malice. [Ahh. Good point. Then let us have a try.]

Mephisto says nothing, allowing the exchange to happen. Still tired from the beating he took earlier, he's in no mood to seize control, and also finds himself curious regarding what Yama can accomplish.

All of this happens in the blink of an eye, at the speed of thought. By the time Jason draws within range, he's already noticed a change in the bone-dragon's attitude, its demeanor. The Myriad Deity no longer stands so defiant, but rather lays flat on the universal plane, presenting the smallest amount of its body toward the Wordsmith.

A second later, its clear white bones change color. They fade to grey, then to brown, and finally to black as Yama's element of shadow takes over, dispersing the tens of billions of distant starlight specks instead of allowing them to reflect off his bones and give away his position.

Jason frowns. He notices the anomaly immediately.

"Detect. Locate." Jason says, directing those Words of Power toward the immediate vicinity.

For a brief moment, he manages to uncover Yama's hiding position as the shadowy dragon slithers to his side, but the Word of Power's effectiveness quickly fades, allowing Yama to melt into the Void and become almost undetectable.

Jason goes on high alert. He holds up both of his palms, and two seconds later, marble-sized balls of electrical energy begin to coalesce above his hands. At first, only two or three materialize, but this quickly changes to ten, twenty, and even fifty.

The tiny, seemingly weak beads of energy leap out of his palm and spiral around his body, drawing circles in the Void as they rapidly increase in speed and momentum. Like electrons revolving at high speeds around the nucleus of an atom, they draw bright yellow lines around the Wordsmith, marking his position and making it easy for Yama to pinpoint his location.

But those beads of energy continue to crystallize above the Wordsmith's palms. They endlessly generate from some unknown source, and as they appear and revolve around him, the 'net' of electric beads slowly spreads apart, widening in circumference as they travel ten feet from his body, fifty feet, a hundred...

Faster and faster, this makeshift detection net expands its radius, preventing any entity, especially one as large as the Myriad Deity, from sneaking up and assassinating the Wordsmith.

[Come out, Mephisto.] Jason says, projecting his voice into the void. [I know you're here. Or are you too afraid to battle a mere mortal like me? Surely, even a Wordsmith cannot compare to your grand, illustrious power.]

One of Jason's makeshift electrons ricochets off something. Jason spins around to face the anomaly, but as he does, a massive figure comes barreling toward him from behind, charging through his detection net without hesitation.

Jason does not panic. His eyes jump to the side as he senses the rapid approach of his enemy.

Foop!

Jason flickers away right as a huge spear made of shadow stabs at the position where he was just levitating. But the instant he arrives, a second spear races toward his new position, forcing him to teleport again.

Foop! Foop! Foop!

Jason flickers to the left, then up, then down, rapidly teleporting inside his detection net while turning to face his foe.

But instead of Yama, Jason finds a mere shadow-copy of the Shadow Emperor, one of his duplicates intended to distract the First Wordsmith.

Jason's head snaps toward Tarus II.

Shit. I keep forgetting, he has only one goal, and it's not killing me. What a bastard.

While Yama's shadow-copy attacks the Wordsmith, the real Myriad Deity races through space at a smooth speed, returning toward Tarus II while keeping his presence shielded. Borrowing not only his shadow-powers, but also Mephisto's ability to hide his soul, Yama moves much more stealthily than his huge body would imply, all while shrinking himself down to present a smaller target.

[The Wordsssmith won't be fooled for long.] Mephisto says inside the Myriad Deity's Mind Realm. [You bought yourssself a minute or lesss. What now?]

[Don't you remember our true purpose?] Yama asks. [We need to devour Emperors. All other matters come second. This body can only grow stronger if we assimilate powerful souls. Therefore, we will sneak back to Tarus II and-]

Foop!

Jason Hiro teleports in front of the Myriad Deity, cutting Yama off mid-sentence while firing something at him before the Shadow Emperor can react.

A tiny piece of metal in the shape of a coin travels at the speed of light, bridging the gap between the two instantly. It slaps against one of Yama's shadowy rib-bones, but instead of hurting him, it attaches itself like a magnet to a refrigerator.

The piece of metal adheres to the Myriad Deity instantaneously, making him wonder what the heck the Wordsmith just did.

[Dammit!] Jason says out loud. [It did no damage?!]

Yama frowns. He glances at the tiny coin-shaped piece of metal, but it truly seems harmless. It doesn't possess even the slightest lick of magical energy inside its core.

He tries to claw at it, to scratch it off, but it remains stubbornly fused to his rib. Unable to remove it, Yama decides to ignore the suspiciously harmless piece of metal, at least for the moment.

He once again turns himself to shadow, blending into the background of space. He watches as the Wordsmith frowns, then begins conjuring much larger orbs of energy while looking around, trying to figure out where Yama has slinked off to.

[He must have gotten lucky.] Yama thinks. [We don't know how he found us, but lightning can't strike the same place twice.]

Just as Yama has that thought, the Wordsmith abruptly vanishes, along with his orbs.

He reappears mere feet above Yama's hiding form, the larger and more powerful orbs held at the ready.

Yama's cold heart leaps in shock. [What?! Shit-!]

Jason fires the orbs downward at the speed of light. They explode on impact, erupting into electrical tendrils that ensnare the Myriad Deity like before. But this time, they begin

rapidly shifting polarities, as well as their elements.

The tentacular limbs stretch and wrap around the Myriad Deity, changing from electricity to ice to fire to shadow and even to light! They change so quickly that he can't easily adapt, forcing him to struggle against them with only his physical strength.

Jason does not rejoice at this development. Unfortunately, outside delaying Yama and preventing him from returning to Tarus II, Jason can't actually do anything to seriously injure him! Even the 'weak' point of Mephisto's combined souls are still far stronger than Jason can handle!

This is so troublesome... Jason thinks.

Foop!

Hope Hiro teleports a short distance away, his gigantic body looking down at Jason with fumes metaphorically coming out of his ears.

[Jason!] Hope exclaims. [Don't think just because you saved me that this means-]

[Oh, great timing, Hope.] Jason interrupts, turning to look at his clone. [Keep this guy busy for a while. I need to do some thinking. I'll be back in a bit!]

Hope coughs. [Kuh- WHAT? Keep him busy?! Listen here you little-!]

Before Hope can stammer out anything else, Jason *pops* out of existence, vanishing while leaving Hope to deal with the struggling, raging figure of an undead demon-dragon.

[RAAAAH!!] Yama screams, as he finally manages to start tearing the blasted tentacles off his body. [That is IT! We have had it up to HERE with you Wordsmiths!!]

Hope blinks twice, momentarily dazed by Jason's brisk departure.

[That- that fucker!] Hope complains to Arthur, now dormant within his Mind Realm. [What is his problem?!]

Arthur rolls his eyes. [At least your other half is thinking of something, *anything* to deal with this demon. Let's keep our fight away from the planet. We cannot let Mephisto or the other three rampage across Tarus II again.]

Hope glances at the brilliant orb in the distance, its giant figure taking up much of his field of view. His eyes easily spot the huge paths of destruction his fight tore across the planet's near-side.

[...Fine! Yeah, probably not a bad idea. I don't know what Jason's thinking, but we're going to kill Mephisto ourselves.]

Arthur snorts. [I doubt that very much. This beast... he might be at a level we simply can't contend with.]

[We won't know until we try.] Hope replies coolly.

Part 515: Dronesmith

Jason Hiro teleports away from the battlefield, leaving his clone, Hope Hiro, to deal with the Myriad Deity for a while.

The First Wordsmith's body reappears inside the time-accelerated space of Chrona, but instead of moving around, walking anywhere, or doing anything at all, he simply disengages his T-REX, stands in the center of the city, and stares forward with a blank look on his face.

A short distance away, the Spynet Sphere stands off to Jason's side. Its main door opens up, and two people walk out to meet with Jason Hiro.

These two people turn out to be Fiona Hiro and, strangely enough, *also* Jason Hiro.

"The responsiveness is adequate." Fiona says to her husband, "but it just isn't strong enough to handle a Cosmic Entity like Mephisto."

"I disagree," the other Jason Hiro says, as he approaches his 'self' that has just arrived inside Chrona. He walks up to the motionless body and grabs it by the chin, lifting its head and looking at its throat and other areas to see if the newcomer has incurred any damage. "It's plenty strong. And we planted that Tracking Chip on Mephisto, so it'll be a lot easier to keep an eye on him. We just need to figure out a way to kill the bastard."

"Easier said than done." Fiona says with a sigh. "Even Pseudo-Excalibur couldn't chip a flake off those dragon-bones..."

Jason rudely forces open the mouth of his other self, revealing that instead of a fleshy interior, countless tiny, sophisticated nanomachines and electronics line the inside of his other self's mouth.

"Maybe I should go there in person." Jason says thoughtfully. "It takes forever to guide the Dronesmith around. Mephisto moves so slowly too. It's like playing a video game with cheats on."

"Yeah, yeah." Fiona says, rolling her eyes. "You make it sound like it's 'so easy,' yet you still couldn't beat the Myriad Deity."

"Well. He's cheating in his own way." Jason says, sticking his tongue out at his mind-wife.

Jason and Fiona examine the Dronesmith, a mechanical construct the two of them built together, capable of interfacing with technology and magic alike, perhaps the first of its kind in the Milky Way. They lift the Dronesmith's arms, test its actuators, and top its Mana Batteries back up to full.

"I have an idea." Fiona says. "Those tentacles you summoned were too weak. Why don't you try making living chains made of Wordsmithium? Those should be a lot harder to break. Mephisto and the rest won't be able to escape if we bind them with an unbreakable material. Even Marie Becker thinks your Wordsmithium is something special."

"Yeah..." Jason says slowly, his face contorting into a frown. "But it takes a LOT of time to reinforce something to the level of becoming Wordsmithium. I don't even know how many times I'll have to say "harden" before it reaches that level."

Fiona raises an eyebrow. "Jason. We have two hundred and fifty times MORE time to work with than people in Realspace. If you've never really run your Wordsmithium through a proper battery of tests, then maybe we should do that right now. We need a solution for Mephisto. You certainly can't expect *Hope* to handle the situation."

Jason's frown becomes a scowl. "God. He's such a fucking IDIOT. Why didn't he take Mephisto off-world first? He knew enough to make a portal, but all he did was shove him to the other side of Tarus II. Hope is LUCKY Mephisto didn't unleash some attack capable of wiping out all the life on the planet!"

"I don't know what he was thinking." Fiona replies. "At least it won't be *too* much effort for you to rebuild the destroyed areas."

"There were monsters living on that side of the world." Jason says, visibly pained. "They might not have been our friends, but maybe they could have been someday. There were several Goblin colonies hidden underground that are dead now. Hope killed them with his carelessness. I can't bring those creatures back."

Fiona shakes her head. She falls silent for a few seconds.

"It's too late to assign blame. If we weren't so busy building the Dronesmith, we might have been able to help Hope sooner."

"Yeah. I guess that's true." Jason acknowledges.

He and Fiona turn away from the Dronesmith, leaving it to stand and stare ahead blankly while they head back inside the Spynet Sphere.

The door opens, revealing Kar, Blinker, and their eight children, all sitting in chairs in a circle with their backs to each other, looking at the thousands of monitors arrayed across the Spynet's walls and ceiling.

On the screens, instead of images from all across the galaxy, only various videos and feeds taken from Troopers on the ground and various magical spy-drones in the sky of Tarus II provide visual data. The videos play their contents extremely slowly, but even so, keeping an eye on this many individual screens is still a daunting task.

Luckily, thanks to the AI named Centurion's efforts, the screens provide helpful information for each POV present. Sometimes, screens turn red, indicating imminent danger to the viewer or to entities in the area. When that happens, one of Blinker and Kar's kids will pipe up and point at the screen.

"Mom! Mom! Over here!"

Blinker stands dead in the center of the room, wearing a headset with a microphone. A glowing orb rests in her grasp, a highly complex mechanical-magical formation-artifact made through the efforts of not only Fiona and Jason, but Blinker too.

Each time her kids point out something on one of the screens, Blinker turns her attention to whatever is happening so she can examine the situation.

"TROOPERS RICHARD EDWINS, CARMIN SANTIEL, AND EDWARD SANTIEL WILL SUFFER A FATAL SNEAK ATTACK IN THREE REAL-TIME SECONDS." Centurion booms, its oppressive but authoritative voice informing Blinker of the exact situation. **"RECOMMEND IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION."**

Blinker holds the orb with her left hand, and uses her right hand to send pulses of mana inside it. She activates a special premade teleportation effect that locks onto those three troopers, instantly teleporting them fifty feet to the left while adjusting their facing so they will see the undead threat emerge from underground.

At the same time, Blinker also commands a drone armed with twin Spitfire Missiles to converge on the location to provide backup should the undead still manage to overwhelm these troopers.

"Any changes?" Jason asks, only giving the emergency warning a cursory glance.

"Hope will start fighting the Myriad Deity in thirty minutes or so." Blinker says, gesturing to a small cluster of monitors dedicated to showing various angles of Hope and Mephisto levitate motionlessly in space. "They're trading verbal barbs right now. Might take them a bit to actually start fighting."

"That's fine." Jason says. "The longer they drag things out, the more time it gives us to prepare. Fiona and I checked the Dronesmith. It's in good condition."

Kar turns his head to look at Jason. "Hurgh. Metal-Turtle kind of sucked, Turtle. You and White Ghost need to make it stronger."

"Easier said than done." Fiona replies. "We don't have a good way of causing any damage to Mephisto. His dragon-bones are too damn sturdy. That one Hero who Hope channeled- Elizabeth? She dealt some actual damage, but then Zamiel took over and she couldn't put up much of a fight anymore."

"The Myriad Deity's souls are its weak point." Jason says while rubbing his chin. "If we can hit those souls, we might be able to kill him. Hell, we can take his Living Moldanium bones afterward, too."

"Yeah. But we don't have a good way to attack Mephisto's souls." Fiona points out. "It's also not as if we have to hurt a single Emperor soul, but *four* of them, working in tandem. That's easier said than done."

"What a pain in the ass." Jason mutters. "Guess I'll have to try messing around until I figure out something."

"In the meantime," Fiona says, "let's get to work on those Wordsmithium chains. If we can't kill Mephisto, the least we can do is find a way to restrain or imprison him."

Asher, a red-scaled croco-child, blinks at the Wordsmith and his mind-wife.

"Why don't ya stick 'im inside a box?"

Jason glances at the kid. "Huh? A box?"

"Yeah!" Asher says, pumping his fists. "A biiiiiig box! Stuff him in and close it up! Easy!"

"Sure, that's a good idea. I might try that." Jason says, patting Asher's head. "Keep up the good work in here, kids."

He and Fiona leave the room, while Blinker, Kar, and their kids stay behind.

Blinker taps the side of her headset while looking at one of the screens.

"Trooper Edwins, keep an eye out for undead emerging on your position. I'm dispatching additional units to your location. Continue to hold out until then."

Kar chuffs to himself. "Hurgh. This Spy-thingy sure is neat. It's about time Turtle picked up on some of my superior brain-cells. Hehe."

On the world of Numaria, more than three hours pass after Mephisto disappears. However, none of the Emperors move a muscle. They remain in the immediate vicinity of the gigantic Archdemon, visibly worried Mephisto might return.

Through the powers of Auger, some of his minions, and some carefully placed spy-demons on Tarus II, the Emperors get a good idea of how the situation is playing out for humanity.

Things are not looking good for the Wordsmiths, in spite of their minor victories.

Emperor Fae lounges on some grass summoned by Emperor Nymph at the edge of the Stitched Wasteland. The two of them watch grainy footage transmitted into the sky thanks to a spatial-temporal power conjured by Yardrat.

Bael wanders over to them, his Matriarch Armor retracted, and a goofy smile on his face.

"Hey, ladies. Room for another?"

"Bael!" Fae exclaims. "Come on, take a seat. We're just watching the show."

She pats the grass beside herself, and Bael obliges, plunking down while looking around. In the distance, other Emperors sit together in cliques here and there, while Emperors Crow and Yumagi stand atop the towering Archdemon's shoulders, conversing with Diablo in hushed voices.

"Man, this sucks." Bael grumbles. "We had Grandma all ready to beat Mephisto's ass, then she friggin' *poofed* away. Now the humans hafta deal with Mephisto."

Fae smirks. "Fuck the fleshbags. Come on, Bael! They're our enemy! Anything that knocks those idiots down a peg is good by me!"

Emperor Nymph bats her eyes. "Fae's words might be crude, but the sentiment is correct. The Wordsmiths have amassed too much power too quickly."

"Uh huh..." Bael says slowly, while Ose whispers something in his mind. "So what about the uh, the Plague? Ain't that kind of a big deal too?"

"I doubt we have any reason to worry about the Plague anymore." Nymph says, gesturing toward the mountain of a creature half a kilometer away. "We have the Archdemon on our side."

Bael remains quiet for a moment. "Sure, sure... but, uh... the Volgrim- they got a bad babe of their own, ya know. And they're losing the war. Maybe Deebs alone ain't enough to save us."

"I suppose that might be true..." Nymph says, frowning. She falls into thought for a moment. "So, then... what should we do?"

Bael's eyes brighten. "Oh that's easy! We gotta-"

Suddenly, Bael stops talking. He and every other demon present feel a deep chill beneath their skin, a feeling of overwhelming fear as the sensation of a terrifying predator looking at them from the shadows scares them out of their minds.

Bael, Fae, Nymph, and every single other Emperor raise their gazes skyward as they sense the rapid, unmistakable approach of an incredibly powerful energy signature screaming across the sky.

All at once, that powerful force of nature crashes into the upper atmosphere, sending every cloud in the sky flying away. It slowly descends, its dreadful aura growing more and more frightening every second.

Fae, usually one to offer a witty quip, instead falls completely silent, staring up at the diminutive figure descending toward the Archdemon at a meteoric speed.

"The... the Second Founder..." Fae whispers.

* * *

Founder Dosena finally reaches Numaria. She crashes into the upper atmosphere and flies downward, only stopping the moment she arrives within a single kilometer of the Archdemon, her gaze momentarily fixating on the existence before her.

Dosena's powerful senses sweep the world of Numaria. She instantaneously pieces together a million clues regarding what happened only a few hours before, following the obvious trails of devastation, the feathers lost by Demon Deity Crow, and she even catalogs the destroyed moon in orbit of this former paradise-class world.

She sweeps her eyes across the Archdemon's fearsome form, as well as the comparatively insignificant Demon Emperors hiding in its shadow.

She can't be bothered to give a single damn about them. In her eyes, the mightiest Emperor might as well be the mightiest ant.

Though... there was that one time Emperor Ose possessed Bael's body.

Dosena glances at Bael, now in Ose's body. She evaluates him for a fraction of a second before dismissing his existence outright, aside from his clearly formidable soul...

[Archdemon Diablo.] Dosena says, transmitting her words in a telepathic radius around the entire planet. [You fought Demon Deity Mephisto.]

Her words are not a question, but a statement.

Diablo's eyeless head aims in her general direction. The Archdemon nods.

"SECOND FOUNDER DOSENA. I FOUGHT THE MYRIAD DEITY. I DEFEATED IT. THE BATTLE WAS NOT A CHALLENGE."

Dosena blinks all six of her eyes.

[It. Not 'he.' And that title... Myriad Deity. Explain to me why you use these terms specifically.]

"WHAT IF I DO NOT WISH TO DO SO?" Diablo challenges, unmoved by the forcefulness in Dosena's tone.

Dosena falls silent for a short time. A fraction of a second in Realspace, but an eternity to one with a brain as enhanced as hers. She rapidly contemplates all of the clues and Truths she has already gleaned from this short dialogue with the Archdemon.

She momentarily wonder what the result would be if she were to fight Diablo.

Her blood boils at this thought.

It has been an eon since she last fought someone worthy...

But in the end, she does not act on this hunger. She can always fight Diablo later, if she wishes. Getting to the bottom of the Apex Cosmic is her highest calling.

[You are a Mid Cosmic. I am a Mid Cosmic.] Dosena states. [We can be said to be... 'equals.' Let us not act as master and servant. I will exchange benefits in return for information.]

Diablo slowly lifts two of his powerful arms. He crosses them over his chest while continuing to look up at the tiny Second Founder with an expression that gives no hints.

"BENEFITS. THIS EXCHANGE... THESE TERMS... ARE ACCEPTABLE."

He pauses.

"MEPHISTO FUSED HIS SOUL WITH THE SOULS OF THREE OTHER EMPERORS. HE FORCIBLY ELEVATED HIMSELF TO THE RANK OF BOTTOM COSMIC."

[And what of the Apex Cosmic?] Dosena asks. [Why did that entity appear, followed afterward by you?]

Hardly has Dosena asked that question before she suddenly becomes more alert. She turns her head to the side, where she sees a hazy figure approaching from the distance. With each footstep, it crosses a kilometer at a time, treading the lower atmosphere at a speed approaching teleportation.

It arrives before her after only ten seconds, then stops a good distance away.

[First Emperor.] Dosena says calmly. [You are involved?]

My existence is transient. I can only affect the material plane for a time. The First Emperor states. **My strength was insufficient to deal with the existence known as the Myriad Deity. Fortunately, I had already decided to train Emperor Diablo in the control of his Ultraform. Now, demonkind possesses an Existence capable of uplifting it to the same level as the Volgrim.**

Dosena snorts dismissively. [A single Mid-Cosmic, and you call that an equal distribution of power? Do not mock my intelligence, Voidborn.]

The First Emperor of Transience does not continue with that conversational track. Instead, it pivots to a new topic.

You wish to know about the Apex Cosmic. This information will not be granted freely. The cost will be higher than you may anticipate.

[I have many ways of acquiring the information I need.] Dosena states. [Do not test your luck.]

The cost will remain high. The First Emperor repeats.

Dosena's expression changes to a barely-perceivable frown.

[Your price?]

You will hunt down and kill the Myriad Deity. The First Emperor calmly states. **It is a Threat to the balance of power. If the Myriad Deity is allowed to run amok, it will cause untold levels of devastation. The Akashic Laws do not yet strongly bind its existence.**

[That's your price?] Dosena asks, slightly surprised. [Anything else?]

You will retract your Observers from this star system. The First Emperor adds. **From this day forward, Numaria is a sacred ground. You are not allowed to enter the Archdemon's voidspace without permission.**

This time, Dosena does not immediately answer. She silently ponders what goals the First Emperor must be pursuing.

[You lack the means to uncover all of our spying methods.] Dosena states. [If the Volgrim Empire wishes to observe, we will observe. You cannot be certain of our inability to spy on you, even if we do remove our scouts.]

That is where you are wrong. The First Emperor retorts. **I have my means.**

Again, Dosena falls silent.

Several seconds pass as she faces the silent Archdemon and the domineering First Emperor.

[Very well. Your terms are acceptable. Tell me about the Apex Cosmic, and I will kill the Myriad Deity.]

The First Emperor's hazy, faceless figure gives no clues. Not even Dosena's incredibly powerful senses can read its body language.

I was not present when the Apex Cosmic appeared. The First Emperor states. **Neither was Emperor Diablo. All of the other Emperors were hiding inside the Hell Labyrinth.**

[So you don't know who the Apex Cosmic was?] Dosena asks, immediately feeling scammed.

I do not. But there is one who does.

The First Emperor points toward Bael, sitting on the grass.

Emperor Bael observed the Apex Cosmic, as he had been left behind on Numaria. The First Emperor explains. **Emperor Bael, please step forward.**

Bael blinks as he realizes a lot of eyes have started falling on him. "Huh? Me? Oh, okay, sure."

He stands up and trots over to the Archdemon, then flashes a big thumbs-up.

"Yo, Deebs! Good to see you back!"

"AND YOU AS WELL." Diablo replies.

[Tell me about the Apex Cosmic.] Dosena says patiently. [What was their identity?]

Bael frowns. "Ahh, you mean Grandma? Oh, uh... damn. I don't recall if she said her name. I'm kinda bad at names..."

While Bael speaks, Dosena attempts to scan his brain, but she is surprised to find that she is unable to glean even a single thought.

As Bael hems and haws, Dosena's thoughts turn inward. *Somehow, this random demon has mastered the Mind of Void, just as Founder Unarin has. That is an incredible feat. I cannot read his mind...*

She casually sweeps her telepathic senses over the minds of the other Emperors present, only to hear a single name keep popping up in their thoughts.

Did Bael say 'Grandma'? Emperor Fae thinks. That's the nickname he always used for Archangel Camael! But didn't she die?

Yardrat also has a similar thought. *Grandma? Bael might be an idiot, but he's a consistent idiot. He always called Camael 'grandma.' I wonder... did someone find a way to revive Camael after all?*

Dozens of Demon Emperors think such thoughts, allowing Dosena to draw the same conclusion.

[I see how it is.] Dosena says, confident she's 'figured out' the truth. [What happened to the Apex Cosmic? Why did her Existence disappear?]

I am not certain. The First Emperor replies. **I suspect her empowerment may have been temporary. Perhaps she reverted back to the mortal level afterward, and thus disappeared from our senses.**

Dosena nods slowly, once again drawing conclusions from the limited information she's received. *Camael must have learned a superior method of empowering herself, one that eclipsed the likes of her brothers and sister. Perhaps the Cherubiim is no longer the only Ascended Archangel in this galaxy now. Hmm...*

After poking and prodding a bit more, Dosena feels that she has learned enough information. She returns her attention to the other two Cosmics in the area.

[How unfortunate that you are incapable of handling the Myriad Deity yourselves.] Dosena says. [I shall do so with ease.]

"IT IS NOT THAT I CANNOT, BUT THAT THE COST WOULD BE TOO GREAT." Diablo retorts. **"HAD WE FOUGHT FOR A LONGER DURATION, NUMARIA WOULD HAVE BEEN RUINED BEYOND REPAIR."**

[Make whatever excuses you like.] Dosena says, no longer interested in verbally sparring with the two mighty presences before her. [I will handle your screw-up.]

We are in your debt, the First Emperor concludes.

Part 516: Deity Defeated

Hope Hiro once again faces off against the Myriad Deity. But this time, he appears visibly more agitated than before. The Second Wordsmith's right eye twitches as a sense of annoyance builds in his chest.

Jason's appearance made Hope look like a fool. Without using any artifacts, Jason managed to accomplish more than Hope while also drawing Mephisto and his sub-souls away from Tarus II. He ultimately failed to defeat the Myriad Deity, but at least he didn't get his face smashed in, either.

Feeling resentful, Hope can't help but wear his emotions on his sleeve as he prepares to face the dragon once more. This time, Mephisto has shrunken himself into a much smaller form after getting his ass manhandled by the First Wordsmith. He now stands at a mere ten feet tall, a tenth as large as Hope's humongous body.

Hope frowns, realizing fighting the equivalent of a grasshopper won't be a simple feat. He shrinks himself down to match Mephisto's height, along with Excalibur. Then he utters a Word of Power to summon Artoria to his position.

Foop!

Artoria pops into existence beside him, pauses to evaluate the situation, and quickly holds up her Pseudo-Excalibur as she readies herself to join in the fight against Mephisto.

Originally, Hope planned to work with her on subduing Mephisto, but given the demon-dragon's gigantic size, Artoria just wasn't large enough to deal damage to him. And curiously, one annoying aspect of being a Black Hole Construct is her inability to be easily altered through magical means. Indeed, trying to change her size would just result in the spell's energy disappearing inside her body without a trace.

Artoria glances at Hope after she appears.

[Plan?]

[The plan is, we try to kill him.] Hope says with a growl.

[I don't think that's going to work.] Artoria replies, her expression bland.

[Well, it's what we're doing!] Hope argues. [Let's go!]

The two of them fly through the Void, traveling toward Mephisto while the Myriad Deity gazes at them with an expression of disinterest.

Hope slices Excalibur at Mephisto, but the divine blade passes right through Mephisto's body, cleaving him as if he were only a mirage. His body scatters to dust, and a warning feeling buzzes in the back of Hope's mind.

The Wordsmith whirls around right as the Myriad Deity pounces at him from behind!

"PUSH!" Hope shouts into the field of oxygen Wordsmithed around his body. A Word of Power activates, pushing Mephisto back a little, but the demon-dragon easily ignores this slowdown and continues raking his claws at the Wordsmith.

Artoria attacks from the side! She swings her sword down and strikes it against Mephisto's head, knocking the Myriad Deity away! She saves Hope, though he likely wouldn't have been hurt too much even if Mephisto hit.

Unfortunately, despite her sword's supposed ability to cut through anything, Artoria fails to hurt Mephisto's physical body. His bones are simply too durable.

For the next ten minutes, Hope and Artoria race around, working together to do anything they can think of in the chances they might actually beat the Myriad Deity.

For his part, Mephisto utilizes all sorts of new tricks. He and his subordinate souls take turns swapping who controls the main body. Sometimes it's Mephisto, sometimes Yama, and sometimes Zamiel. Lupus never deigns to join, since she doesn't particularly give a damn about her ultimate fate.

The more the Myriad Deity swaps souls, the more its three primary controllers become adept at catching the opponent off-guard.

Mephisto, the malleable.

Yama, the assassin.

Zamiel, the champion.

Of those three, it becomes clear to Hope that Zamiel is the most frightening. While he may have ascended to Emperor last, his latent abilities make him the scariest. The power to copy any technology of war and conjure it using his Qi means he's the most versatile combatant, to say nothing of his Earth Manipulation he stole from Kar.

Most worryingly, whenever Zamiel comes out to play, his actual combat techniques are far and away superior to the other souls inside the Myriad Deity, as well as Hope and Artoria themselves.

With over 100,000 years of endless killing practice, Zamiel has forged his willpower into a deadly blade. His pure combat instincts have reached a level even King Arthur can't compare to.

[I've gotta say!] Zamiel says, swinging a greathammer in a huge arc to send Hope and Artoria flying away. [Becoming a Deity has been SO much fun! I love beating the shit out of cocky little dumbfucks who think they're hot shit! It's even better when my opponents are strong and I STILL get to kick the shit out of-]

Suddenly, in the middle of Zamiel's sentence, an orb as black as the night and the size of a bowling ball *pops* into existence behind him. It flies at his backside, catching him by surprise.

BANG!!

The orb explodes when it strikes his spine, and two dozen glowing golden chains emerge from its interior. Before Zamiel can figure out what the hell is happening, the chains snap around him, enveloping his arms, legs, and tail while forcing his arms to tuck against his chest. Like a makeshift straitjacket, the chains snare him and completely take the Myriad Deity by surprise!

[What the HELL?!] Zamiel roars, enraged by the sneak attack. [What even-?!]

Hope pauses, gaping with widened eyes as the living chains hastily wrap and tighten around Zamiel more and more every second, making him thrash around as he tries to escape their bindings.

[Excellent work.] Artoria says to Hope.

[I didn't make those chains.] Hope replies. [I have no idea what they are!]

Suddenly, the chains begin to illuminate as holy energy surges across them, making Zamiel scream in pain!

[AAAAHHH!!]

The enemy of all demonkind scorches his bones, burning Zamiel's soul itself as the corrosive angelic energy threatens to char his demonic essence to ash!

Seeing this, Hope pieces together who must have made the chains. [Jason! He did this!]

In between Zamiel's roars of anger and pain, one chain flies into his open mouth like a bit on a horse, yanking his head backward and exposing his neck.

Hope's eyes flash. [Whatever! Forget it, we'll worry about Jason later! Artoria! Cut off his head!]

Hope and Artoria synchronize their movements. They fly toward Zamiel with their swords at the ready, then slash horizontally at the seemingly weak and vulnerable spinal cord attaching Zamiel's head to his shoulders.

CLANG! CLANG! TINK! TINK!

The two of them strike Zamiel's bones with all their strength, trying desperately to sever the Myriad Deity's head from its body.

But they fail.

Ten times, Hope and Artoria slash their blades against what should be the weakest part of the Myriad Deity's skeleton. But each time, their strikes end up being completely ineffective! Even when Hope enhances his strength, accelerates his speed, and swings his sword with the intent to kill, he only succeeds in knocking Zamiel around without causing his skeleton any damage!

[This is insane!] Hope screams in despair. [Even tied up and helpless, this demon bastard is impossible to kill!!]

Despite being trapped and snared, suffering terrible holy burns, and having two jerks trying to hack his neck in half, Zamiel still keeps his wits around him. The energy surging through his body gives him a hard time in thinking up an escape plan, but he does eventually come up with one.

[Mephisto!! Swap out!]

Mephisto doesn't even bother giving an answer. He swaps with Zamiel, howling in pain as the holy energy scorches his soul instead. Despite the agony, he doesn't regret taking over, and instead begins working to free himself.

Using his power of his Mist-Body, Mephisto softens his bones, turning himself malleable. The chains continue to constrict him tighter and tighter, but he allows them to

squeeeeeeze inside of his skeleton, melting the skeleton around those chains and allowing them to travel deeper and deeper inside his core...

Suddenly, the chains break through! They pass through Mephisto's entire skeleton and snap back into a single bowling ball-sized sphere in the center of his ribs, where they collapse and return to their inert form.

Before anyone can react, Mephisto swaps places with Yama, tears the orb out, and throws it at Hope, startling the Second Wordsmith.

Luckily, the orb simply bounces off Hope's head. But Yama still turns into shadow and start to flee again, putting distance between himself and the Second Wordsmith.

[You fucker!] Hope yells. [I'm not letting you get away!]

Yama's expression becomes glum.

[This isn't working.] He says privately to the other souls of the Myriad Deity. [We're no closer to killing the Emperors on Tarus II, and our minions keep getting slaughtered. Humanity's soldiers are too powerful.]

Mephisto appears just as unhappy with the situation. [Our assssault hasssn't failed. The Wordsssmithsss can only delay usss. We're too powerful for them to win. Ssso long ass we perssssisst, we will triumph.]

Zamiel grimaces. [What a boring way to win. If only we could just SMASH these losers! We might- huh?]

Zamiel pauses.

Every individual inside the Myriad Deity does.

On the planet of Tarus II, the Warpgate flickers to life. It connects to another Warpgate elsewhere in the Milky Way.

Not the Warpgate Network inside the Labyrinth.

But rather...

[Oh no.] Zamiel says, his heart turning cold. [It's... IT'S HER.]

A monstrous energy signature emerges on the planet of Tarus II. In an instant, every single one of Mephisto's Death Gates shatters and breaks, causing the flow of undead to halt.

That energy signature begins flying up and out of the planet's atmosphere, making Zamiel's eyes pop open.

[NOPE! NOPE! BYE, FUCKERS!]

He turns around and starts flying away at top speed, racing as fast as he can while motioning with his claws to create magical symbols.

Zamiel starts to conjure a portal glyph so he can make a swift escape, but just as he's about to succeed, his hands completely fumble the magic, making his mana backfire and explode in his face.

Thoom.

A massive detonation of Cosmic energy reverses Zamiel's momentum, making him cry out in frustration.

[WORDSMITH!!]

While he might not know which of the Wordsmiths stopped him, Hope certainly does. He recognizes Jason must have interfered, so he starts to pursue Zamiel, only for Artoria to grab his shoulder.

[There is no need.] Artoria says to Hope, her tone eerily calm.

From behind the Second Wordsmith, Founder Dosena rips across Tarus II's skies and into the Void in less than a second. She flashes past Hope so quickly that he doesn't even perceive her movement, only sensing an instant later that the sensation of power from behind himself has traveled to a position in front of himself.

Hope's heart skips a beat. *Holy!*

Zamiel shrieks in fright as he senses the rapid approach of the Mightiest Volgrim, an existence only a bit less frightening than the Apex Cosmic, the Seraph known as Anaelle.

[YOU WON'T CATCH ME, YOU VOLGRIM BITCH!!] Zamiel roars, turning around to face the approaching threat.

He motions with his hands to summon Yama's shadows, trying to hide himself. He and Yama swap control, with the Shadow Emperor sending several dark-dragon-clones in different directions while trying to evade their pursuer.

Yama starts to run away, but to his horror, Dosena only continues to draw closer and closer, having somehow locked onto him despite his best efforts.

Then, a feeling like plunging into quicksand seizes Yama. His entire body freezes up, as if having become trapped in a thick, viscous quagmire.

[No!!]

Yama cries out in fear. He tries to turn his head, but he fails to move a muscle. Much like the Wordsmithium Chains that bound him only a short while earlier, but a hundred times more effective, he loses control of his body.

[Where do you think you can flee?] Dosena asks, arriving within spitting distance of the visibly terrified demon-dragon. [Do you think you can escape me? The only reason I didn't chase you earlier was because I erroneously believed you were of no use to me. That has changed.]

The eerily calm and emotionless Second Founder does not stand nearly as tall as Mephisto. At only a touch above six feet tall, she is much shorter than his ten-foot stature. But even so, the energy contained within her vessel is far, far superior, making her a hundred times his senior in the Cosmic Way.

[Let me go! You'll REGRET pissing me off!] Zamiel threatens, struggling to move his body even a millimeter.

He fails.

His words lifelessly splash against Dosena's face, failing to make a single muscle of hers twitch in response.

Hope Hiro finally catches up to the two of them, stopping a short distance away.

[Dosena!] Hope exclaims. [Why are you here? Did Unarin send you?]

Dosena rotates around to face the Second Wordsmith while keeping an unbreakable psionic grip on the Myriad Deity, preventing him from escaping.

[This creature is made up entirely of highly purified Living Moldanium.] Dosena states. [It poses a minor threat to the Volgrim Empire. I will eliminate it and reap the bounty of its skeleton. Clearly, you are incapable of doing so yourself.]

Hope's eyes narrow. He shoots a nasty glare at her, but doesn't make any moves forward.

[Mephisto... the Myriad Deity attacked my planet! It killed my people!]

[According to my senses, that is a lie.] Dosena replies. [Your security forces prevented even a single death from occurring. However, if I had not shown up, it is probable the Myriad Deity would eventually wear you down. You Mud-Dwellers are incapable of handling a Cosmic-Level threat. I am doing you a favor by disposing of this entity. You are... *welcome*.]

Hope struggles to find a good counter-argument. He opens and closes his mouth twice while his brain fails to keep up.

Suddenly, Jason Hiro pops into existence off to Hope's right side.

[Founder Dosena.] Jason says telepathically. [Thank you for showing up when you did. You are correct. We were unable to defeat the Myriad Deity. However, that does not mean you are allowed to violate our airspace with impunity.]

[I eliminated the necromantic energies beneath your city.] Dosena says. [You may consider that my payment. I will be taking this creature, now.]

She cocks her head. [Unless you would like to challenge me?]

Both Wordsmiths fall silent.

[...No. That's fine.] Jason says. [You may have him. But I'll expect compensation for the value of his corpse.]

Dosena snorts. [Ask your clone for compensation. Considering he now possesses one of my people's Celestial Designers, I'm sure he can provide you with better compensation than we ever could. I take my leave, now.]

Without waiting for a response, Dosena turns around, grabs at the air around Mephisto, and begins to rocket away, racing across the Tarus system at a speed far faster than light as she takes her spoil of war along for the ride.

Just like that, the emergency situation disappears along with Dosena, leaving Hope and Jason to float in the void.

Hope's frustrations reach a boiling point. He turns to his other self.

[Jason! Why did we just let her go?!]

Jason shrugs. [Why not? Do you have a better idea? We can't beat Dosena. Not as we are now. Not even with Excalibur.]

Jason flicks his eyes to the holy sword.

[You know, Hope... you're wasting Excalibur's potential. All that energy and you're just using it like a glorified beating-stick. You should put its mana to better use. Conjure some traps, some other items...]

[At least I HAVE artifacts!] Hope claps back. [All you did was tickle Mephisto, while Elizabeth nearly killed him! We're the ones who saved Tarus II today! You'd do well not to forget that.]

Jason stares at Hope for a second, then nods.

[You did well, Hope. Keep up the good work. Next time, though, try and drag the giant dragon away from our homeworld, okay? That's all I'm asking.]

[We can fix the damage.] Hope argues. [Nobody died, and that's what matters. In fact...]

Hope directs his attention back to Tarus II. He calls upon the power of Excalibur while aiming his mind at the ravaged, annihilated, torn-up side of Tarus II where he fought the Myriad Deity.

"Terraform! Heal! Regrow! Repopulate!"

Hope speaks over thirty Words of Power, quickly and efficiently using Excalibur's magic to repair the damage wrought upon his homeworld.

After two minutes of effort and exertion, he turns back to Jason. [See? I fixed all the-]

He pauses and blinks.

Jason has disappeared.

[What the- Jason!! Where did you go?! You arrogant piece of shit! Tell ME what to do, why don't you?!]

"Locate!" Hope yells, trying to find his other half.

But the Word of Power has no effect. It fails to uncover Jason's current location.

Hope grimaces, a dismal look upon his face.

"Fucking hell. Goddamn Jason. Always getting in my way, trying to make me look stupid."

Those words evaporate into the Void, failing to transmit audibly to Artoria, who remains standing a short distance away.

Even so, with her enhanced brain, she easily reads Hope's lips.

[You fought sub-optimally.] Artoria states without emotion, completely ignoring any of Hope's feelings on the matter. [You could have killed everyone on Tarus II through sheer negligence. The First Wordsmith was correct to push the Myriad Deity out of Tarus II's gravity well.]

Hope falters. [I was fighting for my life! I didn't have the option to take a step back, relax, and think things through!]

[Perhaps not.] She acknowledges. [But what is the point of possessing Solomon's Crown if you aren't going to use it?]

That shuts Hope up.

He frowns, then looks away.

[...Yeah. Maybe you're right. I didn't look very good today. Jason... one-upped me.]

[I believe saving lives is more important than 'looking good.'] Artoria counters, her expression as neutral as ever. [But perhaps I am simply not accustomed to human displays of ego.]

Hope coughs. [You really don't know how to hold back, do you?]

[No.] Artoria responds. [I do not.]

Part 517: Void Beast Assault!

One of the many tens of thousands of Troopers on Tarus II jogs over to another group of Troopers in the center of the Fortress of Retribution, popping open his helmet as he approaches.

"Commander Neil. I've confirmed it." The man says to his superior officer, a man wearing a striking red-and-blue T-REX with heavy armor. "The flow of undead has dried up. There are still stragglers, but we expect to have them finished off within the next three hours."

Neil Adams stands with his helmet only half-engaged, revealing his mouth and neck. A visor continues to cover his eyes, allowing him to keep an eye on the overall situation while he peruses a datapad in his hand.

"Good work." Neil says to the scout. "You can join the Eastern Flank. We have a few hundred undead in that area that need mopping up. Keep an eye out for corpses playing dead. Don't let them grab you by the ankles."

"Yes sir." The scout trooper says, turning and jogging away.

Neil pays no mind to the young man after he leaves. He instead turns his head to a Hummer-wearing trooper beside him.

"Great work today, Linda. You saved me at least a dozen times."

"I take my duties seriously." Linda says, continuing to hold her large and cumbersome sniper rifle close to her chest. "Can't let anything happen to my boyfriend."

A couple troopers nearby cough, then take a few steps away, clearly having heard something they don't think they should have. They glance up into the sky, pretending to admire the waning daylight.

Neil pays them no mind. "Zero casualties. Today went better than I could have dreamed. We were attacked by a demon more powerful than Beelzebub, yet our contingencies held up. Hope and Blinker fended off Mephisto, while the rest of our people kept the undead occupied."

"It was a good result." Linda says through her helmet's intercom. "Everyone did their part."

"Yes. Everyone..." Neil says, his words implying the opposite. "Did you know Archangel Uriel barely contributed to the battle? She simply levitated above the Primary Shelter and killed any straggler undead that came close."

"Uriel isn't our asset." Linda points out. "We have no control over her. It's fortunate she protected the biggest mass of civilians. She could have simply taken a nap inside her little church and we'd have no recourse. At least her presence deterred the strongest undead."

"I'm not exactly taking fault with her actions..." Neil says slowly, as he looks up at his girlfriend. "I just think... it's a shame. She could have done more. She didn't even send out her brothers in their spirit-forms to help."

"Again, she's not ours to command." Linda repeats. "We're lucky she helped at all. From what I understand, the Demon Emperors Mephisto sent to attack us never went near the primary civilian shelter. We can probably chalk that up to Uriel's presence."

Neil glances into the distance, but he can't spot that specific shelter behind all the other buildings in his way.

"Right. It's fine, I suppose. More importantly, look at these performance metrics."

He holds up the datapad so Linda can see its screen.

"Our troopers had an average hit-rate of about 40%. That's 15-20% for those in the thick of the action, and 60% for the snipers and detached regiments. We also saw some surprising results from the Felorians. It seems Brunhilda's people have become significantly more competent than we projected."

Neil leans slightly toward Linda.

"...What do you make of that?"

Linda frowns inside her helmet. "How much more competent?"

"Their abilities seem to have increased anywhere from 50-100%." Neil explains. "For example, this Felorian named Sariah, her speed and strength are rated at Class A+ now, whereas just one week ago she was only Class B. Further, she has already reached her maximum number of visits to the Body Booster. Such a jump should not be possible with the training and empowerment methods we currently possess."

"She received a boost from somewhere else, then." Linda mutters. "And not an insignificant one, either. You don't think the demons...?"

"Not the demons." Neil says, shaking his head. "Lady Brunhilda *detests* demons. She'll stomach their presence, but I assure you she is more on my side of the fence than Jason's. But now that I mention him..."

Neil trails off, allowing the implication to linger.

"You think he's finding new ways to upgrade our soldiers?" Linda asks.

"It's as good a hypothesis as any." Neil says with a shrug. "I certainly won't fault him for doing so. But it's curious he didn't think to inform me."

"Considering the impending 'split' you've been grumping about, Jason probably isn't as fond of you as he was in the past." Linda says, while deactivating her helmet to give him a pretty smile. "And neither are you all that fond of him."

Neil smiles back at her, then he returns his attention to the reports still flooding in.

"Our soldiers did well." Neil mutters. "Yamir Ironhorn personally slew over 300 undead. Samuel Baker waded into a mass of enemies and killed them all. Seems his fairy powers have become a bit stronger than before his death. Oh, and look at this..."

Neil's voice raises an octave as he reveals a video of an angelic warrior clad in golden armor, ripping through the undead hordes with fluidic ease.

"Is that Uriel?" Linda asks, slightly confused. "But I thought she was at the shelter. No, wait, that's..."

"It's Cassiel. The Daughter of Heaven." Neil says, smiling faintly. "She did well to hide her appearance, but I can't imagine the demons are going to miss the signs of holy energy with a different signature from Uriel. We need to spin this, somehow..."

"We do?" Linda asks. "Shouldn't we tell everyone about her valiant fighting efforts?"

"No." Neil says simply.

The man pauses. He looks off into the distance and sighs.

"Cassiel is a special existence. I've said as much before. She has suffered terribly, and it's remarkable how quickly she's regrown her fighting spirit. Truly the willpower of a Frenchwoman, I would say. But she is still in a delicate state."

He lowers his gaze back to the video.

"Look at her movements. They're jerky and awkward. Unpolished. She's 100,000 years out of date with what her body can do. She's... rusty. And she's only killing those undead

so easily because they're pathetic, weak little pissants."

Linda slowly nods. "So you're saying she's not ready to be revealed yet?"

"When she intends to reveal herself, she shall do so herself." Neil states emphatically. "We will *not* be the ones to unmask her. This was more of a practice run, you see? It's clear she's still trying to fight her trauma. For now, we will put out a statement about a secret superweapon the Wordsmith is building. We'll make up a story about 'bringing back the might of angelkind.' Anything to deflect her true identity. We keep this *hush-hush*."

"...There's a problem with that." Linda says, looking at Neil evenly. "Gressil knows about Cassiel. The moment he blabs her existence to the other Emperors, she won't be able to hide any longer."

"Hahaha." Neil laughs.

"Did I say something funny?" Linda asks.

Humanity's military commander chuckles quietly, then reaches under his helmet to rub his eye. "No, no, it's nothing like that. But don't you find it odd? Gressil has had weeks to tell the other Emperors about Cassiel, yet he hasn't. The longer he goes without acting, and the more intel we receive on him, the more I get a better grip on this strange, frightening monstrosity."

Neil glances around, as if try to look for faint motions in the air, the signs of an invisible lurking predator.

"If I had the powers Gressil had, my logical course of action would be to start quickly assassinating my enemies. Ruining their chain of command. Hell, I might even screw with them just to make them doubt their own eyes. But that is not how the Emperor of Chaos works, is it? He likes to... play with his food. It's not about winning or losing. It's about watching how the pawns fight each other."

Neil raps his knuckle against the datapad. "Gressil won't reveal Cassiel's existence. We know he's already appeared inside her quarters once. He intends to torment her. He doesn't want the other Emperors knowing about her, because he views the angel as being rightfully *his* possession. He's merely allowing her to be free for a time. Perhaps he may even try to recapture her in the near future."

"Do you even hear what you're saying??" Linda asks, aghast. "We need to up her security detail if that's the case!"

"She already has that Black Hole Construct protecting her." Neil says. "A bunch of ordinary troopers won't be any more helpful in that regard. Soleil showed up in the battle alongside Cassiel, and she was far more effective when it came to combat. I'd say she's one of humanity's secret powerhouses... along with her 'sister', Artoria."

Neil skims past a few more names, pausing when he arrives at humanity's allied Demon Emperors.

"Mephisto was targeting these three." Neil says. "Belial, Kiari, and Beelzebub. Plus some of the Dukes as well. Beelzebub, in particular, had a lot of enemies trying to bring him down, but he held them off with ease."

"Why do you think Mephisto wanted them?" Linda asks.

"He intended to turn them into undead thralls, I imagine." Neil says with a shrug. "Or maybe he wanted to directly consume their power. Either way, they acted as a liability this time. Those three... they almost brought a calamity upon our heads. Mephisto didn't give a damn about us humans, only our so-called Emperor 'friends.' Not sure how I feel about that."

Neil shakes his head. "I need to get back to work prepping my big speech. It's only a little over a week from now, and everything that happened today will act as good fodder for my platform. Can you take care of the rest while I'm busy?"

He smiles at Linda, and she smiles back. "Of course, Neil. Let me know if you have any specific commands. In the meantime, I'll focus on rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure."

"Good. Take care to gather testimonials regarding our combat superiority. I want to emphasize the merits of our military training and how it allowed us to reign supreme against that Demon Deity."

Neil turns to walk away, but then he pauses. A notification appears on his datapad.

"What the..."

Linda frowns, hearing the change in his tone. She peeps over his shoulder, only to find a yellow alert on the screen.

"Something happened?" Linda asks.

"Something indeed." Neil says, his voice turning nasty. "We have a fatality! A little girl died inside one of the shelters! A human child!"

"What? A fatality? Was it because of stress?"

Neil clenches his hand into a fist. "No! It wasn't an accident! All signs point to murder! Linda, with me!"

He and Linda take off, marching toward none other than the largest shelter in the city, the one Uriel fought to protect, all to get down to the bottom of this strange new mystery...

Somewhere in deep space, Fourteen Standard Time Units after the appearance of the Apex Cosmic.

The VLL Archontis IV travels through subspace, racing away from the planet Volgarius at Warp 5. While certainly a fast speed, Warp 5 is also the speed where a Trifrancium Drive will never deplete its reserves, no matter the duration it travels for. This allows it to conserve fuel while traveling across star systems at a moderate pace.

On this particular ship, a dozen Psionic Enclaves reside. It is but one of many vessels traveling on the same vector toward a world intended for temporary residence, should a disaster befall Volgarius.

More than a thousand young Psions reside within this ship. The majority of them are at or below the 3rd Level.

In one particular enclave, about a hundred and fifty junior Psions of the 1st and 2nd level sit cross-legged on the floor while a male teacher prances about before them in a dignified yet somewhat flamboyant manner.

[The situation on Volgarius has been resolved.] Educator Norim says, the black-armored fellow strutting about like a peacock. [I'm sure some of you were a little alarmed, but as predicted, our wise and all-knowing First Founder has resolved the crisis!]

One of his students manifests a dot of light above her head, drawing the Educator's attention.

[Ah yes, Initiator Y'ill!] Norim says, turning to face the inquisitive youngster. [Does my newest student have a question?]

She sits up a little bit straighter. [Educator, I contemplate but I do not comprehend. I have heard rumors that the happenings on Volgarius were caused by the human Wordsmith. Is that truly the case?]

[Haha.] Educator Norim laughs lightly. [Inquisitive minds, always filled with curiosity. You have heard correctly. I am not privy to all the details, but it seems the Second Wordsmith planned to attack Volgarius, yet ultimately failed due to our First Founder's careful planning. No doubt, the First Founder outwitted him with the same ease any self-respecting Volgrim would outwit a lowly mud-dweller.]

Norim motions with his hands to conjure a powerful psionic projection of their fleet, an armada of over a hundred ships all built by the Technopaths of Clan Symmetra.

[We were originally planned to travel to a Class-III world, not particularly suited for habitation, but one that would meet our emergency needs. Now that Founder Unarin has solved the immediate crisis, he has begun recalling our people back to the homeworld. We are expected to receive our recall notice within the next six standard time units. Until then, we will continue on our original path.]

A different student manifests a dot of psionic light above his head, and Norim gestures to him.

[Yes, Initiator Hadwin?]

[Educator. Will Volgarius be able to function properly with 99% of its population missing?] The disciple asks.

[Of course, of course.] Norim says, waving his hand flippantly. [The First Founder long ago made more than ten thousand contingency plans in case of various catastrophic events that might play out. Nothing which has occurred was beyond our great First Founder's ability to predict. You need not worry about such distant woes.]

He pauses for emphasis before continuing. [Further, I have heard from reliable sources that our First Founder has brokered a deal which might prove to be quite satisfying to our people's-]

Abruptly, the Educator stops speaking.

His eyes become unfocused, and he looks away.

Streams of psionic words enter his mind.

[ALERT! THE FLEET HAS BEEN FORCIBLY TORN OUT OF HYPERSPACE! ALL VOLGRIM OF THE 4TH LEVEL AND ABOVE, PREPARE TO ENTER COMBAT WITH ROAMING VOID BEASTS.]

Educator Norim glances at his students. [Stay here. There is an emergency. I must join our combat forces in the Void.]

Without explaining further, he quickly walks out the door while overhead alarms begin to blare. The ship shudders as something strikes its hull, but the shields remain intact.

Educator Norim strides quickly, increasing his speed once he enters the main hallway. He passes by half a dozen 4th-Level Psions, and even a single 5th Level he happens to recognize.

[Proctor Landis!] Norim calls out to his senior Psion, running over to catch up with him. [What manner of Void Beast is attacking us?]

[We are not yet certain. It is an unrecognized species.] The green-colored Psion says with an authoritative voice. [You have not yet reached the 4th Level. You will stay inside. Our forces are not technically sufficient, but there do not appear to be many Void Beasts attacking us. Now, if you'll excuse me.]

The Proctor doesn't wait for Norim's response. His speed abruptly quadruples, and he races ahead, leaving Norim behind.

Frustrated at his inability to help, Norim lowers his head for a moment in shame. Then he continues down the pure-white halls of the Archontis IV, arriving at the observation deck where he and the other senior teachers can finally see what the hell is going on outside the ship.

Technopaths dart around the Observation Deck's different command panels, barking commands in their native language, a mixture of Volgarian and technobabble even Norim can't keep up with. Having never seen a Great Void Beast in his life, Norim widens his eyes when he gets a good look at the monitors.

Huge creatures, each roughly the size of a Volgrim cruiser, 'swim' in the void like aquatic sea-monsters. Their forms are many and varied, but notably they have semi-translucent skin that reveals their muscles and internal organs. Their bodies range from grey to black, with most ranging on the darker side to better blend in with the void itself.

Some of them resemble large squid-like masses that wrap around the ships with their tentacles to press their toothy maws against the metal and start chewing. Others resemble eyeless sharks, or bipeds with mouths on their 'hands', or any number of other strange and bizarre life-forms.

Educator Norim watches silently as the high-level Psions in the armada quickly and efficiently deploy into space and begin attacking the Great Void Beasts. Among the Psions present, there is even a single 7th-Level named Praetor Thade. This particular Praetor turns out to be a powerful Body Manipulator capable of greatly expanding his size, as well as ripping apart enemies and consuming their bodies to empower himself by way of assimilating their DNA.

Along with just four 6th-Level Psions and a hodge-podge of 5th-Levels, the Psions quickly and efficiently take action, battling these Void Beasts with practiced efficiency as per their many millennia of drills. The creatures utter silent screams to the void as the tiny little Psions tear them to shreds, ripping their bodies with ruthless efficiency.

While Norim watches, he happens to overhear a pair of Technopaths nearby.

"-like the others we've seen. Are these really Great Void Beasts?"

"Hmm. They seem much weaker than the ones in our databases."

"Yes. And it's rare for so many of them to appear this deep inside the galaxy. They usually prefer to remain at the fringes of the galaxy, near the Emptiness."

The two Technopaths banter quietly, but Norim's sharp senses easily pick up on their words.

[You said these Void Beasts are unusual?] He asks, walking over to them.

One of the Technopaths nods at Norim. "Ah, Educator. Yes, we were just comparing the creatures attacking our ship to the ones in the historical records. They are substantially weaker than the Void Beasts of old, and furthermore it is quite rare for them to venture so close to the Galactic Core."

[Hm. How odd.] Norim replies, though he doesn't have enough experience with the Void Beasts to add anything worthy of mention to the discussion.

He wanders back to his original spot and waits. After thirty time-units of battle, the Psion Elites return, victorious. With only the weakest of the 5th-Level Psions having suffered minor injuries, the defense was ultimately a huge success.

Norim heads over to meet up with his senior, Proctor Landis. When he does, he finds that the Proctor is in excellent condition, having fought bravely while suffering no injuries of note.

[Proctor. How did the battle go?] Norim asks.

[As well as can be expected.] Landis replies perfunctorily. [Those Void Beasts were weaker than we expected. Perhaps the weakest I've ever seen.]

[You have fought Void Beasts before?] Norim asks, falling into step with his senior as Landis heads to a cleansing room to remove the impurities on his skin.

[Three times, yes.] Landis answers. [I barely even exerted myself. Were there any losses on the ships?]

[None that I have seen.] Norim answers, while tapping into the ship's Psionic Net to double check. [All crew and civilians are accounted-]

He suddenly pauses mid-step, then he blinks twice.

[What in the Founder's name?]

Proctor Landis also pauses, noticing the look of surprise on his junior's face. [Hm?]

[An... an entire enclave has vanished!] Norim exclaims. [Look! How did we miss this?!]

Immediately, Landis taps into the ship's Psionic Net. He follows Norim's data-trail, where he finds the same thing!

Before his eyes, a blueprint of the ship hovers in the air, with a large hole torn in the hull that everyone somehow missed. Huge teeth-marks lay bitten in the ship's underbelly, revealing where a Void Beast must have attacked.

[Attention all personnel!] Landis calls out, transmitting his voice over the net. [A Bronze Enclave has gone missing! Immediately begin searching the void's vicinity for Aspirator Raavul and her entire class!]

[Damn!] Landis roars, his expression turning to rage. [Those accursed Void Beasts! That was the enclave where I left my student!]

[We may yet find the missing Enclave.] Norim says, trying not to sound bothered. [Initiator Ferral was a promising seed. But in the end, he was only a 1st-Level. His loss is unlikely to affect the future of the war.]

[We will not write my progeny off yet!] Landis thunders with righteous indignation. [Fan out! I want all Psions of the 3rd-Level and higher to sweep the vicinity! Leave no space debris unturned! We WILL uncover my progeny's ultimate fate!]

Landis splits off from his senior to inform his class of what happened. After he leaves, Initiator Y'll breathes a quiet sigh of relief, since she might have been one of the victims devoured by that Void Beast had she remained in Raavul's class.

Six standard time units later, after the fleet receives the order to return to Volgarius, they still fail to find the missing Enclave.

The fleet turns around and returns to Volgarius, forced to write off the loss of their bright young minds as a minor but unavoidable tragedy...

At the same time, in a secret dimension known as Chrona, a hundred Psions *pop* into existence, their bodies becoming frozen by powerful forces as the First Wordsmith nabs his latest haul...

Part 518: Captured Psions

Everything was going decently enough for Aspirator Raavul. She was teaching her class as she usually did, showing them how to slowly build their foundation as they worked steadily toward reaching the Second Invocation. But then, the Great Void Beasts attacked. Weaker than usual, they shouldn't have posed a threat.

She carefully monitored the situation, watching the battle outside from inside her classroom while assuaging her students' fears. It seemed a one-sided victory, and that the High Psions would easily deal with these stray Void Beasts.

But then her eyesight vanished. She woke up with a pitch-black fog covering her vision. Even her psionic senses became muted and ineffective.

Now, after three hours, she is becoming fearful and frustrated.

[Is anyone out there? Hello?]

Raavul tries to move, but her body remains immobilized, as if held in place by powerful clamps that prevent her from even so much as fidgeting. Despite being a ten thousand year old Psion who has seen many oddities and experienced plenty of scares, nothing in her past prepared her for this sudden and abrupt change in her life's situation.

She tries to reach out with her telepathy, but a thick mental wall blocks her senses, making her words fizzle into the darkness before her.

[Help! Proctor Landis! Anyone! Where am I?!]

* * *

Jason Hiro walks up and down the line of Psions placed inside Psio-Stasis Pods, inventions his mind-wife made for the sole purpose of capturing and immobilizing Psions so they won't be able to fight back or escape.

"Some of the weakest Psions, the youngest ones especially, are showing high levels of stress in their cerebral activity." Fiona says, as she walks up behind him. "I think we've given them a good enough scare."

This facility, built ten levels beneath Chrona's soil, serves as a holding facility for the captured Psions. Its dark grey walls keep the room from stressing Jason's eyes, even with

plenty of lights illuminating the interior. But the walls also have a secret purpose in preventing psionic transmissions and other meta-activity from leaking out.

The First Wordsmith massages his chin. "You're sure the Psio-Suppressors will work?"

"I'm as sure as I can be without a real-world test." Fiona replies. "Let's put them on."

Jason and Fiona walk over to the pods. The Psions rest inside without a cover on the front, allowing the Wordsmith and his mind-wife to clamp collars made of Wordsmithium around each Psion's neck. These collars contain highly complex technological and magical internals designed to completely suppress nearly all psionic capabilities from their victims.

After ensuring each of the 101 Psions have been properly fitted and collared, Jason and Fiona take a step back, then sigh deeply.

"Alright." Jason says. "Let's start with the 3rd-Level Psion. If she can't use her abilities, none of the rest will be able to, either."

Fiona instantly transmits a command to Centurion through her neural connection to Chrona's network. The AI begins the wake-up procedure, allowing Aspirator Raavul to open her eyes.

Immediately, the Psion sits up, becoming alert much faster than Jason expected. She looks around the room and quickly assesses the situation, her eyes flicking across all of her comatose students. She then gazes at the two humans, assessing their identities with a hint of uncertainty.

[You! Who are you?] Raavul asks, her telepathic voice much weaker and feebler than she expected it to be.

"You don't recognize me?" Jason asks.

Raavul hesitates. She tries to inspect the entity in front of her, only managing to deduce that he is a male human, and the one beside him is a female human.

[...Should I?] Raavul asks.

"My name is Jason Hiro. I am the Wordsmith." Jason explains. "This is my wife, Fiona Hiro."

[The Wordsmith!] Raavul exclaims. [I had not seen a holo-image of your face, but I have heard your name. What are your intentions toward my students and I? Why have

you captured us? Why am I unable to tap into my Psionic Seed?]

"Let's slow down on the questions." Jason says, holding up a hand. "First off, I'll explain the situation to you succinctly. I conjured fake Void Beasts to attack your fleet. I wanted to snap up some low-level Psions for experimentation purposes, and your Enclave was the ideal choice. Nice and weak, the Volgrim Empire probably won't miss you. I even made it look like the Void Beasts killed you, so they'll be unlikely to guess I was the culprit."

Raavul's stomach sinks upon hearing the Wordsmith's explanation. A deep sense of unease begins to make her feel skittish and vulnerable.

[You... are you planning to torture us...? Let my Enclave go. Wipe their memories if you must. I will do anything you ask. Just don't hurt my disciples!]

"Ah. I think I worded that poorly..." Jason says, realizing his mistake. "Let me correct myself. I don't want to keep you here by force. In fact, I'd prefer if you were all willing to stay here of your own accord. I'm not going to subject you to torturous experiments or anything crazy like that. I just... have a hunch."

Raavul glances at Fiona, searching for answers in her eyes. Then she looks back at Jason.

[A hunch. What is the meaning of this word? I contemplate, but I do not comprehend.]

"I meant to say I have a theory." Jason says, correcting himself once again. "I believe that I might be able... to unify the power of magic and psionics. It should be possible for humanity and the Volgrim to work together more closely. But frankly, I don't trust the Volgrim Empire as you are now, so I want to run these experiments in complete secrecy."

Raavul frowns. [You wish to enhance the psionics of myself and my students? Why? We are not talented in our Paths. I am only a low-level Aspirator. My students have barely begun their journey.]

"That's the thing." Jason explains. "I could have tried capturing a higher-ranked set of Psions, but that might damage your Empire's war effort. Likewise, maybe I could enhance your learning speed, or find ways to augment your potential so you can become much stronger over time. It would be best to start with Psions who have not yet forged a Path, along with a teacher capable of guiding them."

Raavul swallows heavily. She reaches up to scratch her neck, only for her fingers to poke against the collar suppressing her powers. Until now, she hadn't had the mental energy to even notice it, but upon realizing what it must be, her eyes turn dark.

[Then what is the meaning of this device?!] She asks accusatorily. [It restricts my psionic power! Why have you rendered me helpless?]

"Well, it should be obvious, right?" Jason asks back. "We didn't want you freaking out and attacking us before we could explain the situation."

Raavul doesn't appear convinced. [Then remove it now. I will not attack you.]

"I haven't received your answer yet." Jason retorts. "Are you willing to work with me? To help me merge magic with Psionics?"

Raavul starts to reply, but Fiona butts in. "Please keep in mind the state of your Empire, Miss Raavul. You are losing the war. We don't know how long your people have before everything you hold dear collapses and the Plague falls upon you, wiping out your population. And in the interests of self-preservation, once the Volgrim fall, humanity and the demons will fall too. It's in both our best interests to work together."

The Psion frowns. [How do you know my name? I never told you.]

"We investigated your identity, and that of all your students." Jason answers. "It's not that big a leap of logic."

For several seconds, Raavul doesn't reply. She gazes at both humans with a look of intense distrust, but also a tinge of misgiving. Fiona's words metaphorically burrow into her ears, making her doubt her future actions.

Should she work with these two strangers who have boldly kidnapped her?

Could this secretly be a plot to use her knowledge to destabilize the Volgrim Empire?

Might the Wordsmith have more nefarious intentions he hasn't mentioned?

Raavul shuffles her feet nervously. [What... what if I say I do not want to work with you? What will be my fate?]

Jason shrugs. "Then I'll mind-wipe you and send you back to the Volgrim Empire. You'll never know you were here."

[What? You lie. How could it be that easy after you went to such lengths to capture my Enclave?]

Raavul practically bores holes in Jason's head with her stare, but the Wordsmith doesn't seem bothered.

"Once again, you're laboring under a misconception, Miss Raavul. It wasn't much trouble for me to take your Enclave. I didn't do all that much research when I picked yours out. It was just a random stroke of Fate I chose yours. I could have picked any one of the Enclaves on the other ships. From my point of view, one group of 1st Level Psions is pretty much the same as any other. I'm just hoping to find Psions receptive to my goals. If you're going to fight against me the whole time, I'll send you back and look for an Enclave more receptive to my ambitions. I harbor no ill-will toward your Empire."

This time, Jason's words seem to have an effect. Raavul's glare softens a little. She looks at Fiona for confirmation. The Wordsmith's Wife merely nods along, affirming what Jason said.

[You are not trying to deceive me?] Raavul asks.

"I'm not. Do you have an answer now?" Jason asks.

Raavul's face shifts. She crinkles her nose and looks to the side, falling deep into thought.

[...I must withhold my answer for now. Do you intend to ask each of my students the same question?]

"Y-yeah." Jason answers. "Why?"

[I would like you to ask them first. If you cannot convince them, then I must politely decline. If they choose to stay with you, then so too shall I.]

Jason and Fiona shrug in unison.

"Sure. We can do that."

After making the preparations, Jason and Fiona pause to decide on whether or not they should talk to each student one at a time, or all at once. In the interests of expediency, they decide to speak to them as a collective group.

One by one, each young Psion awakens. They all climb out of their pods, much groggier and more confused than their teacher was; likely a testament to their youth and inexperience. Once they have all spotted their teacher and come to grips with the situation, they fall into a loose line in front of their pods to obediently listen to the Wordsmith's request.

One of the students, however, begins to shake with excitement. Hardly has Jason started telling them about how they can choose to opt-out before that student quickly raises his hand.

[Wordsmith! Wordsmith! I accept! I wish to join your cause!]

Jason coughs, not expecting the sudden and somewhat rude interruption. He turns to look at the red-and-blue Psion, a male whose colors melt together in a camouflage-like pattern, and smiles awkwardly.

"Uh. And you are?"

[Initiator Ferral!] The male shouts with a surprising amount of enthusiasm. [I am the progeny of Proctor Landis, a 5th-Level Psion whose name you no-doubt know!]

"Err, actually, I don't know the guy." Jason says. "But it's good you're interested. I'm a little confused though... what makes you so eager to join my cause?"

Ferral's face, despite lacking a mouth, seems to beam out a huge smile. [I have been so bored for so long, Wordsmith! You cannot fathom what a rotten and hollow mess the Volgrim Empire is! They expected me to train endlessly, without rest, all to achieve greater power! Then I would be sent out to fight in a war I had no part in starting! None of these things interest me. I would much rather go out and see the wonders of the cosmos! Gaze upon the different species in the Milky Way! Feast my psionic senses upon the glittering lights of the quasar cluster-]

[Ferral.] Raavul says grumpily. [Control yourself. You are embarrassing me.]

Ferral halts immediately, feeling chided by his teacher. His smile slips a little, but he maintains his enthusiasm.

[M-my apologies, Aspirator. Wordsmith, I stand by my convictions. I would like to join your cause. Even if everyone else here rejects your offer, I will not. I wish to see a better future for all of Volgrimkind.]

With Ferral's declaration out in the open, the other students start to take the Wordsmith's suggestion more seriously.

[Jason Hiro. My name is Initiator Dunal.] A blue-skinned male Psion says, his tone ponderous and slow. [I also wish to join your cause, but not for the same reasons as my fellow disciple. Rather, I do not believe I will be able to Uplift myself in time to make a difference in the ongoing war. It is likely the Plague will defeat my people before I have

any chance of reaching the Third Invocation. For that reason, I desire to subject myself to your experiments, so long as it will give me the strength to fight for my Empire.]

Another Psion, a male with black skin dotted with flecks of white, steps forward. [My name is Initiator Tarim. I am of the same mind, Wordsmith. I wish to see my talents realized. My Path is unorthodox. I do not believe I will achieve much in the time left for my Empire. Allying with you might grant me the capabilities to realize my ambitions.]

Next comes a brown-skinned Psion. [My designation is Initiator Likron. I hope to rise to greater heights by following you, Wordsmith...]

Then comes half a dozen female Psions. Some more males, then females again.

One by one, each student stands up and agrees to go along with the Wordsmith's plans, surprising not only Jason and Fiona, but Aspirator Raavul as well.

Before long, every single disciple has spoken in favor of following Jason's goals. This allows their teacher to metaphorically breathe easier as she turns to face Jason.

[My students have made their choice, and so have I.] Aspirator Raavul states calmly. [I will join you and assist your goals of empowering my sub-species to the apex. Perhaps, through our efforts, we can forge a future wherein Volgrim and Human alike will not act as enemies, but as colleagues, comrades, and even friends. I only pray you will not betray our trust with acts of deception.]

"I will not." Jason vows solemnly. **"Release."**

With a single Word of Power, Jason deactivates the collars on each of the Psions, allowing all of the 1st-Level disciples and their 3rd-Level teacher to breathe more easily as the suppressive forces holding them back fall to nothingness.

A tense moment follows as Jason waits to see if this was all just a ploy to make him lower his guard.

Luckily, none of the Psions lash out. They simply pull the collars off and rub their necks, relieved to walk freely.

"Well." Jason says. "I guess that's that, then. Who wants to have a look at your new home for the next however-many-years?"

[Me!] Ferral exclaims, always the first to oblige.

Jason chuckles good-naturedly at the young Psion. "How old are you anyway, kid?"

Ferral blushes slightly, causing the blue parts of his skin to redden. [Ah. I acted immaturely again. Forgive me, Wordsmith. I am but a mere two hundred and forty orbital cycles of age. I am truly young and foolish.]

Jason's eyes nearly pop out of his head. "What the f- you're *two hundred and forty* years old?! What about the rest of you?!"

Initiator Dunal raises his hand. [Three hundred and seven orbital cycles.]

[Three hundred and seventy-four orbital cycles.] Initiator Tarim states.

[Four hundred and nine orbital cycles.] Initiator Likron adds.

One by one, each Psion answers with an age noticeably higher than Ferral, with Aspirator Raavul coming last.

[Twelve thousand, six hundred and forty-six orbital cycles.] Raavul states, looking at the Wordsmith with a knowing gaze. [Let me guess. Your age is... not as advanced as ours.]

Jason's expression darkens. He privately thinks to himself that he only hoped to wheel and deal with some young and inexperienced children, but he somehow forgot about how ridiculously old even a low-level Psion like Raavul should be.

"Uh. Yeah." Jason coughs. "Something like that."

[Do not fret too much. Our species is long-lived, but our perception of time is much faster than that of a mud-dweller.] Raavul says, finally feeling a bit better about her situation. [Your species' concept of 'generations' does not apply to mine, but I suppose you could consider me a 'young adult.' My disciples are still merely children in the eyes of our longer-lived seniors.]

"So what does that make your Founders?" Jason pokes. "Grandparents?"

Raavul blinks twice. [Wise.]

"Ookay, fair enough." Jason concludes. "Why don't you all come with me then, and I'll show you around?"

[I look forward to examining this strange realm.] Raavul says, as she tries to expand her senses beyond the confines of the Psio-Suppression Chamber, yet fails to detect anything beyond its boundaries. [My curiosity is... boundless.]

Part 519: The Artificer

Eight hours after the conclusion of the battle on Tarus II, Archangel Uriel continues to sit atop a building in the center of the primary human city, the Fortress of Retribution. This building happens to be the entrance to the main underground shelter where the civilians were taken during Mephisto's attack, a reinforced bunker intended to safeguard them from anything, even an atomic blast.

Uriel sits atop the giant Wordsmithium dome encasing the bunker with a blank expression, silently watching as the humans far below her slowly swarm like ants, moving undead corpses around, cleaning up the streets, and otherwise rebuilding their city.

To her right, left, and behind, Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel also sit facing four different directions, their bodies of light giving them distinct and unmistakable appearances. She has long grown capable of recreating their original forms with her magic, though their power naturally pales in comparison to when they roamed the cosmos a hundred thousand years before.

As they sit, Raphael meditates, keeping his eyes closed while muttering and grumbling under his breath.

"Hmph. Hmm... hmmmm..."

Ever since Mephisto's attack concluded, Raphael has been making these noises.

Finally, Uriel reaches her breaking point. She slowly turns her head to the side to look at her older brother's back.

"Raphael. Thy... *grunts* art getting on my nerves."

Raphael doesn't answer for a few moments. He slowly opens his eyes, then clears his throat before craning his head to meet Uriel's gaze.

"Ah. Apologies, sister. Was I speaking out loud?"

"Not speaking." Uriel clarifies. "Speaking would have been more tolerable. Thou were making... grumbling noises... *incessantly*."

"Oh. I hadn't realized." Raphael says apologetically, returning his gaze to face forward once more. "Tis' just... I have much on my mind."

Michael pipes up, not bothering to turn around and look at his eldest brother. "Regarding?"

"That Dosena..." Raphael murmurs. "Verily, she mayeth be a 'mere' Mid Cosmic, but she possesseth abilities most frightening. When she emerged from the Warpgate, she traversed the distance from ground to void in but a single second, yet in that instant she had already swept the entire planet with her senses multiple times. Her cognitive speed far exceeds my own."

"Thy meaning is, she is highly intelligent?" Michael asks.

"I cannot speak to her intellect." Raphael says slowly. "But the 'speed' with which she perceives reality far eclipses any of ours. Perhaps even thy own mental speed, Michael."

Michael snorts, finding his brother's claim to be a bit far-fetched. "Hah. I doubt that."

Gabriel hums quietly. "Hmm... what did the Psion discover to cause thee such distress, Raphael?"

"I do not know." Raphael says. "But I suspect anything which was once 'hidden' on this world is no longer so. Undoubtedly, Founder Dosena's ability to read the thoughts of lesser beings vastly eclipses that of the lower-ranking Psions. Tis' possible she made gains and uncovered secrets we cannot fathom."

"Then we should warn Neil Adams about this matter." Uriel concludes. "Let the big-brained human leader figure the situation out."

"Aye. We can do that later, after I have thought some more." Raphael murmurs.

He and the other Archangels once again fall silent, continuing to gaze out in the four different directions, each of them having different thoughts on their minds.

"Had Founder Dosena failed to show up, I am not certain how the battle would have ended." Gabriel muses. "The humans lack power. The Wordsmiths have techniques aplenty, but the False Dragon was too durable for them to injure. He may have won had the Volgrim Empire not dispatched their mightiest Psion."

"Hah. Do not jest." Raphael laughs wryly. "That Psion had no interest in protecting humanity. She merely desired the dragon bones comprising Mephisto's body. As well, she may have sought information regarding that mana signature belonging to our sister..."

"Which sister was she?" Michael asks, turning his head slightly, though not quite getting a good enough angle to look behind himself at Raphael. "Not Camael. Someone

else."

"I did not recognize her signature." Raphael mutters. "As far as I could tell, she was but an ordinary Seraph from the Primordial Era."

"What? A mere Seraph?" Michael asks, aghast. "And yet she possessed such power?"

"She fell during the ancient times." Raphael explains. "One of a billion-billion others. Too many fell during those old wars. Thus, when she appeared, she must have retained the power she possessed prior to her death."

Uriel shifts on her butt a little, turning her body a smidge to better face Raphael's back. "We are Archangels, yet our power doth not compare to a Seraph from the primordial age. Brother, is there no way I can regain my full strength? Is there not some path I can walk to attain the power I once held, eons ago?"

Raphael shakes his head. "Not while thou continueth to possess that accursed demonic body. But perhaps, should'st thou formeth a new vessel, thou mayest yet restore what thou hath long ago lost."

A faint fire ignites in Uriel's eyes. "So, tis' possible?"

"Again. I am not certain." Raphael says glumly. "We no longer possess the power of creation. That was lost when Uzziel fell. Her remnant soul lacks the powers she once possessed. She cannot help us. Verily, our only prayer of success requireth the Wordsmith's assistance, but they are still dim of mind and unable to offer the specific help we need.

Uriel raises her voice an octave. "But surely-"

However, in the middle of the Archangel's conversation, a movement from below catches their eyes. Uriel stops speaking as she catches a glimpse of someone at the base of the dome. A woman with long white hair, wearing a somewhat skimpy fur-lined leather bra and loincloth ensemble jumps atop the base of the dome and slowly approaches from below.

"Ah! Excuse me! Great Archangels! Am I... interrupting?"

The woman pauses, clearly not wanting to offend the winged creatures perched atop the reinforced dome's center.

Uriel swallows her words, deciding to leave that discussion for later. "Thy name is?"

"It's Sariah, my lady." The woman says, quickly bowing her head. "I'm Brunhilda's confidante. I'm a Felorian."

"A Felorian." Uriel repeats, the name failing to register in her mind. "Dost thou requireth our assistance?"

The woman stands meekly, not wanting to get too close and offend any of the Archangels. "I was wondering if I could speak to the Eldest Archangel, Father Raphael? I have a problem... but if you're busy, I can leave. It's not a big deal."

Raphael sighs. He stands up and pops his back, then turns to face the woman below.

"Not a big problem, thou sayeth, yet thou seeketh out the Archangel of Wisdom. Were this matter as mundane as thou claimeth, thou surely wouldst hath many a friendly ear to pull upon. What matter requires my intervention, little one?"

The woman smiles faintly, then takes a few steps forward. "Great Archangel, I am a craftswoman of the Felorians. I forge our armor and weapons. I imbue them with Qi in order to empower our people beyond the station of what ordinary humans can achieve. But a few months ago, the First Wordsmith granted me a boon..."

Sariah launches into a short but information-dense explanation of the problem she is facing, while Raphael continues to stand atop the dome and look down at her with slowly increasing interest.

"...he empowered all of the Felorians with new abilities." Sariah explains. "In my case, he gave me the ability of 'Perception' which allowed me to see things I had never noticed before. But this has caused me a certain distress I did not expect."

"A distress, thou sayeth?" Raphael asks, lightly flapping his wings to float down to the Felorian woman's level. He stops a few paces away and smiles kindly at her. "Consider my interest piqued, young one. Continue thy tale."

The two of them stand at a slight angle near the bottom of the dome, but neither one pays much mind to the rounded incline of the shelter's roof.

"Your Excellency," Sariah continues, as polite as ever, "I have crafted more than five hundred pieces of equipment in my life. Swords, maces, battlestaves, helmets, armor... but when I obtained the Wordsmith's gift, it allowed me to perceive thousands of flaws within my work. More flaws than I could fathom! All those incredible items I deemed to be 'artifacts' now feel to me as if they were trash meant to be cast into the ocean! I come to

you seeking guidance. From what I've heard, there was once an incredible craftswoman among your people. Does she still draw breath?"

Raphael's smile slips away. He looks at the young woman, noting her earnest eyes. He quietly lets out a breath of defeat.

"Thou speaketh of Sister Camael. Verily, she hath long ago passed away. She is dead."

Sariah's shoulders slump, but not by much. "I see. I assumed that was the case. Do you happen to know anything about artifact-smithing? Maybe you picked up some tricks from her? I need any help I can get! I don't know how to proceed when all of my works are so utterly awful!"

"I take it the First Wordsmith is not able to assist thee?" Raphael asks.

"He doesn't have an eye for craftsmanship." Sariah answers. "Though he *has* been making artifacts using his magic, it's not the same. His method isn't hands-on like the way I make them."

"Taking shortcuts, as always..." Raphael muses. "Hmm. Well, to answer thy question, Camael may hath departed us, but there art many competent and talented artisans in the galaxy. For example..."

Raphael pauses to gather his thoughts. He glances up at the sky thoughtfully, as if picking out the stars from the waning daylight to try and remember names.

"Ah, the fairies." Raphael says. "They might be able to assist thee. Indeed, the fairies art quite talented in terms of craftsmanship."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that." Sariah says. "I could ask Miss Blinker."

"And there thou hath it." Raphael says with a smile. "The fairies shalt be able to uplift thy capabilities to the next level."

Just as Raphael thinks he's solved the problem, Uriel speaks up from behind him.

"Brother. I have another suggestion. What of the Heroes who Hope recovered?"

Raphael turns around to look up at his sister. "Hm?"

"Hope Hiro channeled several Heroic Spirits within his body as he fought Mephisto." Uriel explains. "One of them was quite familiar. Hath thou forgotten the visage of Elizabeth Kindelmann? One of the Heroic Artisans?"

"Ah yes, the Flame of Love." Raphael says, blinking his eyes slowly. "She did make an appearance, didn't she? Hmm. Verily, she would'st make for a fine teacher in the trade of artificing."

"Elizabeth Kindelmann?" Sariah asks, uncomprehending. "Who is she?"

Raphael turns his attention back to the young woman.

"A Hungarian Hero from the 16th Century, in Earth's Calendar." The old man explains. "She was capable and competent in the art of combat, but 'twas her blacksmithing skills that made Camael take note. Indeed, my sister praised her skills, saying if little Elizabeth were immortal, she might reach the same lofty heights as the Archangel of Divination."

"She's that talented?!" Sariah crows. "Then I'd really like to meet her!"

"Aye. I imagine thou would'st..." Raphael says, while the smile on his face turns gloomy. "Ah. But there is a problem. Hope Hiro possesses Kindelmann's artifact. On thy behalf, I shalt intervene, asking him if he would'st allow thee to train under the Flame of Love. I believe he shalt agree to my request, but we cannot be too certain. The Second Wordsmith does not necessarily follow the same logic as he did merely a few weeks ago. Tis' hard to say how he might react."

"Oh..." Sariah mumbles, her expression deflating once again. "Well, if you could speak to him, I'd really appreciate it. My skills aren't good now, but maybe I can help you in the future? I can make artifacts for all the Archangels, or something!"

Raphael pats the young woman's shoulder. "Thou art a kind-hearted child, little one. Worry not about my needs. Tend to thine instead. I wisheth to see the uprising of humanity as much as thou surely do, so I shalt seek this favor on thy behalf."

"Thank you very much, Your Excellency." Sariah says, beaming a bright smile at Raphael. "Then... shall I leave and come back later, after you've talked to Mister Hope?"

"That would be for the best." Raphael says. "Continue trying to improve for now. It shan't take me too long to speak to the Wordsmith. But one cannot rush these matters, especially with so many major events occurring at present."

Sariah glances back at all the undead bodies being wheeled around.

"Yeah... everyone is still working on the cleanup. Sometimes I forget how little time passes in realspace. Anyway, many thanks, Archangel Raphael. I'll see you in a day or

two."

The Felorian bows her head politely, then jumps off the dome and lands on the ground with ease before trotting off to somewhere unknown.

After she departs, Raphael remains standing in place for a while, thinking about even more new developments.

"So... tis' not only the Second Wordsmith who hath created a domain of time acceleration, eh? And from the sounds of it, the First Wordsmith's domain must be revolving just as fast, if not faster. Hm. Hmm... the young are truly full of energy."

Raphael shakes his head, then he turns around and shambles back up the dome to take his seat once more.

"Ahh, now what were we speaking about before that young lady interrupted us?"

Uriel blinks her eyes. "A method of ascension, brother."

"Ohh, yes. That. Quite..." Raphael murmurs.

The wizened old man turns a sly smile toward his sister. Instead of speaking aloud, he transmits a burst of thoughts to her using their unique connection, a telepathic link so secure that he's quite certain only the Wordsmiths could listen in, but if they did then he would know. Not even the Second Founder would be able to intrude on the soul-anchor linking two Archangel souls...

After Raphael finishes sending his secret communication, Uriel's expression changes drastically. A look of shock, awe, and disbelief washes across her face. Not just hers, but Michael and Gabriel's too. They hear what Raphael has said and both their mouths fall open.

"Brother. Is that truly possible?!" Uriel asks.

"Only in theory." Raphael says, still slyly smirking. "Why do you think I went to all that trouble back in the day? Michael's sacrifice served many purposes. 'Twas a tragedy to lose his body, but it gave us a long-term glimmer of hope. The only problem came in the political games between humans and angelkind. We could not rely on them as they were. The Heroes held too much sway."

"And they don't now?" Michael asks, trying not to look as dumbfounded as he feels.

"The Heroes naturally possess much sway among their people in the current era. But 'tis humanity itself that holds the keys to power." Raphael explains. "We must proceed slowly, brothers. Sister. This plan has been a long time coming. When we passed away, I believed I had failed, but now I see the project may yet bear fruit."

Gabriel looks out into the horizon as Tarus II's sun slowly dips beneath the distant peaks.

"Faith Energy... tis' more incredible than I imagined. One mayeth revive a God."

"The quantity required is, frankly, absurd." Raphael counters. "And the humans do not trust us, not that I blame them. Moreover, Uriel's soul remains attached to that demonic vessel. So long as this remains true, she can never recover her former power."

"And we lack bodies entirely." Michael says, his shock finally fading away. "So, we cannot harness Faith Energy ourselves."

"Where there is a will, there is a way." Raphael concludes. "Now, let us speak of this no longer. We've no idea who might be listening. Keep thy thoughts to thyselfes."

"Of course, brother." Uriel says, her admiration for Raphael returning in full force.

She gazes down at the humans below, her thoughts swirling like a vortex, hungry for the Truths her brother has quietly revealed.

There is a method. I mustn't give up hope. Demonkind may yet pay the price for their ancient crimes. I need only wait for Raphael's plan to bear fruit...

Inside the time-accelerated dimension known as Chrona.

Fiona hovers over Blinker as the Monster Queen's tiny body lays on a miniature hospital bed, her expression telling a story of deep fatigue.

"Still." Fiona says quietly, frowning as the word departs her lips. "It's been months. Why haven't you recovered?"

Blinker slowly closes and opens her eyes. "I don't know. I felt fine at first. I left Chrona to help fight Mephisto. I was at the top of my game. But then as the fight dragged on, I started feeling so tired... so fatigued. Once I returned, I fell into this mental slump. I can't seem to wake up. It's like my body just wants to sleep forever and ever..."

Kar stands next to Blinker's bed, his body supported by a mechanical exoskeleton. He still can't walk on his own, but at least he has a little bit of dignity.

"Hurgh. Butterfly. Maybe the fight exhausted your mana more than you thought."

"No, not even..." Blinker retorts. "It's not like when Jason ran himself dry Wordsmithing. This is different. I felt like... like the universe itself wanted me to slow down. I can't put the feeling into words."

Fiona steps to the side. She flips open several records she wrote over the last few months, including biometric tests she performed on Blinker, among other things.

"The data hasn't changed. Your body is in a state of lethargy. It's not so different from a sedentary human abruptly running a hundred kilometers without stopping. The toll on their muscles would be just as immense. But based on the footage we recorded, compared to when you fought Zamiel, you barely exerted yourself against Mephisto. I have no idea why you're still in this condition."

"Even Jason couldn't fix me." Blinker mumbles, visibly disheartened. "Maybe I'm... dying."

"I don't think you are." Fiona says quickly. "The data doesn't pan out in that way. Your body is merely... exhausted. I'm not sure why. Perhaps you simply need to rest a while longer."

"How much longer?" Blinker questions. "I can't even pick up my kids, Fiona. I can't use my magic. I can barely hold a spoon. Even staying awake right now is a struggle."

The Wordsmith's Mind-Wife doesn't have any answers.

She shrugs heavily and releases a sigh, exasperated over her helplessness.

"I can bring Samantha here." Fiona suggests. "Maybe she can heal you."

"Isn't Sam busy healing the people Mephisto injured?" Blinker asks.

"Hurgh. I'm sure Big Boobs will find time to help a good friend." Kar says, reaching down to pat his wife's shoulder with his finger. "We'll get you all fixed up, Butterfly."

"Good. That's good..." Blinker says slowly, as her eyes start to close. "Getting... sleepy again. Sorry, I just... just can't..."

A few moments later, her eyes completely close. She stops speaking, and her breathing becomes more even as she drifts off back to sleep.

Fiona and Kar exchange a glance. The two of them quietly depart the room, though Kar seems hesitant to leave his wife's side.

The crocodile waits until after he and Fiona have stepped out of earshot to air his true feelings.

"Hurgh! That damned Smokey!" Kar snarls under his breath. "This is all his fault! He did something to my Butterfly. How dare he!"

Fiona shakes her head. "I don't know, Kar. I don't know. Mephisto's a Cosmic Entity now. Whatever he did, not even Jason can undo it. I think I'll have to ask the Archangels soon if we can't find a cause for her lethargy. But, it is a little baffling... there's no signs of any magical tomfoolery messing with her body. She's simply extremely tired."

"Smokey definitely did something to my Butterfly. Definitely." Kar continues to growl, repeating his words for emphasis. "If only I was not so weak, I could have killed him when I was still the Monster King. Now I'm useless. This is all my fault."

"It's not..." Fiona says, touching Kar's arm. "Don't talk like that. You have to stay strong and take care of your kids. I'm sure Blinker will get better soon, Kar."

"Hurgh. My body is still too weak to do much." Kar says, his anger turning to sadness. "Even with this metal skeleton, I can barely hold them for a few seconds. Then I get tired and need to sleep. Say, White Ghost, could you do me a favor?"

Fiona blinks. "A favor? If it's within my means, sure."

"Good." Kar nods. "Can you get in contact with the Lizards? Have them send a nanny here. I could really use some help with all my rowdy spawn, and I do not wish to impose on you or Turtle."

"Oh. You want a nanny? I guess that's fine..." Fiona says, uncertain of what to say. "I'll have to ask Jason though. This realm is supposed to be a secret."

"If you can't find me a nanny... I will manage." Kar grumbles. "It's just getting hard. I did not realize how much I relied on Butterfly to take care of the kids. She and I are both so weak now..."

"Don't worry, Kar. I'll talk to Jason." Fiona confirms with a nod of her head. "Why don't you go play with your children for a bit, then let me know when you need to rest? I don't ever need to sleep, so I can keep an eye on them for you until we find a nanny."

"Ohh... that would be such a help. But I know you are a busy woman. Are you sure it will be alright?" Kar asks.

"I'm a big girl. And ever since I started projecting myself in Chrona, my capabilities have become quite impressive." Fiona says with a big smile. "In fact, I've been meaning to talk to Jason about something for a while now... I guess today's as good a time as any."

Fiona and Kar exchange a few more words, then they split up and go their separate ways.

After peeking in and checking on Blinker one last time, Fiona takes a deep breath. She starts to exit the hospital and head toward Jason's current location.

I have to do this. She thinks. It's for both our well-being. Hopefully he'll understand...

Part 520: Diablo's Secret

While a few hours have come and gone in realspace, far more time has passed in the dimension known as Chrona. Jason Hiro only recently captured a school of Psions, but now, he's had the lesser part of one Chrona-day to acclimate them to their new living situation.

Most of the students appear enthused to walk around in a human-created dimension. While the technology in Chrona certainly appears shabby compared to that of the Volgrim Empire, Jason's world makes up for it with lush forests, grass, and flowers spread out in any direction they look.

Never have these humble 'children' of the Psions seen greenery in person, let alone such a substantial amount! Jason even begins to feel dismayed by how sheltered they act, gasping, oohing, and ahing at every new flower or greenery they pass. Even their revered teacher, a 14,000 year old Psion of some notoriety, can't help but admire her surroundings.

Still, the youngsters mostly keep their commentary tamped down. Only one of them practically blows his stack with excitement every time he finds a new sight to set his eyes on.

[Incredible! Beautiful! How truly gorgeous!] Initiator Ferral crows as he kneels down to look at a white lily floating on a pond just outside Chrona's cityscape. [The white! The green! It blends together so immaculately! What beautiful colors compared to the hideous, grey, drab decor of the Volgrim Empire! I feel as if I have entered paradise!]

[Ahem. Initiator Ferral. Insulting our culture is *not* an appropriate act of decorum.] Aspirator Raavul says, a hint of annoyance in her voice. [Once more, I must insist you restrain your excitement.]

The other Initiators glance at each other, laughing telepathically in private. But even they have to admit that while the silly Ferral might be outspoken, his words are not entirely baseless. This causes Raavul some consternation, as even she has to acknowledge the ugliness of the Volgrim Empire compared to the beauty of Terrankind's nature.

Still, she refuses to allow her student to blatantly and outright insult the Empire in front of mere mud-dwellers. It's an unacceptable action in her eyes, one that demeans ten

million years of her culture's glory and valor.

Ferral doesn't even bother to look back at his teacher. His gaze instead remains fixated on the flower floating in the pond.

[I apologize for nothing, master! This world is what I have yearned for since my body was first formed! I finally feel as if I have found my purpose!]

Jason, standing off to the side of the Enclave, coughs into his fist. "Your teacher is right. There's no need to belittle the Volgrim Empire. While Volgarius itself might be a hellish landscape of concrete and steel with not a tree in sight, your people almost certainly control many paradise-class worlds. You-"

Before Jason can continue, Raavul quickly cuts him off. [Apologies, Wordsmith, but you are wrong. We have lost control of all our paradise-class worlds. Only the ones owned by non-Volgrim subspecies remain within our periphery.]

Jason swallows his words. "Really? But why? How...?"

[I am not a high-enough ranked Psion to join the galactic army. Therefore, I am not privy to any classified details.] Raavul explains. [However, I have long kept an eye on the galactic starmap. I know of the vast majority of worlds inside the Milky Way. I also know which ones are ostensibly controlled by which species, be they Volgrim or non-Volgrim.]

She pauses to heave a mental sigh.

[The War is unending. The Plague prefer to target worlds rich in life. Those worlds typically end up being paradise-class planets. Sharmur was one such world lost recently. Tarus II could be the next. Even worse, the more a planet teems with life, the greater the benefits it provides to the Plague. The Kolvaxians can reproduce faster if they have ample access to a ready food supply.]

"If you're not in the military, then how do you even know any of that?" Jason questions.

[One need not fight for their empire to perform their own investigations.] Raavul retorts. [I and plenty of others in my place have long learned some of the intricacies our forces face in the Void. The universe is a cold and merciless place.]

Jason considers her words carefully. [Yeah. Of that, I have no doubt.]

He cannot fathom the monsters which truly lurk elsewhere in the cosmos, the distant galaxies beyond his conceptualization of the universe...

Jason continues to talk to the Psions, leading them around. At some point, a female voice softly calls out to him from behind.

"Jason. Do you have some free time?"

The Wordsmith turns around and smiles as he spots his Mind-Wife, Fiona. "Hey, honey. Something happen?"

He doesn't mention the Spynet, though his Volgrim guests will learn of its existence sooner rather than later. For now, he intends to show them the brighter side of Chrona before exposing any dangerous secrets he'd rather the Founders not learn.

"No. Nothing like what you're thinking." Fiona says, as she walks up to him, a weak smile on her face.

Invisible question marks bubble up over Jason's head. He notices Fiona seems to be acting different from usual. She seems... hesitant. Not confident, like she usually is.

The Wordsmith clears his throat and turns back to the Psions. "Pardon me. I'm going to go chat with my wife for a bit. I'll be back soon."

Raavul glances at the two of them, but her ability to read the emotions of Terrans is fairly limited. She isn't certain why the Wordsmith's wife would pull him away, but she still judges it not to be her business.

[Of course. We will remain in this garden until you return.]

With one last nod, Jason departs with Fiona, heading back into the city center.

"Are you sure it's alright to leave those Psions alone?" Fiona asks.

Jason starts to answer, but he can't help noticing Fiona is winding her hair around her finger in a strangely nervous manner.

"They'll be fine. More importantly, what's all this about, honey? You seem... on edge."

"Let's wait until we're more private." Fiona says, making Jason even more worried and curious.

It doesn't take long until they arrive back at their home and head inside. Once there, Jason turns on the light in his room and sits at a table in his kitchen, while Fiona uneasily sits across from him. Unlike Jason, she requires no sleep, and thus she doesn't have a bed of her own or other ordinary human amenities.

The two remain silent for a moment, until Jason's curiosity gets the better of him.

"Well...?" He asks gently. "Why do I have the feeling I fucked something up again? You're acting like a nervous schoolgirl right now."

"I don't want to offend you." Fiona says slowly. "I... I didn't get a say in my creation. You never asked Phoebe if you could 'make me,' and I never resented you for doing so. You had enemies. You needed a mental shield. I was the logical choice. But today, I want to ask you for a favor that I feel has been a long time coming."

Jason's face smooths out, and his expression becomes more solemn as he starts guessing what she's about to ask.

"And that would be?"

"I want to separate from your Mind Realm." Fiona says, deciding to blurt it out and rip the band-aid off. "I'm still a lot like Phoebe, Jason. I love you to death. But being trapped in your Mind Realm has felt so... suffocating. When you're in Chrona, I can walk and talk with a body that is practically fully-human. But whenever you leave, I get pulled back into your Mind Realm, and..."

She trails off, leaving the implication hanging.

A quiet moment follows, as Jason digests her request.

"I've been wondering if you'd ask me to do this." Jason says. "It's a good idea. And our circumstances have changed. I don't need you in my head to protect my thoughts from Psions. I do enjoy having you in there, though. It's... nice... being able to share such an intimate link with someone. I often feel closer to you than I do Phoebe."

"And I feel the same!" Fiona exclaims. "It's just... I'm a social butterfly, Jason. You know me. I love talking to people. I don't like sitting in silence for long periods of time. I enjoy a good book like any other person, but those moments of quiet can become oppressive when they go on for too long."

"You're an extrovert." Jason says. "And I'm a bit of an introvert. It's fine. I think if our roles were reversed, and I had to stay in your head, I'd probably be okay with it. But that's simply a difference in personality. It's no issue at all, Fiona. I'd be happy to split you off. It's just..."

Jason winces.

"...how? How can you split off? Raphael warned me that if I recklessly pulled you out of my head, both of us could suffer permanent damage. I don't know if I can just plunk

you in a new body, either."

"I don't think that would work, no." Fiona says. "Based on the few experiments I've done, as well as some educated guessing and pure conjecture, one cannot simply attach souls to new bodies willy nilly. That's what necromancers do, and it often leaves the body a half-rotted husk."

She pauses for half a beat.

"There is another option though. You can bind my existence to Chrona."

Jason blinks. "What? How would that work?"

"You understand how Heroic Artifacts function, right?" Fiona asks. "Chrona is important to me. It might be a giant dimension, but you crafted it with your magic. It's an artificial construct. A living nexus of sorts... an artifact. I believe you could bind my soul to it, and I could live within it in the same way Arthur lives within Excalibur, or Lorent within his executioner's axe."

Jason sags into his chair. He looks at his mind-wife with a bit of surprise, and a dash of fear.

"You've thought this through. But... Raphael said transplanting you from my mind back into the real world could cause both of us serious issues."

"Raphael could be wrong." Fiona says lamely, though it's clear even she doesn't buy that argument. "Even if he's right, you're a Wordsmith. Surely you can patch up whatever flaws happen, right?"

"You're asking me?" Jason questions. "I don't know! I've never tried pulling a soul out of someone, let alone the soul of my wife which has partially fused with mine. What if I totally screw up and destroy my Wordsmithing? Magic comes from the soul, you know. I won't be able to fix anything if this transfer goes awry."

Fiona bobs her head from side to side thoughtfully.

"Then you should talk to Raphael and see if you can find a compromise, Jason. Now that I've tasted freedom and the ability to walk around again, I don't want to lose it. Maybe Sam can direct you to a demon who would be able to help?"

"No way. Fuck that." Jason says, immediately rejecting the idea. "Asking Raphael for help is fine. But I'm not putting our lives in the hand of any demon. Samantha, sure, but not any others. I'd rather come up with a solution myself."

He rubs his chin.

"Tell you what. Why don't I bring Phoebe to Chrona? It would be good to have her here anyway. She can have the baby here and you and her can work together to find a solution for this soul-fusion problem."

"There is another option." Fiona points out. "Wasn't Rebecca going to arrive soon with Marie's Cybernites? They might be able to offer us some assistance."

"With soulcrafting?" Jason asks skeptically.

"Possibly. Or something else. We might as well put them to work immediately. That's the whole point of bringing highly advanced cyborgs into our collective. They must have picked up SOME useful knowledge over the years."

The two continue going back and forth, but don't ultimately decide on a solid plan.

"You've given me a lot to think about, honey." Jason says as the talk winds down. "I'm not mad you want to split off. I was even expecting this at some point. I just think we need to be extremely careful in how we proceed. We need a backup plan or a failsafe of some sort."

"Yeah... sorry." Fiona apologizes. "I got a little too excited. You're right. We have plenty of time to find an optimal solution. I should spend more time trying to solve Blinker's condition for now."

"She still hasn't recovered?" Jason asks. "It all happened so suddenly. What did Mephisto hit her with to weaken her so severely?"

"You heard Unarin." Fiona replies. "Cosmics possess incredible power. Hope might be hurting too, for all we know. We should check on him."

"I'll look him up on the Spynet, see what he looked like after the battle." Jason says. "But... he seemed really pissed at me. I thought after all these years he'd be over our old issues, but-"

"It hasn't been years for him." Fiona quickly points out. "We're in a time-accelerated space. Hope isn't."

"...are you sure about that?" Jason asks. "Hope, uh... he seemed oddly proficient with those artifacts. If I had the idea to make a time-accelerated domain, then Hope certainly might have too, especially since he has Solomon helping him."

"I'll check the Spynet's records." Fiona promises. "If he did make a domain of his own, there should be signs."

Jason nods. "That would be for the best."

Emperor Yardrat levitates in the air, keeping close to the Archdemon in the same way as all the other Emperors. A few hours have passed since he received word that Mephisto was snapped up by Founder Dosena, but he doesn't dare relax his guard. If Mephisto were to break free of the Psion's clutches, he could warp to Numaria in seconds and nab himself an Emperor. Yardrat has no intention of being the first idiot to fall.

In the meantime, the demons gaze up at the Archdemon in awe as Diablo holds all four of his arms overhead, aiming them up at the sky.

Diablo manipulates his cosmic energy to travel a great distance into the void. He 'reaches' up toward the moon Crow destroyed when she slammed Mephisto into it, and Diablo begins pulling the five supermassive shards together, combining the moon back into one piece.

It takes a great deal of effort, but Diablo makes the process seem effortless. He finishes up his work and mostly compresses the moon back together, though gravity will have to do the rest of the work over the next few thousand years. At least now, giant chunks of the moon will not rain down upon Numaria and render all its remaining life extinct.

After finishing, Diablo remains immobile for a time. He stares straight forward, his giant body becoming like a statue for reasons unknown. Yardrat raises an eyebrow as he feels the Archdemon's energy become minutely less impressive, though he isn't certain why.

Suddenly, a voice speaks up from behind him.

"Yardrat."

The Emperor of the Void nearly jumps out of his skin. He whirls around, his eyes widening as he sees none other than Diablo himself levitating in the air. Not in his flesh-body, but an astral projection of Cosmic Energy that also completely masks his demonic presence. No matter how Yardrat tries to focus, he can't get a read on Diablo's soul signature.

"You... what sorcery is this?" Yardrat asks.

"I cannot exit the Archdemon's body." Diablo explains. "I am not a true Cosmic Entity. I merely possess the uncanny ability to conjure the form of an ancient monster from the Primordial Era. I control it like a puppet. But so long as I do, demonkind will not be easily bullied by the humans, the Volgrim, or even... the Plague. For now, I must rely on this little trick to travel around in my normal form."

Yardrat turns his head to look at the Archdemon for a moment, then he returns his attention to Diablo's astral form. The Second Emperor appears as impressive as ever, suited out in his black cloak with gold trim. His bushy beard and sideburns make him appear sufficiently authoritative to regain control of demonkind.

"What are we going to do now?" Yardrat asks. "The Emperors will naturally defer to your commands, but we face many threats. The Second Founder didn't appear ready to take you on, and the Wordsmiths probably aren't a major threat anymore... but the Plague..."

Yardrat's expression becomes glum.

"...we have no defense against the Plague. We even lost Sharmur."

"I am aware of Sharmur's fate." Diablo says calmly, crossing his arms. "I wanted to intervene, but the First Emperor told me the time was not yet right. He told me we must not act until the players of the Game had begun to move their pieces around the board. And he was right."

Yardrat gives Diablo a quizzical look. "So you sacrificed Sharmur? You threw away Shax's Hell? I never took you for the sentimental type, but even for you, that's cold."

"Sharmur was lost." Diablo says slowly. "But... who is to say it must remain lost forever? Who is to say we cannot take it back?"

"Pah. You're screwing with me." Yardrat says with a scoff. "You think it's that easy? The Volgrim have been trying for millennia. Every world that fell remained lost to them forever. We demons are much weaker than them. We have no chance."

"That is why you fail." Diablo retorts. "You've already given up in your heart. With such a mindset, you'll never be capable of achieving greatness, let alone walking the path of a Cosmic. Let me tell you, Yardrat... the demons are not the Volgrim. We can be better than them. Superior."

Diablo lifts his chin. A look of haughtiness and pride enters his eyes.

"I am the Archdemon. My powers are greater than you imagine. Two years ago, in secret, I stole away to a world overrun by the Plague on the First Emperor's orders. I morphed into the Archdemon and fought a hellish battle there."

He pauses.

"I eradicated the Plague across every corner of the world. In the end, even when the High Psion Plagueborn came, I repelled them as well. I have the *power* to change the fate of the galaxy."

It takes a few seconds for Yardrat to realize Diablo isn't joking.

"You're telling the truth?" Yardrat asks, his mouth slackening in disbelief. "How is that even possible?"

"The Plague has a weakness, and the First Emperor discovered it." Diablo explains. "But exploiting that weakness is... not so easy. I might be the only entity currently capable of doing so. However, there is another individual who can assist our efforts."

Yardrat's face scrunches up as he realizes the answer.

"Don't tell me. *The Wordsmith*."

"Possibly." Diablo says. "But no. Not Jason, nor Hope. They are not the ones of whom I speak. The individual who can help demonkind ascend is none other than..."

When Diablo speaks the name, Yardrat's expression turns ugly.

"You're kidding. You **HAVE** to be joking with me. GLINCH? He nearly killed us all! He's just going to hang us out to dry and save his own skin if we let him go!"

"You do not know the Stitched Emperor well if you think that is how he operates." Diablo says solemnly. "His talents are unparalleled. He does not fear anything. Death is no obstacle to him. Love has no meaning. Envy, greed, none of these traits describe him well. He only cares about one thing: Obsessing over his experiments. All other matters come second."

"We can't trust him." Yardrat hisses through his teeth.

"We don't need to trust him at all." Diablo counters. "We only need to use his expertise well. That's why I made sure you did not kill him. He alone can ensure my efforts keep the Plague at bay... *permanently*. And once we begin making waves, pushing the Plague back, the other species will not be able to ignore us any longer."

Diablo's spiritual avatar levitates proudly, his inspiring aura causing Yardrat to momentarily feel ashamed at his own fearfulness. Compared to Diablo, he simply doesn't match up, and that brings his Emperor ego down to a more manageable level.

He bows his head and nods.

"Of course, Emperor Diablo. It seems you've planned this all out. Give me the orders then, and I shall fulfill them."

"Gather the others." Diablo commands. "Bring our strongest, smartest, and most influential Emperors along, as well as Bael. After I exchange some words with Glinch, the Stitched Emperor will surely join our effort. I intend to start upending demon society within the next twenty-four hours. Everything must change quickly, before the other species can react."

Yardrat looks at Diablo, his eyes filled with respect. Diablo always seemed a lazy but reliable old fool, yet now, he has assumed the form of an undefeatable bastion of sovereignty, a fortress incapable of being overrun. His power will surely form the bedrock of demon society moving forward.

"As you command, Archdemon." Yardrat says, before levitating backward, turning around, and flying back to the ground.

Diablo remains in place, unmoving, while Yardrat does his bidding.

The Archdemon blinks. He looks out at the horizon and frowns.

"Enjoying the show... *Wordsmith*? Did you think you evaded my senses? You're not as sneaky as you believe. Enjoy the status quo for now. It will not last."

He smirks evilly.

"Heh, heh, heh. Demonkind will soon **dominate** the Milky Way."

Part 521: Reconstruction

It doesn't take much time for Diablo and the other demons to reach a consensus. A handful of Emperors, consisting of Bael, Fae, Melody, Serena, Yardrat, Kristoff, and Yumagi, all decide to go along with Diablo's command. Naturally, as a pseudo-Demon Deity, he possesses a power none of them dare defy, but at the same time, he has always commanded a high level of respect among his fellow Emperors.

Even without the Archdemon's power, Diablo is still one of the mightiest Emperors in all the Seven Hells.

The seven Emperors, as well as Diablo in his astral form, all wait for Yardrat to complete a complicated series of hand gestures as he conjures a portal to a secret domain; a dimension created by the First Emperor to contain high-value prisoners.

The portal finally opens, revealing a grey-bricked prison with only ten cells, all of them forged out of demonstone and reinforced by the Archdemon's power. No Emperor could break out, barring an powerhouse like Crow unleashing her full strength. Even then, such a gambit likely wouldn't work. Blue energy crystals embedded in the ceiling radiate cosmic energy, suppressing the powers of mere mortal Emperors to make them feel even more small and insignificant. A statue crafted in Satan's image stands at the end of the cell block, its glowing red eyes seemingly keeping watch over the prisoners to ensure none can escape.

As the Emperors walk toward a cell in the middle, their ears begin to tingle from the sensation of the mana suppression field buzzing inside. They find Emperor Glinch sitting on a stool in the center of the otherwise totally-bare cell, his expression as bored as ever.

The multi-armed, multi-legged monstrosity of a demon turns his myriad of misshapen eyes toward the newcomers.

"Took you long enough."

Diablo doesn't acknowledge the statement. He merely stands with his hands folded behind his back, gazing warily at the Stitched Emperor.

"Let's cut to the chase, Glinch. You know why I'm here."

Glinch doesn't answer. He merely directs a bored gaze toward the other Emperors, smirks contemptuously, and turns his eyes away.

"You seek to perfect your craft." Diablo continues. "This is an endeavor I agree with. Your research has already bolstered demonkind's power tremendously. Thanks to your Exobeast Pills, we now have more than sixty powerhouses."

"Pah. *Powerhouses*." Glinch sneers contemptuously. "Emperors empowered through exobeast slop. They will never proceed further. They will never become Deities. They are useless."

"Every empire needs leaders." Diablo says evenly. "But it also needs commanders. Generals. Subordinates. The demons you've empowered will serve my purposes well."

"You want to take over the galaxy." Glinch says dryly. "How original. Let me guess. You want me to help you empower even more demons. You're going to dangle a juicy offer in front of me to make me work for you."

"Yes, and yes." Diablo says. "I'm not going to threaten or cajole you, Glinch. I understand why you did what you did. You didn't create Mephisto to try and take over demonkind. You couldn't care less about your species' ultimate fate. You just want... *research material*."

Diablo leans forward. He smiles, ever so slightly.

"I can provide you the material you require."

The other Emperors listen silently. Bael appears bored. Fae seems amused. The others don't show any signs of the conversation going in a direction they didn't anticipate.

"And there it is." Glinch grumbles. "I only have one weakness. I hate BOREDOM. And this cell is so devil-damned boring I'm thinking of ending my existence already!"

"You're a genius among devils." Diablo praises. "You and Ose both advanced our conceptualization of demonkind's capabilities by multiple epochs. It would be a shame to leave you rotting in a cell..."

He pauses.

"I want something from you, something more important than the mere empowerment of Emperors."

Diablo's smile disappears.

"I want your help in repelling the Plague. I want the power of your Blighted Lands."

The other Emperors frown. Yardrat scrunches up his face as he tries to think of what Diablo means.

"You know about that too, huh?" Glinch asks blandly. He chuckles at the uncertainty on the other Emperor's faces. "You dimwits are such useless, sad sacks of vomit. You haven't noticed, have you? You haven't realized why the Plague never attacked the lush world of Numaria..."

"What do you mean?" Yardrat asks, his tone incredulous. "You're saying you protected Numaria?"

"Of course not. I couldn't give a damn about the planet." Glinch chuckles. "But I protected myself. It had a spillover effect on the rest of Numaria. Lucky for you lot, I suppose."

"The Stitched Wasteland." Diablo says, turning his attention to the other Emperors. "It's not merely a land devoid of life because of some omnipresent 'aura of death'. It was ruined deliberately by Glinch to keep the Plague away."

"Wut?" Bael asks dumbly. "Spell it out for me, big boss."

"The Plague thrives on worlds rich in life." Diablo explains. "It can survive on hostile worlds, or worlds flowing with molten rivers of lava, corrosive miasma, and so on. But those worlds provide the Plague no strategic benefits. Paradise-class planets like Numaria, however, do."

"So," Diablo continues, "Glinch deliberately sapped every iota of life out of a small part of Numaria's surface. He created the Stitched Wasteland. The Plague now avoids our world as a result. At least for *now*."

"It would have come eventually." Glinch acknowledges. "But only for you fools! Not for me! Hahahaha! The Kolvaxians would avoid my deadlands while running roughshod over all your pretty forests."

Yardrat strokes his chin thoughtfully. "That means... we could halt the Plague's advance on other worlds if we made deadlands on each one. Why haven't the Volgrim figured this out?"

"It's not easy to suck the life out of one part of the planet without causing damage to the rest." Diablo says. "Perhaps the Volgrim know this is possible, or perhaps they don't."

But the problem remains that even if they can slow the Plague for a while, they can't stop it, and they certainly don't possess the means to reverse its momentum."

The Archdemon thumbs his chest proudly. "They don't, but *I* do. That is what will make my plan succeed."

He turns his body to face Glinch once again. "With your ability to create Blighted Lands, and my power to uproot the Plague on worlds they've previously taken, we can begin pushing back against our enemies."

"I didn't say I'd work with you." Glinch grumbles.

"You'd prefer living in a cell until you kill yourself?" Diablo asks.

That shuts Glinch up.

The hideous madman freak glowers for several silent seconds, until he throws five of his hands in the air.

"Fine! I'll do it! But I expect the best laboratory of all time! Don't you try to screw me over, Diablo, or you won't get anything from me!"

The Archdemon grins. "I wouldn't dream of it. You want test subjects? You shall have them. You want a laboratory that puts Marie Becker's to shame? It's yours. As long as demonkind thrives, you can have whatever you want."

Serena frowns. She doesn't like the idea of working with a freak like Glinch, a torturer and tormentor not far removed from the likes of Gressil. Perhaps worse, as he isn't stimulated by the enjoyment of other's suffering, nor does he become bored if they stop resisting.

No, Glinch can be far, far worse than Gressil. He will pursue any development, no matter the collateral cost, so long as it has a hint of bearing fruit...

Diablo opens the cell and steps aside, allowing Glinch to stand up and waddle his multi-legged form out the door. The hideous creature bares a toothy grin at the other Emperors, chuckling as if he always foresaw his quick release.

"Hehehe. No hard feelings, eh?"

Fae snarls at him. "You almost killed us."

"Everyone has an oopsie-day." Glinch counters, his grin turning even more feral. "Next time I'll go a little easier on you."

"There won't *be* a next time." Kristoff warns.

"Everyone, pipe down." Diablo says, intervening before the fight can escalate. "We're demons. Historically, a little genocide here and there has been par for the course. From now on, we'll brush the 'incident' under the rug. Let's get along and work together for the good of demonkind."

"Right. For the good of demonkind, hehehe..." Glinch chuckles sinisterly.

The other Emperors share looks of disgust between each other, but ultimately, they relent.

Diablo calls the shots now.

They have no choice but to follow his will...

Tarus II, on the western side of the Fortress of Retribution.

Soldiers continue to cart away bodies of Mephisto's undead. They toss them into great heaps far outside the city and light the bodies on fire, causing a putrid stench to waft around the valley, sickening countless humans, demons, and monsters, and making them want to puke.

Fairy Princess Melia and her remaining retainer, Ruto, help the humans in their own way. Melia conjures a formation of Earth Energy to suppress the smells. Ruto washes away the blood in the streets with her water magic, emotionlessly doing her duty while thinking of her friend who fell not long ago, Saria.

As they work, in the distance, the warpgate to the Labyrinth flickers. A group of demons steps out, followed by some human soldiers, some monsters, and a group of men and women wearing white and silver robes.

This group doesn't draw much attention. They walk right through the full-body scanners that bombard their bodies with scanning beams, but those beams only turn up that they are clearly ordinary humans, and nothing more.

One of the soldiers at the gate waves these robed figures through. "You're clear to continue."

"Thank you." The lead figure, a green-haired woman, says.

She leads the others past the scanner, and as they depart the Warpgate platform, she directs a look of disapproval toward it.

"This technology is too shoddy."

"The people here don't have the knowledge of what to look for." A black-haired man beside her says. "We'll have to talk to Phoebe about updating the schematics."

The green-haired woman turns out to be Rebecca, put in charge of all 300 of her fellow Cybernites by Marie Becker herself.

She stands for a moment to evaluate the situation on Tarus II.

"Mephisto's attack didn't cause much damage. There's a lot of bodies being moved around, but they're all Mephisto's thralls. Based on my preliminary assessments, the humans have become quite decent at defending themselves."

The man beside her, a Cybernite by the name of Zed, snorts through his nose. "I wouldn't be surprised if a thousand Changelings have already slipped past the Wordsmith's defenses. If the Warpgate Scanners can't detect our true forms, there's no chance they can sniff out a Changeling."

"We have a lot of work to do..." Rebecca says, though her tone betrays a hint of excitement. "But it beats sitting around on our hands in the Remnant Oasis."

The throng of 300 Cybernites slowly makes their way down the path as they head east toward the main city. Along the way, they pass dozens of large apartment buildings and other living blocks, as well as markets for selling food, and a few restaurants here and there. Many of the buildings have been ruined by Mephisto's forces, but a few remain relatively intact and in good condition. The wholly undamaged ones, however, are few and far between.

Rebecca's eyes scan the vicinity. She easily peers through solid walls, her acute sensors able to pierce anything that attempts to impede her scouting sensors. Her ears, a thousand times more perceptive than those of ordinary humans, allow her to make out every minute noise in a large vicinity around herself. Even if her ocular modules shorted out, her auditory receptors would provide a full 360-degree sonar coverage of a five-mile vicinity.

"Over there." Zed says, pointing toward a pair of women standing together.

Rebecca follows the nod of his head. She leads the Cybernites over to none other than Fairy Princess Melia, and her retainer, Ruto.

"Melia." Rebecca says, her large group easily drawing the princess's attention before they draw within earshot. "My name is Rebecca. I'm here on orders from Marie Becker."

Melia nods. She maintains an aloof air as she observes the distinctive silvery robes of Rebecca's group.

"Cybernites. I don't recognize any of you, but I've seen your kind before." Melia says. "Why did Marie send you?"

Rebecca explains the situation to Melia, telling her about Jason's request, as well as her full purpose in coming here.

Melia faintly smiles, though the expression lacks warmth. "I see. I can lead you to Miss Hiro. Sorry, but as you can see, we've... been through a lot today."

"I'm fully aware of the battle which occurred earlier." Rebecca says. "And also, Miss Becker wishes to express her condolences regarding the tragedy on Pixiv."

"Thank you." Melia says, her expression darkening. "That's kind of her to say. But what happened on Pixiv was unforgivable. We lost five million fairies in a single instant. The city of Spackle wasn't any ordinary land. We expressly built it to suppress the living energy of our world. With it reduced to rubble, the Plague can now sense Pixiv's location. We fear the worst is yet to come."

Rebecca maintains a solemn expression. "How unfortunate that Mephisto destroyed the Shielding Crystal. We always assumed Pixiv would be one of the last worlds to fall. But now..."

"Will your people be able to construct another one?" Zed asks, while stroking his short-trimmed black beard. "If not, then perhaps one of the Wordsmiths might be able to assist you?"

"I'm not privy to the discussions the Fairy Queens have been holding." Melia says grumpily, crossing her arms. "It's not as easy as simply creating a new Shielding Crystal. It took them five thousand years to construct the last one. It was an artifact on par with Archangel Camael's best works."

"Mmm. Then that is truly unfortunate." Rebecca says slowly.

"To say the least." Melia concludes.

The two of them talk a bit longer. Eventually, Melia leads them toward the city, and the topic changes as they begin observing new things.

"I've heard the two Wordsmiths might be thinking of splitting humanity between two core worlds." Rebecca says. "This is a good development. Should Tarus II fall to the Plague, it would be best if humanity had a backup."

"Everything seems to be going well." Melia says. "But under the surface, tensions are brewing. Neil and Hope aren't acting as harmoniously as they were just a few weeks ago. Neither of them gets along well with Jason and Phoebe either. I'm worried about the direction humanity is taking."

Rebecca glances at Zed. The two of them communicate through a neural burst, then nod in unison.

"It would probably be best if the Cybernites did not directly pick a side." Rebecca says. "We're not here to help Jason specifically. We're here to empower humanity. The Milky Way needs an Apex Species right now, one with a different outlook from the Volgrim. It wouldn't do for us to focus our efforts on only one branch of humanity."

"I can see about assisting the Second Wordsmith and Neil Adams." Zed says. "You should take half of our group and work for the First Wordsmith and his wife."

"An acceptable compromise." Rebecca intones. "We'll do that, then."

Zed nods at her. He and 149 other Cybernites peel off and head north toward the military base outside the city's limits, while Rebecca continues following Melia deeper into the Fortress of Retribution's core.

Thirty minutes of slow walking pass by. Rebecca takes her time examining the city's structures, noting how quickly humanity has rebuilt after Beelzebub's detonation, as well as the damage caused by Mephisto's attack.

While Mephisto did not manage to kill even a single human, monster, or demon on Tarus II, his thralls certainly tore apart the buildings inside the city center. Dozens lay in piles of rubble, while others are missing walls, corners, roofs, and so on. The luxurious city center now looks only marginally better than it did after Beelzebub's detonation, and that certainly isn't saying much.

"Why do you suppose Mephisto wanted to attack Tarus II?" Rebecca asks Melia. "Merely to exact revenge?"

"From what we've uncovered, he wanted to devour Demon Emperors to empower his body and abilities." Melia explains. "But yes, killing humans and monsters would have probably made for a juicy side objective in his eyes."

"Mephisto is pure evil." Ruto murmurs. "He killed my best friend."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Rebecca says.

The Cybernites arrive at a recently constructed workshop on the eastern side of the city, where hundreds of drones buzz in the air, carrying materials and other goods to and from the giant building. They buzz about like angry hornets, flying through the sky in synchronized lines while fulfilling the orders encoded inside their mainframes.

Melia gestures to the large open entrance, then pauses outside.

"I don't feel like going in. Phoebe will meet you in there. If you'll excuse us, Ruto and I have duties to attend."

"Of course. Thank you for showing us around." Rebecca says.

The two fairies flap their wings and shoot off into the sky, vanishing and leaving the Cybernites behind.

After they depart, Rebecca heads inside. She finds many tables with computer monitors resting atop them, along with researchers working hurriedly to construct new building plans for the reconstruction of the Fortress of Retribution's cityscape.

One man hovers over another's shoulder, pointing to a mockup on the screen.

"...to reinforce the structural foundation. Look at this footage. You can see the Undead Emperor destroyed it with a single slap. We didn't anticipate such a powerful blunt strike at the base of the building, which is why the whole structure collapsed."

"What material should we use to reinforce it?" The man seated at the desk asks.

"We'll have to check the reserves. Might need to materialize some prototypes. Miss Hiro wants to ensure we don't have a repeat of today's events."

"We should construct the corners at more of an angle." The seated man suggests. "This will help reinforce the structure in the event of a direct collision..."

Rebecca walks over to the two men and introduces herself. "Excuse me. Can you take me to Miss Hiro? I'm Rebecca."

The seated man continues his work, but the other one stands up to appraise the beautiful newcomer.

"Rebecca, you say? Oh! Aren't you a Cybernite? Miss Hiro told the supervisors to keep an eye out for you. She said you were bringing three hundred robots to help us out!"

He pauses.

"Though, when she said 'robots,' I was sort of expecting... metal machines."

"I am a cyborg." Rebecca explains. "All of us are. Human flesh, digitized organs, mechanical internals. We've come to assist your people in the rebuilding of your world."

"Excellent timing." The man says, extending his hand. "I'm Edwin, a supervisor for The Factory. I'm not important or anything, but I can take you to Miss Hiro."

Rebecca daintily shakes the man's hand. "I see. Thank you for your assistance, mister Edwin."

"Just Edwin is fine! Hahaha!" He laughs, suddenly feeling a little embarrassed. No matter how he examines the pretty woman before him, he simply cannot believe she is a machine made almost entirely out of mechanical parts. In his eyes, Rebecca is a nerdy but beautiful woman with ravishingly good looks. She appears more hauntingly gorgeous than even the fairies themselves...

Edwin quickly leads the Cybernites into the complex, and as they walk and talk, Rebecca receives a better inside understanding of humanity's current situation.

"We really have our work cut out for us." Rebecca says, her words aimed not only at herself, but the Cybernites behind her as well.

"So much work..." Another Cybernite adds.

Part 522: The Camael Conspiracy

Somewhere within the Deep Void...

Founder Dosena screams through space at a speed far faster than light. She flickers in and out of P-space, avoiding dangerous spatial anomalies such as black holes, giant stars, and the occasional Great Void Beast, all while ferrying her prey from Tarus II back to her homeworld, Volgarius.

Mephisto's formerly giant body has already shrunken back down to its compressed form. Not because of any desire on his part, but because he was forced to shrink himself when Dosena deliberately began compressing him with her psionic field, causing him terrible agony until he conceded to her superior might.

Unfortunately, as Dosena learned, her power as a Mid Cosmic simply isn't enough to actually kill Mephisto. Unlike the ancient angels, or even the demons and humans, the vast majority of Psions aren't adept at soul manipulation. Young upstarts like Creator Demila have made big advancements in the past 100,000 years, but ancient monsters like Dosena have long lost the ability to alter their Psionic Seeds to introduce powerful new elements, and as such, she simply lacks the striking power necessary to eradicate Mephisto's unified souls.

Furthermore, his supernova-forged dragon-bones have become too durable for even her planet-busting attacks to break. Indeed, she spend a full hour attempting to break Mephisto after flying him a few hundred lightyears from Tarus II, but the effort proved moot. Dosena failed to create more than a tiny hairline crack on one of his ribs, a far cry from the sizable spiderweb-fracture left by Anaelle.

As Dosena flies in and out of P-space, rapidly traveling back to Volgarius, her thoughts churn swiftly, hundreds of times faster than any mere mud-dweller could fathom. In the time a fly's wing might beat for a single instance, she contemplates more than three thousand concepts, her brain working like a series of supercomputers all working in parallel to compare and contrast the observations she's made.

While Founder Unarin might indeed be the supreme leader of Volgrimkind, it is in fact Dosena who is not only the mightiest Volgrim, but also the smartest in terms of raw cerebral computational ability.

If Dosena has any weakness compared to the First Founder, it is a certain lack of artistic creativity. She is a brute; a bludgeon taken flesh-form who contemplates things in the simplest and most direct manner.

Naturally, as an ancient monster aged millions of years, she possesses a level of intellectual cunning far beyond that of the Wordsmiths, but even if she were to surpass Unarin in every regard, she still would hold no thoughts toward ruling the Volgrim Empire. Dealing with such mortal mundanities has long ago ceased to hold her interest.

Archangel Camael has somehow obtained the power of an Apex Cosmic. Dosena thinks, as she pieces together the clues she has gathered over the past 24 hours. *How did she revive? Did the demons revive her deliberately? Did they empower her? If so, why? What purpose would empowering one of their greatest enemies serve them? Or was this part of a deeper scheme? Did Archangel Raphael plan for his sister's revival? Could he be planning a revival of his own? Are the Wordsmiths involved? Did the Wordsmiths revive Camael on Raphael's orders? Is that why the First Wordsmith is so eager to work alongside the demons in spite of their crimes against his family? Could this be a conspiracy to unite and destroy the Volgrim?*

Question after question. Contemplation after contemplation.

Dosena's mind rapidly twists and untwists the potential conspiracy, but she lacks crucial clues. She doesn't know about Anaelle's true identity. If she did, she would certainly jump to other conclusions.

After leaping in and out of P-space for the 100th time, Dosena comes to a stop amidst the distant reaches of some random uninhabited star system somewhere in the Southern Milky Way. She levitates Mephisto's crumpled body around, her eyes smiling at his pathetic ball-like form as her psionic force wraps itself around like a hamster ball, preventing him from making any movement but twitching.

[What plan do the demons have with Archangel Camael?] Dosena asks Mephisto for the tenth time since departing Tarus II. [Speak!]

Mephisto's glowers at her, but says nothing. He has long realized the error of her analysis, but he's made no attempt to repair the misunderstanding.

If Dosena thinks Archangel Camael has returned, why correct the record? Better to let her wallow in her misinformation, dreaming up all manner of devilish schemes, than to find out the rather boring truth of the matter.

The corner of Mephisto's mouth turns up in a faint grin. This enrages Dosena, who squeezes her psionic power even tighter, making him gasp in pain.

[Aaaargh!]

Inflicting pain on Mephisto isn't terrible difficult. Despite the durability of his dragon-bones, and Dosena's inexperience when it comes to soul manipulation, she can still wrack some small amount of agony upon the Myriad Deity's souls. This pain is quite horrendous, and were Mephisto in a situation that would give him any leeway, he might have cracked long ago.

Unfortunately, the necromancer knows the cold hard truth; he will gain nothing if he speaks and instead lose all his leverage. Dosena has no reason to ever set him free, but by keeping his mouth shut, he can at least preserve his life while she futilely tries to uncover his 'secrets' regarding the supposed Archangel's return.

[Ke...ke..ke...] Mephisto laughs hoarsely, his telepathic voice feeble and wracked with pain. [You... wisssh... you knew... keke... tremble in fear... Pssion... the Archdemon... keke... he will... avenge usss...]

[You and Diablo are NOT allies.] Dosena snarls, her eyes glowing red with rage. [Do not attempt to deceive this ancient one.]

[Kekeke... of coursse... we're not... kekeke... you are... ssso... right...] Mephisto says, grinning evilly at her.

Dosena growls inside her mind, but says nothing else. Privately, she can't help but wonder if Mephisto is telling the truth.

Are the Archdemon and the Myriad Deity working together? Is this a ruse of some sort? What purpose would letting Mephisto be captured serve? Could there be a hidden agenda? Perhaps a ploy to strike at Unarin? Something involving the Plague? Are the Wordsmiths involved? What does all of this have to do with Archangel Camael?

Dosena can't help but feel frustrated. For an eon, she has reigned supreme in the Milky Way, uncontested among her peers following the end of the Seventh Great War. Obtaining an answer was always so easy, a feat she could accomplish through sheer intimidation alone.

At the same time, her warrior spirit stirs. Breaking Mephisto's will starts to feel like a challenge, a bold declaration to her face that she is incapable of defeating such a pathetic,

insect-like Cosmic Entity with reputation alone. It causes her ears to buzz with a hunger for victory...

Dosena turns her gaze toward the interior of this random star system. Abruptly, she rushed forward, traveling at a multiple of the speed of light.

Mephisto frowns. Something about her movement worries him. That worry escalates into fear as his Cosmic Aura detects the rapid approach of this system's star. Dosena targets the largest rocky planet in the system and flies toward it at a speed defying imagination, tearing through the void at post-relativistic speeds while holding Mephisto directly in front of herself. Instead of using her psionic power, she grabs him by the back of the neck and accelerates toward the planet at a frightening speed, giving Mephisto a good view of the world as it rapidly balloons in size during the approach.

[No! NO! Ssstop! What are you doing?!] Mephisto exclaims.

Dosena doesn't answer.

Her eyes turn upward in the Psion equivalent of an evil smile.

An instant later, a cataclysmic explosion detonates inside the star system.

Dosena slams Mephisto's body into that world at five times the speed of light, instantly vaporizing the planet, causing violent tears throughout the system, and sending shockwaves throughout all of nearby P-space!

The impact causes a terrible impact to Mephisto's souls. Even Dosena doesn't escape uninjured, breaking her arm and neck on impact. She wakes up a few minutes afterward, quickly healing the damage with her innate psionic abilities. She searches for Mephisto, only to find his body floating in the void amidst a 50,000 degree nuclear inferno of super-ignited planet remnants.

Mephisto doesn't move. He drifts in the void, unconscious, his souls rocked to their foundation by the impact.

But even that doesn't kill him.

Disappointed, Dosena yanks the dragon's body to herself, then flickers away, departing the region in an instant while ignoring the cataclysm she has unleashed on this system. By week's end, the star will likely have gone supernova due to the tears in P-space, wiping out any further planets in the system. Luckily, it was uninhabited, or Dosena might have suffered Cosmic Backlash from the Akashic Laws.

After traveling ten lightyears away, Dosena reappears in normalspace. She holds the dragon's unconscious body before herself and frowns. A noticeably large crack has formed on one of his skeletal arms, but it doesn't amount to much.

Not even an impact of that level... Dosena ponders, frustrated once again by her inability to break the demon-dragon. *This Living Moldanium is far beyond any we've found in the Milky Way. If we can kill the Myriad Deity, his bones should allow us to craft a weapon capable of defeating the Plague...*

With the new revelation about the origins of Living Moldanium, Dosena begins to feel the death of all dragonkind was a bit of a shame. If they were allowed to reproduce in limited numbers, the Volgrim could kill them and harvest their bones indefinitely, allowing for greater and greater works of architecture and technology far surpassing mere warpgates.

Still, she shakes her head at the thought.

How could such a convenient thing work out the way she wanted? Ancient Dragons were likely no weaker, and possibly far stronger than 'Archangel Camael,' who was nearly able to break Mephisto's body with her power. If those monsters still roamed the Milky Way's voidspace, Dosena would be helpless before them. She would cease to be the hunter, and instead become the prey.

Feeling slightly glum about this thought, Dosena scoops Mephisto back up and continues on her way.

I must uncover the root of this conspiracy, she thinks.

Hours later, after a short diversion to a Volgrim-controlled world Mephisto attacked, Dosena finds herself drawing near to Volgarius.

That diversion was not for nothing though. Thanks to intelligence derived from a 7th Level Psion named Praetor Revan, Dosena finally obtains visual confirmation of the Archangel's true identity. Without a doubt, it was Archangel Camael who chased after Mephisto and beat the tar out of him.

This further solidifies the thoughts she's been imagining, but continues to confuse and perplex her.

Archangel Camael struck such a grievous blow on Mephisto's body, but might it have only been for show? If she is working with the demons, then this could be a ruse to allow a Demon Deity to slither into our inner circle. But why such a weak creature as the Myriad Deity? And why did the Archdemon seem so honest about wanting Mephisto dead? Demons certainly make for good liars. Perhaps he has even managed to deceive my sharp senses...

Dosena struggles with far more questions than answers. The confounding variable of Camael's supposed return causes no end of consternation for her. She knows in her heart of hearts that if she were to battle the Archangel, she would lose.

But if Camael has returned, why did she leave? Why reveal herself for so short a time, only to disappear once more? Could she be hiding within the 'membrane' of the False Cosmic Realm? Should I go there to seek her out?

Dosena's mounting frustrations find no outlet to escape her body. They simply bubble and roil within herself, making her feel anxious and jumpy. Long has it been since such worry tickled at the back of her mind.

In the Second Founder's eyes, a great conspiracy has begun to form. She cannot be certain of its scope, nor of its depth. For all she knows, it could involve the humans, the demons, the monsters, and even the angels. It could be part of a 100,000 year plot formed by Raphael himself. It might have nothing to do with him, either. Perhaps the Plague is more sinister than even she imagined.

All those feelings... those sensations she has received over the past 100 millennia... could a powerful agent be guiding the Plague, seeking to exact a revenge of untold scale upon Volgrimkind?

Could Archangel Camael be crafting an artifact of untold power with the means to obliterate Volgrimkind and restore the ancient status quo?

And there was that one matter... that whisper of a 'cube' possessed by the First Wordsmith. Dosena could not locate its exact position, but she certainly confirmed its existence somewhere within the Tarus star system...

It must be related. She thinks. I have to inform Unarin of my suspicions. He will know how to unravel this conspiracy.

It's at times like these, when things seem most dire, that Dosena feels a hint of relief.

The greatest Volgrim is not her. It is the First Founder, the brain powering all of Volgrim society.

If he cannot uncover the demon's scheme, then nobody can.

* * *

Dosena arrives inside the Volgarius system. It barely takes her three seconds to travel from the most distant outpost all the way to the interior, where she arrives at the edge of the atmosphere of the fifth planet from their star: Volgarius.

What's most remarkable about her appearance is that not one entity on the planet, nor one outpost capable of sensing fluctuations in the Void, manages to detect her arrival. She appears silently and invisibly, then flickers down to the Founder's Hand with Mephisto in tow.

When Dosena lands in the lone patch of green on Volgarius's surface, she pauses for a moment to seal Mephisto within an unbreakable prison of hardened psionic willpower. She crystallizes this material around his body, locking him in place to ensure that even if he wakes up, he won't be able to twitch a finger.

Then, she steps across space and arrives inside the Founder's Thumb.

Unarin stands next to a table where a galactic holo-map projects upward while he speaks with his brother Randis about various matters that require his attention. Dosena waits for Unarin to finish his discussion before stepping out of a fold in space behind the two Ascended.

Randis senses the faint disturbance in the air. He turns around to face her while offering the Second Founder a polite nod. "Dosena. You're back. Good news, I hope."

Dosena blinks all of her eyes slowly. [Not quite.]

She motions with her hand. A tiny mechanical device, barely the size of a pea, materializes in the air.

[Unarin, I recovered one of our Changeling Drones.] She says, as Unarin also turns to look at her. [It contains a full recording of the battle between the Wordsmiths and Mephisto.]

Unarin nods, revealing a faint, perfunctory smile. "Good. Give me a few standard time units. I will quickly assess the situation."

Unarin plucks the drone out of the air. Despite its tiny size, the materials comprising its body are hardy and durable. Even if he were to squeeze with a bit of strength, he wouldn't damage it.

He turns around and tosses the drone onto the center of the holo-map table. The map disappears, and a series of scanners envelop the drone's marble-shaped body, penetrating it and excavating the precious data held within.

Not one second later, a video begins playing, showing a high resolution recording of Mephisto's initial appearance on Tarus II, followed by his battle against Hope Hiro and Blinker.

Any human witnessing the recording would surely be shocked by how crystal-clear the recording proves to be, and by the fact that this one tiny little drone even includes more than three dozen different angles of the fight, all recorded by other drones and transmitted back to the one Dosena recovered.

Indeed, in the single second Dosena exited the Tarus II warpgate, she had already communicated with the Changelings on Tarus II, nabbed one of the drones, and compiled their collective footage together into the one she recovered before she even exited the planet's biosphere.

Such a shocking show of speed means little to the Second Founder. Her perception of time stands far beyond that of the puny mud-dwellers, and the mere act of revealing this recording to them would likely scare the Terrans out of their wits.

They haven't a clue how significantly they've already been infiltrated...

Minutes pass.

An hour...

Randis and Unarin both watch the feed, with Unarin specifically manipulating the video to search out specific angles of the battles. But he doesn't stop there. He also investigates the human's fighting situation on Tarus II, noting their extreme improvement in tactical capabilities and how they didn't suffer a single loss to Mephisto's minions.

He watches as the First Wordsmith appears toward the end to tangle with Mephisto. He observes, silently, while Jason uses all sorts of strange and unexpected means to deal with Mephisto.

The more Unarin sees, the more his eyes narrow.

"The First Wordsmith has become adept at using his powers." Unarin says. "Surprisingly so..."

Dosena blinks. She also watched the video on her return journey to Volgarius, but she was far too preoccupied with thoughts about Archangel Camael to notice the discrepancy of Jason Hiro's alarming new mastery of his abilities.

[Indeed...] Dosena says slowly. [The Wordsmith has improved his skills in a far shorter amount of time than we anticipated.]

The room falls silent.

Unarin watches the video all the way until the point when Dosena took Mephisto away. Then he rewinds back to the start of Jason's battle with Mephisto.

He skips around the battle, jumping from here to there, observing random moments with seemingly no greater link between them.

"Hmm. Hmm."

Unarin hems and haws to himself, not voicing his thoughts out loud.

At one point, he casually turns to Dosena and smiles.

"Second Founder. Do you remember the Star Flowers on Melkia?"

Dosena also directs a casual gaze toward him. She pauses for a full second before replying, while twitching her right foot slightly.

[Of course. Their venom was lethal, even to a 7th Level Psion. For such a small bud to possess such a toxin, it was a symbol of the damage a minute entity could cause even to a giant.]

She reaches up to scratch her chin while she talks. Unarin nods his head three times, then blinks his eyes twice.

"It's at times like these when I truly admire the ingenuity of these Terrans." Unarin says softly, while glancing at his nails. "They are small, yes. Weak, yes. But they have such beautiful potential."

The two continue to talk about metaphors of the past, but in secret, they begin communicating in a highly confidential, top-level form of non-verbal communication developed more than a million years prior.

A communication method known as The Whisper allows the two highest individuals in the Volgrim Empire to not only communicate verbally, but non-verbally in secret, their enhanced brains allowing them to hold two conversations at the same time with ease.

[I am seventy-three percent certain the Volgrim Empire's highest levels have been compromised.] Unarin transmits to Dosena through his body's microscopic tics. [I postulated this might be the case already, but I lacked proof. Tell me about the Wordsmiths. Did you scan the physical makeup of their bodies?]

[Of course.] Dosena answers, relying on her body's movements rather than her telepathy. [The Second Wordsmith seemed ordinary, but the First Wordsmith did not battle in his true form. The body I sensed was made up of mechanical parts. It was a cybernetic facsimile.]

[Just like how the Second Wordsmith battled Vulpanix with a corpse-puppet.] Unarin acknowledges. [The Wordsmith's methods are eerily similar. Think back on the Second Wordsmith. Did his body appear to be aged significantly on a cellular level compared to the last time you scanned him?]

[No.] Dosena transmits, before her hands stutter for a moment. [Actually... yes. His body's biological indicators were slightly out of sync with what I would have expected. I attributed the difference to spatial distortions. He did meld his soul with multiple other Heroes during the battle against the Myriad Deity, after all.]

Unarin decides to come out and 'speak' his suspicion. [The Wordsmiths may be operating inside a high level Temporally Distorted Realm. I am not certain of its exact ratio, but based on the Wordsmith's abrupt improvement with his magical abilities, it is likely he has spent several orbital cycles inside.]

Dosena maintains a neutral expression. [Does he not know of the risks? Temporal Acceleration is extremely hazardous toward biological life.]

[I estimate with a 40% confidence he is aware.] Unarin replies. [It would explain why he sent a mechanical facsimile of himself to do battle in realspace. But that is not the most pressing issue.]

Out loud, Unarin says, "...of course, that is why the angels once ruled the galaxy. Their leader is a man worth admiring."

In secret, he continues speaking to the Second Founder. [The Wordsmith has likely placing spying devices all across our Empire. He may be listening to this conversation as we speak.]

Dosena doesn't show any surprise on her face. [A plausible inference. What made you come to this conclusion?]

[I estimated what I would do if I possessed the Wordsmith's powers.] Unarin explains. [Spying on our Empire is an obvious move he should have made sooner. It's possible he has been spying on us for a while now, but I believe he did not start until after him and I spoke in person.]

[Then we will have to proceed with extreme caution.] Dosena says. [The Wordsmith should be rapidly growing in a secret enclave somewhere. Perhaps the 'cube' Creator Demila spoke of?]

[Potentially.] Unarin acknowledges. [From now on, assume the Wordsmith has the capability to intercept any communication, be it via mechanical, mundane, or psionic means. He might not be able to listen in on the thoughts of a 7th, 8th, or 9th Level Psion, but that is a risk we should not take.]

Dosena nods imperceptibly. [Very well. I will speak to Creator Demila regarding her efforts in the Labyrinth. We can put the hunt for Gressil on hold. Searching for the lost 10kg's of Trifrancium and keeping an eye on the First Wordsmith is more important right now.]

[Yes. Do that.] Unarin transmits. [Also put out a Star Flower alert throughout the Empire. It's unlikely the Wordsmith will know what this code means, but do be secretive about it. We should also assume the two Wordsmiths are working in tandem to deceive us. Their feud on the surface may not burn as hot as they pretend...]

Dosena hesitates.

[You believe... the Wordsmiths may be working together?]

[It is always a possibility.] Unarin says, neither confirming nor denying.

After a brief moment, Dosena transmits something else.

[Unarin. I have thoughts regarding the Apex Cosmic. Please give me your opinion regarding this conspiracy I may have uncovered...]

Dosena begins to tell Unarin of the suspicions she's been holding all day.

As she does, Unarin's expression becomes faintly cloudy.

[Something nasty is brewing... I require time to unravel these threads.]

[Time is a scant resource.] Dosena concludes.

Part 523: What Makes a Human?

Hope Hiro grumbles under his breath. He shoves his hands into his pockets as he lumbers toward the northern base on Tarus II, the place where Neil Adams has chosen to center his command of humanity's armies.

An air of happiness lingers in the air. Despite the devastation Tarus's structures endured, in the end not a single individual died to Mephisto's forces.

Not one!

Compared with the horrific tragedies that have followed in the wake of every other demonic attack in human history, the events of earlier today have been a complete miracle. Certainly, some people suffered painful injuries. Not everyone managed to escape the storm of undead unscathed. But even those who did suffer injuries simply visited Belial's ward to get patched back up.

In the end, outside some minor psychological trauma, humanity enjoyed a massive victory against a Cosmic Entity, though most fail to fully understand the weight of that achievement.

But to Hope Hiro, the events of today simply don't register as positively as they do to others.

He grumbles and growls to himself while he walks, remembering how pathetic a fight he put up against the Myriad Deity. He thinks about how cool Jason looked when he showed up, kicked Mephisto's ass, and led the Myriad Deity around by his nose.

Even if Jason was not the one who ultimately defeated Mephisto, Jason still came out looking far better than Hope did.

This fact is exacerbated by the number of people and troopers Hope passes who proceed to play out recordings of the fights that took place today. Thanks to humanity's extensive net of T-REX's that can scan a 360-degree field around every trooper, as well as some of Phoebe's drones that deliberately captured the multitude of battlefields, everyone on Tarus II got a good look at how the two Wordsmiths fared.

Nobody looks at Hope and sneers. They don't mock him, nor complain that he did a terrible job. After all, he fought Mephisto alone for a long while, and he kept Mephisto

from directly attacking the Fortress itself.

However, they do rewatch videos of Jason's fight over and over, *oohing and aahing* at how amazing the First Wordsmith was, and how valiantly he fought against Mephisto, beating the Myriad Deity time after time without suffering a major loss.

But Hope knows the truth. Jason couldn't kill Mephisto. He could only slow him down and hold him back a while. Who knows how long that would have lasted?

Most importantly, the reason Hope has had to actively fight his crankiness has nothing to do with Jason.

It's because of his splitting migraine!

Hope massages his forehead, wincing repeatedly as his head feels like it's going to explode.

"Scan. Examine. Fuck, come on! What do you mean there's nothing wrong?? Heal! Normalize! Headache BEGONE!!"

No matter what Words of Power Hope tries to use, nothing works. His headache continues to throb, making him so pissed he even starts to see red spots.

"It's all Jason's fault." Hope grumbles. "How did he get so strong anyway? Don't tell me he made a time-accelerated realm too. But even if he did, so what?? I have Heroic Artifacts and he doesn't. How could he be better than me? I have Solomon on my side! Who does Jason have? Nobody!"

Hope pauses.

"Okay, so he has Fiona and Phoebe. But still!"

Hope seemingly argues with himself, his tone dismal. He continues walking down the street, keeping his voice low so people won't direct stares his way. Even so, the Second Wordsmith always draws at least a few eyeballs wherever he goes.

[Centurion.] Hope thinks, directing his thoughts to the nanites embedded in his blood. [Please tell me you've found the reason for my splitting migraine! I'm going out of my mind here!]

[NEGATIVE.] Centurion beeps. [PILOT HOPE HIRO'S INTERNAL STRUCTURE APPEARS COMPLETELY SOUND. NO NEGATIVE ACTIVITY DETECTED INSIDE THE BRAIN, SPINE, OR INTERNAL ORGANS. BONE STRUCTURE AT OPTIMAL LEVELS.]

NO FRACTURES OR TORN LIGAMENTS DETECTED. SOURCE OF CEREBRAL PAIN: UNKNOWN.]

[Well, that doesn't help me at all...]

Hope continues walking. He eventually reaches the outer wall of the northern compound, where a pair of soldiers stand guard. They nod at Hope, their faceless helmets giving no indication of their identities or emotions.

"Commander Hope." The male soldier on the right says.

Hope pauses to allow a scanner at the entrance to examine his body. The anti-Changeling scanners have stepped up in intensity of late, but the lack of having caught one doesn't speak positively regarding their capabilities.

The scanners finish piercing Hope's biological makeup, then return his identity as positive. The guards nod him through, and Hope stomps into the base's interior.

The moment Hope enters, he passes a faint, barely detectable membrane of hardened spatial energy. This barrier was created by Fairy Princess Melia only hours earlier, intended to prevent entities like Yardrat, Psions, and other space-manipulators from popping into the human's military base effortlessly. None know how effectively it will perform, but perhaps it can be strengthened over time, if nothing else.

As Hope walks inside, several people notice his arrival.

"Hey, Hope! Great work today!"

"You really kicked ass!"

"You were awesome out there!"

Hope notices a few men and woman looking his way, troopers with their helmets deactivated. Despite how they direct cheerful grins his way, Hope can only manage a tepid smile at most.

"Haha... thanks, guys. I've got a terrible migraine right now though. Gotta talk to Neil before I take a nap."

"Sure thing! If it wasn't for you and Jason, we'd have lost big time." One of the women says. "Enjoy your rest, you've earned it!"

Hope nods again. As he continues into the base, the group returns to their conversation. Hope hears them say one last thing before he leaves earshot...

"Hope did such good work, but it was Jason who really saved our bacon. Have you heard all the reports of people who were being teleported around, healed, and protected throughout the day? Seems it was the First Wordsmith who did all that. Guess he's been training since Stormbringer to become a more reliable leader!"

Hope's smile disappears as he enters Neil's administrative facility. His minor happiness at being recognized gets ruined once again.

Always, people talk about how awesome Jason is. He's just soooo much better than me! What the hell am I accomplishing with all my fancy artifacts if he can slap me around, huh?

Five minutes later, Hope gets waved into Neil's office. He walks inside, still massaging his head, where he finds Neil and Linda sitting across from each other, discussing some random issue Hope doesn't care too much about.

"-should really try and liaison with them." Linda presses. "The fairies are by far our most reliable allies. Now only do we have a Male Fairy on our side, Lieutenant Brown, who makes us worth befriending on his own, but we work together with them frequently thanks to Blinker. The Spackle Tragedy is an opportunity for us to deepen our relationship."

"It is an awful matter." Neil says slowly. "But while we didn't suffer any casualties, all the work we put into building up Tarus II have collapsed. Ninety percent of our fortress is in ruins. We don't have time or the resources to help the fairies rebuild."

Hope walks into the room and looks at Neil and Linda. "What's all this about?"

"Ah, Hope." Neil says, offering a warm smile. "I've been waiting for you to show up. Great job today. You and Jason both did excellent work and saved countless lives."

"Yeah. Me and Jason both." Hope snarks, rolling his eyes, then immediately wincing as a fresh spasm of pain hits his head. He plops in an easy chair against the wall a few feet behind Linda, then sags into it, massaging his temples.

"Headache?" Linda asks with concern. "You look miserable."

"I wish it was just a headache. Feels like my head's about to explode." Hope snaps, pausing to realize his rudeness. "Sorry, I'm just... I'm in a lot of pain."

"Did you try visiting Belial?" Neil asks, ignoring Hope's temperamental outbursts. "She might be able to assist you. Or that Leeroy fellow. He's supposedly adept with

healing brains."

"Centurion can't figure out what's causing my headache. My Wordsmithing has no effect. I doubt demons are going to be any help." Hope replies, trying to suppress his anger to regain his calmness. "Just ignore it for now. I'll try to create some painkillers later if I have time."

"Right." Neil says, turning his attention to more important matters. He picks up a datapad on his desk and frowns. "The damage to our infrastructure is significant and widespread. Few buildings came out unscathed, particularly those within the city center. Fortunately, we didn't lose any soldiers to Mephisto's forces..."

He deliberately pauses for two seconds, then looks at Hope.

"But we did lose someone. A child. A *human* child. They died right inside one of our shelters."

Hope rubs his forehead, pushing through the pain. "Seriously? How? Did an undead sneak inside?"

"No. That's the thing." Neil says, his tone curt. "We don't have any idea who the suspect is. There was some sort of localized disruption effect. All of our T-REX's inside the shelter lost their recording functionality for roughly thirty minutes. Nobody noticed the child had died until after the battle concluded. We have no leads on who killed her."

"That's... awful." Hope says, as his thoughts invariably turn to Jason's daughter, Daisy, and how her death affected the First Wordsmith. "No leads, but surely we have some suspects? At least some educated guesses?"

Neil purses his lips. "There were seven hundred and fourteen demons inside that shelter. Weak, low-level grunts. A trio of Lords. I want you to investigate them."

"Me?" Hope asks. "Why?"

"Because you're a Wordsmith." Neil says. "You have powers that should prove useful. And those demons inside the shelter, they were supposedly our 'allies.' Not these new converts, but the so-called true believers who've been with us for six years. If we can prove one of them committed the crime, I'll have a huge advantage during my speech in two weeks. So that's your deadline. I want you to find out who killed that little girl and seek justice on her family's behalf."

Hope grimaces. "Neil, I need to be training with the artifacts, not playing detective. Besides, she'll revive as a Respected soon, right? You can just ask her when she rebirths."

Neil stares at Hope for three long seconds.

"Her soul was devoured, Hope. She won't be reviving. That's why I know the culprit was a demon. And that's why I expect *you* to carry this mission out."

Hope starts to protest, but Neil speaks again.

"That reminds me. You'd better start preparing a speech of your own. I expect you to speak on humanity's behalf as our most worthy Hero. It won't do for me to stand up there alone. People look up to you. They need you in these trying times."

Hope snorts. "Yeah, right. Everyone's been praising Jason for being a badass earlier. Meanwhile, I had all those Heroic Artifacts and got my ass kicked."

Neil's withering gaze continues to focus on Hope. "Quit your whining. You sound pathetic, Hope. Where's your sense of masculine pride? Every man loses a battle once in a while. You just need to stand back up, dry your tears, and get back to improving yourself."

"That's easier said than done!" Hope protests. "I don't even know how he did it! I have artifacts! I have Solomon! How is he still beating me?!"

Neil rolls his eyes. "For god's sake, you're starting to give *me* a headache now. I get that you didn't perform up to par, Hope, but you still saved a lot of lives. Rather than constantly comparing yourself to Jason, you should compare yourself to 'the you from yesterday.' Stop worrying about one-upping the other Wordsmith. Focus on improving your own capabilities over time."

"Neil's right." Linda says. "If you want people's respect, you'll have to earn it, and you can't do that until you learn to respect yourself first."

Hope glances at Linda. Hearing a woman criticize him makes him feel even more ashamed. He finally shuts his mouth, nods, and shakily stands up.

"Right. Fine. Sorry. I'll go get some rest. Clearly, I'm not in my right mind."

Neil softens his expression. "Please do. And when you wake up, remember what I said. Investigate the girl's death. Write a speech. If you don't have any talent, I can set you up with someone who does."

"I'll figure something out..." Hope mumbles, before staggering away.

* * *

Neil watches Hope's departing form. After he leaves, humanity's commander releases a long, slow breath of frustration.

"He's becoming such a handful."

Linda blinks. "Don't you think you should keep your voice down? What if he hears you?"

"Like I give a damn. I don't need the Wordsmiths." Neil says. "They're powerful, yes. A deterrent against the demons and Volgrim, certainly. But make no mistake, Linda... you must *never* place all your cards on others. Especially not a super-powered individual."

Linda crosses her arms. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't like relying on other people, but especially not those possessing incredible latent powers." Neil explains. "Their views are different from mine. They perceive the world in a manner more alien than human. I focus on the people below me. I care about every soldier and human who fights for my cause."

Neil leans slightly over the table toward Linda.

"But what about Jason? Hope? Do you think they *care* about the peons beneath them? How many names could either of them rattle off before they reached their limit? Ten twenty? Fifty? Maybe a hundred at most?"

"That implies you can name more." Linda says, not giving Neil any ground. "Their memory might even be better than yours, for all you know."

"You're missing the forest for the trees." Neil counters. "I'm talking about perspective. My boots are right here, on the ground, every minute of every day. I live among my fellow humans. I watch out for them. I may not know all their names, and indeed I cannot possibly remember them all... but I know their wants and needs. Their words directly reach my ears. Can you say the same for the Wordsmiths, who live in special dimensions detached from our own?"

"Phoebe keeps Jason apprised of humanity's situation." Linda insists. "Just like you keep Hope grounded."

"That's the thing. It's a matter of separation." Neil continues, leaning back while he spreads his hands out. "I am Hope's liason. I am the extension of his humanity, just as Phoebe is Jason's ambassador. But these people, these... Wordsmiths... they are becoming

more and more removed from our lives all the time. Hope is self-absorbed, occupied by some idiotic need to defeat his rival. And as for Jason? He is obsessed with the 'bigger picture' and trying to unify all the species under some big happy banner."

Neil shakes his head. He eases into his office chair and chuckles.

"The Wordsmiths do 'care' about humanity, make no mistake. But they care in an abstract way, like how a man might love his dog. To the Wordsmiths, we're an important pet project they need to maintain for the sake of soothing their morality. So long as we're doing fine, they don't pay any attention to the finer details."

Linda creases her brow. "I see. And it's those finer details that truly matter to you."

"Precisely." Neil snaps, his voice seething with a hint of venom. "Just *listen* to how Hope whined. I'm asking him to look into the death of a child. A precious little girl! And he has the gall to sit there whining, bitching, moaning like I asked him to take out the garbage."

"Pah!" Neil spits, now visibly angry. "A precious little girl was murdered by one of those filthy demons, and neither Wordsmith cares. Jason might care more than Hope, but *only* because he has personally experienced such a loss himself. Neither Wordsmith gives a damn about anything that doesn't affect them directly. And once it does, it's already too late!"

Linda sits across from Neil. She rests her elbow on the desk and forces a strained smile.

"But Neil... do you truly care for the little girl who died? Are you not simply seeking to use her death for your own political benefit? What makes you different from the Wordsmiths?"

"I do care." Neil says, calming himself down. "Naturally, I can make gains from this. But even if I couldn't, I would still want her killer hunted down. I empathize with my fellow humans. I don't want them to suffer for even a day longer. I just wish the Wordsmiths felt the same way..."

"I do too, Neil. I do too..." Linda concludes.

* * *

An hour later, Linda and Neil still remain in his office, discussing some matters involving the Fairy world of Pixiv, until Debra knocks on the doorway and steps inside.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting. Neil, you have a visitor. Someone new."

Neil glances at Debra. "Oh?"

"A human. He doesn't show up in our database." Debra says. "Does the name 'Zed' ring a bell?"

"Can't say it does..." Neil says slowly. "Send him in."

Debra steps out, and a few moments later a surprisingly tall man with brown hair enters the room. His countenance appears quite refined, owing in part to his youthful skin, and his white-and-silver robes.

"Mister Adams." The man says as he enters. "My name is Zed. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Zed nods at Linda politely, then extends his hand across the desk to shake Neil's hand.

Neil stands up. He starts to extend his own hand, but he abruptly pauses.

He frowns at the newcomer, then retracts his arm...

"You." Neil says slowly, as he narrows his eyes and stares at the man. "Who are you? You're not human."

Zed blinks twice. He continues holding his hand out while maintaining a polite smile. "Oh? How perceptive. Your scanners didn't detect anything out of the ordinary, but somehow you did."

"You're not a human." Neil repeats. "What are you? A demon? A Changeling?!"

Zed lowers his arm, realizing Neil has no intention of shaking his hand.

"No, no. Not a Changeling. My name is Zed. My 'identity' is that of a Cybernite. Do you know what a Cybernite is?"

Neil takes a few seconds to reply as he pauses to think of where he's heard that word before.

"...Kar mentioned them in passing once. Something about... robot-humans. You're a robot, then?"

"A cyborg, specifically." Zed explains calmly. "Hence the term 'Cybernite'. My brain is fully digitized. I was created from the soul and mental capacity of an ancient human from Planet Earth."

Neil nods slowly. "I see. Your mimicry of a human is flawed. The way your eyes blink, the way you walk, everything about you is slightly... *off*. I picked up on it when you entered, but I wasn't sure until you held out your hand."

"Perhaps I've lost some of my ability to properly emulate human characteristics over the millennia," Zed says only half-apologetically. "Oh, well. I have come at the behest of Marie Becker, the head scientist of the Remnant Oasis."

"Marie!" Neil says, his voice raising an octave in surprise. "That's right, she's someone quite important, from what I've heard. I haven't met her before, unfortunately. For what purpose has she dispatched you?"

"Three hundred Cybernites have come to Tarus II to assist humanity's rebuilding and expansion efforts," Zed explains. "One hundred and fifty are en-route to Phoebe Hiro's side as we speak. They are led by my colleague, Rebecca. The goals of both teams are to assist the leaders of your two distinct factions in any way you require, barring unethical or vile acts that we determine to damage commonly accepted rules of decency."

"What do you believe falls under those restricted acts?" Linda asks.

Zed looks at the woman sitting a few feet away.

"Acts of torture, chemical experimentation without consent, reproductive assault, and other crimes against humanity all fall under my personally forbidden acts," Zed explains. "Please be aware: I am not an automaton. I was once a biological inferior, just as you are now. My restrictions were not placed on me by Marie Becker. I created them myself. I refuse to inflict any acts of evil that I have personally designated as gross and vile. If you wish to know more, I am willing to write a detailed listing of every act, though the list will not be able to account for every possibility."

"No, that's fine," Neil says, smiling. "You might be a digitized mind, but you are still, in essence, a human. I'm glad you have limits you won't exceed. What about the other Cybernites, though? Do they all hold to the same ethical restrictions as you?"

"By no means," Zed clarifies. "Cybernites are all individuals. Some have more lax and lenient definitions of barbarity. It is up to each one to determine what parameters exceed their personally-placed limitations."

"I will keep that in mind so I don't step on any toes," Neil says, as he finally reaches out his hand. "Welcome to Tarus II."

Zed extends his own hand once more to firmly grasp Neil's.

"My appreciation for the warm welcome."

Part 524: Psychological Imbalance

Hope Hiro staggers out of Neil's office. His scalp tingles feverishly as he struggles to figure out what the hell is going on with his head. His brain seemingly bounces around inside his skull, making him stumble from left to right.

"Ohh, man, hell..."

Hope pauses before exiting Neil's command structure. He wipes sweat from his forehead, wondering to himself if maybe he's come down with something. Just as he's about to leave, Debra seemingly appears at his side, startling him. He didn't hear her walking over due to his distracted thoughts.

"Hope. Are you alright?" Debra asks, pushing her glasses up her nose. "You look terrible."

"I feel terrible." Hope affirms. "Ever since the battle with Mephisto... I think he hit me with something. I've got a migraine from hell. Maybe a fever, too."

Debra reaches up to touch his forehead. She pulls her hand back and frowns. "No fever, but something's definitely wrong. Where are you going after this?"

"Not sure." Hope mumbles. "I need a nap. But I'm hungry, too."

"Alright. I'll have someone escort you to the Horned Maître. After you eat, you should return to Annette. She'll take care of you."

Hope nods, though the motion makes his stomach churn. "Oh... okay, yeah. Thanks, Debra."

Debra sighs. She walks away and makes a call over Centurion Net.

Not long after, a young man in a civilian uniform walks up to Hope, his pinstripe shirt looking quite sharp, yet conveying no sense of authority.

"...Commander Hope. Miss Debra asked me to escort you anywhere you need to be."

Hope barely even looks at the man. "Ah, thanks... I need to grab a bite to eat."

"As you command, sir. I have a vehicle waiting. I'll drive you to the Horned Maître."

Hope blearily follows the man. He gets in the passenger side of a Jeep-like vehicle with 4 seats, and after the door closes and he becomes sealed off from the world outside, he

feels minutely better.

The Second Wordsmith shakes off his dizziness. He glances over at his helper, then blinks in surprise.

"...What? It's you?"

The young man looks at Hope, then looks away while he turns on the ignition.

"It is, sir."

"Henry." Hope says slowly. "During the inquisition, you were- they were going to execute you."

The young man, formerly Private Henry, now demoted out of the military entirely, sighs softly as he begins to drive. It takes several long seconds before he decides to reply.

"It's all thanks to Beelzebub. If he hadn't somehow changed the outcome of that inquisition, I'd be dead. Commander Neil threw me a bone. He told me I could serve in the civilian sector. Beats doing slave labor in the mines."

"Oh. I see." Hope says, not sure how to react. "Have you been doing... well?"

Once again, Henry falls silent while continuing to drive. The brown-haired youth glances at Hope with a tired expression, then shakes his head.

"I don't know, sir. I've lost my purpose. I wanted to fight. To kill demons. But I ended up working for one of their Emperors instead. I betrayed humanity. I was going to die; punished for my crimes. But I didn't. Now I'm here... a glorified chauffeur. Is it better than being dead? Maybe. But I miss being able to hold a rifle. It was the one thing I was really good at."

"Yeah." Hope mutters. "You were a damn good sniper. The best we had."

The two men fall silent. Ten minutes pass as the SUV drives along the narrow roads into the city. Unlike on ancient Earth, only the military drives private vehicles. Otherwise, only buses pass by on the street. Most people commute by walking or riding bikes. For those magically inclined, they may instead fly or teleport between destinations.

Before long, they pull up to the Horned Maître, and Hope pops open to step out. He pauses before closing the door when he sees Henry hasn't moved.

"What? Not hungry?"

Henry winces. "It... I don't think it's appropriate for me to go in there, sir."

"Why not?" Hope asks.

"Well. People don't like me." Henry says slowly. "I betrayed humanity, and only survived execution because of a technicality. I'm sort of... infamous."

He pauses.

"Plus... I'm poor. I can't afford to eat here."

Hope frowns slightly, but that expression softens.

"You might be poor, but I'm not. Come on. Get out, we're eating together."

"But-" Henry starts to object.

"No 'buts.' You're coming with me, and that's an order." Hope says sternly.

A flicker of a smile threatens to appear on Henry's face, but he keeps his emotions muted. "Uh, alright. Yes, sir."

Henry exits the vehicle. He falls into step beside Hope as they approach the large and lavish oak doors leading inside the five-story building.

Upon entering, a fluffy Felaris girl wearing a waitress uniform pads over to them and meows. "Hello, Hope! What will it be today?"

"Hi, Meena." Hope says. "My friend and I are going to the... fourth floor today."

"Oh, your friend?" She asks, turning her large kitty-cat eyes toward Henry.

The waitress looks at him for a single second, blinks twice, then looks back at Hope. "Okay! I'll lead you to your table."

"Thanks." Hope says.

Henry glances around as they approach one of the three spiral staircases leading up to the higher floors. On the lowest floor, more than two hundred tables sit around, placed in modifiable configurations that allow them to be pushed together or pulled apart based on party size. Some tables have more than twenty people seated, while others have just one or two at a time. The place is nearly packed full, and several curious gazes flick in Hope's direction. As one of the Wordsmiths, it's hard not to recognize him at a glance.

The two men follow the Felaris up the stairs, keeping several steps behind her so her fluffy tail doesn't smack Hope in the face while it swishes back and forth.

The second floor is much less crowded than the first, pricier, and significantly more exclusive. This rule holds true for the third floor, and ultimately the fourth. While there

are five floors in total, the prices become much more ridiculous the higher one climbs, so only the richest and most powerful entities will bother to go to the top, and only for special occasions. It's often completely empty.

When Hope and Henry reach the fourth floor, they find that only two of the ten booths are occupied. Privacy filters erected around the booths shield the identities of their occupants, preventing even a single sound or sight from escaping. All one can see if they look at those booths is a pure white screen of ambient light.

Meena seats the two men at one of the booths, takes their order, and waves her paw. A light field materializes around the booth, cutting them off from the outside world.

"Wow..." Henry whispers. "That's so impressive. Is this fairy magic?"

"Wordsmith magic too." Hope responds, resting his elbows on the table. "Jason helped build this place's defenses."

"Oh. I see."

Henry becomes quiet again. He glances at Hope, then glances out the window at the ruined city currently being rebuilt.

More than twenty long seconds pass.

"Are you alright?" Hope asks, massaging the side of his head.

"You saw how everyone looked at me." Henry says quietly. "They hate me."

"Huh?" Hope blinks. "What do you mean? Not to burst your bubble, but I think people were looking at me, not you. I am the Wordsmith after all."

Henry opens his mouth to say something, pauses, then continues with that thought.

"You might be right, sir. But it just feels... it feels like everyone is always looking at me. Judging me. Like I've ruined everything I touched. I can't recover from my failures."

The Wordsmith looks at his slightly younger compatriot. Despite the fact Henry is younger than Hope, the age difference between them isn't large. Hope even thinks that if he hadn't spent so much time recently inside the Hall of Heroes, he might only be a year or two older than Henry.

Hope lowers his eyes to the table.

"You think you screwed up pretty bad, huh?"

"I did." Henry affirms, also looking at the table guiltily. "I don't have any way to repent, either."

"I disagree." Hope says, raising his eyes to look at Henry. "Compared to me, you haven't screwed up that badly. Lately, I've felt so off my game. I can't do anything right."

"What do you mean, sir?" Henry asks, meeting Hope's eyes with a look of surprise. "You're a Wordsmith! You can do all sorts of awesome things. I'm just an ordinary human. You fought Mephisto and saved countless lives. If it hadn't been for you, he might have hit the city and killed millions of people!"

"Well, uh, sure." Hope says, suddenly feeling awkward. "But compared to Jason, I came up short in all respects when fighting Mephisto. I've recently obtained more than a thousand powerful artifacts, but Jason beat Mephisto's bones without owning any. I felt like such a chump compared to him."

Henry scrunches up his face, as if uncertain whether the Second Wordsmith is pulling his leg. "Are you serious, sir? I've seen the video of your fight. You were incredible out there. You fought a hundred-foot-tall dragon hellbent on inflicting destruction everywhere. You kept the damage contained to an uninhabited area, transformed twice into other forms, and knocked him around like a pro."

"I mean, I *guess* so." Hope says, not wanting to acknowledge Henry's words. "But he still introduced my face to the ground. Jason had to rush in and save me."

"Oh, I see..." Henry says. "Well, I don't think that's a problem. You can't win every fight, sir. Every battle needs a winner and a loser. What's important is that when you lose, you pick yourself up and improve your skills for next time. Especially since you're a Wordsmith, I bet you can improve yourself in all sorts of awesome ways."

"Perhaps. I don't know." Hope says, wincing from a slight migraine flare-up. "It just seems as though I should be a better Wordsmith than him, yet he's somehow surpassed me. I don't know how he did it, and I feel like shit knowing I'm not matching up to him."

"I guess so..." Henry says, pausing to formulate his thoughts.

The young man glances out the window. He scratches his chin, but before he can speak again, the privacy screen flickers and Meena returns with two trays of food.

"Hope, Henry, here are your orders!" She meows cutely.

"Thanks for that." Hope says, smiling at her.

"Thank YOU for beating back that evil necromancer." Meena replies. "You saved everyone's lives! Everyone I've talked to is very grateful! Meow! Master Yamir said to tell you today's meal is on the house."

"Oh, he doesn't have to go that far." Hope says. "I have plenty of Merit-"

"Now now, don't turn down his hospitality." Meena says, cutting Hope off. "Everyone wants to show appreciation to you for your hard work. Neil's soldiers fought the undead, but you fought their boss. That makes you the Hero of the hour!"

Hope smiles. "Well. Alright! If you insist."

"I do!"

Meena turns around and reactivates the privacy filter, disappearing as she leaves to attend to other customers.

Henry looks at Hope with a smile of his own.

"You see, sir? Everyone appreciates what you've done. Even if Jason had a more visually impressive fight at the end, does it matter? You fought hard and accomplished many good deeds. Besides. It was you who fought on humanity's behalf seriously for the past six years. Nobody would blame you if you had a harder time following your return from the... the demon prison."

In unison, Hope and Henry's smiles disappear as they recall the horrendous torture the Second Wordsmith suffered at Gressil's claws. While Henry was not part of the rescue party, he had to have heard about Hope's condition from secondhand military rumors.

As for Hope himself, he certainly doesn't want to relive that horrifying experience. His heartbeat quickens, and his muscles tense up for a moment as he stifles the memories.

"I... let's... let's not talk about that." Hope says quietly.

"Of course, sir. Sorry."

Fortunately, Henry and Meena both succeed in uplifting Hope's spirits, and fixing some of his bruised ego. He eats in silence for a few minutes, thinking to himself that he's been much too hard on himself, and putting too much focus on Jason's accomplishments.

"Sir, can I ask you a question?" Henry says after a few minutes of eating.

"Huh? Sure, go ahead." Hope answers.

"Well, it's about the angels that popped up during the battle..." Henry says slowly. "I've heard some rumors about them. I don't want to prod, but could you tell me who they were?"

"The angels?" Hope asks. "You must mean Uriel, Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel."

"No, sir. It was two women, and neither of them were Uriel." Henry says. "All archival footage of their battle was deleted, so I assume it's a secret of some sort. If you're not allowed to say, that's fine. I just heard rumors that an armored angel with long white hair showed up alongside a beautiful lady angel. Presumably they were both women, but neither was Uriel..."

Hope doesn't say anything. Given how he was battling Mephisto at the time, he never heard about this, so he merely raises an eyebrow.

"You don't know?" Henry asks. "I heard they fought alongside Lieutenant Samuel Baker. Kicked some serious butt!"

Hope shrugs. "Haven't heard anything. Why don't you ask Samuel instead?"

"Oh... he and I aren't really on good terms." Henry says slowly. "You know. Because of the Inquisition..."

"Right. Sorry, I forgot." Hope says. "Well, it's just a rumor. Even if it's true, Neil probably wants to keep it on the down-low for good reasons. Best not to blab about it."

"Good point, sir."

* * *

Forty-five minutes later, Hope and Henry finish their food. They thank Meena for the food, and Hope even personally pops into the kitchen to say hi to Yamir before he and Henry depart.

As they head back outside to their waiting SUV, Hope stretches and pops his back.

"Thanks for spending time with me, Henry. I was in a pretty bad mood, but I'm feeling better now."

"Great! I had lots of fun, sir." Henry says with a big smile. "I don't get to hang out with people much these days."

"We should do it again some time." Hope says.

Henry nods. "How about that headache of yours? Need a ride anywhere else?"

"Nah. It's a lot more bearable now. I was just hungry after the big battle. I'm feeling a lot better."

"Great! Then I'll be on my way. Have a good day, commander."

Henry and Hope wave goodbye to one another, then the young man hops back in his vehicle, starts it up, and drives off.

Hope watches him depart. After he leaves, the Wordsmith yawns.

"Welp. Better head back home. **Return!**"

Hope speaks a Word of Power.

...nothing happens.

"Huh? **Return!** OUCH! What the-?!"

Hope flinches as his migraine comes roaring back full-force. His magic fails to activate twice in a row, and that pulse-pounding headache makes his brain feel like he just ran face-first into a glass window.

"Fucking *hell!*" Hope snarls. "Shit, goddammit! That hurts..."

He takes a few minutes to curse while waiting for his migraine to recede. When the pain drops again, he focuses his thoughts one last time. He visualizes the garden inside the Hall of Heroes, that same area he spent lots of time speaking with so many Heroes over the past year of his life...

"Come on, don't fuck it up again, gotta push through the pain... **RETURN!!**"

Finally, Hope succeeds.

His body vanishes from the spot with a faint suction of air.

Foop!

He materializes inside the Hall of Heroes.

Then, a pain unlike anything he has ever experienced in his life slams into his head with the force of a freight train.

"Aaaaa-!"

Hope cries out for a split second before losing the ability to speak. The garden inside the Hall of Heroes violently spins around him. He staggers, trips, and falls to the ground.

A hundred knives pierce his brain. He tries to open his mouth, but he loses control over his synapses.

The Second Wordsmith lays helplessly on the ground, as if having suffered from a full-body stroke. His heart races. His eyesight swims as the world bends and distorts around him. Frightening images of demonic apparitions seem to materialize all around him, making his suffering morph into a full-blown panic attack. Hope sees images of Gressil's distorted body towering over him, laughing maniacally like a cartoon villain while mocking him in an incomprehensible alien language.

'Gressil' kneels down to gloat. As he does, his face changes for a split-second.

"Hope? Hope? Can you hear-"

Hope's heart continues to pound. The voice sounds vaguely familiar, but the blinding pain continues to intensify. A white noise crackles behind his ears. His pupils shrink to pinpricks.

Then, he falls unconscious. The world goes dark.

* * *

Solomon kneels next to the Wordsmith.

"Hope! Hope! Can you hear me?! What in the- everyone! To me, at once! It's an emergency! Something has happened to Hope! Come to the Garden!"

Solomon projects those last few words throughout the entirety of the Hall of Heroes, summoning every available Hero.

It doesn't take long before Arthur, Elizabeth, and a hundred others show up, followed by Amelia and many more.

"What's wrong?" Amelia asks, pushing through the rapidly-gathering throng of onlookers. "What happened to Hope?!"

She falls to her knees beside her fiancé, gasping as she sees his eyes frozen open, drool spilling out of his mouth onto the grass, and the quick, short breaths he swallows reflexively.

"I'm not sure." Solomon says. "Hope returned and collapsed the instant he arrived. You're the only person with a fully corporeal body, Amelia. You'll have to carry him to the Healing Ward."

"Okay!" Amelia exclaims, bending down to pick up her fiance. She easily hefts him over her shoulders, thanks to the Words of Power he used to bolster her physique two years earlier.

She quickly pushes through the gathered crowd of Heroes who part the path for her, many of them looking at Hope's unconscious figure with deep worry. These Heroes, despite technically possessing corporeal bodies capable of interacting with the physical realm, lack the stability to lift heavy loads. If they tried to do so, their bodies would destabilize and disperse, forcing them to re-summon themselves.

Arthur and Solomon follow behind Amelia as she half-sprints down a series of hallways toward the four-bed wing designed to heal Hope, Amelia, and other biological entities in the event of an emergency. Created by Solomon as a safeguard in case of events just like this one, it finally gets to serve a purpose as Amelia hurries to put Hope in one of the hospital beds.

"Was the boy attacked?" Arthur asks Solomon.

"I know only as much as you." Solomon answers. "He teleported to the Hall of Heroes and collapsed as soon as he arrived."

"Hmm. How worrying..." Arthur mutters.

Amelia reaches the Healing Ward. She quickly but gently lays Hope down, stepping to the side as a few healing-type Heroes step inside along with Solomon, Arthur, and a few of the other mightiest Heroes.

Two tense minutes pass as men and women use all manner of instruments to investigate Hope's condition.

"Well?" Amelia asks, trying not to sound panicked. "What's wrong with him??"

Arthur holds his hands out above Hope's body. He summons a spell of glowing light to suffuse Hope's weakly-breathing body with divine energy. He stops a few seconds later.

"Everything seems to be fine." Solomon says, uncertain. "Hope's brain is not suffering any undue stress. His internal organs aren't injured."

"The boy's soul is perfectly fine." Arthur says with a frown. "No issues with his mana circulation either."

Karla, a Chinese Hero born during the 6th Century, uses a pair of acupuncture needles to poke and prod Hope's body.

"No signs of poison." Karla says. "The Wordsmith's Chakra flow is unaffected. I am no healer, though."

"Then what's the problem?" Amelia asks. "Why is he unconscious?"

Several long, uncomfortable seconds of silence follow.

Solomon glances around at the others. He searches his Crown for information, but the sheer volume of medical history he needs to look through is enough to require even him to search a while. He might be the Knowledge-Seeker, but actually scanning all the texts in his Crown could take weeks, or even months.

"I... I don't know." Solomon says. "I've asked all the other Heroes. Not many have a medical background. The best healing Heroes of the ancient past aren't actually present in this hall. We need... someone with a fresh perspective."

"What about Belial?" Arthur asks. "She might be able to heal the boy."

"We don't have a way to teleport in or out of the Hall of Heroes." Solomon answers. "I kept telling Hope to create a portal of some sort, but the brat just didn't listen..."

"Maybe his condition will improve over time." Hammurabi says, walking into the room. "Could he simply be exhausted from his battle with that pompous necromancer?"

"Maybe..." Solomon says, his tone betraying his lack of belief in that statement. "I don't think so, though."

The Heroes gathered around Hope exchange a few ideas, but since none of them specialize in medical science, nobody has any new ideas on how to help the Second Wordsmith.

Finally, Amelia throws her hands up in exasperation. "Well, what about the Volgrim? Remember? Hope took all those high-ranking Volgrim prisoners. Maybe one of them could help!"

Solomon frowns. "The Wordsmith's life is in a precarious situation. We don't know if merely getting some rest will restore his spirits. If we expose our situation to one of those prisoners, they could leverage the situation against us..."

"We have to do *something*." Amelia says through gritted teeth. "I'm not taking a chance on my fiancé dying to some mysterious demon-disease. If there's even a *chance* one of the Volgrim can help, we're taking it."

Solomon exchanges a glance with Hammurabi, Solomon, and the other Heroes. They all nod along to Amelia's words.

"...very well." Solomon says quietly. "Arthur, Hammurabi, Amelia, with me. Let's see if those Volgrim can be of any use at all."

"Even if it's a mistake, we have to try our best to save the boy." Arthur says.

"I concur." Hammurabi concludes.

Part 525: Upgray'd Time

Instead of going directly to Phoebe, the Cybernite known as Rebecca walks around inside the factory on Tarus II, inspecting the warehouse to see how humanity creates its technology and assets. She and her cohorts take detailed scans of the well-crafted but otherwise technologically limited systems spanning throughout Phoebe's facility.

Hundreds of drones fly in and out of the warehouse through a large open section of cut-off roof on the structure's western side. These drones pick up materials and fly away, lifting a surprising amount for their small sizes. Despite each drone only being about half the size of an average human body, they can lift more than two hundred pounds of metal, wood, brick, or other materials to fly them off to distant sites in need of repair.

Thanks to Mephisto, humanity has suffered a large level of devastation to its infrastructure. While the number of victims who fell to the Myriad Deity was zero, the fact most people lost their homes certainly doesn't make them feel any better. These drones are Phoebe's longstanding solution to building up humanity's infrastructure, and they work well enough for her purposes.

Rebecca casually plants a trojan virus on every single drone in sight using her superior mind-link technology. Not to alter their parameters, but merely to scrutinize their internal software and use them as makeshift spying drones. She intends to keep an eye on the drones to see how efficient they are at fulfilling their tasks.

In addition to the drones, plenty of men and women from various species work in the warehouse.

In the back, more than twenty gigantic materializers continue pumping out materials nonstop. Humans who have enhanced their bodies through the Body Boosters, as well as powerful monsters like Minotaurs, all heft large pallets of brick and steel, lifting these multi-ton loads without using any power equipment. Naturally, the biggest loads do require specialized equipment, but Rebecca still becomes impressed by how powerful the bodies of the humans around her are.

"How fascinating." A silver-haired Cybernite named Ryn says, her bright green eyes studying the facility carefully. "The physical parameters of these humans far exceed the expected maximum thresholds noted during the Energy Wars."

"That's right." Rebecca says, turning to her companion. "Have you not followed the Wordsmith's evolution?"

"Miss Becker assigned me to clean the ventilation shafts." Ryn says. "I did not pay attention to the outer galaxy."

"I see."

Rebecca turns away, feeling slightly dismayed. These Cybernites, while impressive entities in their own right, come from the very bottom of Marie Becker's elevated society. They are all highly intelligent and were once considered geniuses in their fields, but in the end they all became mere janitors or button-pressers due to a lack of opportunities in the Remnant Oasis.

With a shake of her head, Rebecca resumes her study of the facility.

Her irises rotate in a decidedly mechanical manner as she sweeps her head from side to side, easily penetrating any of the facility's security systems, be they technology-based or mundane. Even the so-called 'secret' underground base where the highest technology is being created doesn't evade her senses.

Rebecca might be at the bottom of the Cybernite hierarchy, but the technology contained within her body is vastly superior to anything Phoebe Hiro has produced. That thought even momentarily makes her feel a little sad, but the thought vanishes as she firms up her resolve to help uplift humanity further.

This is my chance to make something useful of my existence. Rebecca thinks. *Long have I yearned for something beyond the cursory, useless drudgery of keeping watch over a barely-used portal facility. I can finally make something of myself!*

She turns to look at Ryn, only to raise an eyebrow when she sees the other Cybernite standing right behind a man busily engaged in fabrication work. The man sits with his legs dangling over a small ledge, a soldering tool in one hand, and a small device of some sort in the other. So focused on his work is he that he doesn't even notice the silver-haired woman standing directly behind him, watching him with rapt attention.

"*Ryn!*" Rebecca hisses, embarrassed. She sneaks over, grabs her friend, and drags her away before the man can notice her presence. "What the heck are you doing?!"

Ryn blinks twice. "I was observing the male. His technical skills are flawed. I do not know why he uses such primitive technology to perform that task. Instead, he should use

a materializer."

"That's because his technology isn't as good as the stuff we're used to using." Rebecca explains. "But more importantly, don't creep on people! Do you know how weird you would have looked if Phoebe had seen you?! She'd probably give us the stink-eye!"

"Why would her eye stink?" Ryn asks. "And why would she gift us such a strange item? Don't you think these biologicals act rather illogically?"

"It's a turn of phrase." Rebecca says, exhaling softly. She looks at her blank-eyed companion with dread, realizing Ryn is almost certainly going to cause a major diplomatic incident at some point. "Just... don't act weird, okay? I want to make a good impression and show off the genius of Marie Becker's proteges. We can't let ourselves look like fools in front of these primitive humans."

"I understand." Ryn says calmly. "Do not worry. My intellectual parameters are far beyond any biological on this planet."

"If only your social parameters were at a similar level..." Rebecca says gloomily.

Rebecca continues scouring the facility, but now she keeps a closer eye on Ryn and the other Cybernites, tensing up when they interact with the humans, monsters, and demons working in the facility.

I have to make Marie look good. Rebecca thinks. I may not be a genius like her, but even before I digitized myself, I was relatively intelligent. Ryn was, too. All of us were humanity's cream of the crop.

Her eyes momentarily turn wistful. She activates her long-term memory storage centers, recalling events from previously in her life.

Rebecca was 16 years old when she was accepted into the Ivy League. She was considered a national prodigy at the time, the top 1% of intellectuals. She made her family proud by not only graduating with perfect scores in all classes, but even acquiring a PHD in Artificial Intelligence Technologies.

By the time she was 24, she had been hired to work in a mid-level government position.

Before age 30, she had become an industry leader in overseeing black-level government projects. She even developed certain top-secret projects related to cryostasis.

She helped invent many life-preservation technologies, including the technology Marie Becker would use to create the Cybernites.

But compared to Ryn, even Rebecca has to admit she came up short. Born to a billionaire, taught by the world's greatest scientists and given any tutors she desired, Ryn could have lived life as a spoiled brat, but instead devoted herself to studying technologies related to positronic circuitry, top secret weapons, and mechanical bodies that would later form the basis of the Vanguards.

Both of them were once incredible figures capable of uplifting entire countries. But then the Energy Wars came and the true main character entered the arena.

Marie Becker completely upended the definition of 'genius.' It was as if she was born with the equivalent of Solomon's Crown for a brain. Some people with knowledge beyond the ordinary even surmised she might be a Lowborn Hero, if not a Trueborn outright.

But she wasn't.

Marie Becker was simply an ordinary human gifted with an extraordinary brain. Like a nuclear explosion of intelligence, she systematically overtook everyone else in the field of miniaturization. This in turn allowed her to make incredible gains by digitally enhancing her brain, which allowed her to progress even faster.

Had Marie been born a Technopath on Volgarius, none would doubt her capability of taking over Fourth Founder Cuanali's position as head of technology development.

Alas, she was only a human, and her enemies were too well-entrenched for her to defeat. But even beaten, she still outmaneuvered the Volgrim, putting them in a position where they couldn't kill her or humanity off. They wanted her expertise to live on. And when the Plague appeared, they *needed* her to remain relevant forever.

Nowadays, many of humanity's former greatest geniuses work in close proximity to Marie Becker as her trusted aides and confidantes. But for the so-called 'geniuses' like Rebecca and Ryn, those who weren't good enough to reach the peak of biological intelligence, they fell by the wayside.

That is why Rebecca finds herself hoping for a second chance to prove herself. Despite feeling proud of the woman who ultimately saved humanity, Rebecca would be lying if she claimed not to have developed an immutable inferiority complex.

She wants to surpass Marie Becker. That sensation of yearning never fades, no matter how many millennia pass...

* * *

After a good thirty minutes of surveying the facility, Rebecca is about to go looking for Phoebe Hiro when the woman of the hour shows up unexpectedly, walking directly toward Rebecca's cluster of Cybernites.

"Rebecca!" Phoebe chirps. "So good to see you. I didn't expect you for a few more days."

"Miss Becker decided a sense of urgency was important." Rebecca says after turning toward Phoebe. "Given the attack humanity sustained, you need all the help you can get."

"We're doing better than you might expect." Phoebe says. "I anticipated a giant death toll to go along with the devastated infrastructure, but it turns out Neil's preparations led to a far better war situation than I could have hoped for. We just need to rebuild, and we'll be right as rain."

A few seconds pass. Rebecca smiles weakly at Phoebe, but it appears obvious to the Wordsmith's Wife that the Cybernite has something she's hesitant to say.

"The situation is getting worse." Rebecca finally says, keeping her voice low while moving closer to Phoebe. "This month, the Volgrim lost more than 100 worlds. The Plague's advancement is slowly increasing over time. We suspect something has riled the Plague up, but we aren't certain what it could be."

Phoebe doesn't react outwardly to Rebecca's statement, but her stomach twists in worry.

"You're not certain." Phoebe says slowly. "But... surely you have some guesses."

"We do." Rebecca acknowledges. "And the predictions we've made are quite dire. Simply put... this speedup is recent. *Very* recent. Within the past two years, to be specific. And the most noteworthy thing that has happened in that time has been the heightening of the Wordsmith's movements, both Hope and Jason alike."

"No, that's not all..." Phoebe objects. "What about the uprising of Demon Deities? Space battles between the Volgrim and the Plague?"

"The thing is," Rebecca continues, "the Volgrim keep close tabs on the Plague. They also maintain detailed logs in their databases regarding major events within the Milky

Way. Marie, naturally, keeps a close eye on those logs."

"And they let her?" Phoebe asks.

"It's not a matter of 'letting'." Rebecca explains. "It's more that they can't stop her intrusions even if they wanted. Marie is a much better technologist than all but the highest ranked Technopaths, and even if they narrowly edge her out in certain fields, it's only due to their chosen specification. In terms of well-roundedness, Marie Becker has virtually no flaws."

"She's like a jack of all trades..." Phoebe concludes.

"No, she's a master of all trades, but individually she might not reach the absolute apex in individual fields. On a numerical scale, she's a nine out of ten in all fields of technology. Even if one High Technopath is a ten in one field and Marie is only a nine, she's still beating that Technopath in *every other field*. That's because she was born a human, and humans are not ants. We don't specialize, we adapt and overcome."

Rebecca pauses.

"In any case, the issue we've uncovered is one of patterns. We've discovered that every time Jason has made a major move or performed a significant action, the Plague has stirred for a short time, as if it has become agitated. We are not certain why, but looking through the last twenty years of data, the pattern is unmistakable."

Rebecca's right eye glows blue. It beams out a holographic projection between herself and Phoebe, showing a spinning image of the Milky Way, along with a galactic date at the bottom.

"Volgrim Stardate 7.112.839.11, twenty years ago. You can see that each month, roughly ten to twenty planets fell to the Plague. A speed neither fast nor slow. There are, after all, hundreds of millions of habitable worlds in our galaxy."

The galaxy changes position ever so slightly.

"Volgrim Stardate 7.112.844.11, fifteen years ago. No discernable changes in the Plague's momentum, nor its rate of expansion."

"Ten years ago..."

"Eight years..."

"Six..."

Rebecca deliberately points out the yearly increments to prove the Plague's unchanging nature.

"Volgrim Stardate 7.112.853.06, six years ago. Specifically, three days after the Polaris Incident."

Phoebe sniffs and crinkles her nose. "After Hoarhiim destroyed Polaris's star in a supernova."

"That's right. Abruptly, that event seemed to cause some sort of reaction in the Plague. That month, fifty worlds fell. Nearly double the previous month's rate. A coincidental blip under ordinary circumstances, but an important data point nonetheless."

She continues to play out a series of events in the galaxy.

"Four years ago, the Volgrim launched a massive attack on a Plaguetoached World to try and wrest back control. This world was an extremely important black-level site, not unlike Moonbase Serris. They lost more than a thousand 6th Level Psions and half a dozen 7th Level Psions to the Plague on that day. They also lost one of their Executors..."

Rebecca shakes her head in dismay.

"It was a terrible loss. They failed to retake the world in the end. While those Psions did ultimately revive, the Plague gained the ability to copy and mimic their abilities. This drastically strengthened the Kolvaxian threat, and the repercussions are still being felt to that day."

She manipulates the galaxy map to show that month's activity.

"Despite such a major operation, which should have surely caused a rebound effect of some sort, the Plague's movements remained constant. Your husband, and his clone, have caused far more activity from the Plague than even one of the greatest invasions launched by the Volgrim in our era. Don't you find that odd?"

Phoebe's hands tremble. "Y-yes. I do. Have the Volgrim noticed?"

"Of course they have. Unarin may have even discovered this anomalous data-point before Marie Becker did. It's one of the reasons the Volgrim are hesitant to act hostilely toward you. They are not certain what connections the Wordsmiths have with the Plague, if any at all. And then there's this information that Gressil may be involved, while he was also the one who released your husband from his cryogenic chamber..."

Phoebe listens somberly to this shocking news. She pieces together a few clues of her own regarding various major moments that happened in only the last six months and why the Plague has accelerated faster and faster at its world-devouring speed. It seems that the Beelzebub detonation event also somehow caught the Plague's attention, but the moment Jason teleported all of humanity to Tarus II caused the greatest escalation of interest to date.

"How long until the Plague devours the entirety of the Milky Way?" Phoebe asks quietly.

"Oh, that's millions of years away." Rebecca says. "But the Kolvaxian scourge doesn't need to devour the entire galaxy to win the war. If it seizes all the resource-rich worlds, as well as Volgarius, the Volgrim lose. They could become a space-faring civilization, but the Plague is a massive organic entity, always evolving, always growing. Who knows what capabilities it might come to possess given time? Perhaps it will ultimately take to space to remove them from the equation once and for all."

Phoebe starts to interject, but Rebecca raises a finger. "And before you ask, traveling to other galaxies is not a realistic option. You don't want to know how outclassed the Volgrim are outside of their home turf. The Plague is comparable to a handful of soldiers in the inter-galactic scheme of power."

Phoebe simply nods. "I see. So ultimately, you're saying...?"

"I'm saying humanity is going extinct soon. So are the Cybernites, the Demons, the Monsters, and the Volgrim." Rebecca explains. "It's only a matter of time. We need to scale up our wartime capabilities. We need to fight back. Most importantly, we need a counter-measure. We need *something* that can defeat the Plague, or at least give us a fighting chance."

Rebecca turns off the glowing image of the Milky Way beaming from her iris.

"So, that's why I'm excited to come here. Helping humanity rebuild is fine and dandy, but we're going to need to go far beyond anything you've achieved to date. You might have managed to hold off a bottom-tier Cosmic, but Mephisto is nothing compared to a Plaguehost Executor. If one of those breaks past the frontlines and shows up on Tarus II, your species is dead."

"Our species." Phoebe corrects. "You might have a digitized body, but you were fully human once."

Rebecca shrugs. "I can accept that. Now that the pleasantries are out of the way and the existential dread is helping to motivate you to action, would you like to show me around and explain what you've been up to?"

"Don't you already know?" Phoebe scoffs. "Marie has microscopic spy drones everywhere."

"I know the broad strokes, but I'm not talking about the technology on Tarus II." Rebecca explains patiently. "I'm talking about *you*. Specifically, your philosophy and how it manifests in everything you design. The better I get to know you, the easier it will be for me to help you achieve your goals."

"I see. Then I'd be happy to show you around." Phoebe says with a smile. "And Jason is certainly going to want to talk to you."

"Where IS the First Wordsmith anyway?" Rebecca asks, quickly pivoting her head to look around. "I haven't been able to detect him since I arrived on Tarus II..."

"He's... I shouldn't say." Phoebe says, changing the topic quickly. "I'll leave it to him to tell you."

"So that's how it is!" Rebecca laughs. "Fine. Keep your secrets."

"I'll certainly try." Phoebe answers, though she can only assume any attempt at subterfuge will ultimately fail where Marie is involved.

Part 526: Down With the Sickness

Over the next several hours, Phoebe leads Rebecca and the Cybernites on a guided tour around her personalized warehouse and construction facility. Despite its rudimentary usage of high technology, it still is quite an impressive accomplishment for someone lacking formal technical training to have singlehandedly designed and constructed with only half a decade of time. Unlike Rebecca, Ryn, or any of the other Cybernites, Phoebe never attended a college or a technical university during her formative years. Furthermore, she didn't even properly interact with technology at all until metamorphosing back into a human from a monster nearly 100,000 years after her birth.

The fact the Phoebe has learned so much, so fast, is a testament to her innate genius!

"It's a shame..." Rebecca says, as Phoebe shows her a mockup for a human-shaped robot intended for excavating precious minerals from a mine at the southern side of the city. "If you had been available during the Energy Wars, you might have been able to assist Marie Becker properly. Humanity might have stood a real chance of winning the war."

"That's kind of you to say." Phoebe says with a smile. "But you and I both know that isn't true. The Volgrim never deployed a Psion stronger than the 6th Level in that war. No matter how grand our technology, we could not have defeated an empire with essentially unlimited resources, multiple powerful Cosmics, and hundreds of armadas of warships at their disposal."

Rebecca's enthusiasm slips. "Yeah... I suppose you're right. It felt to me at the time like we were teetering on the brink of success and failure, but perhaps we never truly had a chance in the first place."

She shakes her head and sighs.

"...Anyway. I'm impressed by the solutions you've come up with in so short a time, but the technical limitations and lack of access to high quality schematics has really hampered your expansionary efforts."

"In what ways specifically?" Phoebe asks.

Instead of immediately answering, Rebecca turns to her silver-haired friend, Ryn.

Ryn blinks, realizing she's been designated as the explanation-giver.

"The first issue we have identified has to do with the algorithms you have designed for the Materializers." Ryn says, in that matter-of-fact semi-robotic way she always does. "In order to create matter from energy, you need a vast amount of energy, but also algorithms tailor-made for transforming that energy efficiently into the matter you desire. The issue is, your algorithms are sloppy and sub-par."

Phoebe winces. "...That bad?"

"Ahem, uh, don't mind Ryn." Rebecca says, quickly jumping in. "She's a bit too blunt at times, but she knows her stuff."

"Alright. But what is the problem specifically?" Phoebe asks. "I don't follow."

Ryn motions with her hand, conjuring a series of complicated-looking mathematical proofs to levitate in the air through a holographic projector in her palm.

"The compression algorithms you are using for your Materializers are rudimentary, inefficient, and all are general purpose. As an example, how long does it take you at present to create one kilogram of material?"

Phoebe shrugs. "I believe it takes 50 seconds per kilogram. But some materials are easier to generate, others are harder. A kilogram of gold requires one and a half minutes, while Plutonium requires nearly three minutes."

"That is the dilemma you face when you use inefficient algorithms for compression." Ryn explains. "The reason it takes you so long to generate materials is because you have failed to create specialized compression algorithms for each type of material you need to generate, and the general-purpose algorithm you're using is broadly inefficient."

"Let's put this another way." Rebecca helpfully explains. "If you want to generate a kilogram of gold, you shouldn't use the same energy compression algorithm you'd use for Iron or Plutonium. Their energy requirements, periodic stability, and elemental attributes are all vastly different. Furthermore, the Materializers themselves should be shaped to generate specific types of materials. In this way, a 50 second per kilogram creation time could be reduced to 25 seconds, 10 seconds, 5 seconds, or perhaps even fewer!"

Phoebe gasps. "Such a drastic efficiency increase! Of course! I should have thought of that! I'm just so swamped with too many projects, I don't have time to delve into any of them in depth."

"Well, that's why we're here." Rebecca says, patting Phoebe's shoulder with a smile. "The other advantage of a more efficient algorithm is a drastic decrease in energy needed to produce a material. This means instead of using your current energy production methods to power a mere twenty Materializers, you could easily output enough energy for forty, fifty, or even a hundred Materializers, all while producing those materials ten times faster! It's a win-win."

Phoebe dramatically slaps her face. "I feel so silly now. I can't believe I overlooked this obvious solution."

"Even Marie Becker needed the assistance of other intellectually gifted people to accelerate her plans." Ryn states emotionlessly. "You are no different in that sense."

"Well, how much time would it take for you to help me update my Materializers?" Phoebe asks.

"Not long. A week or two at most." Rebecca says. "To be honest, we'd get even better results if we rebuilt them from the ground up, but that could take months. We definitely don't have that much time to waste. We need to catch humanity up to the Volgrim ASAP."

Suddenly, from behind the three women, a male voice speaks. "I certainly agree with that statement."

Rebecca turns around and nods at the unexpected visitor. "Jason! You finally..."

She pauses.

Rebecca gazes at the man standing before her, allowing her eyes to flick across his body, clearly seeing something others might not notice.

"...This is not your physical body." Rebecca says, after a moment of contemplation. "This is a robotic drone-body."

"What makes you say that?" Jason asks. "Maybe I turned myself into a Cybernite, just like you."

"That would be a foolish choice." Rebecca says. "As a Hero, your connection to your biological self is extremely important. Turning yourself into a Cybernite would be extremely likely to result in the immediate and permanent loss of your Wordsmithing. Meta-abilities are incapable of transferring to a digitized self."

Jason walks over and hugs his wife with one arm while continuing to smile at Rebecca. "Alright, you caught me there. This is just a drone-body. Can't be too cautious, these

days."

"Then where is your... real body?" Rebecca asks, while also immediately tapping into the Dronesmith's central CPU to try and pinpoint Jason's location.

She fails, discovering in the process that whatever method Jason is using to control the Dronesmith isn't based on mundane technology, but something more magical in nature.

"I... can show you." Jason says hesitantly, while glancing around the room. "But it's sort of a big secret."

"I see. Then just take me there." Rebecca says. "Ryn, you stay here with Phoebe and start getting to work on updating her Materializers."

"Okay." Ryn replies, not adding anything else of note.

Jason gestures to Rebecca, his hand motion indicating for her to wait a moment. He turns and looks at his wife lovingly, and the two of them stare into each other's eyes for five long seconds.

Rebecca gets the impression it isn't a simple lovey-dovey moment. They must be communicating in secret. As for what they're saying to each other, she hasn't a clue.

Jason eventually leans down to give his wife a kiss, then he walks over to Rebecca's side.

"This will only take a second." Jason says.

An instant later, Rebecca's sensors detect a micro-burst of quantum energy. She vanishes from her position and materializes inside a pitch black void.

Rebecca blinks. Something seems to envelop her body, bind her limbs, and prevent her from sensing the world around herself.

"One moment, Rebecca." Jason says, his voice transmitting into her ear. "I have to take every precaution to validate your identity before I allow you inside my secret base."

Rebecca remains silent. She detects powerful scanning beams as they pulse into her body, massaging her biological and mechanical innards, until the scanners stop a few seconds later.

Abruptly, a helmet snaps upward and away from her head, while the restraints on her body also fully loosen, allowing her to breathe the fresh air of... someplace she's never been before.

Rebecca finds herself inside an underground complex of some sort, a place with all the scanning beams she already surmised about, as well as two dozen 'isolation pods' designed to snap up new arrivals and immobilize them until their identities have been verified. The harsh blue lights above give this complex a sterile feeling, as if she's entered a prison's medical ward.

"What a warm welcome." She says dryly, turning to look at the real Jason, standing just ten feet away. Beside Jason stands his mind-wife, Fiona, her body appearing nearly as corporeal as his.

"Welcome to Chrona." Jason says, extending a hand toward her. "Sorry for the rough arrival. I try to take as many precautions as I can."

"That's a good policy." Rebecca says, reaching out to shake Jason's hand. "Chrona, you say? I haven't heard that world's name before."

Jason chuckles. "Haha. Well, Chrona is pretty unique in the Milky Way. I'm not surprised you haven't seen it before. Let's go topside and see what you think."

Rebecca nods. She, Jason, and Fiona all step inside a nearby elevator and ride it upward. At the same time as they engage in pleasantries, Rebecca tries to communicate with Marie Becker, but she finds that all of her communication tools have failed simultaneously. In fact, she has lost contact with the greater galaxy at large; an alarming find under more stressful situations, but one that only causes her to frown slightly in this case.

"Your ability to suppress my communications technology is impressive." Rebecca says, directing a frown at Jason. "Nobody has managed to do that to Marie's work before."

"What do you mean?" Jason asks.

"My transponders have all failed to link-up with the quantum nodes Marie and the Volgrim placed across the Milky Way. In theory, so long as we remain within the galactic sphere, I should be able to maintain contact in at least some minor way. Perhaps if 'Chrona' were located beyond our galaxy's sphere of control, or at its very outer edges, that might not be the case. But if so, then your ability to transport me tens of thousands of lightyears in a single second is genuinely impressive."

Jason clears his throat. "Err, ahem, it's not quite like that. But I think you'll figure everything out once we reach the surface."

Jason and Fiona remain silent while Rebecca continues to puzzle over the matter. As the elevator races upward, it doesn't take long before her iris modules become fully capable of piercing the dirt and soil above, allowing her to finally peer up at the sky through several different bands of the light spectrum. She frowns at the immediate lack of stellar radiation, as well as the revelation that not one bit of cosmic background noise is present.

"This... is a special dimension? Like the Labyrinth?" Rebecca asks.

The elevator comes to a stop. Fiona gently squeezes Rebecca's arm. "Something like that, yep."

The elevator door opens, allowing the trio to step out into the fresh air. A false sun beams down from the sky above, warming Chrona's surface. But the colorless void around it, as well as the lack of an atmosphere, means that the void still appears as black as a pitcher of ink. Not one star twinkles above, a fact Rebecca has already come to notice. Furthermore, the 'spinning' vortex in the sky gives the illusion she has stepped inside the eye of a gentle hurricane, one that revolves around the planet slowly.

It takes Rebecca no time at all to uncover the truth.

She turns to look at Jason with a deep-set frown.

"This is a special dimension. According to my internal chronometer, it is also a time-accelerated realm. I am rapidly losing sync with the exterior galaxy."

Jason nods. "Yeah. Good intuition, Rebecca. This is Chrona. It operates at two hundred and fifty times the speed of the outer galaxy."

Rebecca flinches. "What?! That fast? Don't you realize how dangerous such an extreme time dilation ratio is?!"

"Dangerous?" Jason repeats.

"What do you mean?" Fiona asks. "Everything is going fine inside here."

"Yes..." Rebecca says slowly, as her eyes peer more closely at Jason's body. She rapidly scans his cellular makeup, and a look of dismay crosses her face. "In here, there won't be a problem. The issue is that you should never set foot in the outer galaxy again... otherwise, a swift and agonizing death will *surely* befall you."

Inside the Hall of Heroes, King Solomon, Hammurabi, Arthur, and Amelia make their way into a secret corner of Hope Hiro's specialized temporal realm. There, they find a teleportation matrix that jumps them from the main body of the Hall of Heroes into a far larger sub-dimension more than a hundred times bigger in size.

This dimension houses the elite Volgrim Hope Hiro captured when he destroyed Moonbase Serris. It is a place where those Volgrim are kept in stasis, unable to move, think, or act of their own free volition. They remain trapped inside dreamless comas, their sense of time passing by instantly while the outer galaxy proceeds on its course without them.

Walls and walls of stasis pods sit attached to the walls, with many levels of those pods stacked on top of one another, and even more columns going across the central floor to create a library-like illusion of endless corridors.

Each pod houses just one Volgrim. And yet, Amelia couldn't count the ones in sight even if she tried. The sickly green lighting in the Stasis Prison gives her an alien feeling unrelated to the Volgrim themselves...

But Amelia shows no compassion for these creatures. She has already heard from Hope about the morbid experiments they inflicted upon her fellow humans, so she doesn't care if they 'suffer' inside their pods. If anything, it's more like a vacation for them, one where they don't have to work and slave away for their Empire all day, every day.

The three Heroes, and the former Black Queen, all make their way down the seemingly endless rows of stasis pods stacked up to the ceiling. Amelia knows well that despite how many pods are in this one facility, there are even more levels above and below with countless Volgrim stuffed inside, all rendered helpless by the Wordsmith's power.

Solomon quickly leads the group to one specific pod, placed seemingly at random amidst the wall of others identical to it. He lowers this stasis pod from three layers above down to the floor through the use of an automated mechanical arm. When the pod reaches the floor level, he holds up a palm, informing everyone to take a few steps back.

Its occupant is considered extremely dangerous, after all.

A moment later, Solomon positions himself directly in front of the pod, his expression grim as it begins to hiss and sputter, popping open to reveal a female Technopath with heavily armored legs made of Living Moldanium. She stands with her eyes closed while

the stasis wears off, then her eyes snap open to reveal a cunning edge seen only in ancient monsters from a long-lost age.

The Technopath says nothing for a moment. She merely directs a burning gaze toward Solomon, then the other three, then the facility around her.

"*You. Solomon of Jerusalem. Knowledge-Seeker.*" She says calmly, glaring at him with eyes that seem capable of melting obsidian.

"Psymin Miralax. A Celestial Designer." Solomon says carefully. "My apologies for keeping you in stasis. Hope Hiro was not sure what to do with you following your capture."

Psymin blinks. She cocks her head slightly while attempting to transmit a wide-beam data-ping.

The effort fails.

"*My location. Unknown. Imprisonment duration. Unknown. Release requirements. Unknown.*"

"That is why I wanted to speak to you." Solomon says carefully. "I believe I may require your assistance. If you can help me, I will be open to... negotiations."

"*Refuse.*" Psymin immediately states. "*You are my enemy. I do not work. With enemy.*"

Amelia's heart skips a beat. "Wait! Please, we really need your help!"

Solomon quickly holds up a hand. He doesn't even look at Amelia, merely silencing her with his palm. "We are willing to pay remunerations. You will not be at a disadvantage."

"*Return me.*" Psymin says, her tone icy. "*To Serris. Immediately.*"

A brief instant passes. Solomon gazes at her quietly, then lowers his eyes.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that."

"*Why not?*"

"Because... Serris is gone. Hope Hiro destroyed it."

Psymin does not react with even the slightest hint of surprise, as if having guessed this was what happened already.

"*Foolish. Serris was important. Essential. Those projects. Classified. Experiments. Intention. Stop the Plague. You've doomed us.*"

"You underestimate the Wordsmiths." Solomon says quietly. "We will find a way to defeat the Plague, given time. But while you and I speak, one of the Wordsmiths is suffering. He needs your help. If the Wordsmiths fall, the Plague will win. It's that simple."

Psymin glowers at Solomon. *"You. Manipulator. I will not succumb. Mind tricks."*

Her robot voice grates on the ears of those present. Amelia winces as she realizes Solomon is making no headway in swaying her resolve. What Hope did to Serris likely ruined any chances of working with the Celestial Designer in the future.

Before Solomon can speak again, Arthur steps forward. He gently pushes Solomon aside, though the Knowledge-Seeker doesn't offer any resistance. Solomon almost seems happy to let his friend intervene.

"Psymin Miralax. I am Arthur Pendragon. Once considered the mightiest of humanity's Heroes." Arthur says, speaking with a mixture of authority and humility. "But in the end, I am merely a man. One man cannot save the galaxy. This is true of not only me, but your First Founder and our Wordsmiths too. It is true the Second Wordsmith is but a boy. He is hot-headed and prone to making mistakes. But don't you think working with him has a higher chance of pushing back the Plague than working alone, separated?"

"You. Killers." Psymin says, not backing down. *"I will not assist."*

"Do you wish to pretend the barbarism Hope witnessed on Serris was fully justified?" Arthur asks while crossing his arms and puffing out his chest. "Torturous experiments. Vile practices. He took revenge in a fit of rage, yet he still preserved the core of your power. You yet draw breath, as do your elites. Working with us will grant you leverage to free them. Are you certain you wish to stubbornly cling to the past when the future before you appears so dire?"

Finally, Psymin hesitates. She glances between Arthur and Solomon, uncertain of what to say. Unlike her lauded First Founder, Psymin is but a technologist who has solely focused on researching innovative new technologies. In the art of wordplay, she is nowhere near Unarin's equal, let alone the ancient Heroic figures arrayed before her.

To say nothing of her body, disfigured by an ancient accident, a battle involving machines capable of destroying the galaxy. She has spent no time at all learning how to properly communicate with others, and so, her ability to read other people's intentions, particularly those of non-Volgrim species, comes up quite lackluster.

"I..."

Psymin continues to hesitate, not sure of what to say. At that moment, Hammurabi steps forward.

"Harrumph! Listen here, lauded Celestial Designer. I am Hammurabi, the oldest of those before you. I am Solomon's master, and Arthur's grand-master. I pledge upon the honor of my heroic spirit that if you help us, we will help you too. Hope Hiro possesses the ability to terraform planets. It is conceivable he may even be able to remake planets anew. Rebuilding Serris is within reason. I will command the boy to recreate Serris as it was before, but even better. We will find... acceptable alternatives for your experiments to ensure no humans suffer in the way you tortured them, while granting you the ability to continue advancing your goals. We must work together to defeat the Plague, after all!"

"I'm Hope's fiance." Amelia adds. "I can't promise much, but if you help us save Hope, I'll make sure he helps you back!"

Psymin's expression softens slightly. She continues to gaze at the four humans with distrustful eyes, but considering her precarious situation, she lacks bargaining power.

She ultimately relents, lowering her arms to her sides while exhaling softly.

"Very well. Take me. To the Wordsmith. I will look. Investigate. But. You must. Keep your promise."

"Worry not." Solomon quickly replies. "Heroes never go back on their words."

"I hope not." Psymin counters.

* * *

Some time later, the Heroes and Amelia lead Psymin into the Hall of Heroes. As they travel, Psymin's acute eyes observe every nook and cranny she passes. She senses the spiritual energy in the air, and observes many Heroes milling about the corridors, piecing together plenty of clues regarding her current location.

"This location. Time accelerated?"

Solomon nods. "That's correct. The Hall of Heroes exists in a state of quantum acceleration, roughly 100 times faster than the outside galaxy."

"I contemplate. I comprehend."

Psymin says nothing else as they lead her to the hospital ward, where Hope lays motionless on the bed, barely sucking in slow breaths while remaining fully comatose, unable to awaken.

"We can't figure out what's happened to him." Solomon explains. "After he teleported back to the Hall of Heroes, he collapsed. He's been like this ever since."

Solomon quickly rattles off all of Hope's symptoms, detailing as many possible factors as he can while also informing Psymin of the battle against Mephisto.

"...which is why we suspect Mephisto must have struck him with some sort of poisonous necrotic energy. But we can't find any evidence of such a thing." Solomon concludes.

Psymin reaches out her hand. She touches the top of Hope's head for roughly two seconds, then pulls it back.

"My surprise. Unimaginable." Psymin says, turning to Solomon. *"You. Unaware? His condition. Obvious. You. Stolen knowledge. Yet ignorant?"*

Solomon blinks. "I don't follow what you're saying. Are you implying I should know what is causing Hope's condition?"

"Yes. Obvious. His condition. Time Dilation Sickness."

Solomon flinches when he hears Psymin's words. "What? Time Dilation- that's... one moment."

The Knowledge Seeker abruptly vanishes. He disappears from his position, teleports inside of his Crown, and begins rapidly scrolling through the infinite library of files he has compiled from the brains of all the High Volgrim. It doesn't take him long to uncover dozens of top secret documents, memory fragments, and scattered pieces of knowledge referencing this specific condition.

He instantly reappears before Psymin with a look of shock.

"Time Dilation Sickness! I hadn't heard of this until just now, but it's a real thing! It's a phenomena experienced by those who travel from higher to lower dilation speeds within short periods of time!"

"This condition." Psymin states quietly. *"Typically lethal. Hope Hiro. Lucky to be alive. Healing him? Difficult."*

Solomon nods sagely. "Difficult, indeed..."

Rebecca stands over Blinker's hospital bed, gazing at the fairy with a look of dismay. Jason and Fiona stand on either side of her, while Kar sits across the bed, looking up at Rebecca with hopeful eyes.

"It's as I feared." Rebecca says quietly. "She's suffering from Time Dilation Sickness. This is a deadly condition that typically kills those who suffer from it. But the good news is, Blinker did not expose herself to the lower dimensions for too great a time. As the Monster Queen, her body is also extremely hardy compared to those of other mortals. She will recover, but it will require a great deal of time for her body to re-acclimate to the higher dimensional speeds of Chrona."

Jason massages his forehead in worry. "I don't understand. I thought everything was going fine! I live inside Chrona without any issues!"

"That's the thing. You're not applying a proper analogy to the situation." Rebecca explains. "Let me put it this way. Think of higher and lower time dilation ratios as being different levels of gravity, or perhaps atmospheric pressures. The faster the time dilation, the 'lighter' the pressure. Humans who were born in space often have softer bones and weaker bodies than those born on planets with gravity. If a spacefarer attempts to live on a planet, they can die from gravitic pressures, an inability to pump blood due to their weakened heart, and other such issues. The higher the gravity, the more deadly the effect."

Fiona quickly picks up on the analogy. "If someone from Earth travels to space, they won't have much issue. A strong body can cope with a lighter gravitic pressure, no problem. But the opposite is not true."

"Exactly." Rebecca replies. "In the same way, a surface-dwelling human cannot travel and live freely in the deepest depths of an ocean. If they tried, their bodies would explode from the pressure. Now that you and these other people have adapted to living inside a 250x-accelerated time dilation index, you cannot easily return to normalspace. It would be like teleporting into the deepest depths of the ocean. You'd most likely die immediately."

Kar chuffs fearfully. "Then... why did Butterfly live? Is it only because her body is so strong?"

"Yes. But that was only a temporary measure. You can forcibly resist Time Dilation Sickness by virtue of sheer bodily power, but attempting to do so will not leave you uninjured. You will still suffer on some level, as Blinker is suffering now."

Rebecca smiles.

"Blinker is lucky. She will recover. She merely needs to re-acclimate to the time dilation index of Chrona. Once she does, she will be just fine. But unfortunately, the same is not true for the rest of you..."

Rebecca pokes a finger against Jason's chest. "You are weak in body. If you had been the one to leave Chrona, you might have perished immediately. Kar and Blinker's children, likewise, were born inside Chrona and have already fully adapted to its environment. They will not simply die if they enter the physical world; they may even implode due to the temporal pressure around them, transforming into a micro-singularity and disappearing an instant later."

Kar's eyes practically pop out of his head. "Hurgh! That sounds awful! What the heck, Little Orchid! Are you telling me my babies are stuck here?"

"I'm afraid I am, Kar." Rebecca says consolingly, walking around to pat his scaled shoulder. "But... as long as you live inside Chrona, you won't have any troubles. This dimension is so isolated, the Plague probably won't be able to find it. It would make for a solid backup base, a fallback location in case the Milky Way becomes fully compromised."

Jason's eyes darken. "Only if I want to damn humanity like I've damned myself. Anyone I bring here won't be able to leave or their freaking bodies will implode. That's really fucked-up, Rebecca. I'll have to find other solutions."

"What about the Cube?" Fiona asks. "It has much lower TDR's than Chrona. Lower TDRs should mean less chance of suffering from Time Dilation Sickness, right?"

"That's a fair point." Rebecca says, somewhat hesitantly. "We have a Time Dilation Zone that exists at a ratio of 1:4 inside the Remnant Oasis. You might remember it, Jason, as it's where Kar's people, and the Lizardmen, lived. The lower the TDR, the less likely one is to suffer from major effects of Time Dilation Sickness."

"Maybe I could find a way to decelerate someone from Chrona's insane 250x speed to something more like 200x, then 150x, 100x, and so on, until they can return to normalspace." Jason suggests.

"It's worth a shot, but the Volgrim have done plenty of tests with time acceleration in the ancient past. It won't go as well as you'd expect." Rebecca says.

Jason falls silent. So do the others.

"I'll have to keep using the Dronesmith for now." Jason says quietly. "I originally used it so I could stay inside Chrona but maintain a presence in realspace. But now, it seems the Dronesmith is my *only* link to realspace. And that means... I can't bring Phoebe here. I'd subject her and the baby to Time Dilation Sickness if they ever wanted to leave. She wouldn't like that."

"But you can't leave to go and see her." Fiona says quietly, only now realizing the weight of the situation.

"That's right." Jason mutters. "I can't see my wife in person. I can't leave here to hold my son. I can't bring them here, either, or else they would have to stay here forever. In short... Phoebe and I... can't be together anymore. Not physically, at least."

A somber mood takes the Wordsmith's mind.

Jason gazes ahead blankly, feeling as if a planet has just fallen upon his shoulders, one he has no choice but to bear its weight, much like Atlas holding up the Earth.

"This changes everything for me." Jason says softly.

Part 527: Diablo's Offensive

Somewhere inside the Labyrinth, a thousand miles from the Core, in a remote area few entities visit...

"Move, move, move! Let's go! Hurry it up! We're on a tight time-table!"

Hundreds of demons rush down a hallway, cramming into it so tightly they constantly bump and jostle one another as they hurry along, following behind one of their newly crowned Emperors, a product of Glinch's pills.

Those hundreds of demons become thousands, then tens of thousands. They pour down the hallway unceasingly, like a dam that has burst and sent a flood of red pouring into an unsuspecting desert. Grunts and Lords alike intermingle, with many groups led by a few Barons, and a few even find some Dukes at the front alongside their Emperor-level commanders.

They all converge on a single room where one Demon Emperor in particular maintains his focus, conjuring more than thirty portals in a large circle around himself.

Yardrat, Emperor of the Void, exhales and inhales heavily as many different corridors leading from all the different paths from all the remaining Hells pour into this designated makeshift portal facility, where his portals allow the demonic army to travel from the Labyrinth of Hell to the distant world of Numaria.

For five long hours, Yardrat continuously sustains his portals, allowing no fewer than fifty million demons from all levels of power to travel to the distant world. Eventually, his agony ceases. The last stragglers stream into the last portal, allowing him to finally slump to his butt and cough profusely, exhausted from the ordeal.

Five minutes later, an ethereal demon levitates toward him, smiling kindly.

"Well done, Yardrat. I wasn't sure if you could hold out."

Yardrat tries to lift his palm to wipe his forehead, but he fails miserably. His arms refuse to follow his commands, acting as if someone has chained ten-ton weights to his wrists.

"I... *cough!* Diablo, I'm still... I'm too exhausted. I'll need time to recover."

"I anticipated as much." Diablo says, his ghostly body shimmering for a split-second. With a flourish of his hand, he produces a shiny white marble of crystallized mana from nowhere. "Swallow this. It's a condensed drop of Cosmic Energy. It should speed up your recovery."

Yardrat blinks his weary eyes. He gazes at that white marble with a hint of apprehension.

"C-cosmic energy? But... can I even handle such a small amount?"

"It's benign." Diablo answers. "I tested it on Emperor Fae. Your stomach will hurt for a while, but it will greatly expedite your mana recovery. We need your abilities the most, so don't delay."

Yardrat grimaces, then nods his head. He opens his mouth, allowing Diablo to pop the pill inside, then he swallows it. Ten seconds later, Yardrat screams in pain as the tiny droplet of Diablo's Archdemon power begins to tear apart and heal his muscles, bones, ligaments, and blood vessels, all while providing him with a massive burst of demonic energy at the same time.

"Aaaargh!!"

He curls into a fetal position, crying out in pain, while Diablo only watches for a few moments.

"It'll hurt for a bit, but the pain won't last long. When you're fully recovered, meet me on Numaria. I'm going to finish outfitting the army while we wait."

Diablo's ghostly body disappears, leaving Yardrat to writhe on the ground, screaming and crying like an injured bear. Fortunately, nobody else remains in the area to witness his miserable appearance.

* * *

On the world of Numaria, fifty million demon soldiers stand in loosely organized regiments, lacking the level of discipline humanity's soldiers possess, yet outnumbering them in both quantity and average levels of power. In a mass of demons this large, Lords find themselves mingling with their lessers more than they would prefer, having to chit-chat with mere Grunts while they wait for the next phase of this sudden 'emergency operation' announced by the newly crowned Leader of the Seven Hells, Emperor Diablo.

Everyone has already heard through word of mouth the news regarding Diablo's unexpected return. Now fully in control of the Archdemon, calling him by the title of mere 'Emperor' seems somewhat underwhelming, especially when the lesser demons hear even more rumors regarding how he scared off the Second Founder of Volgrimkind, as well as how he trashed the supposed almighty Myriad Deity.

Once the massive army witnesses Diablo's full majesty in person, they learn that the rumors did not do him justice. The true body of the Archdemon is so unfathomably massive and mighty that they feel like ants beneath a skyscraper. They gaze up at the eyeless, hundred-legged Archdemon with worshiping gazes filled with awe and reverence.

"Archdemon!" One demon gasps under his breath. "If Diablo were to call himself the second strongest Deity in the galaxy, who would dare call themselves the first?!"

"Heh, certainly not Mephisto." Another demon chuckles. "Never did like that sniveling necromancer. Diablo is a true leader. He knows what it means to stomp on our enemies."

"Seems our species is about to finally get our face back." The first demon sneers. "Nobody will call us the weakest anymore."

This conversation, and many others like it, play out across the unending hordes. Despite the size of the army assembled before Diablo's voluminous form, it pales in comparison to the number of demons inside all the Hells. Trillions more await in the back wings, many scattered across demonkind's controlled worlds, while just as many live within the Labyrinth itself.

The fifty million assembled today are little more than an initial strike force destined to set the stage for the future war...

Abruptly, the Archdemon straightens his posture. The massive creature tilts its head down to look at the peons clamoring at its feet.

"SILENCE."

Instantly, all words cease. The sheer power behind Diablo's voice causes the weakest willed demons to clam up in fear, while their more mentally formidable compatriots fall silent out of awe and respect; a stark contrast between the two types of warriors assembled.

"TODAY, WE BEGIN A NEW CHAPTER." Diablo says, his voice thundering softly into the ears and minds of those listening. **"TODAY, WE WILL ENTER THE**

GALACTIC STAGE IN SUCH A WAY THAT ALL OTHER SPECIES IN THE MILKY WAY WILL LEARN TO FEAR US ONCE AGAIN."

"THE HUMANS HAVE THEIR WORDSMITHS. THE MONSTERS HAVE THEIR KING AND QUEEN. THE VOLGRIM HAVE THEIR FOUNDERS."

"NOW. THE DEMONS HAVE *ME*. AND I AM WORTH MORE THAN ALL THE OTHERS COMBINED. BECAUSE I HAVE AN ABILITY NONE OF THEM DO..."

Diablo's tentacles writhe hungrily. Their heads snap upward, as if biting at the air around them.

"I... CAN DEVOUR THE PLAGUE."

Some of the more well-informed demons blink in surprise. Aside from a chunk of demonkind's highest Emperors, none have heard this information yet. And when it comes to the lower demons, particularly the Grunts and Lords, they don't really have an idea of how strong the 'Plague' even is. They've only heard second and third-hand accounts regarding the fate which ultimately befell Sharmur...

"Diablo can... eat the Plague?" One random Lord whispers. "Like, chew it up?"

"Shut up! Let him talk!" An adjacent demon hisses.

"IN FOUR HOURS, WE WILL ATTACK." Diablo explains calmly. "THE PLAGUE SEIZED CONTROL OF SHARMUR. WE WILL RECLAIM THAT WHICH ONCE BELONGED TO US."

"BUT SHARMUR... IS ONLY THE BEGINNING. ANOTHER WORLD WILL FOLLOW SOON AFTER. AND ANOTHER. AND YET ANOTHER..."

The Archdemon holds out his palm, extending one finger after another for emphasis, the size of his hands symbolically emphasizing the scale of the attack he is planning.

"THIS ACHIEVEMENT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT ME. BUT MY POWER WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT OUR GREAT LEADER, THE FIRST EMPEROR." Diablo explains. "AND I AM INCAPABLE OF TAKING BACK OUR GALAXY ALONE. THAT IS WHERE THE REST OF YOU COME INTO PLAY. OVER THE COMING DAYS, WEEKS, AND MONTHS, THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE PROVEN YOURSELVES WILL GAIN THE RIGHT TO BE..... *ELEVATED*."

Diablo points randomly into the crowd, as if picking out random Grunts, Lords, and Barons with specific intent.

"WILL IT BE YOU? OR YOU? OR PERHAPS EVEN A WEAKLING LIKE YOU? SOME OF OUR FALLEN BROTHERS AND SISTERS HAVE GONE TO LICK THE HEELS OF THE WORDSMITHS LIKE BROKEN HELLHOUNDS. BUT THE DEMONS SELECTED TODAY ARE NOT AMONG THOSE TRAITORS. NO LONGER WILL DEMONKIND ALLOW THEIR ILK TO WALK AMONG OUR RANKS. ONLY THOSE LOYAL TO THE ARCHDEMON WILL BE GRANTED THE PRIVILEGE OF A RAPID ASCENSION TO THE RANK OF BARON, DUKE, AND EVEN EMPEROR."

Diablo crosses his massive arms, standing proudly like a King before a group of antsy villagers.

"THE WORDSMITH'S FAVORS COME WITH A CONDITION. THAT CONDITION IS THAT YOU HUMILIATE YOURSELVES BEFORE HIM. TO BENEFIT FROM HIS BOONS, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO STATE THAT YOU ARE LESS THAN A MERE HUMAN. BUT THAT IS NOT TRUE. WE ARE DEMONS! WE EXISTED FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS BEFORE HUMANS STOPPED FLINGING FECES AT ONE ANOTHER. WE RULED OVER HUMANS FOR 100,000 YEARS FOLLOWING THE ENERGY WARS. THEIR RECENT RISE IS MERELY A BLIP ON THE TIMELINE. AND NOW, IT IS TIME TO *CRUSH THEM*."

Diablo slowly, dramatically, raises a palm above his head. He slashes downward with his fingers, raking their air like a panther tearing at a tree. Four gashes appear in the air before him, revealing the interior of the Labyrinth.

"FOR TOO LONG, THE HUMANS HAVE BELIEVED THEMSELVES MORE THAN OUR EQUALS; OUR SUPERIORS. THAT ENDS TODAY."

The four tears in space coalesce into one giant spatial rip, revealing a familiar sight to countless demons.

The Labyrinth Core, now filled with humans, monsters, and demons Diablo considers traitors.

Those entities all look up in horror as their eyes fall upon the horrifying visage of the Archdemon, a sight not one of them has ever seen in their lives. The massive entity sneers

as his head pivots to face the lesser life forms looking at him in abject terror.

"AFRAID? YOU SHOULD BE. YOUR ERA OF CONQUEST LASTED SIX YEARS TOO LONG FOR MY LIKING..."

A blood-red glow begins to emanate from Diablo's gigantic body. It travels from the ground, up through his tentacles, into the core of his body, then finally culminates in a rapidly spiraling ball he clenches in his upright palm.

"THE LABYRINTH OF HELL IS NOT FOR TINY LITTLE HUMANS, BUT FOR THE GLORY OF DEMONKIND!!" Diablo roars!

He throws that ball of red energy through the gap, and it explodes inside the center of the Labyrinth like a nuclear bomb.

Boom.

A silent detonation occurs as the energy rapidly expands outward, traveling throughout all the Labyrinth's corridors, past its smallest and largest chambers, all the way until it reaches the farthest expanses of the Hell Network.

When the dust settles, the humans inside the Labyrinth Core touch their chests, their arms, and their legs with great trepidation.

None of them appear injured. None of them have died.

Despite the strange exotic power contained within that orb, nothing seems to have happened to them at all.

But as for the demons, those touched by the power of the Wordsmiths, those who have partaken of the Belial Booster or the other tools made by Jason Hiro, they all collapse to their knees and begin shrieking in fear.

"Aaahhh!! Gone! It's gone!"

"What happened?! Why have I...?!"

"Suff...ocating! Can't... can't breathe! UGH!!"

Alarmed, the humans still inside the Core look at their demonic allies, uncertain of what to do, or how to react. They look up at the spatial tear to see the grinning face of the Archdemon looking at them as if they were mere snacks.

"DEMONIC TRAITORS. I CAST YOU OUT OF MY HELL. RETURN TO THE HUMAN WORLD, FOR THAT IS WHERE YOU BELONG. AND AS FOR YOU

HUMANS... HEH HEH HEH... YOU HAVE TWELVE HOURS TO FLEE. IF YOU DO NOT, YOU WILL NOT LIVE TO SEE THE NEXT SUNRISE ON YOUR BELOVED TARUS II. THIS IS MY ONLY KINDNESS TO YOU."

Diablo snaps his fingers, and the spatial tear closes shut.

He turns his gaze back to the inquisitive gazes of the demons below.

"WONDERING WHAT I'VE DONE? I HAVE RECLAIMED THE POWER OF HELL. THE LABYRINTH WILL BECOME MORE THAN OUR HOME BASE. IT WILL BECOME OUR NEXUS OF OPERATIONS. A FORTRESS NO OTHER SPECIES, NOT EVEN THE VOLGRIM, WILL EVER DARE ASSAIL."

He pauses.

"NOT THE HUMANS. NOT THE VOLGRIM. AND *CERTAINLY* NOT THE PLAGUE..."

Diablo sweeps his arm above the heads of his loyal subjects.

"READY YOURSELVES FOR BATTLE. IN FOUR HOURS, WE WILL TAKE BACK SHARMUR!"

"For Sharmur!" Countless demons shout.

"For the Archdemon!" Even more add in afterward.

Emperor Belial receives the call for help at the same time as nearly every other high-ranking individual on Tarus II. She, along with several other demons and plenty of important humans and monsters, all rush toward the Tarus II Warpgate as quickly as possible, arriving just ten to twenty minutes later. In Belial's case, her Emperor-level speed allows her to run at nearly a hundred miles an hour in a straight line, beating out many of the human-military SUVs in top speed.

Her feet pound the dirt as she briskly stomps toward the Warpgate, arriving barely a minute before a convoy of emergency vehicles and other rapid-response crisis teams.

She quickly contacts the guards at the Warpgate who inform her of the happenings inside the Labyrinth.

"A giant demonic monster?" Belial asks. "What did it look like?"

The soldiers quickly describe the Archdemon's appearance, causing Belial to frown deeply. As someone who is never invited to meetings of the Hells anymore, and who is also ostracized by most of humanity's leadership under Neil Adams, she had no idea Diablo had returned, nor that he had gained control of the Archdemon form. This news shocks her to her core. Perhaps if another day had passed, she would have heard the news from Phoebe, but Diablo moved too quickly to allow that to happen.

"Whatever. I'll head inside and see if I can help." Belial says.

She pushes past the soldiers and charges into the Labyrinth with a small army of exosuit-wearing soldiers not far behind her, all of them ready for battle, invasion, or whatever else the Hells might throw at them.

The moment Belial steps through the Warpgate, she senses something is off. She pauses for a brief moment as a sensation of burning washes across her body.

Then, she stumbles forward, trips over her own feet, and collapses to the floor.

"Ah! Aaahhh! ARRGH!"

The Emperor of Passion grabs her stomach as powerful waves of nausea wrack her body. Through her blotted and spotty vision, she manages to make out the flailing of other nearby demons all being dragged around by concerned human allies into rows, where they too lay on the ground, screaming in pain.

Her distress is not unique. Through her tear-filled eyes and agony-wracked brain, she manages to piece together that something terrible has happened to her kin.

"Uh... uhhhh.... AHHH!!"

Belial cries out in pain once again, until someone runs over to her side.

That someone turns out to be Doctor Fathy, the Harpie who works under Belial directly.

"Samantha, chrtrup! I wish I had time to warn you! Stay still, just lay there a while. The pain will go away!"

Belial nods weakly to her cohort, who simply kneels beside her and squeezes her shoulder comfortingly.

Ten long minutes pass before Belial's agony subsides. She continues to lay in place for another minute while putting herself back together. When she finally stands up, she does

so shakily and with great temerity.

"Oh... ohh... my b-body... it feels so... so weak..." Belial wheezes, as Fathy wraps a wing around her back to help her stand.

"We're not entirely certain what happened." Fathy says. "A giant hole in space opened up, and a huge eyeless monster threw some sort of demonic bomb into the Labyrinth Core. It exploded, and all of the demons became greatly weakened. It seems even Emperors are affected..."

"That was no monster." Belial coughs. "It was the Archdemon. It was Diablo..."

Belial manages to recover some of her strength as the seconds tick by, but that feeling of weakness persists. As she looks around, she frowns deeply.

"I've... I've lost it." She murmurs.

"Lost what?" Fathy asks, only to pause for a moment before adding: "...your link to the Labyrinth?"

"That's right." Belial says slowly. "I... I used to be able... to sense the Labyrinth. Innately. Intuitively. I could travel anywhere without getting lost. But now...?"

Fathy hesitates.

"It... it's not only you. I've lost that feeling too. All the monsters have."

"Diablo must have changed the structure of Hell." Belial mutters. "He cut us off. He made it so demons and monsters can't sense Hell's functions. But how? How did he accomplish that?"

Samantha pulls away from Fathy, finally able to stand through her own strength.

"Satan created Hell." Belial says out loud, though she seems to be speaking to herself more than Fathy. "He was the only one who understood how it worked on a fundamental level. He told me it was... a self-governing organism. It could grow and mutate based on the power of those living inside of it. How could Diablo change its structure? Did Satan teach him a method to do that?"

"Hah hah!" A loud, boisterous laugh cackles from Belial's right. The noisiness of that laugh startles Belial out of her contemplative mood, making her turn to face the speaker.

"Emperor Fae?" Belial says, noticing the strong, confident swagger in Fae's posture. She walks with ease, demonstrating that unlike the other demons nearby, she hasn't been

crippled by the changes to Hell.

"Sup, bitch?" Fae snarks, her eyes flicking over Belial's pale pink skin and sweat-soaked clothes. "Damn! You look like crap! What's the matter, wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

Belial frowns. "And you look just fine. What's going on? How has Diablo changed Hell? And why don't you seem affected?"

"Hah hah!" Fae cackles again. "See, that's where you're wrong. I WAS affected!"

Before Belial can react, Fae lunges toward her. So lethargic are Belial's movements that she fails to react in time before Fae grabs her by the throat, lifts her into the air, then hurls her into the crowd of exosuit-wearing humans, causing them to cry out in fear as Belial slams into them like a cannonball.

Crash!

Belial tumbles into five men and women, knocking them over like bowling pins. Luckily, Belial doesn't receive too heavy an injury, and the exosuits protect the humans as well.

"Listen up, hellhound-fuckers!" Fae shouts, projecting her voice throughout the Labyrinth Core. "From today onward, EVERYTHING changes! No more humans stinking up demonkind's Hell! No more traitor demons! No more traitor monsters! Anyone who colludes with humanity is gonna get the axe, PERIOD! But Emperor Deebs is SUPER generous! If you traitors renounce your ties to humanity in the next twelve hours and come crawling back, we'll let you keep your Wordsmith boons AND you can fight for a REAL demon leader! Otherwise..."

Fae makes a cutting motion across her neck with her thumb.

"...you'll regret making an enemy of us!"

As Fae speaks, Belial picks herself back up. She winces as she realizes Fae's throw broke her arm, but when she tries to heal herself, a shock goes down her spine.

Her abilities have dropped from the rank of Emperor all the way to Duke! Her healing powers have lost much of their effectiveness, and the reason behind how Fae managed to injure her so badly becomes readily apparent.

Fae sneers when she sees the look on Belial's face. "What's the matter? Didja just realize what's happened? That's right. Big Boss Deebs has turned Hell into demonkind's

fortress. His minions will enjoy a *healthy* powerup while we're inside here, but as for his enemies? Heh heh... you get the shit end of the stick. No more easy boosts from the Wordsmith."

"What the hell have you done?" Belial asks, popping her arm back into place while standing defiantly before Fae. "Why are you going back to the old ways? Humanity and demonkind were going to work together! The Wordsmith's rising tide was going to lift everyone's boats! It was going to be a win-win situation for everyone!"

"Oh, sure." Fae says quietly, her voice dropping to a snarl. "Suck up to the Wordsmith. Do tricks for him like a stupid monkey. Get his blessing. Then we all dance around a campfire and sing songs. GET REAL! We're demons, you dumb human-sucking broad! I ain't gonna bow down before some sniveling apes! With Deebs back, we get to follow the powerhouse known as the Archdemon! Now THAT'S the way a trueborn demon ought to act!"

"The Plague is going to kill us all if we fight each other!" Belial protests.

"The Plague, you say?" Fae asks, her expression morphing into one of pity. "Hehe... maybe *you* fear the Plague, but I know more than you, Belial. I know what's coming. The humans and the Volgrim might fall to the Plague, but we demons *never* will."

She glances around the room one last time.

"I've said my piece! The rest of you demons, those who ain't too-far-gone like Fat Tits over here, you can feel free to crawl back into Diablo's good graces. But you'd better hurry! You only have twelve hours to decide. After that... Hell's *closed* to human-fuckers."

Fae turns toward the two great doors leading into the Core. She starts to walk out, but as she does, a dozen infantry leap into her path and take aim with their rifles.

"Not one step further, Emperor of Terror!" The commanding officer shouts. "You've betrayed humanity!"

Fae pauses for half a second, then chuckles. "Oh? You're going to stand in my way? Don't you morons see how much danger you're in? If you want to die, I'd be happy to oblige!"

She holds up her hand. Instantly, the mana in her body condenses into a spiraling grenade of demonic power, one that rapily builds up strength as she looks at the walking dead men before her with contempt.

But before Fae can throw that grenade, she pauses. She turns her head backward to see an Emperor walking toward her, the epitome of calmness. He stares at her with only mild interest, looking her up and down as if she's not as hot shit as she thinks she is.

"Fae. Bullying a few weaklings is so *unbecoming* of an Emperor. Don't you agree?"

Fae ignores the human soldiers. She turns to face the approaching Emperor while adding even more power into her grenade.

"Beelzebub! Why does it sound as if you're not about to take up Diablo's *generous* offer? Do you really want to stand against the great Archdemon?"

Beelzebub stops a short distance away. He doesn't show the slightest fear toward the demonic power spiraling in her grasp.

"What is an Archdemon compared to me? I'm far beyond the likes of an ordinary Emperor already." Beelzebub boasts. "Who knows? Maybe in due time I'll become an Archdemon myself. I don't need to grovel at the feet of another being to achieve new heights."

Fae narrows her eyes. "That's rich, coming from the Wordsmith's newest lapdog. Since you've decided to stand against Diablo, your powers are going to be a lot weaker than before. I wouldn't want to... bully you."

Fae speaks with confidence, however, as she assesses Beelzebub's physical and spiritual state, she barely manages to contain her surprise.

What the... why was Belial weakened by Diablo's power, but Beelzebub wasn't? He still has the full power of an Emperor! It's as if the Labyrinth isn't able to suppress him at all!

Beelzebub continues to stand in place while gazing at Fae with bored eyes. "You can hurl that grenade if you want, Fae. Toss it at me, or the humans behind you, or Belial, or whoever else. But just know that if you do, it will be the last one you ever throw."

Fae hesitates.

She stares into the eyes of the shockingly calm Beelzebub, then flicks her gaze behind him to the wary Belial, the frightened but stoic humans, and the conflicted demons.

In a moment like this, she must show strength if she wants to ensure Diablo looks powerful. It won't do for her to buckle before Beelzebub's threat.

But on the other hand... Fae doesn't really give a damn about Diablo or anyone else. She simply likes to terrify people and make them piss their pants.

Compared to her own desires, working for Diablo is simply a fun side project. She doesn't have any skin in the game.

Slowly, Fae recalls the demonic power spiraling in her palm. She lowers her arm and snorts at Beelzebub, not fearing him, but not wanting to waste her energy fighting him either.

"Whatever. I'm just the messenger. The next time I show up, it'll be with more Emperors than you can shake a stick at. Your childish taunts won't save you then."

"A hundred Emperors wouldn't hold a candle to me." Beelzebub retorts. "See you around, Fae."

"Yeah. *See you*, Beelzebub." Fae says back, her tone more than a little sarcastic.

Fae turns around to leave, and with a look from Beelzebub, the exosuit-wearing troopers reluctantly step aside, allowing her to leave.

After Fae departs, Beelzebub smiles.

"Things seem like they're about to get a lot more interesting..."

Part 528: Blinker's Recovery

Jason, Fiona, Rebecca, and Kar stand inside the Spynet Sphere, watching in silence as ten minutes of realspace footage plays out before them. At a rate of 250 times faster than realspace, they needed 2,500 minutes, or 41.6 hours, to fully conclude Diablo's big moment as he launched a surprise 'attack' on the Labyrinth. Now that almost two days have passed in Chrona time, the four of them can properly discuss the situation.

"Well. Hurgh. That's not good." Kar concludes.

"A fair assessment." Rebecca adds, turning to look at Jason and Phoebe. "This Spynet Sphere isn't half bad. You can even keep an eye on places Marie can't."

"I'm guessing her surveillance of the Milky Way is more... comprehensive." Jason quips.

"To put it mildly." Rebecca replies. "But I think even she would find this structure admirable on your part. You're starting to use the brain the Creator gave you."

Rebecca glances around at all the various monitors.

"You're not exactly an intellectual, Jason, but having an extra 250x more time to think about things as they happen in realspace is certainly going to help you narrow the gap. Just be careful that you don't become too distanced from the problems outside Chrona, or else you might find yourself thinking about humanity's issues in a more disconnected manner."

Jason shakes his head. "Not gonna happen. I care about humanity a lot. I made Chrona so I'd have time to solve the issues plaguing my species."

"I'm sure you did. It's just a warning, in any case." Rebecca concludes. "Now, regarding Diablo..."

"Any idea what he just did?" Fiona asks, not yet having seen the after-effects of Diablo's spell.

Rebecca gestures at the monitor showing Diablo's giant ugly face. "If I had to guess, I'd assume he's found a way to take control of the Labyrinth's 'nervous system.' We'll know more over the following realspace hours, but Miss Becker has been worried something like this could happen for millennia. If Diablo is a Cosmic, or can at least wield the power

of one, he's likely found a way to subvert and seize control of Satan's creation. After all, Hell is a living super-organism."

"What will that allow him to do?" Jason asks. "Are my people in danger?"

"Almost certainly, but I'll need time to figure out the specifics. For now, we'll simply have to keep an eye on the situation as it develops."

Fiona looks at Kar, then at Rebecca. "Have you checked on Blinker's physical condition yet?"

"Yes. Why don't we all go to the medical ward?" Rebecca says. "We can return to Diablo in a bit once a few more real-time minutes have passed and we know more about what's happening."

Rebecca exits the Spynet Sphere with Jason, Fiona, and Kar close behind her. Kar walks with the assistance of two robotic exo-legs, but his movements are clearly still stiff and awkward. Fiona hasn't had time to give him better technology, but at least his legs no longer dangle underneath himself uselessly.

After they cross the small city inside Chrona to arrive inside the medical ward, they find Blinker laying in bed like usual, her expression tired but with slightly more energy than a week before. Her children sit around a table not far from her bed, chattering to one another about various childish things.

"Kar..." Blinker says slowly, lifting her tired eyes to smile at her husband as he enters the room.

"Butterfly." Kar says lovingly.

He sits beside her bed and listens as Rebecca voices her concerns out loud.

"I have good news and bad news. The good news is that Blinker is in no danger. She can exist in this state indefinitely, and given time I can heal her condition to bring her back up to where she was before she exited Chrona's space."

"...then what's the bad news?" Jason asks, praying it won't be too severe.

"It's not as bad as you might think." Rebecca says. "It will take between six months and a year of Chrona-time to restore Blinker back to her old self. To understand why, I need to explain to you the way time dilation affects an entity's body and how that can change depending on who that entity is."

She pauses for a moment before launching into her full explanation.

"As a Cybernite, time dilation does not affect me. But that's not because my body is metallic. Even fully robotic organisms can suffer catastrophic failures when subjected to extreme swings of temporal flux. Rather, Marie Becker created the Cybernites to be highly advanced life forms that have transcended many different mundane hazards. And like the Cybernites, other organisms can resist the effects of temporal flux to varying degrees."

Rebecca holds up her hand, causing a holographic projection of a familiar Demon Emperor to materialize before the group.

"I am only hypothesizing here, but I believe Beelzebub would also be quite resistant to the effects of temporal flux. If you were to bring him to Chrona, he could live here indefinitely and transfer into and out of Chrona's unique temporal signature without suffering major ill effects. This is because Beelzebub is an organism who has gained highly advanced regenerative capabilities. But other strong entities, such as Blinker, Belial, Kiari, and so on, they can also resist the effects of temporal flux to different degrees."

"So, stronger bodies have better resistance to higher TDRs?" Fiona questions.

"Generally yes, but it's not a hard and fast rule." Rebecca continues patiently explaining. "Biology is complex, and even if someone has a strong body, they might have a weak mind that can suffer permanent cerebral afflictions due to losing sync with realspace. In Blinker's case, she is a fairy gifted with a strong mind who also owned the power of the Sphinx for a short while. This has evolved her body's abilities drastically. Had she not obtained the Sphinx's power, she might have..."

Rebecca leaves the implication to hang in the air uncomfortably.

"She might have *what*?" Jason asks, frowning with worry.

"It's better if you don't know. Let's just say her death would have been quick and gruesome. This is why playing with the higher states of temporal flux is a dangerous game. You, Wordsmith, are extremely weak of mind and body. If you left Chrona, you'd most likely die a horrible death within seconds, and possibly even instantly. In all ways but spiritual, you are still a baseline human."

"What if I Wordsmithed 'invincible' on myself? And 'regeneration'?" Jason asks. "Wouldn't that make me able to resist?"

"Possibly..." Rebecca replies, her tone uncertain. "But I wouldn't chance it. Unfortunately, until I come up with a more long-term solution, you should not leave Chrona's sphere under any circumstance."

Jason becomes quiet for a moment. He looks away, falling into thought.

"...I brought a few of the Felorians here. Brunhilda and a handful of her subordinates. Are they in danger?"

"How long did they stay in Chrona's sphere of influence?" Rebecca asks, before quickly adding: "In terms of Chrona-time, not realspace time."

"A few hours at most. Not even a minute of realspace time." Jason says.

"Then they should be fine. I have looked into the Felorians before. Their bodies are a bit harder than a baseline human, especially due to their unique connection with the 'Wind Mother.' Their ability to wield Qi means they can travel in and out of high states of quantum flux for *very* brief periods of time. And that's the rub, really. It's not only about a person's strength of body or mind, but the amount of time they spend within a state of high temporal flux, as well."

Fiona nods along. "I think I get it. You mentioned before that traveling into a high state of flux is like a deep-ocean dwelling organism exiting the water and living on land. They can handle it for a while, but the effects will heighten depending on how much time they spend in the new environment."

"Exactly correct." Rebecca affirms. "You could bring an ordinary human to Chrona for a short while and the effects wouldn't be severe. They might not even be affected at all. But the longer they spend in Chrona's dimension, the more drastic the effects on their biology until they are no longer able to leave."

Blinker looks at Rebecca. "Then... you said... there's a way... to fix me?"

Rebecca smiles kindly. "There is. It's not a quick solution, but I'm certain it will work. The Volgrim have long ago created solutions for the various problems arising from extended stays in dimensions high in temporal variance. The simplest solution is to re-synchronize Blinker's physique to Chrona once more... but I must warn you that doing so will be a bit of a *permanent* alteration. If she leaves Chrona again, death will likely follow quickly afterward."

Rebecca glances behind herself at Kar and Blinker's crocodilian children before looking back to the others.

"Unfortunately, these children are also unable to leave. They were born into the higher dimensions and cannot leave, and neither can Kar either. If they do, their bodies will almost assuredly... meet a swift end. I'll spare you the details."

Kar sighs quietly.

"Hurgh. That is unfortunate. It seems my wife and I, along with our children, have become effectively imprisoned in this dimension."

"It's not all bad, Kar." Rebecca says, walking over to his side to pat his scaled back. "You'll get to retire from the frontlines, raise a family, and leave the fighting to others. I doubt the Plague can reach Chrona. Only a Psion trained in spatial manipulation or a demon like Yardrat could travel here, and that's assuming they know the spatial location of Chrona's anchoring point. Since I don't even know where it is, I doubt any of them could figure it out."

"What do you need to restore Blinker's condition?" Jason asks. "Materials, tools, name it and I'll Wordsmith it."

"We are going to require Hyper Particles..." Rebecca says slowly. "But Marie can synthesize those. I plan to show you how they function, too, so you can create more as needed. But most of the work is simply a lot of fine-tuning extremely precise temporal measurement systems, and a long waiting period once the tool comes online. The stress on Blinker's body will be quite severe, which is why it's best to take this transition process slowly. Over time, I will re-acclimate her to Chrona's dimensional speeds until she can walk and regain her energy. Then things will proceed more quickly from there."

She pauses.

"In the end, Blinker should require less than a month to be up and walking around, with five more for a full recovery."

"A month away... from my babies..." Blinker says in dismay. "But at least... I can survive. Thank you, Rebecca."

"Don't even mention it." Rebecca says with a smile. "I'm here to serve Jason and humanity alike, and you're his good friend."

Jason and Fiona both thank Rebecca profusely, and the Cybernite gives Jason a long list of metals and other materials to procure, then the two of them depart the medical ward, leaving Rebecca behind to prepare some preliminary tests to ensure Blinker will be in the proper condition to receive her treatments.

* * *

Later that day, as Jason Wordsmiths various types of metal, wiring, and other knick-knacks into existence, he pauses for a while to stare ahead, becoming lost in thought.

Fiona notices after a few minutes of silence when Jason stops uttering Words of Power. She turns away from a computer workstation, where she is currently constructing an updated variant of the T-REX, to look at Jason with mild concern.

"Honey? Everything okay?"

Jason doesn't reply. He continues to stare off distantly, as if not having heard her words.

"Honey? Jason?" Fiona repeats.

The Wordsmith finally blinks. He turns to look at her. "Huh? You say something?"

"I'm just wondering if you're okay." Fiona repeats. "Is something on your mind?"

Once again, Jason doesn't immediately respond. He looks at a batch of copper wires in his hand absentmindedly, then averts his eyes to look off into the distance once more.

"It's just... kind of hitting me now." Jason murmurs. "This whole situation. I can't leave Chrona. If I do... I'll die. But I also can't bring Phoebe here either. Not unless I want her to become a permanent resident, unable to leave."

He sighs.

"This changes everything. All my plans, up in smoke. I wanted to spent 20, maybe 40 years in Chrona to upgrade my abilities and explore my powers, then I was going to return to realspace. This was only supposed to be a temporary venture. But like always, I screwed things up badly. Blinker has suffered because of me. And now I can't be around to raise my son."

Fiona slowly turns in her chair, stands up, and walks over to sit beside Jason. She massages his back gently, her touch enhanced by Chrona's enhancements to her spiritual body. She's almost fully corporeal now, but only so long as she remains in Chrona's space.

"You couldn't have known." Fiona says. "Even I didn't know about the long-term negative effects of temporal dilation."

"Right, but in hindsight it's so obvious. I should have done my research." Jason grumbles. "How could there ever be such a good deal? Why wouldn't all the Volgrim just live in a higher state of time dilation if it's so convenient? I'm an idiot. I took a shortcut and screwed up AGAIN. That's all I ever do."

"No it's not..." Fiona says, trying to comfort him. "Everyone makes mistakes. You can't keep beating yourself up every time you stumble. You just have to pick yourself up and keep trying."

"But that's the thing." Jason says. "What if me 'helping' only aggravates situations? What if I'm just so inept that everything I touch falls to pieces? Supposedly I'm a Chosen One, some person the Heroic Aura decided was capable of saving humanity. But I failed my daughter, I failed Kar, I failed Blinker, humanity, and now I've even failed Phoebe and Timothy too. I have to interact with my wife through a robotic proxy-Jason. That's screwed up."

"I believe in you." Fiona says firmly. "And I know Phoebe does too. It's easy to look at all your past mistakes, but think about the good you've accomplished, too! You made the Belial Booster, the Body Booster, and the Lazarus Tower. You made lots of devices that will, in the long run, greatly strengthen humanity. We suffered terrible losses, especially to Beelzebub, but you brought everyone back eventually."

"I didn't bring Daisy back." Jason says quietly.

His words seem to suck the oxygen out of the room.

Fiona lowers her head.

"No. You didn't. But... but at least... at least she died protecting her daddy. You haven't failed Timothy, you just need to engineer a solution to this temporal flux situation. If you can do that, then you can exit eventually and return to Phoebe's side. You won't miss out on your son's birth."

"But how do I solve that problem?" Jason asks. "Wordsmithing won't fix Blinker. I tried Normalizing her. I tried other Words of Power too. None of them worked."

"Well, you always treat Wordsmithing itself as your primary ability." Fiona says slowly. "But what if... what if it's simply a tool? And with that tool, you can use it to create

other things?"

Jason nods slowly. "I'm listening..."

"Marie Becker said it best, didn't she?" Fiona explains. "She said you have the power to create new Exotics. Why not start there? Try and make stones, rocks, bars of metal, and whatever else. Try imbuing them with abilities, or something. Remember Dellfingler?"

"Yeah. The talking sword." Jason says. "You think I should make more sentient artifacts?"

"Not... exactly." Fiona replies, her face contorting into uncertainty. "More like... like things that can help you in other ways. Like, uh..."

She trails off, uncertain of what to say. But as she talks, a spark ignites in Jason's eyes.

"Like buff items!"

Fiona blinks. "Huh?"

"From video games." Jason says, his tone turning noticeably lighter. "Items that give passive effects or that have a beneficial aura! I bet I could make a helmet that enhances my thinking speed! Like Solomon's Crown! Or maybe I can make a sword imbued with fire! Or... I don't know, something more practical?"

"Those do sound like pretty good ideas..." Fiona says, though she sounds less than certain. "But will that work?"

"I don't know. I've never tried." Jason admits. "I attempted to duplicate Solomon's Crown once, but I failed. Maybe I can't make artifacts at all? This is at least worth exploring in theory. Maybe I can... maybe I can make an artifact that allows me or anyone else to travel between different states of temporal flux at will! Like a necklace, or a belt, or something like that!"

Fiona's eyes light up. "Oh, yes! That's more like it! That does sound practical. But will you be able to succeed?"

Jason's enthusiasm wanes. "I don't know. Like I said, I've never tried it before. But I was able to sharpen Dellfingler far beyond the realm of the ordinary, and make him sentient. I feel like imbuing artifacts should be possible."

"Then I say you should start work on that today." Fiona affirms. "It's better than sitting around and feeling defeated, right? And you can always pop over to the Spynet

Sphere once in a while to see how the Diablo situation is shaking out."

Jason smiles, feeling much better after having this epiphany. He turns his head to look into his mind-wife's eyes, deep affection visible on his face.

"Yeah. I love you so much, Fiona. If it weren't for you being here with me, I don't know if I'd make it..."

He starts to lean toward her, but Fiona pulls away.

"Jason. We can't."

"Huh?" Jason asks, blinking in confusion. "What? We can't kiss?"

"It's... it's just not right." Fiona says, pulling away. "Jason, you're married to Phoebe, not me."

"But you were made from Phoebe..." Jason protests. "What, you think it's cheating if I kiss my mind-wife?"

"We haven't done anything intimate since you created me." Fiona says, firming her tone.

"But..."

"No buts." Fiona says, standing up and putting a small amount of distance between herself and Jason. "If you really think it's okay, then would you want Hope to make out with Phoebe?"

"That's different." Jason protests. "He's... he and I are complete opposites! We're entirely different people! You and Phoebe are practically identical!"

"Practically." Fiona repeats. "But not exactly. I'm not going to get into double-standards or anything like that. I love you just as much as Phoebe does, Jason. I'd love to... to be *with* you like that. But it wouldn't be right. What if Phoebe found out? Maybe she'd try to act like it was fine, but *would* it be? Or would she grow to resent you and I both? Is that a cloud you want hanging over your marriage?"

Several long seconds of silence follow. Jason maintains eye contact with Fiona, but eventually looks away. His passion cools, and he releases a long breath.

"I... no, you're right. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking straight. You're Fiona, not Phoebe. I shouldn't just- it's not right."

Seeing Jason has returned to reason, Fiona gently sits back down beside him. "I do love you, Jason. And I know you love me. But I'm a... monogamous woman. And Phoebe is too. We can't share you, and it wouldn't be fair for me to 'steal' you away."

"But... doesn't that mean you're destined to be alone?" Jason asks, looking at Fiona with a faint expression of pity. "You told me before that you wanted me to bind your existence to Chrona. If I do that, then..."

Fiona sighs softly. She crosses her arms and avoids Jason's gaze.

"I've... already thought about that. If you think rejecting your advance is easy, you're wrong. It hurts. This is *why* I told you that creating me so thoughtlessly was a bad decision. I have to live with this feeling of... loneliness. And since I still love you so deeply, it hurts every time I see you with Phoebe. I can't just move on to another man, either. It feels like a betrayal of the marriage vows I made, even though that wasn't me."

Jason stays quiet for a moment.

"...this must be how Hope felt when he saw me with Phoebe mere seconds after his creation. I hurt him, and I hurt you."

"You did." Fiona acknowledges. "This is why playing with clones and Wordsmithing thoughtlessly is so dangerous. Hope and I are both living imposter lives. He feels he should be in your position. I feel I should be in Phoebe's position. But we're not in those positions, and we never can be, either. We're stuck with who we are now... living as half-humans."

"Just another thing I've screwed up." Jason mutters, despondent. "Add it to the pile."

"As long as you learn from your mistakes, and don't repeat them," Fiona says softly, "then you can continue to better yourself as a person."

She gently touches Jason's back. He looks at his mind-wife and gives her a sad smile. Then he stands up and turns to leave the warehouse.

"I... I'm gonna go and see what I can do with those artifacts." Jason says. "Let's talk later."

"Uh. Sure." Fiona answers back.

Without another word, Jason exits, and as the door closes behind him, Fiona fights back tears.

"I said it." She whispers to herself. "I finally said it. I just... I didn't think it would hurt *so much* to say..."

Part 529: Amelia's Story

Inside the Hall of Heroes, Solomon stands watch while Elizabeth Kindelmann fiddles with a magic-infused stone of some sort. She coordinates with the Celestial Designer, Miralax Psymin, the two of them working on entirely separate magical and technological devices while Hope lays comatose on a hospital bed, his body slightly spasming from pain every few seconds.

Solomon divides his attention between watching Psymin like a hawk ninety percent of the time and directing casual glances toward Elizabeth's work.

"Do not attempt to deceive me, Volgrim." Solomon warns. "Your survival depends on the boy's recovery. If you attempt to harm him, I will eradicate you and all the rest of your kin from this dimension."

Psymin manipulates a delicate cutting laser while soldering together a surgical arm she will later use to operate on Hope's brain. She pauses what she's doing to glance at Solomon with disinterest.

"Not in my nature. Not deceptive. Scientist."

"I've seen inside your head." Solomon proclaims. "Your endless fascination with radical experiments has yielded poisonous fruit one too many times. Do not think I am oblivious to your true nature."

Psymin returns her attention to the giant surgical arm as she continues to construct it piece-by-piece.

"You speak of Sentinels." She says, her crackly robotic voice twanging in the ears of those nearby. *"I was young. Impulsive. Foolish. I paid the price."*

"You thought you could create the ultimate protector for the Milky Way." Solomon says softly. "But you overestimated your abilities. Trillions died as a result. Expect me to double-check every single thing you do today. I won't have a repeat of your past mistakes."

Psymin says nothing for a few moments. She locks a few actuators into place, then delicately solders a piece of micro-circuitry to the surgical arm's internals.

"I am trustworthy. I want progress. I want peace. Settle differences. No wars. But life is chaotic. Mistakes, impossible to avoid. Always regretful."

Solomon continues to stare at the side of Psymin's face, but his posture relaxes slightly.

"That's true. Mistakes happen. My friend Arthur made a terrible mistake once, as did I. When you are in charge of projects and laws that influence vast bodies of people, a single mistake can cost incalculable lives. But I still believe you should have acted with more restraint when designing the Sentinels."

"You are right." Psymin murmurs. *"I should have."*

She continues assembling the mechanical arm. At the same time, Elizabeth finished her work, holding up an obsidian rock carved with numerous mystical letters that form over a hundred sentences written in Latin. The palm-sized rock fits in her hand easily, and the tiny but intricate lettering gives the simple-seeming rock a far more mystical aura than it might have otherwise.

"Hmm..." Solomon says, glancing at the rock. "How will this artifact function? You've kept me in suspense long enough."

Elizabeth beams a smile at the old man. "It's quite simple, Knowledge-Seeker. Hope's body is suffering from falling out of Temporal Flux. While Miss Miralax intends to bring his body's cellular makeup back into sync, this artifact will target the intangible attributes comprising his spirituality."

"His spirituality is out of sync too?" Solomon asks. "I suppose that does make sense..."

"Part of the reason Hope is in so much pain is because his magical aura has drastically deviated from his physical body." Elizabeth explains. "Because our time dilation ratio is one hundred times greater than normalspace, Hope suffered a terrible loss of synchronicity when he arrived."

"The situation would be much worse at higher ratios." Solomon comments idly. "If we were at 200x or even 300x realspace's speed, his body might have imploded."

"An entity with a stronger body wouldn't have had as much trouble." Elizabeth sighs. "If only he had the strength of a minotaur, or an orc, Hope would've ended up with a light headache at worst."

"We'll just have to make sure he pays more attention to his stamina after this." Solomon concludes. "The boy could stand to work out and stop being so lazy. He still has a bit of Jason in him."

* * *

Three days pass. Amelia comes over to watch once in a while, staying by Hope's side for hours while Psymin continues expanding her operating table to add other devices and gadgets intended to expedite Hope's recovery. At the same time, Elizabeth creates other artifacts with the intent of nurturing his spiritual form.

"Why is this taking so long?" Amelia asks, frustrated, on the third day. "Hope is in terrible pain! Can't you hurry up and heal him??"

"We're doing the best we can," Solomon says. "Psymin does not require sleep, and neither do Elizabeth or I. We're all working tirelessly to ensure the tools we use will be capable of healing your fiance."

Amelia groans. "It's just... it's taking so long. I don't like to see him hurting like this. And what if you take too long? What if Hope DIES in this bed?!"

"*He will not.*" Psymin swears. "*His condition. Stable. He will recover. Given time. My job... expedite process. Without me. Three years. With me. Three weeks.*"

"Hope would slowly regain his ability to function even without our help." Solomon explains. "People who don't die from Temporal Flux will always recover, given time. We just want to heal him much faster by forcibly resynchronizing his temporal state."

"Well, just hurry up." Amelia complains. "I don't know what I'll do if something happens to Hope. He's all I have left."

Solomon glances at the girl.

"What of your sister, Debra?"

"Oh. Right, yeah. Debra too." Amelia says absentmindedly, though she doesn't seem to think much about Annette's familial relations.

Solomon frowns as he looks down at the sitting girl's back.

Amelia's ego is much more dominant compared to Annette's. Solomon thinks. Her spirituality is constantly being bathed in the Hall of Heroes' ambient energy. This must be what is causing her slow personality shift over time...

He clears his throat. "You've lost people before, I presume."

Amelia goes quiet for a minute.

"Not many. Only one, in fact. I never had friends when I was the Black Witch. Just my best friend, Levvy."

"Leviathan..." Solomon says slowly. "The Dark Dragon."

Having accessed the memories of multiple Archangels as well as other important figures, Solomon has long figured out many pieces to Amelia's old self. However, since his crown has never rested upon her head, he isn't certain about the entirety of her life's story.

With nothing else to talk about, Amelia decides to continue speaking.

"I met Levvy a long, long time ago. He was living under a mountain at the time. He was all alone."

Solomon nods. "A mountain not far from Mount Sinai, as it happened."

"Yeah." Amelia says softly. "At the time, I was only a little girl. I was being pursued by slavers on horseback. I escaped their city and ran into the plains while they pursued me. I had to hide in the tall grass to evade them, but their hunting dogs always found my trail. Eventually, I found a tiny but secluded cave entrance and crawled inside. I hoped the men would be too big to fit inside and wouldn't follow after me."

She pauses.

"Then I fell down a steep incline inside the cave. It was pitch black. I broke my arm... I started crying... that's when two bright red eyes lit up in the darkness, scaring the life out of me."

"Seeing a dragon must have been the scariest thing you ever encountered up to that point in your life." Solomon remarks.

"No... not really." Amelia says softly. "When Leviathan looked at me, there was no malice in his eyes. Only curiosity. He had never seen a human before. I think he... pitied me."

"Few can resist the tears of a little girl." Solomon muses, while both Psymin and Elizabeth glance over once in a while to listen to Amelia's story. "Perhaps even dragons are not immune to such charm."

"He told not not to be scared." Amelia said. "He told me I could stay a while if I wanted. I told him about the slavers, and he became angry about my plight. The dogs never followed me inside, so I stayed a while..."

Amelia sighs.

"Levvy healed my broken arm. But as hours turned into days, I grew weak and faint with hunger. I could barely sit up. I knew I was at death's door. Levvy felt terrible. He wanted to help me, but there was no food to give me. He explained that if he left the mountain, the Archangels would sense his presence, and they would come after him. We didn't know it at the time, but the Archangels had long ago fallen from their lofty heights... so he still feared their power."

"What happened then?" Solomon asks.

"I was dying. I could barely stay awake. Levvy asked me if... if I wanted to stay with him forever. I was so delirious... but having such a kind friend, someone who clearly cared so deeply about me... it was bliss." Amelia says, her eyes moistening. "I thought he was just trying to comfort me. I told him it would be okay. He would forget about me, in due time..."

Amelia wipes her eyes with one hand.

"That's when Levvy did it. He performed some... some mystical incantation. He transformed himself from a living dragon made of flesh and bone into pure spiritual energy. Then he entered my body."

"Everything changed in an instant." Amelia continues. "One second, I was at death's door. The next, I became filled with an inexhaustible power, a strength so formidable that it felt as if my body was going to burst. That's when Levvy told me about what he'd done. He gave up his identity to protect me."

Elizabeth gasps. "He sacrificed himself for you?! Oh my heavens, that's... that's such a heartbreaking tale!"

"No. Not sacrificed." Amelia clarifies. "He lived on inside of me. He took up residence within my Mind Realm, hiding away within my body by using the power of his underground chamber to seal away his soul signature. In this way, the angels wouldn't detect his presence even if I left."

Solomon strokes his beard. "A dragon, particularly the last living dragon, would possess a quantity of power far too great for a fragile human child's body to contain. The side effects must have been intolerable."

"You guessed right." Amelia says, looking up at Solomon. "The power I gained was too much to handle. It wouldn't take long before my body exploded and Levvy would be forcefully expelled back into the world. I would die a swift but gruesome death, and he would become exposed to the Archangels. That's why he came up with a solution that would allow me to gain enough power to resist his draconic might..."

She hesitates for several long moments, then sighs.

"I... I had to eat other humans. I had to devour their bodies to empower my own. In this way, I would become physically capable of suppressing Levvy's power and staying immortal."

Solomon widens his eyes. "I see. That explains so much! That is why the Black Witch was such a terrible fiend who devoured countless innocent lives!"

"I didn't want to do it. Not at first." Amelia explains. "But the hunger was horrible. I never felt satiated. I could only suppress the pangs for a while at a time. I went back to the city where my slavers originated and devoured all of them. I found my father and told him to live a good life. He passed away a decade later. At this point, I've entirely forgotten who he was or what his face looked like."

Elizabeth looks at Amelia with a mixture of pity and disgust. "How many people... did you consume?"

"I didn't keep track, and I would have lost count anyway." Amelia says. "Millions, most likely, if not tens of millions. Levvy's power turned me into a killing machine. It was his greatest regret."

"What caused the two of you to split?" Solomon asks curiously. "Obviously, you separated at some point. So..."

Amelia says nothing. She frowns at Solomon, then looks away.

"Satan killed my friend. Then I killed Satan. That's all I'll say."

"Mmm." Solomon grunts.

The room goes quiet. Solomon, Elizabeth, and Psymin all reflect on Amelia's story, thinking different thoughts regarding the morality of her actions.

"I can't lose Hope too." Amelia says after a while. "I... I can't. Make sure you save him, okay?"

"Don't worry. I will." Solomon says.

The former Black Queen nods silently. She stands up, smooths down her dress and walks away.

"Let me know when it's time to do the procedure." Amelia says. "I want to be there when it happens."

"Of course." Solomon replies.

She departs, leaving the other three behind to continue their work in peace.

After Amelia leaves, Psymin says something unexpected.

"I like her."

"You do?" Solomon asks. "I don't see why. The two of you have nothing in common."

"She reminds me. Old friend." Psymin says cryptically, without refusing to add anything else.

No matter what Solomon asks, she does not go into any further detail, leaving the Knowledge-Seeker to scratch his head. Even with access to all of her memories, he hasn't a clue which part of her multi-million life might refer to that 'old friend'.

"Just make sure you finish the job properly." Solomon finally says, giving up on the matter.

"Of course." Psymin replies.

Jason Hiro sits inside his bedroom, alone for once. He rests his elbow on a desk with a slim monitor that shows six different live feeds from the Spynet Sphere, video recordings he can change to any of his spy cams in the Milky Way if he so desires.

His thoughts scatter about at random as he thinks about what Fiona said to him. About how lonely she must feel, and what a betrayal to Phoebe it would be if Jason were ever intimate with Fiona.

"Fiona's right..." Jason mutters. "I can't keep hurting the people I love with my flippancy. It's starting to get really old."

He looks at the wall for a time before finally shaking his head to focus his thoughts.

"Diablo is making big moves. While Rebecca deals with healing Blinker, I need to focus on the more important things. Phoebe still has that speech in front of humanity in a few real-time days. That gives me several years to prepare. But Diablo is a more pressing concern. I need to think about how to counter whatever he's planning."

Jason massages his forehead.

"Strange. I don't get it. When was Diablo ever such a... warmonger? I thought he was a lazy guy who liked to sleep and goof off. When he lead the Seven Hells, he never demonstrated such hunger for conquest, nor such cunning. Could this be a result of the First Emperor's influence? Or perhaps it's the Archdemon's body that's changed him. Hell, maybe the last six years have just been a big wake-up call for him. He doesn't want to see his species fall by the wayside..."

Jason worriedly looks up a feed showing the Archdemon's exact location. With time slowed down 250x in realspace, Diablo appears to be frozen in place, but Jason still shudders as he remembers something that happened recently.

"He saw me." Jason whispers. "I gazed at Diablo through the Spynet... and he *looked back*. How did he even do that? Cosmics are on another level, I swear..."

The First Wordsmith quickly closes the feed, not wanting a repeat of that extremely creepy moment from before. He sits up a little straighter at the desk and stares at the hardwood surface, uncertain of what to do.

"I need to solve the time displacement issue." Jason says to himself. "But can I do it? Can I create an artifact capable of allowing someone to swap from realspace to Chronospace without suffering ill effects? I've never tried before..."

Jason metaphorically scratches his head. He can't search for more information on a magical internet, and he can't call up any friends who know about artifact creation. The only person he even knows with experience on the matter is Camael, and she's long dead.

For five long minutes, he sits in place, gazing blankly at the desk.

"...this is getting me nowhere. I'll just try doing random stuff. Maybe I can imbue items with magic? 'Imbue' sounds like a good starting point."

Unfortunately, the Wordsmith doesn't have any random trinkets stored in his room. Phoebe might have various bits of simple jewelry stored on Tarus II, but not Jason. He's

never been interested in that stuff.

"**Necklace.**" Jason says, causing a simple golden cross and chain to materialize in his hand. The decidedly Christian artifact doesn't mean much to him, as he's always considered himself something of an atheist, but it's the most spiritual item he can think of on short notice.

"Okay. Uh. Let's see. **Imbue!**"

Nothing happens.

Jason blanks out for a moment.

"**Inspect.**"

His scan comes up inconclusive. The necklace appears completely ordinary.

"No, this isn't right. I can't just imbue *nothing*." Jason mutters as he falls into thought. "Wordsmithing requires intent. Dellfingler was an artifact at some level. I didn't 'imbue' him with anything. I just created an ordinary sword and made it impossibly hard, flexible, and sharp before imbuing it with sentience. I should try something similar now."

He thinks for a full minute.

"Let's see. Trying to manipulate time sounds complicated. I'll try something else.

Flight!"

Jason casts a Word of Power on the necklace, then he inspects it.

Immediately, a mysterious voice plays in his head.

"An uncommon necklace. It recently obtained the power of flight..."

Jason jumps out of his seat. "Just like that?! Holy shit, that was so easy! Lemme put this bad boy on and give it a try!"

He quickly strings the necklace around his neck. He stands up and focuses on the cross, trying to activate its special power.

However, two minutes later, he remains standing in place, unmoved.

"It didn't work? Why not? Shouldn't it allow me to fly now?"

Frustrated, he pulls the necklace off, sets it on the desk, and stares at it in annoyance.

But the moment it leaves his grasp, the necklace vibrates slightly, then begins to sloooooowly levitate upward, like a balloon low on helium. Jason's eyes darken as he

watches the necklace levitate a few inches off the desk, then begin traveling higher and higher as it crawls upward at a snail's pace, making its arduous journey toward his room's ceiling.

"I... that makes sense." Jason says to himself glumly. "The necklace doesn't grant ME the ability to fly. I just made IT fly instead."

As the golden cross silently *bonks* against the ceiling, Jason's expression becomes more contemplative.

"It's better this way. I can't take the lazy way out this time. I'm going to really need to experiment if I want to create legitimately useful artifacts."

The Wordsmith's new era of 'smithing' thus begins with a quiet revelation instead of a thunderous bang...

Part 530: Laws of Creation

"Okay." Jason says to himself, as he places a blank piece of paper on the desk before him. "First order of business. I need to define all the known rules of Wordsmithing. Perhaps by doing so, I can think of a way to make these 'buff items' work properly."

He glances up at the ceiling, which the golden cross continues to press against, its metal chain hanging down due a lack of flight-imbuelement.

"**Pen.**" Jason says, conjuring a ballpoint pen into his grasp.

He thinks for a moment, then begins to write.

"**First rule of Wordsmithing:** All commands must be verbalized through the mouth, and must be a single-word."

"**Second rule:** The intent behind a Word of Power has a strong effect on what that word conjures."

"**Third rule:** The volume of the spoken word can strengthen or weaken the intended effect."

"**Fourth rule:** The qualitative power of any Word of Power is also dependent on my mana reserves, as well as the strength of my soul."

He pauses for a moment to think about other rules he has inferred over the years.

"**Fifth rule:** Words of Power cast directly on other entities can be drastically weakened depending on their own spiritual, psionic, or soul-based powers. I tried to kill the Black Queen once with the word 'Kill,' but I failed because she resisted its effect. She was much stronger than me at the time."

He frowns.

"But does that mean if I am stronger than another entity, my Word of Power *can* 'kill' them? I haven't actually tried..."

Jason chews on his pen for a moment before continuing to write.

"**Sixth rule:** Multiple Words of Power can be chained together to improve a spell, but this causes the spell's final outcome to drain more mana, as well as put its final effect in

flux. I won't know exactly how good the final product will be until the spell is completed..."

He glances up at the cross on the ceiling.

"Take."

Jason teleports the cross into his palm, then he holds onto it while focusing his mind.

"Flight. Flight. Flight."

He repeatedly imbues it with the same Word of Power, then he lets it go.

Immediately, the cross begins levitating upward, but this time much faster than before. It strikes the ceiling with an audible *ding* before bouncing along to a stop.

"Seventh rule: The single effect of a Word of Power can be increased by speaking that same word multiple times. The mana cost will also increase marginally. There is a limit to how far this effect can be pushed."

He thinks about Dellfingler and how after a certain point, no matter how many times he said the word 'sharp', the blade could not be sharpened any further.

He also thinks about Chrona, and how the rate of time dilation would only slightly increase with each repeated casting of a Word of Power.

"Eighth rule: There is a diminishing return to Words of Power. Just because I spend ten times more mana to cast a spell doesn't mean I'll get a tenfold increase in output. I should be mindful of wasting my mana on minuscule gains."

"Take."

Jason once again yanks the cross back into his hands. He pauses for a moment to think about how he can alter the artifact to better suit his needs.

"Hmm... **Equipment.**"

He casts a Word of Power on the necklace, then places it around his neck. This time, it does not levitate upward, but remains held fast to his chest like any ordinary necklace would.

Jason waits for a moment, but his body doesn't levitate. He takes the necklace off and sets it on the desk, but it also doesn't levitate anymore.

"Huh? That's unexpected. Did I overwrite the 'flight' ability with the 'equipment' Word of Power? **Inspect.**"

Once again, a mysterious voice speaks inside Jason's mind.

An uncommon necklace of magical origins. Grants a weak flying effect to any entity that wears it.

Jason's heart skips a beat. "It didn't overwrite the effect! But then why didn't I gain the ability to fly?"

After a few moments of thought, he deduces the answer.

"Of course. The flight effect is so weak that my body's mass probably isn't even being nudged."

Just to test that theory, he dons the necklace once more, then stands up from his chair.

"Hmm... wait, what if..."

He glances over at his closet where he stores some of his clothes and shoes. There, he sees a scale sitting on the ground. He walks over and weighs himself on it.

"Seven feet tall, weighing 250 pounds, or about 113kgs. I see. So if I take off this necklace..."

Jason removes it from his neck, then glances down at the scale once more.

"275 pounds now, or 124kgs. So the necklace is trying to make me fly, but my body weighs too much, so it can only make me a little lighter. I'd need to drastically strengthen the effect to actually gain the ability to fly, myself."

Jason once again holds the cross in his hands, then he focuses his mind.

"FLIGHT! FLIGHT! FLIGHT! FLIGHT! FLI-"

Abruptly, the necklace yanks out of his hand, flies upward, and slams into the ceiling with a violent *THUMP!*

The ceiling begins to crack as the necklace presses against the building's foundations, as if having fallen into a reverse-gravity well.

"Shit, why did it do that?" Jason asks, invisible question marks popping up over his head. **"Inspect!"**

A rare necklace of magical origins. Possesses a strong flying effect that overrides its nature as a piece of equipment.

"Oh!" Jason exclaims. "I put too much emphasis on the 'flying' part, so now it's become less of a piece of equipment! Man, I guess I'll have to balance that out in the

future too, huh? **Equipment! Equipment!**"

Just like that, the cross suddenly becomes inert. It falls from the ceiling and Jason catches it in his hand.

"Inspect."

A rare necklace of magical origins. Grants a moderate flying effect to any entity that wears it.

"Nice! I fixed it. Let's try wearing it now." Jason says to himself, grinning like an idiot as he realizes he's having fun playing around with his abilities.

He dons the necklace, but immediately realizes he's made a mistake. The moment he places the necklace around his neck, Jason begins to levitate uncontrollably upwards, albeit at a slow speed, as if having fallen into a weakly-reversed gravity well. He flails his arms around until he presses against the ceiling, where he manages to turn himself around and 'stand' upside down.

"...Okay. I should have expected that." The Wordsmith says, grumbling internally as he makes another realization. "I gained the ability to fly, but not to control my flight. So I just sorta... float upward forever."

He recalls a time six years ago when he cast Flight on himself. He ended up flailing around uselessly for a few minutes until he normalized his condition and grew wings instead.

He also remembers a lecture about specialists and generalists Solomon explained some time ago.

"Specialists know how to use their powers innately, and can deal with the side-effects with ease. But a generalist like me needs to figure out all the nuances of my abilities to maximize their potential."

He thinks for a moment, then utters a few more Words of Power.

"Control. Adjustment. Aptitude. Understanding."

He imbues the cross with more Words of Power, and thus finally tames its power to grant himself the ability to fly in a controlled a steady manner. Like a bird born in the skies, Jason rotates and flips himself around without a second thought, using pure instinct to guide the power of his newly-made artifact.

Unfortunately, he finds even more problems.

"My speed is slow as a snail."

Jason barely levitates through the air in any direction at a speed approaching a slow walk. On the plus side, levitating in place proves simple enough, so it grants him a bit of utility in that manner.

"This would be a good artifact for a construction worker." Jason says to himself. "Or someone painting a big building, statue, or mural by hand. It's easy enough to control, and it- oh shit!"

Abruptly, the artifact's power gives out. Jason falls from the air five feet to the ground below, landing awkwardly on his ankle and twisting it painfully. He collapses onto his ass and howls in pain.

"Shit! Fucking hell! Why did the artifact stop working?? **Heal!**"

Jason heals his sprain, then climbs back up, feeling more annoyed than ever.

"Inspect."

A rare necklace of formerly magical origins. It once granted a moderate flying effect to any entity that wore it. Unfortunately, it has lost its internal charge.

Jason blinks twice.

"Internal charge? Wait, don't tell me this tiny little cross needed energy to lift my body? Christ, of COURSE it did! **Energize!**"

Jason sends a Word of Power into the cross, and just like that, he regains the ability to fly. But despite the easy fix, he doesn't feel good about the solution. He takes off the necklace, sets it on the desk, and sits back down to write.

"Ninth rule: Artifacts seem to require a power source to maintain their magical effects."

"Conjecture: Perhaps effects that merely alter an object's physical properties, such as hardening or sharpening a sword, are immune to this issue, but magical effects that require sustained usage, are not."

Jason taps the pen against his lips.

"Tenth rule: Some sustained magical effects require auxiliary effects to stabilize and make them more useful. Like how 'flight' is useless without a way to control it."

He leans back in his chair and falls deep into thought.

"If that's the case, then it would explain why Dellfingler never needed mana to stay sharp, but this necklace ran out of power after just a minute of sustained flight. I can probably link the flying effect to my own internal mana, but that simply extends the timer until I run out... and draining all my mana could put me into Mana Shock. I never want to let that happen again..."

He recalls the time he passed out from overdraining his reserves some years ago. While trying to build houses for his fellow humans, he nearly perished due to his ignorance, a fear that has held back his desire to explore his powers all these years.

"I've been letting fear rule me." Jason says. "This is a problem that should be solvable with proper engineering. Hmm. Let's think about this carefully. What about Excalibur and Camael's Cube? They are both artifacts that can obtain a massive amount of energy, and in Excalibur's case it is also self-powering. The Labyrinth is an artifact of sorts too; it feeds off the excess energy produced by the entities living within itself."

Never having touched Excalibur, Jason isn't sure how it works, but he knows plenty about Camael's Cube and the Labyrinth.

"Hell converts life energy to magical energy. Camael's Cube converts ambient energy from the universe into mana, as well as faith energy aimed at it by humanity. Doesn't that imply energy-to-energy conversion is possible?"

Several seconds pass.

Jason's expression changes multiple times as several startling realizations strike him.

"If it's only a matter of converting energy to energy... then... isn't there basically infinite energy to be found across the universe? What about the radiation output by any random star? What about black holes, psionic energy, and..."

Jason continues to talk to himself for several minutes. He begins theorizing like crazy, mentally mulling over all manner of different scenarios that could drastically improve his ability to make artifacts.

"Can I harness the power of a star to increase the power of the Cube?" Jason thinks out loud. "What if I don't need Faith Energy at all? What if I can just use solar or fusion power?"

He frowns.

"But usually the laws of conservation apply. There could be a lot of wasted energy too. What if one 'joule' of faith energy needs a thousand joules of mundane energy? What if the opposite is true? I've never tested this before..."

Jason thinks back on how easy it was to create fusion reactors on Tarus II. Sure, he needed Phoebe, Fiona, or Solomon to draw up the schematics, but once he had those, actually making the reactors was no problem at all.

"That implies converting magical energy to mundane is simple. But what about the inverse? I should try it now."

Jason quickly conjures a transparent orb of glass roughly half the size of a bowling ball. He places it on his desk, then he conjures a small fusion reactor to take up the entire back half of his bedroom.

"Alright. Let's see how this goes. **Storage. Energy. Conversion. Transfer!**"

Jason turns the orb of glass into a makeshift container for spiritual energy, then tries turning all of the fusion power into mana.

Immediately, he sucks out all of the reactor's power, shutting it down and rendering it inert. Unfortunately, when he examines the amount of mana that has materialized inside the glass sphere...

"Damn. It's not even the equivalent of 1% of my body's internal mana capacity. Did I choose a shitty method of transference? Maybe the loss of energy between mediums is always high? Or maybe I just screwed up..."

Jason holds his hand over the sphere.

"**Absorb.** Well, at least that felt kind of good. I'll check back into this stuff later. For now, I'd better focus on refining my artificing skills..."

He swallows the mana into his body, finding out that in the process of creating the fusion reactor, transferring the energy into the orb, and reabsorbing it back, he lost ten times as much as he gained back. It was overall a huge waste.

Returning his attention to the cross necklace, he thinks for a moment.

"What if the material used to create an artifact has an effect on its abilities? Maybe a golden cross isn't the ideal material for a flying, equippable pendant. Maybe it should be made of wood, or steel, or Living Moldanium, even. Does the shape of the object matter?"

What if instead of a cross it was an image of a dove or a pigeon? Would that help its 'conceptualization'? Would that make the flying speed any faster?"

Jason massages his forehead as he starts to get a headache.

"I can't just wing this. I need to plot out a more data-driven approach. Maybe I should bring Fiona in for- no, that won't do. I can't just have my wives help me with everything. Hm, I could ask Rebecca... but do I want detailed knowledge of how my powers work making their way back to Marie? Not really. Who else? Blinker? Not until she's healed up, and she might not be the best candidate for a data-driven approach. Those Psions I brought here aren't doing much... but I'd rather have the help of a Technopath if I were going to trust a Volgrim, which I *definitely* don't."

Unfortunately, Jason doesn't exactly have tech-capable candidates beating down the doors. For the briefest of moments, he contemplates cloning Phoebe's spirit again.

"Fiona says she's lonely. What if I gave her a twin sister? ...Yeah, she'd definitely beat my ass if I did that. Guess I'll just ask Rebecca for help."

Jason decides to do a quick preliminary test himself. He conjures a wooden cross necklace, an iron cross, a steel cross, obsidian, silver, platinum, and a dozen others.

Then he turns his attention to the golden cross from before. "**Copy. Copy. Copy. Copy...**"

He duplicates all of the flight powers from the first cross onto each of the other ones. Five minutes later, he finishes, then he picks up the wooden cross and puts it around his neck.

...Nothing happens.

"The hell? **Inspect.**" Jason says, targeting the pendant.

An ordinary wooden necklace in the shape of a Christian cross, comes the response.

Jason metaphorically scratches his head. "Wait, the golden cross's power didn't duplicate? Why not? **Copy!**"

He tries again and again, but his attempts continuously fail. Two minutes later, he remembers something that happened six years earlier.

"Shit. FUCK. Oh, I'm an idiot. How could I forget?? I tried duplicating Solomon's Crown for Phoebe six years ago but I failed! I can't just duplicate extraordinary objects,

and this flying cross now counts as one of those! I didn't even think of that!"

With this in mind, Jason adds one more rule to his list of Wordsmithing requirements, then he takes a good long read of the list to verify all the things he's written down so far.

* * *

"First rule of Wordsmithing: All commands must be verbalized through the mouth, and must be a single-word."

"Second rule: The intent behind a Word of Power has a strong effect on what that word conjures."

"Third rule: The volume of the spoken word can strengthen or weaken the intended effect."

"Fourth rule: The qualitative power of any Word of Power is also dependent on my mana reserves, as well as the strength of my soul."

"Fifth rule: Words of Power cast directly on other entities can be drastically weakened depending on their own spiritual, psionic, or soul-based powers. I tried to kill the Black Queen once with the word 'Kill,' but I failed because she resisted its effect. She was much stronger than me at the time."

"Sixth rule: Multiple Words of Power can be chained together to improve a spell, but this causes the spell's final outcome to drain more mana, as well as put its final effect in flux. I won't know exactly how good the final product will be until the spell is completed..."

"Seventh rule: The single effect of a Word of Power can be increased by speaking that same word multiple times. The mana cost will also increase marginally. There is a limit to how far this effect can be pushed."

"Eighth rule: There is a diminishing return to Words of Power. Just because I spend ten times more mana to cast a spell doesn't mean I'll get a tenfold increase in output. I should be mindful of wasting my mana on minuscule gains."

"Ninth rule: Artifacts require a power source to maintain their magical effects."

"Tenth rule: Some sustained magical effects require auxiliary effects to stabilize and make them more useful. Like how 'flight' is useless without a way to control it."

"Eleventh rule: Extraordinary objects or effects cannot be duplicated via Wordsmithing."

* * *

As Jason finishes compiling and re-reading his rules, he feels a sense of satisfaction. The limitations he has discovered are unlikely to be the only ones that exist, but they give him a strong idea of just how far he can go in his future endeavors, as well as hinting at what sorts of incredible artifacts he can make once he starts applying himself seriously.

"Wordsmithing has so much potential, and I've barely even tapped it. Perhaps my experiments with the Felorians can lead into even better artificing of superior weapons and utility items? I should talk to Brunhilda soon, as well as Sariah and the others."

He keys up the communicator and gives Rebecca a call. "Hey, when you have a bit of free time, mind meeting me in the workshop on the northeastern side of Chrona? It's the big black building with the tower on top."

Rebecca's voice comes back loud and clear. "Sounds like your experiments bore fruit. I'd be happy to assist you."

"Great!" Jason says. "Normally I'd bug Fiona but she's working on all sorts of other stuff."

"Mmm. I'll also be bringing along one of those Volgrim Initiators." Rebecca says. "This 'Ferral' fellow seems particularly enthusiastic about helping us out."

"Err..." Jason says, his enthusiasm noticeably dampening. "I don't know if I want to involve them..."

"You should try. These 1st and 3rd level Psions are no threat to you. They've voluntarily decided to help you, but if you snub them, they will grow resentful. It's better to start integrating them into your experiments as soon as possible so that you can reap the benefits of learning how Psionics works, firsthand. Even Miss Becker hasn't had that privilege."

Jason blinks. "Marie hasn't even directly collaborated with a Psion before?"

"Everything she knows about Psions comes from information she stole from their databases. They would never willingly give up the secrets to their heritage to a mud-dweller. In that respect, you can become a true pioneer in human-to-Psion

understanding. Who knows? Perhaps you can even find a way to merge the biology of both species..."

"To make humans who can use psionics, huh?" Jason mutters. "I guess you have a point. Alright, I'll bring Ferral and Raavul into the experiments, too. More data to look over would be nice."

"Agreed. I'll meet you in one hour, then." Rebecca concludes. "I need to finish the setup for Blinker's temporal stabilizer first, though."

"Take your time with that. No rush." Jason says. "See you in an hour or so."

The line disconnects, and Jason leans back in his chair.

"This is only the beginning..."

Part 531: Transmorphism

An hour later, Jason meets up with Rebecca in his northern warehouse, a place he's already stockpiled a good amount of Wordsmithium inside for the sake of his experiments, as well as tons of leftover gadgets Fiona has made and tossed aside over the years.

Rebecca barely glances around the facility as she enters, having already scanned its every corner with her enhanced iris modules as she approached from the outside. She smiles at Jason and folds her hands behind her back.

"So. What have you been up to, Mr Hiro?"

"That feels weird." Jason says. "Let's just stick with first names. As for what I've been up to..."

He pauses for a half-second, debating whether or not he should give her the notes he wrote earlier regarding his powers. Considering their strategic value, he isn't sure if he can trust Rebecca not to hand the information off to Marie.

Ultimately, the Wordsmith relents, and he hands over three pages of notes detailing not only the eleven rules he's written about his Wordsmithing, but past scenarios that made him come to those conclusions.

Sensing Jason's hesitancy, Rebecca takes the papers, glances at them for a moment, and instantly downloads their contents into her brain. She looks at Jason with deep meaning.

"You were feeling uncertain whether you could trust me with this information or not." She says, her tone lacking judgment while also being firm. "I don't blame you. We wouldn't want the Founders to learn this information about you, and certainly not the demons."

Jason swallows heavily, feeling a tad guilty in his heart. "It's not *you* I don't trust... it's-

"

"Miss Becker. I know." Rebecca says, handing the papers back. "I'm glad you've decided to extend this trust to me. For what it's worth, I can *promise you* I will not share any of these documents with Miss Becker, nor any other Cybernites without your express

permission. It's up to you whether you want to believe in my pledge or not. I don't have any way to make it a binding pledge."

Jason clenches his jaw for a moment. He genuinely feels a sense of fear in his heart that Rebecca might be deliberately deceiving him...

But that fear quickly evaporates.

He's never had any reason to doubt her. Rebecca came to Jason's side at his request. Maybe she still works for Marie Becker, but then again, perhaps she's more closely linked with Jason because she wants to make something of her existence.

"I..." Jason starts to say, though he finds it hard to follow-up with anything else.

"I cannot communicate with Marie Becker as we are now." Rebecca adds. "Chrona's dimensional speeds make it impossible for my galactic communicator to breach the barrier of temporal flux. If you would like, I can simply stay in Chrona forever. Unable to report back to Marie, you can be assured I am not leaking any information to her."

"No. No, that isn't necessary." Jason says quietly. "I... I have trust issues. I'm sure you can understand why. I've been betrayed a few times by people I cared about a lot, and by enemies who were simply waiting for a prime opportunity. It's made me a deeply suspicious man. You have been kind to come here and help humanity."

"I'm not that kind." Rebecca says bluntly. "I'm selfish. I didn't like sitting around uselessly in the Oasis. I came here to do *something*. If that something helps you out, then it makes my existence finally have some merit. I'm happy to stay in Chrona forever if it means I get to uplift your understanding of Wordsmithing to greater heights."

Jason smiles back at her. "Well. I guess that's all I can ask for. Sorry for doubting you."

"Trust is neither given nor taken. It is earned, and I have a long way to go before you should feel confident in trusting me fully." Rebecca says. "Now, since you've shown me this information anyway, why don't we start with what you've compiled?"

Jason nods. "I'd like that."

* * *

Thirty minutes pass.

Jason and Rebecca carefully pore over each of the 11 'Laws of Wordsmithing' Jason has written down, with Rebecca making sure she fully understands each one.

"I won't lie. Miss Becker already guessed the majority of these, and hypothesized to varying degrees the rest." Rebecca says. "She shared that information with me before I departed so I could better assist you in your future endeavors. However, what this list also tells me is that you have not gone nearly far enough in hypothesizing, theorizing, and testing what Wordsmithing can accomplish."

"In what way?" Jason asks.

"Let's start with a simple question." Rebecca says. "What makes an 'artifact'?"

"An object of immense magical power made with superior materials." Jason answers.

"Oh? Wow, for a guy who just started making artifacts *today*, you sure sound certain." Rebecca snarks, leaning toward him with a goofy grin. "Are you willing to bet your life on that statement?"

Jason's confidence crumbles. "...not really. I'm no expert on artifacts."

"Miss Becker wouldn't call herself one either, but she once ruled over humanity. She came into contact with many different artifacts before the fall of Earth. She gave me a detailed list of artifacts, as well as their original inhabitants, their materials, and other miscellaneous data. Here, have a look sometime if you want."

Rebecca tilts her head to the side, and a tiny marble falls out of her ear. She hands it to Jason, who looks at it with a mixture of curiosity and disgust.

"...it's a data-orb." Rebecca says, looking at him strangely. "Don't tell me you thought it was hardened earwax or something."

"No! No, no, I'd uh, I'd never think something like that." Jason quickly says, while internally wishing she wasn't so good at deductive reasoning.

He locates one of Fiona's gadgets in the warehouse for reading these strange orbs, then he places the orb inside to extract its contents.

Moments later, holographic images materialize in the air, displaying text that describes a series of ancient artifacts, 'long lost' to the annals of time.

Except Jason recognizes them. It turns out to be a complete library of all the Heroes whom Marie has been keeping down in her vault, as well as many others he's never seen before.

"I see..." Jason says carefully, glancing at Rebecca while putting together the truth. "So these are various artifacts Marie Becker came into contact with while she was ruling Earth? I didn't expect there to be so many."

"Being on top grants a lot of privileges," Rebecca says, clearly unaware of the existence of the Heroic Vault deep beneath Marie Becker's laboratory. "It's a shame these artifacts were lost or seized by the Volgrim at the end of the Energy Wars, but even if we don't have physical access to them, we can infer a lot of useful data that might help your efforts."

Jason nods. He returns his gaze to the artifact images. "Alright, I'll bite. What useful data specifically?"

"Let's focus on your answer from earlier. You stated it took a lot of energy to make an artifact, and that artifacts needed to be made from excellent materials. But what about this cat toy-artifact?"

Jason frowns as he looks at the artifact she's pulled up.

"Let's see. The Hero was named Wendy. She could change the direction the wind was blowing, but then she would fall asleep. Oh huh, I think Marie mentioned her once..."

Jason starts to drift off into thought, but Rebecca pulls him back.

"You see? Wendy's artifact is just a little wooden cat toy. There's nothing special about it. It's not made of any rare materials, and her ability is unimpressive. But do you think you could duplicate her artifact?"

"No. I don't think so." Jason replies. "I could obviously duplicate the toy itself, but it wouldn't have any metaphysical powers attached to it. But that's exactly what I said in my notes, so what does it matter?"

"Mmm, what does it matter *indeed*?" Rebecca asks conspiratorially. "The answer you arrived at might be correct, but a flaw in the underlying assumption can cause mathematical errors in other areas. Let's try this question instead: Can you duplicate exotics?"

"I can duplicate Wordsmithium, no problem." Jason says.

"And other exotics?" Rebecca presses further.

"...not sure about that." Jason answers lamely.

Rebecca stares at him for several seconds.

"Well? Aren't you going to try?"

"Oh! Right, yeah." Jason exclaims. "Give me a minute, I'll uh... Marie won't mind if I just...?"

Rebecca laughs. "As long as you return the ones you take, she won't care! She already expects a few to go missing."

"Great. That makes this easier." Jason says. "One moment. **Scan. Observe. Locate.** Hmm... maybe these twenty or so... **Take. Take. Take. Take...**"

Jason grabs a mixture of Spiritual, Psionic, and Mundane Exotics. He makes sure to pick a variety of Low, Medium, High, and Special Exotics to round out the collection so he'll have lots of variables to work with. He keeps them inside their specialized containers so the energies won't leak out, but once they appear in his workshop, they quickly feel far more threatening than they did in Marie's laboratory.

Alarm flashes across Jason's face. He glances at Rebecca, who doesn't appear to notice the spiritual and psionic threat some of the exotics radiate, at least not on an instinctual level. She is, of course, already aware of the identities of each exotic Jason has brought to Chrona.

"Interesting choices..." Rebecca says. "Some of these are more volatile than the others. You don't want to subject the more dangerous ones to any extreme experiments if you're not a professional, so let's just start by trying to duplicate the more dangerous ones first before sending them back to Marie Becker."

"Marie warned me she wasn't allowed to have more than a certain quantity of any specific exotic..." Jason says.

"We'll dispose of the excess exotics if you succeed, at least for now." Rebecca says. "But, you know? It could be worth constructing a secret realm where you stockpile Exotics if you succeed in perfectly recreating the strongest ones. Storing them here is dangerous, but a containment realm isn't a bad idea."

"I'll think about it." Jason concludes.

He takes a minute to go over all of the different exotics with Rebecca's help.

"Aquanite Quartz, Psionic Low-Exotic. Has several uses involving liquid dynamic alterations. Can increase the tolerance to high-pressure underwater dynamics substantially."

"Cerebral-115, Psionic Mid-Exotic. A mind-altering exotic especially useful at boosting the range and power of psionic wavelengths, but with plenty of other non-psionic uses as well."

"Shatterstar Liquid, Psionic High-Exotic. A fluid that can increase the effectiveness of various nuclear ignition sequence effects. Extremely rare, and certain high-ranking Psions at or above the 7th Level can absorb it directly into their Psionic Seeds to empower themselves."

"Transmorphium, Psionic Special-Exotic. An extremely rare substance which enables metal-based devices to gain sentience and change their form at will. Sourced from an unknown distant galaxy where it is far more common."

Jason raises an eyebrow at that last one, but otherwise continues reading off a bunch of other Mundane and Spiritual Exotic data printouts before finally reaching the last one.

"These are all wildly different from one another." Jason says. "Which ones should I duplicate first?"

"Start with anything that's Special-class." Rebecca says. "We'll work our way down from there."

Jason nods, then he follows along with her request. He decides to start with the Transmorphium first, which upon further inspection turns out to be only a tiny sliver of an aqua-colored crystal. No bigger than his thumbnail, Jason has to squint at it to even make it out.

"Really? This thing can turn robotic devices... sentient? And allow them to change their shape at will?"

"You won't hear a single High Volgrim confirm this," Rebecca explains, "but Miss Becker has confirmed that one of the reasons the Seven Great Wars of Volgrim myth occurred at all was because of an arms race sparked by a single fragment of Transmorphium coming into contact with an ancient Volgrim device of some kind. We don't know all the details, since the records were purged, but we believe Transmorphium is not supposed to exist at all in the Milky Way. It's actually the trump card of an extremely powerful Ruler from a distant galaxy."

"...I take it you would be opposed to me touching it against like, a toaster, or something?" Jason asks.

"Very much opposed." Rebecca says simply. "Marie Becker has already tested this sliver of Transmorphism on five occasions. All entities it creates instantly become extremely hostile to all biological life inside the Milky Way. We do not want to risk creating any situation mirroring the rise of the Sentinels during the 6th and 7th Great Wars."

"Noted." Jason says quietly.

He focuses his mind for a moment, then aims his thoughts at the thumbnail-sized shard of metal.

"Duplicate."

Inside the containment sphere, an exact duplicate of the Transmorphism appears, but Jason reels as a wave of exhaustion strikes him. He slumps to his knees and gasps for breath, feeling instantly and completely drained of all his mana.

"Ugh...!" Jason wheezes, breaking into a coughing fit. "Oh, god..."

Rebecca quickly helps Jason sit on the ground, paying careful attention to his physical parameters.

"As I expected." She says a minute later, returning her gaze to the duplicated shard of Transmorphism. "The amount of innate power inside this tiny shard of metal is far beyond what you can fathom. You failed to duplicate it properly. It does not contain the same effects as the original shard, but perhaps if you had more mana capacity, and by that I mean *far* more, you might have succeeded."

Jason momentarily wavers in and out of consciousness. He shakily grabs a glass of water and chugs it down, feeling only a little better.

"You're... you're saying, *cough!* You're saying that tiny little piece of metal sucked me dry when I tried to duplicate it... because it's so complex??"

"Transmorphism is a Special-class exotic. It was made by a Ruler." Rebecca explains. "Not all Special-class exotics are, mind you, but we've known this one was for a long time. Qualitatively, this shard of metal is more profound than anything made by any High Volgrim, and that includes the Sentinels. You trying to duplicate it is like asking a five year old child to solve a college-level advanced trigonometry equation. You simply lack the qualifications, and gaining them might not be possible even with a practically unlimited amount of time."

Jason leans back against a desk. He closes his eyes and takes a few long breaths to improve his condition. "Shit. I can't do any more duplicating for a while."

"You can." Rebecca counters. "Drain some mana from the Cube."

"But-"

"No buts. That's what it's for." Rebecca counters. "Unless you have some spare mana beads you've been storing elsewhere."

Jason grimaces. "I store extra mana beads in my body. I just don't like using them unless this is an emergency. A bit of rest will bring me back up to snuff anyway."

"Yes, but time is valuable." Rebecca says, crossing her arms while looking down at the sleepy Hero. "Lest you forget, Diablo is still making moves in realspace. We may have far more time to expend than him, but we shouldn't waste our gift."

A moment passes. Jason grimaces, then he sighs.

"Absorb."

One of the mana beads inside his body vaporizes and turns into a flash-flood of mana, instantly refilling his internal mana battery so that he can stand back up and return to work. He does, but he sends a hurt look at Rebecca, feeling wronged that he had to use up one of his precious mana beads for this.

"You know, these beads are pretty wasteful." Jason complains. "It takes me five days of accumulation to fill one up. One night of sleep would have done the trick just as well."

Rebecca frowns. "It's that bad? How many beads do you have remaining, then?"

Jason blushes.

He looks away.

"Only... uh... like, I dunno... seven... mumble mumble..."

"Seven?" Rebecca asks. "Only seven mana beads?"

Jason's blush becomes more noticeable.

"W-well, more l-like... seven... hundred... sevenhundredandfourteenorso..."

"Seven hundred and fourteen mana beads?!" Rebecca exclaims. "Why are you just storing them away uselessly then?! You have PLENTY to use, Jason!!"

"But what if I NEED them in the future?!" Jason shouts back. "I can't just waste these beads!"

"They're a RENEWABLE RESOURCE!!" Rebecca screams in frustration. "What are you, some kind of hoarding goblin?? And here I was thinking you only had like a handful of the damn things!"

"I'm not a loot goblin, I'm a gamer. It's just not in my blood to waste precious consumables!" Jason complains.

Rebecca goes quiet for a moment.

"Do I need to involve Fiona in this discussion?"

"N-no, ma'am. I'll use the beads." Jason says, his willpower deflating immediately.

"Good. Let's get back to work, then." Rebecca says. "Duplicate the other Special-class Exotics next."

"Sure..."

Reluctantly, Jason begins duplicating one exotic after another. Despite his complaints, he ends up burning through more than thirty mana-beads when Rebecca forces him to try again on a handful of Special-class exotics, and the findings prove to be astounding.

"You succeeded in duplicating every single Exotic except for Transmorphism and the Special-class Spiritual exotic, Neon Void." Rebecca says. "That is a remarkable duplication rate, and the data gives us a lot of clues."

"Clues pertaining to what?" Jason asks.

"You can duplicate Living Moldanium, I'd wager." Rebecca says. "Its physical properties, at least. However, your power is actually more compatible with duplicating Psionic and Mundane Exotics than Spiritual ones. There appears to be a conflict that occurs when you try to perfectly replicate spiritual effects you didn't create yourself. Neon Void is great at masking the spiritual patterns of voidborn life-forms, but your Wordsmithing can't directly replicate the effect using only a single Word of Power. No doubt you can mimic the effect by creating your own version of Neon Void, but that gives us a lot of clues regarding your unobserved limitations."

Rebecca holds up her palm, causing words to holographically project into the air.

The true power of observational data lies in allowing someone to make inferences about future data they have not yet observed.

"To explain further," Rebecca continues, "if we can find consistency in the rules for your Wordsmithing, we can make inferences about Wordsmithing's other uses without you even attempting to use your magic in that specific way. If we know 'what goes up must eventually come down,' then we should be able to assume things that go up *always* come down. At least with a reasonable rate of consistency."

"I see." Jason says slowly. "So it's not about these Exotics specifically, but finding the underlying logic behind why I can duplicate some Exotics and not others. Once we figure that out, we should know with a high degree of certainty what I can and cannot duplicate without my actually attempting it."

"Right. But don't get me wrong, I still intend to have you try duplicating every single Exotic Miss Becker has in her storage. We need to confirm the hypotheses I make today in order to validate future predictions."

"Yeah. That's the scientific method." Jason agrees.

He and Rebecca continue their work for the next ten hours straight, tearing through Marie's catalog of Exotics while charting their predictions, successes, and failures one after the other. Jason continually drains his mana, consumes a mana bead, and drains his mana again. Barring a few surprises, Rebecca continuously gets better and better at figuring out what Jason can and cannot duplicate, though the man himself actually has a hard time keeping up with her accuracy.

"I'm starting to think I should find a way to digitize my brain." Jason grouches. "You're way better at this than me."

"I am, but there are thousands of Cybernites and only two Wordsmiths." Rebecca clarifies. "You know what they say about the grass looking greener on the other side. To gain my digitized brain and deductive abilities, you would have to stop being a Wordsmith. Neither of us wants that."

"You're right." Jason admits. "In any case, we're nearly done. I've successfully duplicated 817 Exotics, and failed to do so with 114 others. Have you built a foolproof theoretical model yet?"

"That doesn't seem possible anymore. Exotics always have edge cases. And Miss Becker doesn't have access to all the Exotics the Volgrim Empire does. We don't know where their most treasured stashes are, so we can't infiltrate them. The key now is finding out how to make your own Exotics next, then how to integrate them into your artificing..."

She pauses to mindlessly tap on the glass container of one rather boring Mundane Exotic while looking off into the distance.

"I think we should try something new, next. Jason, why don't you bring in those new Psion initiates to this warehouse? We could use their help determining our next line of experiments."

"Oh, sure." Jason says. "Uh, I was actually going to chat with a couple of Felorians, though..."

"Acceptable. I'll think about how we can integrate them into our next battery of tests."

Jason blinks his eyes wearily. "Okay. But unlike you, I need sleep. We'll pick this back up after I take a power-nap."

"Fine by me!" Rebecca chirps. "Oh, and thank you for using all those beads for my sake, by the way. It really expedited our progress."

Jason tries not to cry. "It's... it's fine. It was only... *five hundred*... mana beads. N-no big deal."

As he walks away, the Wordsmith feels a great loss deep in his heart.

My mana beads!

Part 532: Enlightened Cultivation

Many hours later, Jason awakens from his deep sleep. He decides to rest for twelve hours instead of a mere eight, not particularly caring about the extra time required. After all, eight hours and twelve hours in Chrona are both essentially a blink of an eye in realspace time.

He takes a long hot shower to wake himself up, munches on a hearty breakfast, and attends to some other minor things before making his way back to the warehouse to rejoin Rebecca on another day of hard work and experimentation.

When he shows up, he finds Rebecca standing inside the warehouse next to a brand new rack of metal shelving units, each one with neatly categorized Exotics ordered alphabetically by their broad types and rankings of power.

"Hey. I'm back." Jason says, giving a friendly wave to the Cybernite. "I wanted to thank you properly, Rebecca. I tried duplicating one of Marie's exotics when I first saw them, but I failed and assumed I was incapable of duplicating them. If it wasn't for you convincing me to try again, I'd never have found out I can duplicate some but not others."

"I think you would have tried eventually." Rebecca says with a smile. "You're more intelligent than you think, Jason. You might not be anywhere close to Miss Becker's level, or that of your esteemed wives, but you're not an idiot. You simply suffer from... a lack of initiative."

"I'm lazy." Jason counters. "It's fine. You can speak the truth."

Rebecca doesn't add any fuel to that metaphorical fire. She instead turns her attention to the Exotics she categorized and organized while Jason was sleeping.

"Now that you've made a solid list of replicable Exotics, the next step should be to experiment in other new and novel ways. Your ultimate goal is to try and create powerful artifacts rivaling those of ancient artificers, such as Archangel Camael and Elizabeth Kindelmann."

Jason scrunches up his face. "I don't have any background in artificing, though. Do you? I don't even have a clue where to start..."

"I have no background either." Rebecca says. "But I did download a few exabytes of historical information regarding the trade. It will give us a foundation to start with."

She pauses.

"Oh... and don't forget, Jason. You have Wordsmithing. You can cheat a good bit of this process."

"You think I'd go and do something as dishonorable as cheating at a proud, ancient profession?" Jason asks with a grin. "You're goddamn right. Now tell me how we can start!"

And so she does. Over the next two hours, Rebecca and Jason engage in a few different experiments.

First, she has Jason merge the most stable Exotics together to try and create new Exotics. This produces mixed results, with most losing all of their exotic capabilities, but some do produce weak new effects, and a small handful merge together perfectly, combining their abilities to create powerful synergies.

Next, she has Jason try to boost the effects of existing Exotics via his magic. Jason tries making Trifrancium even more energetic, he attempts to boost the power of Shatterstar Liquid, and finally, he concludes by attempting to increase the effectiveness of Cerebral-115.

The problem is, when Jason tries improving the last one, he can't detect any differences in its chemical or extraordinary structure.

"Did it work?" Jason asks, squinting as he tries to detect any changes in the Cerebral-115 Exotic.

"I... don't know. My sensors aren't picking up any changes." Rebecca says.

The two of them examine this Exotic for a moment before Jason smacks his forehead.

"Of course! We're not Psions. We won't be able to detect any alterations since this Exotic is pretty much only useful for those adept in the Psionic Arts. Why don't I call over some of those Psions I brought to Chrona?"

"That's a good idea." Rebecca replies. "I've been saying you should include them in your work. If you want to make inroads with your guests, it's important you don't continue to treat them like outsiders."

Jason nods. He walks away to call Aspirator Raavul over, as well as a handful of her eager disciples. Chief among them being Initiator Ferral, who, despite lacking a mouth, always seems to be smiling from ear to ear whenever he gets a chance to speak to the Wordsmith.

[Wordsmith Commander Sir Lord Jason Hiro!] Ferral exclaims. [Do you require our assistance? My teacher and fellow initiates would be extremely happy to help! And me as well, of course!]

Jason laughs at the youthful Psion's excitement while also doing his best to ignore the fact Ferral is hundreds of years older than him.

"I could indeed use your help. If you would all be so kind as to talk to Rebecca, she and I have been working on creating, combining, enhancing, and otherwise altering a variety of exotic materials. One of these is called Cerebral-115, and it only seems to be useful for Psions..."

Jason quickly explains the utility of this exotic, but to his dismay, not even Raavul has ever heard of it. She simply listens to his explanation, then nods.

[It seems to be quite a formidable and useful alloy. Very well. My disciples and I will be happy to assist you in investigating the effects of this Exotic material.]

"Thanks. We'll take all the help we can get." Jason says, before turning to start walking away.

Hardly has he taken two steps before Ferral pipes up. [Lord Wordsmith, sir! Aren't you going to join us?]

"In a bit. I need to talk to a few friends of mine first." Jason says.

[I see! Then we will await your return!] Ferral concludes.

The Psions enter into the warehouse to talk with Rebecca. After they depart, Jason concentrates his mind.

"Recall. Recall."

He uses his Wordsmithing to teleport two Felorians into Chrona: Brunhilda and Sariah. Originally, Jason planned to keep the Felorians inside Chrona's sphere, but he sent them back out to help fight off Mephisto's forces. Now, he once again requires their assistance.

The two women pause after arriving, having unexpectedly appeared inside an unfamiliar location. It only takes them three seconds to recognize Chrona's unique appearance, as well as the Wordsmith before them.

"Ah, Wordsmith." Brunhilda says, bowing her head respectfully for a moment. "Can we help you?"

"I wanted to inquire about your tests. Have you made any progress yet?" Jason asks.

Brunhilda blinks her pretty blue eyes twice. "...our tests? Err, we haven't started yet. We only fought Mephisto a few hours ago... we haven't had time to experiment with your gifts."

Jason coughs. "Right. A few hours. Sometimes I forget about the time dilation differential..."

The Wordsmith hesitates for a few seconds while collecting his thoughts.

"I've brought a newcomer to Chrona. Her name is Rebecca, and she's a Cybernite. She's been helping me perform experiments with these special materials known as 'Exotics', and it got me thinking..."

Jason takes a few minutes to explain his recent findings. However, in the middle of his explanation, Sariah frowns deeply and begins scratching at the back of her head in a somewhat distracting manner, while Brunhilda's right eye starts twitching erratically, making her rub her eye and wince.

"Agh!" Brunhilda lightly exclaims. "What is this feeling? It's so irritating..."

"I feel it too." Sariah says, as she scratches the back of her head more intensely. "Feels like there are a bunch of flies crawling around under my hair! It's making me so itchy!"

Jason looks at them, bewildered. "Is something the matter?"

In unison, both women look away from Jason. They direct their attention toward the warehouse where Rebecca and the Psions entered.

"This feeling is coming from over there." Brunhilda exclaims, rubbing her eye even more intensely. "I apologize, Jason, but I cannot focus on anything you're saying! This itch behind my eye is driving me mad!"

"Hmm. Let's go see what's happening." Jason says, momentarily worried something may have gone wrong with the Psions and Rebecca.

He turns to walk toward the warehouse, but quickly breaks into a jog with Brunhilda and Sariah following close behind him. They arrive at the entrance in under thirty seconds, causing Sariah to moan in annoyance. "This itchy feeling is getting more intense every second! It feels like t something sparking a reaction inside my skin!"

When Jason enters, he immediately spots Rebecca standing at a table directly across from Aspirator Raavul, who happens to be levitating an oblong-shaped, fist-sized rock made of Cerebral-115 in the air before herself. As Jason draws within eyesight-range of those two, he picks up on Raavul's words. She only happens to be projecting them in a nearby radius for the benefit of her students, but not 'shouting loudly' enough for them to penetrate through solid walls.

[-remarkable, I must admit.] Raavul says. [I am not much of a world-weary soul, Miss Rebecca. I possess little experience when it comes to Exotics, and none at all in regards to Exotics of this level. I must imagine this 'Cerebral-115' is a precious commodity within my Empire, used only by High Psions.]

"That, it is." Rebecca replies with a nod. "Typically, this Exotic is used by Psions of the 6th Level and up. It's used to temper one's Psionic Seed, but you must have strongly decided the Path you will walk before you can use it to its fullest extent."

[Hmm. I feel that if I were to drain this Cerebral-115's power, I might temporarily obtain strength at the 4th Level... but it would ruin this rock entirely.]

"I don't know much about Cerebral-115's properties, unfortunately." Rebecca admits. "Only the notes from Miss Becker's database. We'll need to experiment to find other uses for it."

Jason walks over to the two women, catching their attention. "What are you two doing right now? It seems to be negatively affecting Brunhilda and Sariah."

Raavul blinks slowly. [I am currently performing a simple act of resonance with this remarkable Exotic. I was planning to tap into its core to test how it can augment my abilities. Why? Is there a problem?]

Brunhilda madly rubs her right eye. "Can you stop for a moment? There's some sort of energy signature inside that rock that's making my brain itch!"

[Oh. My apologies.] Raavul replies, immediately setting the rock down. [I was unaware of your discomfort.]

As soon as Raavul drops the Cerebral-115, Brunhilda and Sariah both breathe sighs of relief. That incredibly annoying itchy feeling disappears from their brains, allowing them to finally return to a sense of normalcy.

Rebecca frowns. "You two are able to sense the psionic fluctuations emanating from this alloy?"

"I suppose we are." Brunhilda says. She reaches toward the Exotic, only to pause and look at Jason. "...may I?"

"Go ahead." Jason answers.

Brunhilda picks up the Cerebral-115 and stares at it closely.

"Hmm... I don't feel like I can interact with this directly... unless- wait! What if I...?"

She inhales deeply and focuses her mind, driving part of her body's potential. She forces her muscles to tighten and for a mysterious spiritual connection to form between her soul and body. She strengthens her physical frame immensely over the course of just a few seconds, and in that short period of time, the Cerebral-115 begins to levitate out of her hand.

[What?!] Raavul exclaims. [Inconceivable! I sense no psionic activity from your body, yet somehow you are resonating with a pure-psionic Exotic!]

Rebecca frowns deeply. "This is indeed strange. How are you resonating with the Cerebral-115, Brunhilda?"

Brunhilda remains silent for a few moments longer before exhaling and allowing the Exotic to levitate downward back into her palm. She looks around at the Psions, then at Rebecca and Jason.

"It was simply my intuition. Something about this Exotic resonated with my soul. I felt as if I could reach out and touch it through the Wind Mother's blessing. It seems my intuition was correct."

Everyone falls silent for several seconds. Rebecca lifts up her hand and points a finger at Brunhilda. A wide-beam of light spreads out to scan the Felorian from head to toe, then she points at Raavul to repeat that process.

"My scans are inconclusive." Rebecca mutters under her breath. "You seem to be able to interact with psionic exotics through an unknown mechanism... perhaps your 'Wind Mother' has made this possible?"

Jason pipes up. "Brunhilda, you Felorians are capable of manipulating the energy known as 'Qi,' right? I remember the Battle Brothers, Duriel and Zamiel, could also manipulate it. Could 'Qi' have some relation to psionic power?"

"I have no idea." Brunhilda says, glancing at Sariah who also shrugs in response. "We wield the power granted by the Wind Mother. We do not question how it functions. That would be an insult to our deity."

Jason rubs his chin as he falls into thought. "What would allow a pair of demons like Zamiel and Duriel to wield Qi in the same way you do? Is their Qi the same as yours? Can you tell us more about it?"

Brunhilda makes eye contact with Raavul, sensing her deep interest in this topic, as well as the others awaiting her reply. She simply nods.

"Wordsmith, you appear to be under a misconception. I do not consider the power of Qi to be any grand secret. This power is not unique to my people, the Felorians. All humans are capable of accessing their internal Qi. The Wind Mother simply has made the process of manipulating Qi easier for Her devotees to obtain access."

"Any human can control Qi?" Rebecca repeats. "Marie Becker has provided me with notes regarding the Felorians. This was never an observation she made, nor did the Volgrim. How can you utter such a statement with so much confidence?"

"Because." Brunhilda answers. "We have already taught a few dozen non-Felorians to access the Wind Mother's power. It is a simple process, but it does require certain demands of those desiring to wield the Wind Mother's might."

Sensing a barrage of incoming questions, Brunhilda continues to speak.

"To manipulate Qi, one must first learn to sense this source of energy. Qi exists all around us, in countless forms. All life-forms radiate it and possess it within their minds, bodies, and souls, to varying extents. Inanimate objects, artifacts, and even ordinary rocks also radiate Qi. It surrounds us, binds us, and holds the fabric of reality together."

Jason itches the back of his neck. "So... it's... it's magic? Like my Wordsmithing??"

"No. Magic is different." Brunhilda retorts. "To what degree, I cannot speak with much confidence. I do not possess the ability to manipulate magic, after all. But the Wind Mother has told me this Truth; that magic and Qi are systems of power which affect the material realms differently."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jason exclaims. "Hold up a second. You're telling me you've SPOKEN to the Wind Mother?? As in, you have directly *conversed* with your goddess?!"

Sariah and Brunhilda exchange sardonic glances, as if having heard the dumbest question in the world. They both look at Jason in unison, obviously trying not to insult him with their gaze.

"...of course." Sariah says slowly. "All Felorians can communicate with the Wind Mother. If you follow our ways and meet the requirements to sense and manipulate Qi, you may speak to Her as well."

Jason's heart falls into disarray. All this time, he assumed the religion the Felorians followed was just some hokey mumbo-jumbo, but listening to them talk now, he feels as if their power might be based on something FAR more substantial, physical, and obtainable than he ever imagined.

"Okay, so what are the requirements to manipulate Qi then?" Jason asks. "Do I meet them?"

"We cannot say." Brunhilda replies. "First, to begin the process, one must sit beneath a tree, a cliff, a waterfall, or some other location rich in Qi energy. On my homeworld, there are many such known locations. Then, for 81 days and 81 nights, you must meditate while moving as little as possible. You must still your heart and focus your senses while wholeheartedly thinking of the Wind Mother. You must bare your soul to Her will, and if She finds you worthy, your body will spontaneously open the Doorway to your Inner Self. In that moment, you will become capable of walking the path of a Qi Cultivator."

"81 days and nights..." Jason says slowly. "What if you need to eat, or drink, or sleep, or pee...?"

"Ahem. You may *of course* attend to your bodily needs." Brunhilda says with a quick rolling of her eyes. "This process is not about following the exact letter of the Wind Mother's requirements, but their spirit."

Raavul, having been listening silently all this while, finally speaks.

[This act of meditation... it is extremely similar to the meditation a Psion must perform in order to form their Psionic Seed. Do your people also form... seeds?]

Brunhilda turns to look at Raavul in surprise. "I am not certain of what you speak. Can you explain the function of a 'Psionic Seed' to me? I don't believe my people do anything

like that, but I could be wrong..."

Raavul hesitates, given the potentially sensitive nature of this information. Telling outsiders the details of her people's power could someday result in a calamity if the humans learned how to weaponize the information to their advantage.

She opts to speak of this information in only the broadest terms.

[A Psionic Seed is the core of all psionic power.] Raavul begins. [Through meditation, study, and practice, Psions learn to walk a Path. Paths can come in many forms. For example, that ability you used earlier is not so different from what a Body Strengthening Psion might do, where they temporarily boost their physical power to extreme heights. We can also manipulate the elements, augment our telepathy and telekinesis, and elevate our control over other similar effects.]

She continues. [Forming a Psionic Seed is only the first step. To reach greater heights, we must study and consolidate our power over long, long reaches of time. Thousands of your human-years can pass before we rise from the first to the second to the third level of Psionic Power. Some Psions rise quickly, but most do not.]

"I see..." Brunhilda says softly. "So it's like that. You slowly amass power over time, occasionally gaining much greater bursts when you ascend to the next level of Psionic Power. Unfortunately, our Qi does not function in that way. The power we gain from the Wind Mother always seems to reach a plateau before we can ascend any further."

Once more, the room becomes quiet.

Raavul silently thinks about the information Brunhilda has given her. She compares the process of ascension for Felorians to the one she has personally used to reach the 3rd Level of her Psionic Power.

Ultimately, she feels a slight coldness, a primal fear deep within her bones.

This process... it is frighteningly similar to the one my people use to Ascend. Could it be that mud-dwellers are capable of wielding a power not dissimilar to that of the Psions? Are the High Psions even aware of this matter?

While she broods, Jason turns to Brunhilda.

"I'd be interested in trying to wield Qi, but... 81 days and nights? That's a LOT of time to spend. Can I do it on my off-days and weekends or something?"

"The period of self-examination must be as uninterrupted as possible." Brunhilda states emphatically. "A strong sense of patience is essential to master the power of Qi. If you cannot bring yourself to spend such a long time meditating, then the Path of Qi is not for you."

"I guess it isn't." Jason says with a shrug. "Shame. I have Wordsmithing anyway, so I guess it doesn't matter. But are you really telling me there are people on Tarus II, non-Felorians, who have learned to sense Qi?"

"I would never utter a lie capable of harming the Wind Mother's face." Brunhilda answers. "Those with patience and talent can join my people as wielders of Qi. They can speak to the Wind Mother and learn her Truths for themselves."

"I assume there are other requirements." Rebecca suddenly says. "It can't be as simple as a mere three-month period of meditation. Even if one were to find meditation boring, this is a relatively small price to pay in order to obtain extraordinary superhuman abilities."

"One must possess other qualifications." Brunhilda admits with a nod. "A pure heart is essential, as well as a strong desire for self-improvement. The more physically fit one is, the better their mastery of Qi can become."

"You said a person's heart has to be pure?" Jason asks. "Then hold on a second! What about Duriel and Zamiel? If those guys are wielding Qi, then are you telling me *they're* pure-hearted?! Those two were pure EVIL, if anything!"

"I cannot speak to how that pair of demons came to possess control over Qi." Brunhilda says calmly. "But what I can say is that they did not access it through the Wind Mother. She merely granted our species one method to walk the path of a Cultivator. There are some who have obtained this power through other means."

Jason snorts. "Yeah? Like who?"

"The first human to ever become a cultivator was not a Felorian." Brunhilda says quietly. "The Wind Mother once spoke of his identity to me. His name was Siddhartha Gautama."

"Buddha!" Jason exclaims, shock lacing his voice. "He's a cultivator too? He's still alive!"

"That he is." Brunhilda acknowledges. "Buddha did not obtain his powers through the Wind Mother's assistance. He obtained them through diligent meditation, through his pure heart, and through a single-minded dedication to finding Enlightenment. He is the progenitor of Cultivation, and thus the one you should ask questions regarding its future potential."

Jason nods slowly. "I will definitely do that when I have time."

Raavul, having remained quiet for the past two minutes, decides to interject.

[Lady Brunhilda. I have a suspicion regarding your... Qi mastery...]

"A suspicion?" Brunhilda repeats. "I'm listening."

[I suspect... you have not tapped properly into your full potential. Perhaps you may not have even reached a *fraction* of your full potential. I believe your mastery of Qi may be capable of evolving far, far beyond what it is now. I also fear that voicing this suspicion could cause a terrible calamity to fall upon my Volgrim Empire.]

Brunhilda waits a few seconds before replying.

"You believe... since Qi Cultivation seems somewhat similar to your Psionic Seed... it might be capable of progressing upward in power through a means similar to what Psions use? And by telling me this, in the long term, it could threaten the Volgrim Empire by allowing humanity to harness ever greater levels of martial strength?"

[...Yes.] Raavul says, her stomach feeling as if she has swallowed a fly. [Precisely that. I should state that I do not harbor any resentment toward the group assembled here, specifically. But I contemplate and I comprehend that today's discussion may have far-reaching consequences I am too slow and dull-minded to predict. I worry I may have sent a future calamity hurtling toward my people, and would ask that you not reveal this information to those... *corrupt of heart*.]

"I fully understand." Brunhilda says quietly. "I would like to work with you on human-Psion relations. Perhaps the two of us could learn from one another in mastering our respective powers. For now, only Sariah and I need to know of these developments. That way, we can keep any negative future issues contained purely to Chrona."

[I would appreciate such a boon.] Raavul says, while slowly blinking her eyes and nodding her head. [May the Founders bless our efforts with a gift of long-lasting peace between our species.]

"May the Wind Mother guide our hands to produce future miracles." Brunhilda replies with a radiant smile.

Jason's eyes flicker between the Psion and Felorian. He silently evaluates the potential Pandora's Box he may have just opened by bringing these two together.

But in his heart of hearts, he decides that it can only end up a net gain for humanity, assuming anything happens at all.

Maybe nothing will come of these talks and the Felorians, as well as other Qi Cultivators, won't become any mightier. Perhaps Raavul is wrong and they have indeed already reached the apex of their strength - barely being capable of contending against Demon Barons.

But then again... perhaps humanity may have just unlocked a new path of progression. A method they can use to rise to frightening heights in the not-so-distant future!

The Wordsmith shrugs.

Eh. I'll worry about this stuff when it becomes more relevant. If bad things happen, I can always do some casual mind-wiping to eliminate the knowledge of Qi Empowerment. How crazy can things possibly get?

While these high-level sentients debate the ethics of what they've just discussed, Initiator Ferral suddenly pipes up.

[Excuse me, Master Raavul. Can I interact with the Cerebral-115 now? Is it my turn?]

[You brat!] Raavul exclaims, resisting the urge to slap her disciple. [Stop embarrassing me! This Exotic is not a toy! Wait until you've reached the 3rd-Level before having designs on such a powerful material!]

Ferral's expression falls.

[Humph. Just you wait and see. I'll rise through the ranks faster than you can imagine, teacher!]

Jason chuckles. "Yeah, *sure* you will, kid."

Part 533: Liberating Sharmur!

On the world of Sharmur, billions of simple-minded creatures live in peace. Birds, trees, mammals and bees. Through convergent evolution, plenty of creatures on Sharmur share traits with the animals that once arose on humanity's homeworld, Earth. They live in harmony with nature, chirping and releasing mating calls as they go about their lives, living purely through the instincts that have evolved over tens of millions of years.

However, on this fallen world, a strange aberration exists. A species known as the *Kolvaxians*.

This alien form of life coexists with the creatures that originally inhabited Sharmur. But it is a disquieting entity that does not live in the same way Sharmur's natives do.

The Kolvaxians stand in place, unmoving. Each one faceless, unidentifiable. Like zombies, the Plagueborn stare vacantly into the distance, their figures infesting the many cities that were once controlled by Demon Emperors, Dukes, and Barons, and were once populated by those demons and their human comrades.

But no longer.

Now, only the Kolvaxians remain, converted by the power of some unknown alien entity.

The creatures native to Sharmur give every Kolvaxian a wide berth, as if a foul stench were radiating from their bodies. As for the Kolvaxians themselves, they pay no attention to any entity lacking in sentience.

Sharmur's primitives simply lack any attraction to the Kolvaxian hivemind.

* * *

In the skies of Sharmur, a sudden and violent tearing of space rips apart the upper atmosphere. A ten-foot-in-diameter portal materializes, only to rapidly expand in size as a surge of Cosmic Energy pours into it.

On the other side, on the world of Numaria, Emperor Yadratt grimaces as he stands atop the shoulder of the Archdemon, pushing his magical powers to the peak. He forcibly widens his portal to a previously unimaginable size, expanding it to become bigger and bigger than ever.

Diablo watches.

Inside the Archdemon's body, Diablo's Emperor-form rests, controlling the Archdemon through some mystical, unknown methods. He gazes at the portal, sending his Cosmic Energy into Yardrat's body to empower him further.

"Just a little more." Diablo says, his astral form levitating next to Yardrat. "You're almost there."

The Emperor of the Void roars with pain as he drives the demonic energy within himself to higher and higher levels, feeling as if his body will explode with the might of a nuclear bomb. He holds himself together through sheer force of will, and eventually he manages to raise the portal to a size just barely big enough for the Archdemon to fit through.

"Good work!" Diablo praises. "This next part will be up to me- hm?"

Diablo frowns. Through the portal, he senses the approach of several powerful life-forms. The Kolvaxians detect the aura of a demonic powerhouse and begin racing toward the portal from all across Sharmur.

Silently, two dozen Psion-type Kolvaxians tear across Sharmur's airspace. They rush toward the Archdemon fearlessly, as if Diablo himself were nothing more than a gnat they needed to swat out of the air.

Diablo's astral figure dissipates as he takes full control of the Archdemon's body. The Archdemon's head casually adjusts its angle as it looks in their direction.

GOOD. COME TO ME. THAT WILL MAKE HUNTING YOU DOWN MUCH EASIER.

Without warning, Diablo rushes forward, leaping through the portal at a speed far faster than any observer would expect. He jumps through the portal with Yardrat on his back, and at the same time, the army of Demon Emperors and Dukes behind him follow afterward.

The approaching Psion-Kolvaxians express no fear of the Archdemon through their movements. Like mindless automatons, they continue charging at Diablo as if they were lobotomized chickens attacking a Dire Wolf. Their actions make little sense to the demons following the Archdemon.

In unison, a hundred of the Archdemon's tentacles snap at the Kolvaxians. They rip through the air at supersonic speeds, closing the gap in an instant and causing sonic booms to erupt in their wake.

An instant later, those tentacles collide with the Kolvaxian attackers. Many Demon Emperors, such as Fae and Serena, expect a huge battle to take place, but they jerk in fright as Diablo easily kills the Kolvaxians with ease. His tentacles tear into them and rip them to shreds with no effort whatsoever, ending the 'threat' of these enemies as if they never possessed any to begin with.

Fae cackles. "Hahahaha! That was pathetic! The Kolvaxians exploded into pieces! This is gonna be SO easy!"

"DO NOT BECOME COMPLACENT." The Archdemon warns. **"THE ENEMY WILL ADAPT. SO TOO MUST WE."**

Emperor Kristoff sneers. "With the Archdemon by our side, nothing can stop us!"

"THOSE WERE MERELY SCOUTS." Diablo warns. **"THE TRUE VANGUARD HAS YET TO ARRIVE."**

Inside Sharmur's planetary core, a series of powerful life-forms emerges. Diablo senses these newcomers, but his comparatively weaker compatriots do not. The Archdemon's head inclines downward, toward the incoming threats, but the Demon Emperors look forward instead, toward the shaking treeline. A massive horde of Kolvaxians runs at them beneath the tree cover, making them frown.

"So many?!" Kristoff gasps.

Emperor Melody levitates beside him, a complicated look in her eyes. "The former inhabitants of Sharmur. My friends..."

Diablo lifts one of his hands. **"GO. I WILL SUPPORT YOU FROM BEHIND. MY FOCUS MUST BE ON THE ELITES OUR ENEMY WILL CALL FORTH. I HAVE NO TIME TO SLAY THE WEAKLINGS. THAT IS YOUR TASK TO PERFORM..."**

Unable to maintain his power any longer, Yadrat finally seals the portal shut, forcing his allies to confront the Kolvaxians head-on. He wipes his sweat-covered brow, then stands up straight atop the Archdemon's shoulder.

"We no longer have a path of retreat! Everyone, kill these Kolvaxians! Take back Sharmur!"

"For Guura! For Viola! And for Shax and Murmur!" Emperor Melody shouts, her emotions rising as she remembers the friends she lost. Her sonic powers project her voice over the entire region, causing the trees to sway as her sound-waves strike them.

"For Sharmur!" All the other Emperors shout in unison.

Like this, the battle erupts.

Demonkind brings its mightiest demons to the battlefield. Only Dukes and Emperors have the capital to appear. Not one Lord or Baron joins the party, leaving a small but elite force to push their way toward Sharmur's largest city.

The Archdemon concentrates the power of destruction into its mouth. It launches the first attack far into the distance, aiming at the largest concentration of incoming Kolvaxians.

THOOOOM!!

A laser of nuclear hellfire lances into the distance, detonating with terrifying strength. The entire planet rumbles as Diablo sweeps his head from right to left, slaughtering 500,000 Kolvaxians in an instant. He rips apart the tree-line and forcibly creates a zone of death for the demons in front of him to arrive at and begin fighting inside.

Inside this area, flames rage and the temperature rises to several hundred degrees. Emperor Serena shrieks at the top of her lungs, sending a shockwave of sound to extinguish Diablo's hellfire, as well as to flatten whatever large terrain features might remain, obstructing her allies' lines of sight.

Like this, an impromptu battlefield forms, creating a flat area for the demon rulers to do battle with their blood-enemies.

Dukes fight on the frontlines like common footsoldiers. Even the Emperors find themselves coming up a little short as tens of thousands of Kolvaxians tear through the woodlands to fight them in the open terrain!

With eerie silence, never making any deliberate noise, the flood of Kolvaxians continues unstoppably. Emperor Serena blows up hundreds, even thousands of them with her violent thunderclap-shrieks. Emperor Kristoff forms powerful blood shields to defend the frontlines, as well as halberds of blood to slaughter any Kolvaxians attacking from the

sides. Emperor Fae gleefully lobbs bombs at the enemy, cackling maniacally as she is allowed to go all-out on her aggression. Among the demons present, Fae quickly racks up the highest kill-count.

Dagon, the Emperor of Pathogens, works in tandem with Vepar, the Corrosive Emperor. Together they spread corrosive acid on the ground and in the air to slow down any Kolvaxians approaching them from behind and from the front.

Rhesus, the Emperor of Ripping, fights like a savage on the frontlines. He follows orders and stays close to the main group, but for any Kolvaxian that comes too close, he pounces at them and rips them apart with his claws, devouring them to minutely increase his strength.

At the same time, while the Emperors and Dukes do battle, two dozen Psion-type Kolvaxians emerge from underground and ignore the Demon Emperors and Dukes. These newcomers instead attack the Archdemon, sensing its immense threat and intuitively understanding they must kill it first before dealing with the small fry.

Among these Psion-Kolvaxians are two 8th-Level Psions, the rest being only 7th-Level. Much like when Mephisto fought them, Diablo comes under a field of suppression. He lacks the speed and durability of the Myriad Deity, but he makes up for this disadvantage with a far greater level of magical power and a regenerative capability bordering on the invincible.

"YOU'VE COME TO FACE YOUR DEATHS!" The Archdemon roars, releasing beams of nuclear hellfire with laser precision. He blasts one of the 7th-Level Psions out of the sky, rending its body to pieces, but the two 8th-Level Psions circle around behind him where his mouth can't strike them.

These two high-level Kolvaxians speak no words. They lack mouths, and they lack the ability to speak telepathically. They act like mindless automatons, but Diablo knows... there is more to these creatures than meets the eye.

"HEH HEH... STILL HAVE NOTHING TO SAY? I KNOW YOU ARE NOT WHAT YOU SEEM. TODAY, I WILL IMPRINT THE FEAR OF THE ARCHDEMON WITHIN YOUR SOULS."

Diablo claps his upper and lower hands together, releasing a massive domain of gravity magic around himself. The Psions flying around him abruptly slow down in midair

and lose a great deal of their strength, shuddering as the full power of a Middle Cosmic Entity crashes into their bodies.

One of the 8th-Level Psions yanks a dozen massive trees out of the nearby forest. It transforms those trees, transmuting them from wood to iron to steel, and then to an even more powerful, unknown, exotic compound. This metal forms in a single second, then transforms into a 300-foot-long series of chains, which it snaps at the Archdemon's neck like a whip!

The chain-whip wraps around Diablo's neck and the Psion holds on, stabilizing its position in the air to resist the Archdemon's gravitic magic.

"I SEE..." Diablo says, turning his massive head slightly to peer behind himself at the High Psion. **"SO YOU ARE THAT WEAK LITTLE 'COPY' OF EXECUTOR HURON. I'VE BEEN LOOKING FORWARD TO FIGHTING YOU."**

Diablo's eyeless head does not have the ability to 'see' in the way one might imagine, but he merely does this out of reflex, since he ordinarily occupies a Demon body that does possess eyes.

At the same time, the second High Psion yanks up a nearby lake with the power of Fluidic Psionics. It sends this massive body of water flying at the Archdemon, splashing Diablo and soaking him from head to toe.

Then, the Psion conjures a massive amount of electrical power in its grasp. It erupts with a planet-shaking bolt of lightning, sending that power flying at the Archdemon's back!

BOOOOOM!!

The Archdemon staggers slightly as the water soaking its body increases the conductivity of that lightning strike. But ultimately, despite the large hole blasted in Diablo's back, the wound quickly regenerates, and he merely chuckles.

"HEH HEH... AND YOU MUST BE EXECUTOR SARTRAN'S CLONE. WHERE, I WONDER, IS THE FINAL EXECUTOR, HMM? TOO BUSY TO COME AND PLAY? LET'S CHANGE THAT."

The Kolvaxian copies of Executors Huron and Sartran give no reply to Diablo. They continue attacking him from behind while he clumsily turns around to swing a palm at them. Thanks to the power of his Gravity Domain, their speed actually drops low enough

that he manages to casually swap Huron's Kolvax-clone out of the air, but such a casual strike doesn't cause it any severe damage. Huron loses its grip on the metal chain and falls out of the sky, smashing into the ground, while Sartran continues pummeling Diablo with lightning from afar.

Simultaneously, two dozen 7th-Level Psions strike Diablo with fire, ice, plasma, wind, and all sorts of other attacks. Diablo's tentacles snap at these Psions, but many of them end up pulverized to meat by the Psion's combined strength!

Unfortunately for the Kolvaxians, the strength of their Psion-copies pales in comparison to the original bodies.

Executor Sartran wields the power of a Low Cosmic. But his Kolvaxian-clone only wields the power of a Bottom Cosmic!

As for 7th Level Psions, they ordinarily wield the power of Bottom Cosmics, but now their Kolvax-clones fight at a level between a Demon Emperor and a Bottom Cosmic; more than capable of flattening most Demon Emperors, but nowhere near powerful enough to threaten an entity like the Archdemon!

Large icicles fly into Diablo's body, each one the size of a tree! But compared to his titanic figure, these ice-spears are practically tiny needles, little more than an annoyance to him.

Thunder and fire blow apart chunks of the Archdemon's flesh, but Diablo regenerates these wounds with ease.

Huge blades and hammers made of condensed metal-energy slice and bash the Archdemon, but most of these barely cause even the lightest of surface damage.

Between the copies of Executor Sartran and Huron, there exists a boundary of two levels separating them from the Archdemon's Cosmic Power. From Bottom Cosmic to Low Cosmic to Middle Cosmic, High Cosmic, and Apex Cosmic, the absolute power any Cosmic Entity controls can vary drastically.

Perhaps if these were the original bodies of the Executors, they might be able to put up a serious fight against the Archdemon... but since they aren't, they simply can't.

As for the 7th-Level Psion copies, they can barely even cause him to flinch.

One hour passes. Two hours, three, then four...

Over and over, the Archdemon smashes apart the Psion-Kolvaxians. He splatters their bodies into mist-particles with his palms, crushes them into the dirt with his gravity magic, blasts them out of the air with his nuclear-breath, and uses his tentacles to chew up their remains and supplement his regenerative capabilities.

Whenever Diablo kills one of these mighty Psions, a short period follows before they regenerate, swim up and out of the planet core, and emerge from the soil to fly back up into the air and rejoin the battle. None of this escapes Diablo's notice.

At the same time, Diablo does not neglect his comrades. He keeps a portion of his demonic sense locked on the battle between the lowly, common Kolvaxians, as they battle the Emperors and Dukes.

Emperor Fae cries out in fear as a pair of Kolvaxians pounce out of the ground below her, grab her arms, and yank her into the dirt. She disappears underground before anyone can react, causing a brief panic to spread among the Emperors.

"Fae!" Melody shrieks, reliving the trauma of her lost world. "No!!!"

But Diablo notices this event. He sends his tentacles burrowing underground to intercept Fae as the Kolvaxians drag her into the planet's crust. Before they can traverse a mile of the underground soil, Diablo's teeth-filled mouths chew up and rip apart those feeble Kolvaxians, then quickly pull the Emperor of Terror back up to the surface, throwing her back into the fray.

She gasps for breath, momentarily losing her cool. Fae is usually such a wild-spirited Demoness, but when she found herself faced with the horrors of zombification, even she lost her cool and fell into a state of panic.

Fae directs an unusually cordial look toward the distant Archdemon as Diablo continues to battle his Psion enemies.

"...Thanks, Deebs. I owe you one." Fae mumbles.

The battle continues.

Despite her near-death experience, Fae returns to flinging bombs at the largest groups of Kolvaxians. The eerily silent enemies actually begin to slow down their attack speed as the Emperors and Dukes slaughter them faster than they can emerge from underground.

During the battle, despite its fearsome tempo, Diablo maintains his cool. He waits for a previously-agreed-upon signal, and that signal comes when the First Emperor manifests

into reality, stepping across the Void to approach Diablo from across the horizon.

In a mere ten seconds, the First Emperor's illusory body travels hundreds of miles to appear beside the Archdemon. For some reason, the Kolvaxians don't react to the First Emperor's presence, as if they are incapable of sensing it...

Diablo. The time has arrived. The Core has lost enough energy for you to execute the next phase.

"FINALLY. I HAVE WAITED LONG ENOUGH." Diablo booms.

Abruptly, Diablo stops battling the Psion-clones. He ignores them as they continue uselessly blasting him and peppering him with powerful but ineffective elemental attacks.

The Archdemon lowers its head. It gazes deep into Sharmur's interior, toward the very core of the planet.

As for what the Archdemon sees, that is something few can know...

Diablo launches hundreds of tentacles downward. They burrow into the planet, chewing through the dirt and magma as they become enveloped by tens, hundreds, thousands, and even millions of tons of pressure. The deeper these tentacles travel, the faster they move, somehow defying the laws of physics.

Even when the core of the planet reaches tens of thousands of degrees in temperature, those tentacles continue stretching, moving downward far further than many would believe them capable of stretching.

The Psions attack Diablo relentlessly. They strike him with attacks that would slaughter Demon Emperors like pigs, but no matter how mighty their powers might seem, they barely even injure the Archdemon.

Suddenly, the Psions stop attacking him. They pause in midair, then they begin to shiver, as if they are mere humans that have fallen into a freezing cold tundra of ice and snow.

At the same time, the Kolvaxians attacking the Emperors and Dukes also pause their movements, freezing wherever they stand. They, too, begin trembling madly, then they fall to the ground and convulse as if suffering violent, epileptic seizures.

Bewildered, the Emperors gaze at their formerly frightening enemies with looks of confusion.

"Is... is this part of Diablo's plan?" Kristoff asks.

"It must be." Emperor Serena says. "But..."

Before she can say anything else, something happens that startles all of the demons in the assault force.

The Kolvaxians disintegrate!

Their bodies crumble to ash and dust. They cease their movements and fall eerily still, then begin melting into particles of sand, crumbling apart for seemingly no rhyme or reason.

The lofty Psions that were attacking Diablo only moments earlier fall from the sky, strike the ground, and explode into ash, their souls and vitality disappearing from Sharmur's planetary sphere.

The First Emperor and Diablo both express no joy. To them, this result was already preordained.

"EVERYONE." Diablo says, his voice booming across the horizon. **"OPERATION VINDICATION IS COMPLETE. WE HAVE RETAKEN SHARMUR!"**

"We did it?" Kristoff gasps. "We really did?"

Tears well up in Emperor Melody's eyes. She collapses to her knees and heaves a great sigh as she feels a terrible mental burden finally lift.

Her world, Sharmur, has been retaken! This is a feat not even the Volgrim have accomplished in the last 100,000 years!

She wasn't able to bring back Guura, Viola, Dorma, or the others who fell, but that fact doesn't dampen her spirits. Melody still feels a sense of euphoria as she realizes today marks a true turning point for demonkind.

"We defeated the Kolvaxians!" Melody exclaims. "If we did it once, we can do it again!"

"And again!" Yardrat cheers. "This is only the beginning, everyone!"

All the demons roar with excitement. They pump their fists into the air and issue a joyful cry.

"Diablo! Our savior!"

"The Archdemon guides us!"

"The Archdemon guides us!"

"The Archdemon guides us!"

These cheers erupt spontaneously, with Melody's voice crying out the loudest as she shouts with all the force in her lungs.

At the same time, the Archdemon remains quiet, allowing his subordinates to vent their frustrations and joy. For them, this is a defining moment that signals the beginning of a new path for demonkind.

But as for Diablo?

This is only the beginning.

Diablo's astral body reforms. He levitates downward, materializing in his Emperor form as he travels to the clearing where all the other demon leaders have assembled.

"Everyone. Thank you. If it were not for you holding back the horde, this victory would not have come easily. Demonkind needs more than a mere Archdemon to win this war. It needs all of you to contribute your blood, sweat, and tears to our cause."

Diablo's humble words cause even more cheers to erupt. He smiles and waits for those cheers to die down.

"Today is only the beginning. Now that we have retaken Sharmur and proven that we are capable of doing battle against the Kolvaxian menace, our value is going to skyrocket in the eyes of our... *competitors*. The Volgrim are old and decrepit. The humans are young and stupid. The angels are nothing but a shadow of their former selves. Only WE, the demons, possess the capital to retake and control the Milky Way for all eternity!"

The Emperors and Dukes restrain their cheers. Something about Diablo's words makes them a little uneasy.

"Is there a problem then, Diablo?" Yardrat asks. "It seems like you have something else to say?"

"There is not a problem. Not yet..." Diablo says slowly. "But in time, there will come a catastrophe that we must begin plans to mitigate now. Let me speak plainly."

He pauses.

"Demonkind... is cursed. We are all incapable of properly ascending to the rank of Cosmic. This is because of those DAMNED Archangels! They placed limiters on our

power. They did so because they feared us... and they were *right* to fear us. But simply put, we face a critical juncture."

Diablo sweeps his gaze across the expectant faces of his brothers and sisters.

"Imagine a time, 50,000 years from now. We have successfully cleared the Milky Way of the Kolvaxians. We have retaken countless worlds in the name of the Demon Empire. Do you think we will possess the capital to contend with the Volgrim?"

"Won't we?" Kristoff asks, visibly confused. "We have you, the Archdemon! If you can defeat the Kolvaxians-"

"I am but a single Cosmic." Diablo says quietly. "A Middle Cosmic, yes. Perhaps equal to Founder Dosena. But that is all. We are in a unique situation right now. I am *potentially* capable of doing battle with the Second Founder. But I am only one entity. Even if Mephisto were to join forces with me... that is the extent of our forces. Do you think I alone am capable of holding all the worlds we will eventually take from the Kolvaxians?"

Like this, the enthusiasm of the gathered group drops significantly. The Emperors and Dukes look at one another, worried about what all this means.

"So... we... what do we do?" Yadrat asks. "If we purge the Kolvaxians, we'll have to face humanity and the Volgrim. You think demonkind will die if the Kolvaxians are no longer around to keep the Volgrim in line?"

"That would indeed be the case under normal circumstances..." Diablo says softly, as a faint smile begins to spread across his face. "However... what if I told you there was a secret method we could use to raise up Demon Deities to protect our newly-taken worlds, hmm?"

"A secret method?" Melody asks. "Like what?"

Diablo gestures around himself, to the entirety of Sharmur.

"The First Emperor and I came up with a special method of Deity Empowerment just two years ago. It is truly versatile, and all it requires is the power belonging to Emperor Nymph."

Nymph, the Emperor of the Forest, blinks her ruby eyes with great surprise. "...what? Me? How is my power relevant?"

"With your abilities..." Diablo says slowly, "...we will crown the first of the Planar Wardens. Elite warriors possessing Cosmic Power. The first line of defense, should our enemies decide to invade."

Diablo raises a single finger. He points at one of the Emperors.

"And you, Emperor Melody, will become the Planar Warden of Sharmur."

Melody's jaw drops, along with many other demons present.

"...W-what? ME?!"

Part 534: Planar Wardens

On the world of Sharmur, a strange peace settles across the land. A creeping dread had long taken hold of the indigenous life, the mammals and lizards and birds alike. They subtly feared the strange, unmoving creatures which radiated an aura unfamiliar to them... the alien Kolvaxian life forms.

But now, those Kolvaxians have died. All thanks to the efforts of Diablo and his fellow demons.

As for those demons, they gaze at their leader with looks of surprise and shock. Melody, especially, has her jaw hanging open in complete disbelief.

"M-me? You want *me* to be... the Warden of Sharmur? I don't... I don't feel I am worthy."

She lowers her eyes, a deep sense of despair in her heart.

"When the Kolvaxians attacked, I couldn't do anything at all. My powers barely pushed them back. Viola fell, as did Guura and Dorma and all the others... I ran away like a coward while so many of my friends perished. I don't deserve to be elevated at all."

Diablo listens to her words, but he does not relent. He continues to levitate in midair, looking down upon his fellow Emperors and Dukes as if he were a god possessing unimaginable power.

"You are mistaking my words." Diablo says calmly. "I am not asking you to become Sharmur's Planar Warden. I am commanding you. And make no mistake... this is an incredible gift, but it is also a heavy burden. In the future, I will expect many more of you to become Wardens. This is demonkind's best method of obtaining Cosmic Power, but it is a path that will cost each of you dearly."

Yardrat frowns slightly. "What is your meaning, Diablo? Are you saying we cannot become Demon Deities without shackling ourselves in some way?"

"That is precisely my meaning." Diablo answers without hesitation. "Look at the historical precedents. Wolfram became a Deity, but for less than a handful of hours. He perished, his body and soul turning to ash. Mephisto stepped past the boundary as well, but he only managed to step into the lowest of all Cosmics, a weakling capable of

trampling mortals wantonly while being utterly helpless against any self-respecting Cosmic, such as myself and Founder Dosenia."

"Think of me, as well." Diablo continues. "I am not a Cosmic. I merely 'wield' Cosmic Power. This body of mine is but a suit of skin that possesses true Cosmic Power. It once belonged to an Apex Cosmic, a Titan of unimaginable strength from the Primordial Era named 'Morva.' But me? I am barely able to control a portion of its power. In the end, I am still only a Demon Emperor like the rest of you, but one who has cheated to reach a higher boundary."

Diablo lowers his eyes. He shakes his head in dismay.

"All of you. All of us. We demons are a cursed species. We are soul manipulators, through and through. We devour the souls of countless Sentients to fuel our ascension. This historically granted us tremendous power, but it has also placed an invisible limiter on our species. Stepping past the boundary of Mortal to become Cosmic is... almost impossible."

Kristoff massages his chin. "You're saying that no matter how many souls we eat, we can never step past the rank of Demon Emperor? None of us can become Demon Deities, no matter how we try?"

Diablo sighs, his voice soft. "For the past six years, the First Emperor and I have quietly experimented with the power granted by Morva's body. We came to many startling conclusions, obtaining results that proved there is a deep order to the universe than cannot be explained by mere evolution or happenstance."

He pauses.

"This sense of order is known as the *Akashic Laws*. And these Laws do not tolerate the evils of soul manipulation past a certain point. They are the reason demons cannot step into the rank of Cosmic without making deep and painful sacrifices."

Melody listens quietly, then raises her hand.

"You keep mentioning making sacrifices. What sorts of sacrifices would I need to make to become a Planar Warden?"

Diablo smiles.

"Now *that*... that is the question you should be asking."

He levitates downward, then strolls into the middle of the assembled demons so that everyone can be within an equal distance of him when he speaks.

"Before I answer your question, let me first tell you what a Planar Warden is. It is a higher form of demon identity, one that achieves Cosmic Power not through harnessing the power of massed-souls, but through the power of one or more celestial bodies."

"Specifically," Diablo says, glancing around the assembled group, "the energy contained within a planet."

Emperor Nymph narrows her beautiful eyes. "You said before that my abilities are required to create a Planar Warden. Is that because... I can manipulate the life-force of a planet?"

"You are a lot like Archangel Uzziel in that way." Diablo says, affirming her guess. "Nowhere near as strong as the progenitor of demonkind, but your abilities aren't too dissimilar. By linking the power of a planet's core to the soul of a given demon, we can drastically elevate them, turning an Emperor into a Cosmic."

Diablo continues. "If this sounds too good to be true, that's because *it is*. To give an example, if we link Melody's soul to Sharmur, then she will indeed be easily capable of rising to the rank of a Demon Deity. But this power... it will only remain in effect so long as she is within the voidspace of Sharmur. If she were to travel to Hell or pass through a Warpgate to visit another world, she would immediately lose that power... or worse."

"Or worse?" Melody asks, her heart skipping a beat. "Does that mean I could die?!"

Diablo doesn't immediately answer her question. Instead, he changes the subject.

"There are three types of Planar Wardens. Each type is more powerful than the last. But to obtain such great strength, one must pay a higher and higher price."

Diablo holds up a single finger.

"The first type of Warden is a Free Warden. An Emperor who becomes a Free Warden will immediately obtain the power of a Demon Deity! Even so, they will be little more than a Bottom Cosmic... the same as Mephisto. Capable of battling 7th-Level Psions, but useless against any foe stronger than them."

The Emperors nearby share a mixture of emotions, with some immediately excited about obtaining any form of Cosmic Power since they already have no chance at obtaining that power through their own efforts, but others appear decidedly less enthusiastic.

Yardrat assumes that Diablo will reveal more than a few downsides to this powerup, and he is proven correct.

"To become a Planar Warden, you must link your power to a celestial body, such as a planet's core." Diablo explains. "All of you will have the opportunity to choose how deeply you wish to commit to becoming a Warden, but suffice it to say, a Free Warden shows the least commitment, obtains the smallest increase in power, but also takes the fewest risks. You will become a Bottom Cosmic, retain your Demon Emperor power if you leave the world you protect, and if your world falls, you will suffer no major ill effects."

"Free Wardens are 'free' because they are barely Wardens at all." Diablo continues. "Your shallow commitment also means you will not offer a strong deterrence to the enemies we will form following the fall of the Kolvaxians. The Volgrim will be able to easily kill you. Choosing to become a Free warden is, in essence, a selfish choice. You'll gain enough power to stomp any mortal into bloody pulp, but you will collapse when faced with any other truly dangerous Cosmic threat. And for that reason, I do not advise anyone to choose to become a Free Warden. Only the most selfish and free-spirited among you, who do not wish to give up their current status and freedom, should do so."

He pauses for a moment to evaluate the expressions on the other Demons' faces.

"There is one advantage to turning some of you into Free Wardens though. And that is that you will retain your Emperor-level strength if you leave the world you protect, meaning you can still project formidable levels of mortal power throughout the Labyrinth and other demon-controlled worlds. For those of you who value your freedom and only want a mild power-up, becoming a Free Warden of a weaker planet with few greater prospects might not be such a bad idea. For example, a simple mining colony that produces Demonstone might not be too valuable in the eyes of the Volgrim, while Paradise-class planets certainly would be."

Diablo clears his throat, despite not particularly needing to do so in his astral form.

"The second type of Warden is known as a Planetary Warden. The costs you pay will be higher. The sacrifices, deeper. And the risks, higher. But you will also gain a far greater boost in strength, because you will be giving up all your current demonic power to reach a higher level of existence. Any of you who choose to become a Planetary Warden will obtain the might of a Low Cosmic, one step above a Bottom Cosmic. You will become

capable of contending with 8th Level Psions, which will make you a formidable existence in protecting your chosen world."

"We have to give up our demonic power?" Emperor Serena asks. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I said." Diablo answers. "To become a Planetary Warden, you must disperse all of the souls in your body and devolve to the level of a mere Demon Grunt. By doing so, the power of a planet can more deeply energize your soul, and you can become a much mightier Cosmic Entity."

Some of the Emperors look at each other with indecisive eyes. Yardrat, in particular, appears unimpressed.

"We have to devolve into Grunts? If I'm not mistaken, that means unlike a Free Warden, when a Planetary Warden leaves their designated planet, they won't possess the power of an Emperor. We'll essentially become trapped on our chosen world. We'll be Low Cosmics, yes, but if we ever need to leave we'll barely be stronger than the average human. This is an unacceptable tradeoff in my eyes."

"To obtain greater power, we demons must make sacrifices." Diablo says, his voice cold. "Do you believe I have become unstoppable in my Archdemon form without paying a high price? I can no longer easily exit Morva's body. I am trapped inside of it, because I have fused my flesh with his. I can no longer partake in the pleasures of mortal life. If you wish to obtain the power to crush planets with the wave of a hand, you will also need to make sacrifices."

Because of Diablo's words, the other Emperors feel an inexplicable sadness. They suddenly realize that while Diablo may feel like an invincible juggernaut, an avatar of glory for demonkind, he has actually chosen to become a prisoner in another entity's body... all in order to assist the rise of his people.

Some of the demons, though not all of them, feel a deep shame from their previously selfish thoughts. They rethink the offer Diablo has made, finding that compared to the price he's paid, the price of becoming a Warden is not nearly as severe...

"If you absolutely must maintain your freedom and attachments to the mortal world, then becoming a Free Warden is your best choice." Diablo explains patiently. "But if you intend to make a greater stand for demonkind... if you are like me and willing to make a

deeper sacrifice on behalf of your people to ensure ten billion years of glory... then you should consider the other options."

He pauses to let his words sink in. Then, he continues.

"The final option you may choose is to become a Stellar Warden. Without a doubt, this is in many ways the most restrictive of all the options, but it will also grant you a vast and tremendous power. You will become a Middle Cosmic, capable of even doing battle with our mightiest enemy, the 9th Level Psion known as Founder Dosen. You will possess a power and status equal to myself! By becoming a Stellar Warden, you will be *more* than capable of defending our core worlds. The Volgrim will not dare to rashly engage in any form of warfare in a star system protected by you... and that is why I hope to convince some of you to accept this heavy burden."

Diablo heaves a great sigh.

"The cost will be unimaginable. You will have to bind your life not only to one or more planets within your chosen system, but its central star as well! You will have to disperse your demonic power entirely, and if you ever attempt to leave the system, you will quickly wither and die! This means your fate will be completely tied to the fate of your star system, so you will have no choice but to defend it with your life!"

He looks at Yardrat deeply.

"This choice I am asking all of you to make is not just about becoming stronger or what benefits you will obtain. It is a strategic decision that requires a degree of selflessness, as well as answering the big question all demons need to ask themselves during the coming years."

"What is 'the big question'?" Yardrat asks.

"That question," Diablo answers, "is... 'what does it mean to be a demon?' Are we parasitic life-forms that feed off the souls of others? Are we flesh-eating creatures that lurk in the shadows, devouring Sentients in the same way as the Plague does? Or can we become more than we are now?"

He continues.

"Demons devour souls to empower themselves. But is that the only method we have to achieve greater heights? Psions become mightier by slowly building up the foundation of their Psionic Seeds. Angels become mightier through the power of Faith. Humans grow

through tempering their willpower. Why can't we find a method to grow that does not turn us into soul manipulators? If we were to succeed in this ambition, perhaps we could rise to the rank of Cosmic far more easily."

A strange light flickers in Emperor Serena's sightless eyes. "You speak of the Belial Booster. The Wordsmith has already found a way to empower demons without consuming Sentient souls. Do you believe we might be able to develop our own method?"

"I do." Diablo says softly. "As of now, I don't know what that method might be, but the Belial Booster proves we have more than one road to elevating ourselves. We should earnestly research other avenues as the years pass us by. I hope that someday Planar Wardens will become unnecessary, but at least for now, that is not the case."

After he finishes speaking, Diablo turns to look at Melody expectantly, and this causes all the other demons to do so as well.

For several seconds, a mixture of expressions pass over Melody's face. She frowns, scowls, becomes uncomfortable, then frowns again.

"I... I don't know. Other than becoming stronger, it seems the price I'll have to pay to become a Planetary or Stellar Warden is really high..."

"Yes. Very high indeed." Diablo affirms. "Let me be clear. All of the Warden empowerment methods require you to stand on or around the voidspace of the planet you are assigned in order to wield your Cosmic power. Leaving the voidspace will weaken you back to Emperor if you are a Free Warden, to a Grunt if you are a Planetary Warden, or it will even *kill you* if you are a Stellar Warden. But if you want to truly commit yourself to our people, to our cause, then I advise you to consider the higher levels seriously."

Diablo gently squeezes Melody's shoulder.

"I know that you wrestle with your failure at Sharmur. You blame yourself for what happened to the demons that lived here. In truth, it was not your fault... but if you wish to take responsibility, then you should earnestly commit yourself to preventing such future tragedies from ever occurring. Sharmur is a Paradise-class world. It would not be appropriate for the demon stationed here to be a selfish-minded Free Warden. We need a true-blooded fighter for the cause to stand up against the Plague and the Volgrim alike. I hope you'll consider this when you make your choice."

Melody closes her eyes. She slowly nods, thinking carefully as she dwells upon Diablo's words.

While she thinks about what type of Warden to become, Emperor Yardrat pipes up. "I have a question, Diablo. If it's true that becoming a Plentary Warden or a Stellar Warden will require us to weaken ourselves to the rank of Grunt, then why are you even talking to us Emperors and Dukes anyway? We should retain our strength! You should just pick a Grunt and empower them to the rank of Warden!"

Several other Emperors blink in surprise. Emperor Fae laughs uproariously. "Hahaha! Well said! I can't believe I didn't think of that! Why ruin a perfectly good Emperor when we can just put some random Grunt in place instead??"

But Diablo does not laugh. He sighs.

"That won't work. The reason an Emperor has to become a Warden is because your bodies and souls have already been tempered over the years by all the souls you've ingested. Even if you disperse your demonic power, you'll still be capable of returning to and surpassing your former strength. If we attempt to force a mere Grunt to elevate themselves... they will immediately explode and die. The power of a Cosmic Entity is just too much for their fragile bodies to handle."

"Oh." Yardrat mutters, feeling a little depressed his idea won't work. "But... that begs another question. How do you know all of this? How do you know about all these Warden ranks and the like?? You've never empowered a Warden before! We'd know if one of our fellow Emperors went missing!"

Diablo remains quiet for a short time.

"You're wrong. The reason I know all of this is because I've already successfully empowered a Warden. The First Emperor and I worked hard on testing that our methods could succeed. We tried empowering Grunts, Lords, and Barons, but all of them either perished in the most violent of ways, or the empowerment simply failed. As for the successful tests, we made our own Emperors by feeding certain Barons enough souls to elevate them to the level of Dukes and Emperors. Finally, we used Emperor Nymph's magic to create the only successful Warden."

Several Emperors blink in surprise. They look at Nymph, only to see an expression of complete confusion on her face. The pretty green-haired demoness looks around at the

others, then lifts up her palms. "What? Don't look at me! I have no idea what Diablo's talking about!"

"Nymph doesn't remember because the First Emperor erased her memories." Diablo explains. "The First Emperor's existence is transient. They cannot be properly recalled by mortal minds. Additionally, we wanted to ensure nobody, especially not the Volgrim, found out about our tests. That's why we made sure to do all of this on a remote world in the Northern Quadrant. We kept our activities quiet enough that not even Founder Dosena could sense our presence. The First Emperor additionally erected an Aura Suppression Field around that distant world. Now, the Demon Deity of Solitude protects a world surrounded by the Plague in all directions. No other demons reside on his world. He is constantly under threat. But that ensures he is at his mightiest."

At this revelation, every demon in the audience practically jumps out of their skin. Yardrat audibly gasps. "Wait, you mean to tell us there's another Demon Deity out there? A Warden nobody knows about?! We need to meet him!"

"You don't." Diablo retorts. "Demon Deity Nihilon is a unique existence. The more demons that surround him, the weaker he is. But the more isolated he is, the more powerful he becomes. At this moment, he is even capable of doing battle with the Archdemon on equal terms. He is highly suited for protecting his world from the Plague."

Diablo's eyes flash. He knows that the First Wordsmith is no doubt watching this conversation, but that fact does not matter anymore. He has already begun to enact his great plan. Nothing Jason Hiro does will be able to stop him, not for a while at least.

As for Dosena learning of Demon Deity Nihilon's existence? That won't matter either. Nihilon might be capable of fighting her on equal terms. She won't dare to fly deep into Plague-controlled space to fight him. She has enough on her plate.

"One more question." Yardrat says. "You seem keen on avoiding Free Wardens. Is there no tactical value in having Emperors who can obtain a minor level of Cosmic power without any real downsides?"

"Of course there is. Of course." Diablo says twice. "One problem I have identified is that as we assault Plague-controlled worlds, the time required for me to seize their planetary cores so the Plague can no longer replicate is dependant on how quickly I can neutralize the millions, billions, or perhaps even trillions of Plagueborn living on said

world. This is why I had all of you Emperors and Dukes help me, today. The more of you there were, the faster we could cut down these monsters."

He continues. "If too many Emperors become Planetary Wardens or Stellar Wardens, we won't have enough of you to fight on the frontlines. We'll lose momentum and capturing speed! This is why Glinch's pills have come at such a good time. Crude though they might be, his exobeast-pills offer us a new method to empower Emperors! With their help, we can thus make more Wardens, and take over more and more worlds! While the Volgrim are helpless against the Plague and the humans struggle to come back from the brink of extinction, we can use our vast reserves of demons to quickly expand and conquer worlds! We must strike while the iron is hot."

"That's what I thought." Yardrat says. "I think if I'm going to become any sort of Warden, it should be a Free Warden. My powers are much too useful to have me trapped on a world, unable to create portals to elsewhere in the galaxy. I can think of several other Emperors in a similar situation."

"I disagree." Diablo argues. "You are a fantastic candidate to become a Stellar Warden, Yardrat. You could project portals all across the galaxy without needing to leave your designated world. As a Middle Cosmic, you might obtain new powers you never thought possible! Compared to the power granted by a Bottom Cosmic... tsk. I think you're valuing your freedom too much."

Yardrat massages his chin. "Hmm. Possibly. I suppose that's not the worst logic I've ever heard."

"Auger should become a Stellar Warden." Fae says. "His powers are incredibly useful already, and he always stays out of the big fights. If he can become way stronger just by sitting on some backwater planet, we demons might become unstoppable! We'd kick 800 trillion asses with him at our backs!"

"That's certainly worth considering." Diablo says, his tone non-committal. "Ahem. In any case, Emperor Melody. Have you made your choice?"

Melody nods slowly. "I think I have. But to be clear, I can pick any of the options, right? You're letting me decide?"

"It's a permanent choice." Diablo answers. "I don't want to force anyone into something that will drive them insane after a few thousand years. It's best if you choose

yourself. I can only tell you the upsides and downsides and let you be the judge of your own fate."

Melody looks around at all the expectant faces. She lowers her eyes, then closes them, heaving a great sigh.

"...alright. I've made my decision, then."

Part 535: Hope Awakens

Hope Hiro's eyes flutter open and shut. For a period of time he can't determine whether it is long or short, he tries to wake up, but all he sees is blackness, with the occasional flickers of light and shadowy figures standing over him.

Sometimes Hope hears voices. Male, female? He can't tell.

Their words are inaudible.

The pain wracking his body is like a dull ache, slowly pummeling his tendons and bones. Over time, it weakens and becomes part of the background static. Eventually, it disappears entirely.

Once more, the Second Wordsmith opens his eyes. This time, the world comes into focus.

"Uh... uhhh..."

Hope groans weakly. The confusing noises around him clear up, and Solomon's face appears overhead, looking down at him with a smile.

"You've returned to the realm of the living." Solomon says.

"Solo... mon..." Hope mutters. "Was I... asleep?"

"Comatose." Solomon answers succinctly. "It's been a long three months of transitioning you back to accelerated time-dilation. But we can talk about that later."

Amelia appears overhead, her beautiful smile contrasting with her exhausted and sleep-deprived eyes.

"Hope! Oh thank goodness, you're awake! I was so worried, I thought you might never wake up again..."

With Amelia's help, Hope slowly pulls himself up to a sitting position as he lays back against the pillows in his bed. He dizzily looks around the room, feeling as if he's looking at the world through a fishbowl filled with water.

"Easy, now." Solomon says. "You're still a few percentage points out of dilation-sync. It won't be possible for you to walk around for another few hours. Best to just sit there and close your eyes if the dizziness becomes too severe."

Hope slowly nods at Solomon, but he doesn't fully comprehend the Knowledge Seeker's words. His gaze lingers on Amelia, but then it shifts to a blonde-haired woman standing across the room, as well as... a Technopath he doesn't immediately recognize.

Hope squints at the woman and the Technopath, trying to peer through his distorted vision to identify them.

"Oh... it's, uh... Miss Kindelmann." Hope says, before metaphorically scratching his head as he tries to identify the Volgrim beside Elizabeth. "And you are...?"

"Designation: Psymin Miralax." Comes the reply. "Celestial Designer. Created time-acceleration device. Saved your life."

"Oh. Well, thank you, then." Hope says. Normally he'd probably hold some hostility toward a Volgrim, but at this moment he simply lacks the energy for any strenuous emotional outbursts. "I guess if Solomon asked you for help, the situation... wasn't simple."

Solomon looks away in embarrassment. "...Well. That is to say, I was ignorant on one thing in particular. I didn't know about Time Dilation Sickness. If I did, I probably wouldn't have needed Miss Psymin's assistance. But, well, since I already took her out of stasis, it felt impolite to shove her back in."

"Time Dilation Sickness?" Hope asks with a frown. "That sounds serious. Man. What was I even doing? I remember I... I fought Mephisto, then I was at a bar, or something... then I, uh... it's a bit blank after that. Then I woke up here?"

"Let's get you caught up to speed." Solomon says.

* * *

Solomon spends a solid half-hour answering all of Hope's questions.

The Second Wordsmith listens while Solomon explains to him just what sort of life-threatening crisis he had fallen into. His frown deepens as he realizes that if the time dilation were any higher, he might have imploded the moment he arrived inside the Hall of Heroes.

"...So you're saying because the time dilation was 'only' 100 to 1 that I managed to survive with soul-wracking pain? If it were 150 to 1, or perhaps even higher, I'd have collapsed into a singularity?"

"I wouldn't use terms as extreme as that. But yes, the situation would have almost certainly instantly killed you. We're lucky you're a Wordsmith with a decently strong body."

"Yeah. But not strong enough, apparently." Hope says quietly.

"All that matters is we saved you." Amelia says, touching Hope's face gently. "I'm... I'm so glad you pulled through. I couldn't sleep properly for months."

"Sorry I made you worry like that." Hope says, smiling back at her. He turns his gaze to Solomon after a few moments. "My head's still a bit of a mess right now. Solomon, can you get me properly adjusted back to the Hall's time-flow? This distortion is making my head hurt. It's like I'm looking at all of you through a fogged-up mirror."

"You simply need more rest." Elizabeth says. "I worked with Miss Miralax to create an artifact capable of slowly stabilizing your time dilation status relative to the Hall of Heroes. It not only adjusts the temporal properties of your body, but your spirit and soul as well. The last two were my contribution, but the first was by Psymin."

"My contribution meant little." Psymin says with her trademark robotic tone. *"Solomon could have replicated my feat. With ease."*

"That's true, but to be fair, I'd have been relying on your memories and knowledge." Solomon says, his tone more respectful than Hope would usually expect. "The fact of the matter is, you are a genius when it comes to technology. Your assistance was greatly appreciated."

He pauses for a moment to look at Psymin with deep meaning.

"We will *not* forget the help you've given us."

Solomon glances at Hope, and the Wordsmith nods.

"He's right. We won't." Hope affirms.

The Wordsmith directs a look of gratitude in Psymin's direction. In his heart, Hope concludes Psymin probably didn't play an extremely pivotal role in saving him, but this was most likely Solomon's way of playing nice with her. After all, it wouldn't hurt to have a card to play in terms of befriending the Volgrim in the future. Treating one of their last remaining Celestial Designers well might help brook a diplomatic treaty someday.

While Hope certainly cannot help but feel an intense loathing and disgust toward the Volgrim, especially for the callous and villainous ways they treated humanity over the

millennia, in the end the Plague is still the Milky Way's greatest threat.

Perhaps Jason and Hope won't be able to solve the Plague Problem. If not, then all the Sentients would need to rise up and work together in the future.

It wouldn't do him any favors to have turned the Volgrim into his blood-enemies!

Slowly, Hope closes his eyes. The pain of his distorted vision fades somewhat, allowing him to better think as he sags against his pillows.

"Any change on the situation outside?" Hope asks.

"I have no way to monitor realspace." Solomon answers. "You have been in treatment for three months. Ninety days. That's nearly one full day in the outside world. As far as what has happened following your collapse, I am clueless."

"Hmm. I'll need to give you a way to monitor the situation externally, then." Hope says, keeping his tired eyes closed.

Unlike Jason, Hope has no equivalent to the Spynet Sphere. He never found it necessary, since his utilization for his secret realm was very different from Jason's.

But now, thinking back on the time since the Hall of Heroes' creation, Hope decides he needs some method to monitor the external situation. Especially since he's now trapped inside until he finds a way to mitigate the effects of Temporal Distortion!

"Can you give me any solutions for curing Time Dilation Sickness?" Hope asks, still keeping his eyes closed. "Any of you. Solomon, Psymin, Elizabeth...? It'll be terrible for humanity if I end up trapped in the Hall."

Psymin blinks her eyes. *"Some options known. Not desirable. Best solution: spend little time inside accelerated space. The more time spent, the greater the side effects."*

"I might be able to fashion an artifact of some sort." Elizabeth says. "Something to reduce the severity of time dilation's side effects on you. But... I'm not Camael. I'm quite slow at making artifacts, and mine are rather crude and unwieldy."

"Wordsmithing is likely the best solution." Solomon concludes. "I'm certain there must be some combination of Words of Power that will allow you to travel between Realspace and Dilated Space with minimal negative side effects."

Hope nods slowly.

"Yeah. Less time spent... artifacts... Words of Power... these all sound... good to... me..."

Hope's consciousness wavers. After a short while, he falls back asleep, leaving the four others in the room to their own thoughts.

Amelia gently lowers Hope back into a laying position. She tucks him in while he falls asleep, then kisses his forehead.

"He's just tired." Amelia says. "Right?"

"Yes. A bit more rest will give the artifact time to fully align his temporal position." Solomon confirms. "Even if he's only 0.01 time units out of sync, it can still stress his brain. It's best if we let the Wordsmith rest a while."

"I will take my leave." Psymin says. *"Require maintenance."*

"I can help you with that. But I have some friends who are better with technology than me." Elizabeth replies.

"Understood. I thank you for your hospitality." Psymin concludes.

The two of them depart, leaving Solomon and Amelia alone.

"Hmm..." Solomon mutters. "I can only imagine the situation in realspace right now."

"Hopefully things are going well enough out there." Amelia answers. "It's only been a day. How much could possibly change?"

"You would be surprised." Solomon retorts.

Emperor Melody sighs deeply as she looks at Diablo levitating above her.

"I choose to become... a Stellar Warden."

On the world of Sharmur, a few hundred Emperors and Dukes listen intently to her declaration, blinking with surprise at her words.

"That is quite a statement." Diablo says slowly. "Do you understand that you will be forever locked to this system, unable to leave? To become a Stellar Warden, you must tie every part of your life force to the celestial entities residing within Sharmur's voidspace. Leaving will mean a rapid decaying of your body and a quick, brutal death. If an enemy attacks, you will have no choice but to stay and fight them."

"I know." Melody says, her tone even. "Needing to stay and fight... to put up a fight until the end... it's what I should have done the first time Sharmur was attacked. I know I wouldn't have made a difference. But that was then, and this is now. I won't let the Plague or the Volgrim roll over my friends again. Sharmur will become a world where demons and humans can live in peace, without worry of their lives coming to an end. I'll fight with all I have to make that happen."

Diablo turns his attention from Melody to the other elites around her.

"Sharmur is a paradise-class world. It is a strategic resource, ideal for raising a populace of future powerhouses. It also happens to be the type of world the Plague prefers to devour, as well as the Volgrim, the humans, and all the other Sentients. It is for this reason I advised earlier that Wardens of paradise-worlds should not be Free Wardens. We need raw military might to defend our strategic locations of interest."

He pauses for a second to let his words sink in.

"But make no mistake. Becoming a Stellar Warden is a particularly excellent choice for Melody to make. That is because, depending on the system, one's power can be amplified significantly. The power any Warden can harness, and the boundary of their Cosmic Might, is dependent on the *quality* of the best world in that system. But the amount of power they can wield, the mana at their disposal, that is affected by the *quantity* of worlds in their system."

Diablo motions with his hands, causing mana to build above his palm and form a micro-simulation of the worlds inside Sharmur's star system.

"The Shredder System consists of the Ripper Star as well as twelve planets and thirty one moons. The Ripper Star is only slightly bigger and more luminous than Sol, the star of demonkind's homeworld, Earth."

He points at one of the planets nearest the sun.

"Sharmur is a paradise-class planet. But in truth, there is one other minor life-bearing world in this system we never expended time to colonize. The Plague has already taken it over, as well. This planet will fall to our combined forces much more quickly than Sharmur did, as its life energy is much lower than Sharmur's."

Melody listens quietly while Diablo patiently explains the Shredder system's dynamics, clearly reaching toward a greater point.

"If you were to choose to become a Planetary Warden, you would only need to disperse your demonic power and then attune your soul to Sharmur's core. But since you have chosen to become a Stellar Warden, this is merely the *first* step you must take. To obtain the complete status of a Stellar Warden, you must not only disperse your demonic power, but also simultaneously attune your body, spirit, and soul to the Ripper Star. After that, you will need to attune yourself one-by-one to each of the planets in the Shredder system."

He continues. "With each planet your body attunes to, your radius of power will magnify exponentially. You will become capable of traveling anywhere within the Shredder system's voidspace. This is another huge benefit of becoming a Stellar Warden: You can travel throughout the void to battle much more powerful adversaries. The more planets you attune yourself to, the greater your reserves of mana when battling your foes, and the further from the Ripper Star you'll be able to voidshift."

Melody, as well as all the other demons, raise their eyebrows in realization. It occurs to them that these Warden titles and attributes are far more flexible than they originally expected.

"This makes me wonder," Yardrat interjects, "if a system with fewer planets would ultimately end up with a far weaker Stellar Warden? Would it then be better to assign a Planetary Warden?"

"The choice is up to each of you." Diablo says, spreading his arms. "Do not forget that demonkind already controls several other worlds, such as Diabolus, Hell Harbor, Numaria, and other such systems. We need to not only assign Wardens to newly conquered worlds, but important strongholds we already control, now. We can rapidly inflate our standing war strength which will provide us inestimable benefits in the long run. In the end, some Wardens will be mightier than others. That is merely the balance of the Akashic Rules at play..."

* * *

As Diablo talks, one demon sits in the back of the Emperors, not particularly giving a damn.

Bael, despite coming along and joining in the fighting by fighting as a purely melee-focused attacker with his Matriarch Armor, wasn't able to actually do much. Like Rhesus, he could only kill any Plaguehosts who drew within range of his Big Bonk, and those

weren't very many after being whittled down by all the other Emperor's long-range attackers.

As far as all the complicated explanations given by Diablo, Bael barely pays a single iota of attention to them. He sits on a rock and yawns repeatedly, trying not to fall asleep while all the other demons shout cries of 'ooh' and 'ahh!'

But unlike Bael, the soul possessing his Matriarch Armor listens carefully.

Very carefully.

Ose frowns multiple times as she hears Diablo's explanation of what steps must be taken, all the gains demonkind will obtain, and other such tangible benefits.

[This Warden business is not as simple as Diablo makes it seem.] Ose says to herself. [Each Emperor we convert will become rooted to their world of choice. They won't be able to go out and help conquer other worlds, which will quickly slow down our expansion progress. Doesn't Diablo understand just how many star systems there are in the Milky Way? Tens of billions! We barely have two hundred elites here, and two-thirds of them aren't even Emperors. We'll have to rely heavily on Glinch to make up the difference... but how can it be so simple to just pop some pills made with exobeast blood and make a thousand new Emperors?]

Ose scrunches up her face. She eventually turns to Bael.

[Bael. Bael! IDIOT, wake up! Stop dozing off!]

Bael blinks in surprise, waking from a daydream involving multiple painfully cute bunnies frolicking in a meadow. "Uh... huh? Huh? What's up, Ose?"

[I have some problems with what Diablo's been saying.] Ose says, inhaling deeply to control her breathing. [Go up and ask him a few questions for me.]

Bael sighs. "Man, and here I was enjoying my nap..."

[SCREW YOUR NAP, you tiny-brained starfish! This concerns the future of demonkind! Just get over there and ask him these questions for me!]

Bael frowns at Ose's insults, but ultimately stands up and waddles forward, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Just tell me what to say so we can get this over with already..."

With the Matriarch Armor muffling Bael's voice, the other demons don't pay much attention to his ramblings, especially when Diablo is uttering such shocking words that

will affect the future path of their species! As Bael approaches, he pushes a few people out of the way, then raises his hand.

"Hey. Hey! Deebs! Got a couple questions over here real quick!"

Diablo pauses, glancing at Bael in surprise.

"Oh? Go on then, Duke of... hmm, are you still a Duke? I can't tell. You have a bit of an aura of an Emperor about you..."

"Right, yeah, Emperor or whatever." Bael says, not really caring, and instead trying to focus as Ose feeds her words through his ears to speak on her behalf. "So uh, I gotta ask, man. What happens if one of these fancy-shmancy Wardens, you know... gets eaten?"

"By the Plague?" Yardrat asks, a few feet away.

"Yeah!" Bael says. "Like what if the Plague *noms* on Melody and turns her into a bad girl? Then the Plague would have a super strong demon on their side."

"I don't actually know the answer to that question." Diablo replies. "The good news is, I believe any Wardens who are swallowed by the Plague would still be trapped on the worlds they defend. The Plague wouldn't suddenly have a new Cosmic Entity they can throw at our frontlines."

Bael pauses a moment to wait for Ose's input.

"Right..." Bael says slowly. "But it'd sure make retaking that world a lot harder, wouldn't it? Y'know, what with having a strong lady like Melody protecting it."

Yardrat's eyebrows arch up. "Bael makes a good point. If Melody becomes a Middle Cosmic on par with Diablo, but she is somehow defeated and converted by the Plague, we'll have given them a world they can protect with ease. We might never be able to retake Sharmur if that happened."

He glances at Melody and shrugs apologetically. "Of course, I am not only referring to you, but to any Warden controlling any world."

"I got the gist of the argument." Melody says, while slapping Yardrat's shoulder lightly. "No worries!"

Bael pipes up once more. "Oh also, uh, I gotta ask. What happens to Wardens if their worlds are blasted to smithereens?"

"That... is not something which will happen easily." Diablo says slowly. "But assuming Dosena or one of the Executors were to go all-out, or the Wordsmiths were to take extreme measures like they did with the Polaris System... each level of Warden would react differently."

"Free Wardens can retain their Emperor power. Their connection to their Warden-world is tenuous. If they die, their world will be just fine. Similarly, if their world is destroyed, they will suffer no ill effects."

"Planetary Wardens tie their life-force to their world. If they die, their world's core will likely begin to cool, then it will fall inert, ultimately losing its magnetic field and becoming subject to the bombardment of celestial objects. Similarly, if their world is destroyed, Planetary Wardens will die."

"Finally, Stellar Wardens tie their life force not only to their system's star, but to its many worlds as well. If that star is destroyed, the Warden will suffer a serious injury, but so long as the planets remain, the Warden will simply drop from the rank of Middle Cosmic to Low Cosmic. However, if all the worlds in that system are destroyed, such as through a supernova, the Warden will perish."

He pauses.

"Similarly... if a Stellar Warden is slain, all the worlds in their system will shrivel up and die. The star will lose its ability to generate fusion, and... the results can be imagined."

The Emperors all fall silent. Their eyes lower in thought as they contemplate this new information.

"We'd truly be tying our lives to the stars and planets..." Emperor Serena says.

"It also means anyone who can kill a Stellar Warden will ruin all of the planets in that system." Yadrat points out. "If the Volgrim or some other enemy are desperate to cripple us..."

"Sure, but that's only *if* they have the ability to fight a Cosmic Entity." Melody retorts. "You've seen how tough the Archdemon is. Imagine if all of us could have that kind of power!"

Emperor Fae rolls her eyes. "This is stupid! So what if destroying a planet kills the Warden and vice-versa? What a bunch of yadda-yadda! If we've got an enemy that can

blow up a planet, a Cosmic, or a freaking star, we're already in big trouble, you bunch of dumb dopes!"

"That is true..." Yadrat concedes.

Ose listens silently from within the Matriarch Armor. She mulls over the costs and benefits, then leans back.

[These Wardens aren't a silver bullet, but they do solve a lot of problems. I have to tenuously agree with Diablo's arguments on the matter. Melody can serve as an example for what a powerful Warden can accomplish. Perhaps by elevating her, we'll obtain clues about how much strength the other Emperors can wield once they reach her level. It would certainly give us a solid foundation to make further judgments.]

She shrugs.

[And, at the very least, if Melody dies, we'll only have lost Sharmur. We already lost it once. One more time won't be any different...]

Diablo looks at the faces of everyone present. He watches as a consensus grows among his fellow Emperors.

He smiles.

"Then... are we all in agreement? Melody, knowing all the risks, do you still choose to become a Stellar Warden?"

Melody takes a few moments to think.

She evaluates the gazes of her fellow Emperors. Plenty of them want her to ascend if only for the selfish reason of seeing what sort of power they could possess, given they made the same choice. But most certainly appear to want her to make the choice due to it being a reasonable decision, given her desire to protect Sharmur at all costs.

"...I do, Diablo. Even knowing the downsides, I still intend to become a Stellar Warden."

"Good. Good!" Diablo says twice. "I like your decisiveness. In the future, I hope all of you will make similarly bold choices when your time comes to rule over a world! But now, enough talk."

Diablo's astral form vanishes. At the same time, the Archdemon becomes more animated, rising up to its full height and slowly making its way toward the assembled

Emperors.

"THE ASCENSION CEREMONY WILL BEGIN AT ONCE."

Part 536: Melody's Ascension

The Demon Emperors on Sharmur spread out, surrounding the Archdemon from all angles. They look up at Diablo's massive body as he wraps an orb of cosmic power around Emperor Melody, then levitates her into the air, up to the Archdemon's eye level.

Melody's heart beats like a drum. She swallows heavily, not sure of what is going to happen next. She watches as Diablo levitates not only herself, but Emperor Nymph and Emperor Fae as well, lifting them both up into the sky to levitate alongside her.

"Eh... what the heck?" Fae asks. "Why are you bringing me along too, Deebz??"

Diablo's voice booms throughout the sky.

"TO ALIGN AN EMPEROR'S SOULS WITH THE PLANETS, NYMPH'S POWER IS NECESSARY. BUT TO ALIGN THEM WITH THE STARS, I REQUIRE A DIFFERENT CONDUIT. EMPEROR BEELZEBUB WOULD BE A PREFERABLE CANDIDATE, AS HIS DOMAIN IS MOST ALIGNED WITH THE NUCLEAR ENERGY OF A STAR. HOWEVER, YOUR MAGIC MAKES FOR A SUFFICIENT ALTERNATIVE."

"Ah. So I'm runner-up." Fae snarks. "Well, whatever works! Let's get this over with."

The Archdemon remains silent for a moment. Diablo sweeps his gaze across the Emperors below.

"THIS NEXT PART WILL TAKE PLACE FAR FROM HERE, DEEP INSIDE THE VOID. YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO WITNESS ANYTHING WITH YOUR EYES. GAZE INSTEAD WITH YOUR SOULS... PERHAPS THEN YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SEE THE TRUTHS BEHIND MY ACTIONS."

A moment later, Diablo tilts his head. His gaze lifts to the sky above, and the burning sun warming the planet's surface...

His body begins to float.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, he flies upward, taking along Melody, Nymph, and Fae inside heavily-protected force fields of energy.

A minute later, Diablo races through the upper atmosphere, his massive body and thousands of tentacles moving much more slowly than a smaller, more agile Cosmic

might. Unlike the tiny and lithe Dosena, or the serpent-like Mephisto, the ancient body of Morva is simply too large to move with grace and speed. But what it lacks in speed it makes up for in momentum, becoming faster and faster as Diablo propels himself and the three Emperors forward via his cosmic power.

Before long, the planet of Sharmur becomes smaller and smaller, shrinking to a dot in the distance. Diablo's speed quickens thanks to the lack of gravity and friction slowing him down in the Void, and as such, he begins approaching and eventually exceeding the speed of light.

The three Emperors, having never personally set foot in outer space, become slightly dazed as they witness the unfiltered beauty of the cosmos, no longer shrouded by the haze of a planet's atmosphere. Naturally, with their keen eyes, they have observed the night skies countless times on worlds unsullied by light pollution and other ailments of Ancient Earth.

But even so, those sights pale in comparison to the weight of what unfolds before them now. Ten septillion points of light surround them, each one a star that could be a few lightyears away or tens of billions. They even find that if they focus on any single cluster of stars, they can become capable of seeing additional stars in that region as their eyes are exposed to the light from those distant points over time.

"The universe is... so.. beautiful..." Melody whispers.

"IT IS." Diablo answers, the Archdemon's voice booming throughout the void. **"THE UNIVERSE IS VAST. IT IS LARGER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE. OUR GALAXY IS NOTHING. A SPECK OF A SPECK OF A SPECK. MINUSCULE IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS. IF WE WISH TO PROTECT OUR HOME, WE MUST AMASS POWER... THE TERRORS IN THE UNKNOWN ARE MORE FEARSOME THAN YOU CAN FATHOM."**

Diablo continues traveling, drawing closer and closer to the Ripper Star in the heart of the Shredder System. As the star becomes larger, all three of the Emperors gasp, their eyes watering from the mind-boggling size of this one otherwise ordinary sun.

Until one were to come face to face with a powerful celestial object, they could never comprehend the scale of the universe. The world of Sharmur, by comparison, is but a grain of sand. The yellow star in the interior of the Shredder System is even bigger than

Sol, the star at the heart of Earth's system. Not by much, perhaps only twenty percent more massive, but still unbelievably vast in the eyes of these simple-minded demons.

"That's... I didn't realize stars were so big." Fae mutters. "I kinda just took it for granted since I never got up close to one before..."

Emperor Nymph sighs, her heart filled with an indescribable sense of wonder and awe.

"It's not only huge, but unimaginably powerful. At the heart of every world, there exists a core of liquid magma. That core is nowhere near as fearsome as this common, ordinary star..."

Diablo slows to a stop just a few hundred thousand miles from the Ripper Star's scorching hot corona. Naturally, as a Cosmic Entity, he could draw much closer, and perhaps even come into physical contact with the star without dying, but staying too close for too long could injure him quite badly, and eventually lead to death.

"WE ARE CLOSE ENOUGH NOW TO BEGIN THE RITUAL." Diablo says, his words causing Melody's heart to tighten. **"THIS NEXT PART WILL REQUIRE DEEP FOCUS ON YOUR PART, EMPEROR FAE. I WILL NEED TO RESONATE WITH YOUR SOUL, TO EMPOWER IT WITH MY COSMIC ENERGY, AND FINALLY, TO CREATE A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE RIPPER STAR AND EMPEROR MELODY'S CONSCIOUSNESS. BUT FIRST, EMPEROR MELODY... YOU MUST DISPERSE ALL OF THE SOULS THAT HAVE CORRUPTED YOUR VESSEL."**

Melody nods seriously. "Alright. How do I do that?"

The Archdemon falls silent. A moment later, Diablo's astral form materializes atop the gigantic body's head, then he levitates over to Melody's side.

"I will assist you." Diablo says without a trace of worry. "First, you must look inside yourself, to the source of your power. Then, you should close your eyes, reach down, and use a sharpened part of your soul to begin severing foreign material, bit by bit. As for me, I will hold onto these foreign souls as waste byproduct..."

Melody listens intently. She closes her eyes and directs demonit energy along her entire body toward the inside of her head, where her Mind Realm rests. There, Diablo helps her to visualize a mass of grey colored light that surrounds the true 'core' of her existence, a single dot of red light.

"That... that red dot... it's my true soul?" Melody asks.

"It is the core of your existence. Compared to the souls you have devoured until now, it is truly nothing." Diablo says. "Do you finally understand? The reason demons cannot easily become Cosmics is because stepping into the next realm is like trying to dig through a 100-foot-thick demonstone wall with a spoon. The 'wall of foreign souls' surrounds yours tightly, but becoming a Cosmic means your soul must be capable of handling all that Cosmic Energy on its own. Each individual foreign soul is simply too weak to do so."

He continues. "When Wolfram ascended, his soul had to forcibly increase in size because of the effects of Serena's magic, but it was still surrounded by the foreign soul matter that fought back, compressing and squeezing his soul until it finally shattered. The results would have caused him to lose his life even if the Seraphiim did not kill him."

"So..." Melody says slowly, "to become a Cosmic, the foundation of my soul must keep up with the increase of power?"

"That's right. And foreign souls are not a part of your natural strength. They are the strength of others which you have stolen to empower yourself. By relying on soul manipulation, the power of cosmic energy will slowly become harder and harder to control, eventually causing you to drop in cosmic strength until you are one no longer. In the wrong circumstances, your soul may simply implode from the pressure crushing it on all sides!"

"I understand." Melody says seriously. "Well then. Time to... remove all of the foreign soul energy."

With her eyes tightly closed, Melody begins attacking the foundation of her power. She grits her teeth and cries out in pain as she metaphorically rakes the grey barrier surrounding her soul with spiritual claws, tearing it apart piece by piece while her body violently shudders with agony.

"Aah! Aaargh! AHHHH!!"

She cries and wails while deliberately ripping parts of her soul out, shredding chunks of foreign grey soul matter apart with reckless abandon!

Meanwhile, Diablo carefully grabs at the removed soul matter and retains it inside a special pocket space of the Archdemon's body. He does not dare to absorb it himself,

since it would only weaken the Archdemon, but perhaps he might be able to make use of it later.

Fae and Nymph watch with concerned gazes as Melody shrieks louder and louder, her voice transmitting between the cosmic bubbles enveloping all of them.

"Damn... that looks like it freaking hurts!" Fae laughs uneasily. "...am I gonna have to go through that too? Maybe I'll just become a Free Warden. Sounds a lot less miserable."

"Obtaining power without pain is not the path of a successful powerhouse." Nymph admonishes. "You shouldn't be so cowardly, Fae."

"Pft. I like hurting others." Fae quips. "Not myself! I think I'll pass on this soul-rending nonsense!"

Melody's screams grow weaker and weaker. She wavers in and out of consciousness each time her demonic power plunges, dropping her from the rank of Emperor to Duke to Baron and even Lord. By the time she has reverted to a Grunt, she has already returned to her original demonic form; that of a Banshee, a demoness phenotype capable of shattering glass with a single scream.

Melody pants like a dog suffering from heatstroke. Sweat drips down her forehead to her chest as she looks up at Diablo with pained eyes.

"That's enough." Diablo says. "The remaining bits of foreign matter can stay. You do not need to fully expunge these leftover souls, as they are too weak to affect your future prospects. Well done, Melody. You were as decisive as I've come to expect. Now... for the next part."

Diablo motions toward Fae, causing her cosmic bubble to fly over and merge with Melody's.

"Damn, look at you!" Fae laughs at her comrade. "You were quite the hottie a minute ago! But I forgot, all those years ago when you were just a lil' Banshee-bitch, you were a scrawny little twig. Nothing but ribs! Hahahaha!"

Melody doesn't return the laugh. Already, her strength has faded enough that she feels a desire to fall into a deep, deep sleep.

Only her willpower keeps her awake as she looks away from Fae to Diablo, waiting for his instructions.

"Fae. Now is no time for goofing off." Diablo says calmly. "I shall next channel the Archdemon's cosmic power through your vessel. We must act quickly, before Melody's consciousness enters an eternal slumber. The trauma she has just inflicted on her soul could cause permanent damage if we are not fast enough to rectify the situation. A strong body will ruthlessly crush a weak soul, and her physical form is in fact just as powerful as it was before. It merely has yet to lose its efficacy."

Without waiting for Fae's acknowledgment, Diablo's astral form dissipates, causing the Archdemon's eyes to light up once more with invigoration.

"AT LAST," The Archdemon says, **"IT IS TIME TO FORM A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE RIPPER STAR AND MELODY'S SOUL. YOUR CONTROL OVER EXPLOSIVE FORCE WILL BE ESSENTIAL, EMPEROR FAE. BARE YOUR SOUL, AND I SHALL DO THE REST."**

"Yeah, yeah." Fae mutters. "Just get on with it!"

And so, Diablo does.

He reaches inside Fae's Mind Realm, causing her eyes to become glossy. She loses control of herself and begins rapidly forming mystical signs with her hands while speaking in an ancient language few entities in the universe can fully comprehend.

Fae symbolically reaches into the core of the Ripper Star. She grabs hold of its energy source and pulls out a long, invisible stream of power, a stream which she drags over to Melody's exhausted body and forcibly attaches.

This burning string instantly latches on to Melody's tiny red dot of a demonic soul, causing her to cry out in pain. But this exclamation quickly becomes dwarfed by the following shriek as a flood of immense cosmic power rushes through the newly formed Soul Bridge, blasting Melody's consciousness with an ungodly level of nuclear power.

"AAAAHHHH!!!"

Melody doubles over and curls up into the fetal position as her strength explodes once again! She shoots up from the rank of Demon Grunt back to Lord, then to Baron, Duke and Emperor!

Within just a few minutes, Melody's soul-power rockets upward, traveling back to its former heights while also surging toward a barrier she previously could not sense. This

barrier collapses instantly beneath the power of her star-infused soul, shattering into a million pieces as she smoothly but agonizingly erupts into the Cosmic Realm!

Melody's bones, tendons, and ligaments creak and shatter before reforming second later. They become refined by the power of the Ripper Star, all while she voicelessly screams into the cosmos, her mouth remaining open in a silent wail of agony!

Diablo watches. The Archdemon's expression does not change as she first breaks through the barrier of Bottom Cosmic into the realm of Low Cosmic, then swiftly approaches the final barrier, the path to Middle Cosmic!

Unlike the previous time Diablo did this, he does not hide this transformation with any magic arrays. He allows her aura to erupt out into the Void, causing many Cosmics within the Milky Way to abruptly sit up and take notice.

Key among these is none other than Founder Dosena, now back on the world of Volgarius. At that moment, she happens to be suppressing the Myriad Deity, trying to find a way to imprison him so she can keep him out of trouble, extract his soul, and refine his dragon-bones for the Volgrim Empire's use.

But when she senses the sudden evolution of a Cosmic Entity within the Milky Way, she abruptly stiffens, then swivels her head toward the 'western edge' of the Southern Milky Way. Her pupils shrink as she senses an immense level of threat growing in the Shredder System.

[What? Another Cosmic is rising? And it is a demon as well? Since when were demons able to so cheaply and easily break past Akasha's Barrier...?]

Her shock turns to disbelief, then a deep sense of wariness as the entity's aura rises from the rank of Bottom Cosmic to a Low Cosmic, then rapidly approaches a boundary the same as her own...

A Middle Cosmic!

When Melody finally breaches that final barrier, Dosena immediately activates Volgarius's alarm system. She transmits a burst of thoughts to Unarin, then she sends out a telepathic transmission to the one Low Cosmic currently stationed on Volgarius, Executor Riley.

[To me at once!] Dosena commands, her voice striking Riley's soul with concussive force.

It doesn't take more than five seconds for Riley to rip across space and arrive inside Dosena's sanctum, a hidden dimension orbiting Volgarius's voidspace. Without Dosena's express permission, none may enter even if they wanted due to possessing weaker strength than her.

[Second Founder.] Riley says, immediately dropping to one knee, closing her eyes, and bowing her head as a show of respect. [Command me!]

[You will hold this wretch for me.] Dosena orders, gesturing with her psionic energy toward Mephisto, now bound by exotic cables and held in place by Dosena's suppressive force. [I must immediately investigate the status of this new Threat. You will control Volgarius's Psions in my absence.]

[I contemplate, and I comprehend.] Riley says, rising to her feet and sending out a wave of Primal Psionic Force to hold Mephisto down. [The creature will not escape my grasp.]

[I expect not.] Dosena says, before stepping through a gap in space and racing away from Volgarius at her highest possible speed.

At the same time as Dosena departs, Melody completes her transformation. Her body, mind, and soul overflow with power, causing her to gasp as Diablo pulls away the protective membrane of Cosmic Energy he was previously enveloping her with.

Now... she no longer requires his protection.

Melody levitates in the void, but her consciousness departs the Milky Way for the briefest of moments.

Her soul transfers across the material planes, arriving in a special land more beautiful than any she has seen before. She steps into the True Cosmic Realm, also known as Akasha's Domain, where she sees many of the same sights that Mephisto once did.

She blinks her watery eyes in confusion at the many gem-trees dotting the realm. She inhales the rich spiritual energy in the air, becoming momentarily intoxicated by its aroma...

Then, a hazy figure speaks from behind her.

"My child. It is good to see you, though your identity is unknown to me."

Slightly dazed, Melody turns around to see a golden, ghost-like figure with an amorphous face standing a short distance away, his identity utterly unknown to her.

"Huh? Who are you?" Melody asks.

"I am The Creator." The entity states. "I am what is left of the Milky Way's former Ruler. And you are... the latest one of my children to attain the rank of Cosmic. I was not expecting you..."

The Creator cocks his head thoughtfully.

"A demon? Elevated by attaching your soul to the power of a star? I've seen this method used by other Rulers. It is nothing novel. Still, you have become a formidable, if limited, existence. It is time for you to approach the Staircase of Ascension, my child. There, we can see how you compare to others of your level."

Unsure of what The Creator is referring to, Melody simply nods, then follows behind him as he leads her toward that beautiful but intimidating golden staircase.

The moment they arrive at the bottom, The Creator pauses. He looks upward as a pair of powerful entities descend, one possessing the form of a winged biped, and the other a mere glowing orb of light.

"Hahaha! Creator! What's this? Another child of the Milky Way has ascended? You're starting to worry me, you old bastard!" The Winged Biped says. "I thought your Fate had been fully exhausted, but now the Milky Way is capable of producing a Middle Cosmic! That's actually... not too bad!"

"Another False Cosmic." The orb of light says. "Elevated not through their own efforts, but through the theft of a celestial body's energy."

The Creator's expression remains impassive. "My children are simply dealing with internal conflicts, Dark One, The Absolute. You need not worry about them."

The orb of light, also known as The Absolute, momentarily brightens as if emoting with regards to The Creator's statement. "Internal conflicts. The Akashic Barriers will soon disappear, but the Milky Way lacks Cosmics capable of battling on the frontlines. Your galaxy will fall."

"Save it for later." The Dark One says, glancing at the ball of light with a look of amusement. "We can't all seize the Milky Way's Uniqueness. We'll have to compete for it, fair and square. And I intend to be the victor of that competition."

"Your intentions matter not." The Absolute states authoritatively. "All that matters is strength. And my strength... is absolute."

The Dark One snorts with contempt, but says nothing else. He gestures to the staircase. "Well? Get on with the show! Let's see what this baby Cosmic can do."

Melody feels a sense of oppression hanging over her. These Rulers act with impunity, laughing at her as if none of the accomplishments made during her entire life matter in the slightest. She feels unwilling to make her Creator lose face, and so, she boldly walks toward the Staircase of Ascension.

"We'll see who's a 'baby Cosmic,' Dark One!" Melody shouts, her fighting spirit rising to unprecedented heights. "These stairs don't scare me!"

She places her foot down on the first step, intending to race upward at top speed, but the moment her foot makes contact, a wave of powerful Cosmic Energy falls from the heavens above and crashes into her figure, causing her to cry out in pain. She falls down, face-first, and gasps in surprise. "Ugh!!"

When The Creator explains what is happening to her, Melody's eyes light up.

So it's like that! Melody thinks. These steps can baptize my soul, making me a more powerful Cosmic. But it all depends on how far I can climb...

She grits her teeth, then stands up, and takes another step.

Boom!

A wave of Cosmic Energy crashes into Melody's body, but this time she doesn't fall down. She remains standing, ignores the trembling in her legs, and climbs up the third step.

Boom!

Then the fourth step.

BOOM!

The Cosmic Energy becomes stronger and stronger with each step, washing away the impurities of her soul, healing the wounds she suffered when she dispersed the foreign souls within herself, and even clearing out the remaining foreign soul remnants Diablo told her not to bother removing.

As it turns out, Diablo knew this would happen. He left those remnants inside so the Staircase of Ascension could instead purify them and add them to her foundation, solidifying herself as a Middle Cosmic powerhouse!

Step by step, Melody climbs upward, traveling far higher with much greater ease than Mephisto ever could. Unlike his garbage, sloppy soul foundation, Melody's is quite sturdy, though lacking in accumulation. Due to being empowered through an external means, her own power is limited, and so, when she reaches the twelfth step, she also hits the limits of her endurance.

Melody collapses into her shadow, gasping for breath and no longer able to more. She looks up the remaining staircase, seemingly infinite, with regret on her face.

"Twelve steps!" The Dark One 'praises' sarcastically. "Wow! What an achievement! Creator, it seems you're making a comeback! These 'impressive' Cosmics of yours might even be capable of doing battle with the juniors of Andromeda... if my children tie all their arms behind their backs! HAHAAHA!"

"An artificially evolved Cosmic is nothing at all." The Absolute says, losing all interest in Melody after she collapses. "The Milky Way is a sad existence. When the Akashic Barrier falls, your galaxy will be among the first to fall."

The Creator lowers his head, sighing quietly to himself.

"Perhaps that may be the case. Or perhaps not. Only time will tell..."

"Of course." The Dark One says with a smile. "Only time will tell. Hahaha. You keep telling yourself that, Creator."

He and The Absolute grow bored of the show and take their leave, departing into the skies to allow The Creator one final chance to talk to his progeny.

"Do not listen to those two." The Creator says, his tone warm. "You've done well, Melody. I know what it is that you seek. Strength to protect the ones you love. You are not a Candidate because you have no further room left to grow. But for now, you will have what you need. Your defensive capabilities will become formidable, given time. Once Diablo aligns your vessel to all the celestial bodies in the Shredder System, it will become very difficult for invaders, foreign and otherwise, to bring you down. Your home will be safe."

Melody blinks her tired eyes.

"I... I thank you... Creator. Thank you for showing me the way."

"Go in peace." The Creator replies, waving his hand to send her away.

And so, Melody departs the True Cosmic Realm, returning to the material plane to complete her evolution to the next state of existence...

Part 537: A Challenger Appears

While Melody undergoes her Ascension, the Emperors on Sharmur squint and gaze up at the Ripper Star, using their metaphysical senses to try and observe what is happening a million miles away due to their eyes and mundane senses being of no use.

Emperor Serena has the sharpest senses of those present. While her blind eyes might be useless compared to other Emperors, her Soul Vision happens to be particularly useful on this glorious day, allowing her to relay a play-by-play to the other Emperors, informing them of Melody's successful ascension to the rank of Demon Deity.

The Emperors and Dukes break out into cheers! They whoop and holler as Serena informs them of the immense power radiating off Melody's form. Before long, they too are able to sense the distant power radiating from the central point of the Shredder System.

"Incredible!" Emperor Kristoff exclaims. "It really worked! Diablo and the First Emperor are geniuses!"

Vespera's pitch-black eyes radiate a single point of light as the Emperor of Nebulae gazes at the burning sun in the sky. "Demonkind will finally gain the footing to stand on its own. Today marks a crucial day in our history."

Yardrat smiles. "Emperor Auger is looking forward to his future Ascension. Even I'm beginning to feel a hunger towards this level of power..."

While nearly all of the demons appear visibly excited, one of them does not. Bael sits on a rock, yawning inside the Matriarch's Helmet while blinking away tears of boredom. Unlike his allies, he doesn't have any special magical senses, so he can't tell what the heck is going on with Melody's Ascension. Not that it would matter anyway, as he'd just find it all a bunch of boring hype.

But unlike Bael, Ose watches keenly from inside the Matriarch Armor. Her eyes radiate a faint hunger as she listens to the other demons and keeps her spiritual senses locked on Melody's evolving aura.

Impressive. Ose thinks. Diablo wasn't lying. This method truly can mass-produce Deities. To think Diablo solved an issue as old as the demon species. The limitations are severe, of course, but being able to produce powerhouses on par with Founder Dosena is

incredible! So long as one Middle Cosmic defends a world, Diablo can always show up later as the Archdemon to reinforce that world's Warden, doubling their defensive power. Not even the Volgrim can do this, since they only have a single Middle Cosmic in their ranks!

Her expression becomes contemplative.

Unfortunately, this method will quickly deplete the number of Emperors at our disposal. Low and Middle Cosmics are powerful, yes indeed, but we need Emperors to maintain our forward momentum. Perhaps my plans for the Eden Initiative should be changed...

Ose's thoughts switch gears as she recalls the 'Garden of Eden' located beneath the crust of a certain hidden world in the Milky Way. On that world, seven massive EVE ships rest, waiting for a potential future tragedy to each take 500,000 demons away from the Milky Way and fly off into the Unknown. But in addition to those ships, a vast number of other contingencies reside inside Eden, plans Ose formed and executed in the hopes of someday empowering demonkind. Unfortunately, while she found she was capable of increasing demonkind's quantitative strength among the lower ranks, she could never bridge the gap between her species and the High Psions, numerous entities which all possessed Cosmic Power.

But that was then, and this is now.

Ose thinks about how Diablo has solved the qualitative dilemma, granting the demons a way to not only stand up against the Plague, but hold steady against the mightiest of the Psions, Founder Dosenia. Now, it seems increasing the power of mortal-level demons, such as Lords, Barons, and Dukes, would actually be a fantastic benefit to her species in the short and long term.

They need a way to continue charging into Plague-infested worlds to quickly clear them out. Relying on Emperors who will quickly be converted to Cosmics simply isn't a good enough option!

Unfortunately, even if I wanted to introduce these ideas to my fellow demons, I couldn't tell them directly. I have no way of speaking to them except through Bael. And Bael is NOT an adequate voice for my initiatives. I need someone else... someone relatively intelligent, loyal, and capable of speaking my words with some level of authority...

Ose's expression becomes gloomy.

In her mind's eye, only two candidates appear, one of them being ADAM, who would feel quite alien and worrisome to the demons, and a second individual, someone she would never pick under ordinary circumstances.

No... devils, does it have to be her? Ose thinks, pressing her palms forcefully against her eyes. *It's only marginally less bad than relying on Bael! I can't seriously be thinking of using HER as my voice! But what other choice do I have? She's a Baron, and she's loyal... she's relatively intelligent... oh, if only I had another moderately intelligent demon I could rely on!*

She lowers her hands, feeling a thousand years older. Then she turns her attention to Bael.

[Idiot. Hey idiot. BAEL! Wake up and pay attention!]

Bael's drooping eyes blink open. He wakes up from his boredom-inspired stupor and looks around.

"Huh? Who said that? Ose?"

[Yes, moron, it was me.] Ose growls. [Listen. Tell Yardrat to send you back to the Labyrinth. You and I need to make a trip back to the Garden of Eden.]

Bael stares ahead blankly for five seconds.

"...the whuh?"

[THE GARDEN OF EDEN!] Ose roars. [Don't tell me you already forgot?! It's the place where you found the Matriarch Armor!]

"Ohh. That garden. The Garden of Eden. The shitty 'garden' that sucks ass and ain't got no trees." Bael says slowly. *"That garden."*

He pauses.

"What about it?"

[We're GOING there.] Ose snaps. [Tell Yardrat to send us back to the Labyrinth!]

"Okay, okay. Sheesh, man, you're so bossy." Bael grouches.

He stands up, then walks over to Yardrat's side. Yardrat doesn't even notice Bael's appearance, so enthralled is he by the expanding Cosmic Aura radiating from the Ripper Star.

"Yo, Yardy-boy." Bael says, slapping Yardrat's back. "Can you send me back to the Labyrinth real quick, bub?"

Yardrat glances at Bael in confusion. "Right now?? Bael, we're about to witness the birth of a Middle Cosmic! Why would you want to leave?"

Bael's eyes widen. "Oh, word? Someone's giving birth? Who's the lucky brood-mama?"

"N-no..." Yardrat says. "It's not- I didn't mean... *never mind*. Can you wait a minute?"

"Nah. Don't think so." Bael says. "Ose's gonna yell at me if I take too long. She's such a nag, man."

"Oh. Right. Ose." Yardrat says, his eyes softening as he recalls how Bael has fallen into a grief-filled stupor as of late. "Sure thing, Bael. I'll send you back to the Labyrinth, buddy. Make sure you get some rest. You've been working hard to help us out, lately."

"Thanks, bub!" Bael says, slapping Yardrat's back again. "You're a real pal!"

Yardrat waves his hand to conjure a portal back to the Labyrinth, and he sends Bael through, shaking his head after the gal-guy has left.

"Poor Bael." Yardrat mutters. "We really need to get him some help. Everyone's so busy, we're just not paying enough attention to his mental condition."

* * *

Emperor Melody completes her transition from a mortal powerhouse to a Cosmic one. Unlike Wolfram, Diablo, and Mephisto, her body does not expand in size, but instead all of the Cosmic Energy contracts and solidifies inside her bones, drastically condensing the physical strength at her disposal. She retains all the advantages of a smaller body, including speed and agility, while also focusing her striking power into a smaller area as well.

No longer does she require Diablo's protection. He removes the cosmic energy shield he was using to protect her body, allowing her to become exposed to the coldness of the Void, as well as the direct heat, light, and radiation from the Ripper Star. Melody blinks her eyes, feeling shocked that she seemingly doesn't even need to breathe anymore! The vacuum of space does not negatively affect her, and she even faintly feels that if she were to immerse herself directly inside the Ripper Star's core, it wouldn't harm her. It has become one with her body.

Diablo's Astral Form materializes a short distance away. He listens as she asks him about this phenomena.

"You are a Cosmic now." Diablo says, folding his hands behind his back. "You no longer need to consume minerals to sustain your existence, nor do you require air to breathe. You can absorb the latent energy of the cosmos to sustain yourself, and this energy is prolific throughout all of creation."

Emperors Fae and Nymph gaze at Melody with wide, incredulous eyes. Even Fae, usually a mouthy and obnoxious woman, can't help but feel a deep hunger in her stomach for the power Melody has obtained.

"Amazing!" Fae hisses. "I wouldn't even be able to scratch Melody anymore if we came to blows!"

"I doubt you'd even be able to pull out one of her hairs." Nymph replies.

Melody begins flying around, acclimating to her new level of spiritual power. She inhales deeply, absorbing the power of the cosmos through her nostrils. This energy gives her a warm and pleasant feeling. She even feels that if she were to suffer serious wounds, her Cosmic capabilities would grant her a certain capability of regenerating from severe wounds.

"What now?" Melody asks.

"We have completed the first step of your evolution." Diablo answers slowly. "But right now, your existence is tethered to the Ripper Star. If you travel too far from it, your Cosmic power will rapidly fade until you become trapped in the Void and die. To counteract this weakness, we must have Nymph 'expand' your radius of power by anchoring your soul to the celestial bodies of the Shredder System."

"The other planets and moons..." Melody says, directing her senses outward.

She becomes shocked when she feels how insanely formidable her Cosmic senses have become! In an instant, she sweeps her astral vision out across the entirety of the Shredder System and beyond, not only detecting all of the planets and moons in the system, but even the individual lifeforms scattered across the worlds, though the overwhelming majority of them reside upon Sharmur.

Melody frowns. "There are two other planets in this system with Kolvaxian infestations!"

"Primitive Worlds." Diablo explains. "Few minerals or resources, with minimal sentient life residing upon them. The Plague targets only sentient life, and as such it becomes much weaker when it takes over worlds lacking in them."

Melody starts to say something else, but her blood turns cold. She spins around and 'looks' past the Ripper Star's blinding radiance to another part of the Milky Way galaxy.

"There's something powerful coming this way! A... another Cosmic!" Melody exclaims.

"It seems 'she' has detected your rise." Diablo says simply. "Founder Dosena will not be happy to see you. But we have a few hours until she arrives... provided she doesn't cheat by traveling through a Warpgate. Let's make haste and start improving your foundation by anchoring you to some of the worlds within your influence."

Melody nods. The Archdemon's massive body turns around and begins flying toward the first world in the Shredder system, a molten planet with three small moons. Melody quickly pursues him, becoming delighted by the shocking speed she can display in her newly empowered form.

As the two of them race toward the molten world, Diablo's Astral Body flies beside Melody to keep her company. He directs a knowing look toward his companion.

"How many steps did you manage to climb?"

Melody blinks. "You know about that?"

"All Cosmics do." Diablo says slowly. "Whenever you ascend to the rank of Cosmic, or you attain a noticeable increase in power, the Akashic Laws will bring you there for a short time. By climbing the Staircase of Ascension, you can baptize your soul with the purest Akashic Laws, improving your foundation. The more steps you climb, the greater your future potential can become."

"I see..." Melody says, falling into thought. "I made it up eleven- no, perhaps twelve steps. Is that a good number?"

Diablo looks away. "It is not worth bragging about. Due to the manner in which I elevated you to Cosmic, your foundation is poor and you will never be capable of advancing on your own. You will forever remain trapped within the Shredder System at the level of Middle Cosmic. Even if you climbed a hundred steps, it would not matter. The only advantage you can derive from climbing the Staircase of Ascension now is a broader pool of mana for your abilities..."

Once the first planet in the Shredder System becomes visible to the two Emperors, the Demon Deities finish up their conversation.

"After Nymph anchors you to this world, you may obtain an increase in your Cosmic Power." Diablo says. "You cannot climb 'higher' on the Cosmic totem pole, but perhaps you can 'widen' your foundation. This will grant you an enormous amount of additional energy to use in battle, and for other purposes. Also try to climb as many steps as you can if you are sent back to the Cosmic Realm."

He pauses before adding one last thing.

"By the way. Founder Dosenia has traveled to the True Cosmic Realm and climbed the Staircase of Ascension many times. Her foundation is as solid as it can possibly become, and she is now within reach of climbing to the next level of Cosmic Power. You are far short of measuring up to her when it comes to versatility or endurance. As for striking power, defense, and your other attributes... we'll simply have to wait and see."

Diablo and the others all slow to a stop before the molten planet. Despite its lack of life, this world still holds innate 'earth energy', making it something that Emperor Nymph can affect with her powers.

Diablo taps into Nymph's powers. He commands the full power of his Cosmic Energy to press upon the planet's core, ultimately binding it to Melody's soul.

Just fifteen minutes later, Melody blinks her eyes as a faint but potent surge of energy floods into her veins, bones, and even her very marrow...

Compared to the energy she obtained from the Ripper Star, it isn't much at all, but it still offers her a slight boost she did not possess previously.

After that world, the group moves onto the second planet in the system, then the third, and finally, they reach the fourth.

The fourth world is the first life-bearing planet in the Shredder System. While it is nowhere near the level of the paradise-class Sharmur, and it certainly isn't a pleasant place for life to spring up on, it at least has breathable air and a survivable ecosystem. The freezing winters and boiling summers cause a dramatic amount of instability on this world in particular, with only a single Sentient species having ever taken root.

Diablo shakes his head, a look of dismay in his eyes.

"The world of Thillow, formerly home to a small species of pre-industrial Sentients known as the Thaneri. Unfortunately, this was the only world they resided upon. When the Plague devoured Sharmur, it spread to the two other life-bearing worlds shortly after. The Thaneri have gone extinct as a result."

Melody's face turns gloomy. "Extinct..."

She looks at Diablo.

"Is there no way we could... cure the Plague infection? Revive the Thaneri?"

"That is always a possibility." Diablo replies. "But we do not possess the method to do so. For now, we must focus on cleaning out the Plague in this system entirely. We must go down to the world and seize control of the Core so it cannot return. Luckily, this world does not possess enough Life Energy to sustain a transfer from the Plague's central base inside the False Cosmic Realm. They cannot send any powerful Cosmics to where we are... at least not for the moment."

Diablo starts to say something else, but then he frowns. He turns his attention to the Void, looking off into the distance. At the same time, Melody senses the impending arrival of a powerful energy signature as it rushes toward the Shredder System.

"So fast..." Melody whispers. "She's already made it here?"

"Underestimate the Second Founder at your own peril." Diablo warns. "She has slaughtered countless powerful Cosmics in her lifetime. During the Great Wars of Volgrim myth, it is rumored she even fought three other 9th Level Psions all at once... and won."

Melody and Diablo levitate beside one another, her tiny figure appearing minuscule compared to the titanic and domineering body of the Archdemon beside her. Diablo deliberately levitates Emperors Fae and Nymph behind himself, shielding them with his body.

A few minutes later, Founder Dosena appears.

She silently steps across space, appearing a few miles away in a single instant. Had Melody blinked, she would have missed the faint tremble of space behind Dosena when she arrived.

For a few moments, nobody says a word. Dosena scans the area and assesses the situation rapidly, realizing Melody is the newly ascended Middle Cosmic. After making a few determinations, she turns a freezing-cold glare onto the Archdemon.

[What is this?] Dosena asks, her voice frighteningly calm. [A new trick? A secret ability of yours, 'Archdemon'?]

In the Void, a third figure appears beside Melody and Diablo.

The First Emperor of Transience.

So quickly does the First Emperor appear that they even startle Dosena with their arrival, let alone Melody.

[You?] Dosena asks, snapping her head toward the hazy, indistinct figure.

My existence is temporary. The First Emperor says. The influence I wield is limited. I gave Diablo the method. He used it well. No longer will the demons be pushed around by the Volgrim. This is only the beginning of my plan to restore the Milky Way's balance.

Underneath her calm exterior, Dosena seethes with rage. The arrival of the Archdemon was frightening enough, as it gave the demons a way to stand up to the Volgrim Empire's strongest weapon. But now, for a second Middle Cosmic to appear? It sends her anger to the ends of the universe.

[You... are... a tricky one...] Dosena says, her mental voice dripping with venom. [You hid your cards adeptly, First Emperor. Diablo. It seems I can no longer 'sit back and watch'.]

Diablo remains unmoved. The Archdemon's gigantic head tilts down to look at the pea-sized Psion.

"DO YOU WISH TO FIGHT?" Diablo taunts. **"IT WOULD BE A SHAME FOR THE VOLGRIM EMPIRE TO LOSE THE INDIVIDUAL THEY HAVE PLACED THEIR HOPES AND DREAMS ON."**

Dosena doesn't immediately answer. Internally, she begins to rapidly assess the chances of success if she were to engage in a sudden, violent battle with the Archdemon and his new compatriot.

The First Emperor would not sit idly, either... Dosena thinks, her thoughts turning wretched. *They played me like a fool. If I had fought and killed Diablo before, it's likely I could have stopped him from uplifting a new Cosmic. Now it's too late. They outnumber me two-to-one, and that doesn't even count the strength of the First Emperor.*

Dosena's rage cools. In its place, a calm assessment of the situation follows as she tries to determine the outcome of what would happen if she fought all of these enemies at once.

But, contrary to her expectations, Diablo takes a figurative step backward.

"MELODY. IT SEEMS THE SECOND FOUNDER WISHES TO ENGAGE IN A FRIENDLY SPAR WITH YOU. AS A GUEST IN DEMON SPACE, WE SHOULD TREAT HER WITH RESPECT. YOU WILL DO BATTLE WITH THE SECOND FOUNDER ALONE. THE FIRST EMPEROR AND I WILL NOT INTERFERE."

Melody blinks. "Huh?"

Even Dosena needs a few seconds to react. [...What game are you playing?]

"NO GAME. WE'VE ENTERED A NEW PARADIGM, SECOND FOUNDER." Diablo says, his voice booming throughout the Void. **"IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND THE VOLGRIM'S PLACE IN THE MILKY WAY. THE DEMONS WILL NO LONGER BE PUSHED AROUND."**

Dosena gazes emotionlessly at Diablo, Melody, and the First Founder.

[I see. In that case, I will take you up on your offer. I wish to test the strength of demonkind's newest powerhouse for myself. I have not fought an equal in over two million cycles. This has led to the... stagnation... of my growth.]

"THEN I SHALL STAND ASIDE AND ENJOY THE SHOW." The Archdemon says, as he begins to levitate backward.

Melody's expression becomes serious. She didn't anticipate having to do battle against the Mightiest Psion immediately after her ascension, but even if she had known, she wouldn't have backed down.

In her heart, she secretly wonders just how powerful she has become. A hint of bloodlust wells up in her throat as she licks her lips.

"I may have failed Sharmur once... but I won't fail again." Melody says.

Dosena levitates in place, her eyes piercing through Melody to try and uncover all of her secrets.

[I know who you are. You were previously the Emperor of Suppression. But how should I address you now?]

"My name is Melody. But you can call me..."

"...THE DEITY OF DEFIANCE!"

Part 538: Melody's Defiance

Despite not quite finishing her objective to amplify the power of her Cosmic Soul by attaching it to every celestial body in the Shredder System, Melody still possesses the true power of a Middle Cosmic.

She launches toward Dosena like a bolt of lightning, practically teleporting as she sends a kick flying at the Second Founder's ribcage!

But in that single instant, Dosena coolly levitates backward and bends her body in such a way that Melody's leg sweeps over her chest, missing by a single millimeter. In the fraction of a second afterward, she flickers across space, teleporting ten kilometers away to put distance between herself and the Deity of Defiance.

Even with such a giant distance between them, a pair of Middle Cosmics can clear the gap in a single second. At their level of power, meters and kilometers become nearly the same, especially when they tap into their metaphysical powers at the highest levels.

[Deity of Defiance. That's a fancy title.] Dosena says, her tone neither one of praise nor of scorn. She crosses her arms and levitates motionlessly. [I have not fought an equal in two million orbital cycles. I once tried to spar with every single Executor in the Volgrim Empire attacking me at the same time. I still had to limit myself to a fraction of my full strength. Let me warn you now: If I go all-out, no mere Middle Cosmic is my match.]

Melody's eyes harden into a look of determination. "We'll see about that!"

Once again, Melody pounces toward her opponent, leaving after-images as she clears that ten kilometer gap almost instantly. She races at Dosena like a ballistic missile, but right before she reaches striking range, a ghostly apparition flies out of Dosena's body and launches a punch at Melody's head.

THUMP!!

Melody's vision flickers as a hammer-like force blasts her in the face. She launches backward, struck by that powerful blow, and spins uncontrollably through the Void. It takes her several seconds to shake her senses back into order, and when she does, she finds Dosena hovering in the same spot as before.

This time, however, a phantom levitates beside Dosena, its aura identical to hers, with a body that mirrors the Second Founder in a thousand important ways except for its lack of a face. It has no eyes, nor a nose, nor any other identifying features, making it look like an alien specter she summoned from the distant reaches of the Unknown.

[I am a Brain Enhancer.] Dosena says coolly. [It was the discipline I based my Psionic Seed on. It allowed me to improve my understanding of the psionic arts faster than any of my peers. Later, I even outpaced my seniors. I created the entire discipline of Cerebral Psionics, and none have ever come close to being my match in uncovering its full breadth and scope.]

Melody wipes a tear from her eye, a tear that fell simply due to the pain from Dosena's psionic punch. "...why are you telling me this?"

[You are not my match.] Dosena says. [I have not had an equal to fight in two million years; this much is true. But I long ago came up with a solution for that problem. I taught myself to divide my mind. I created a Psionic Clone with its own thoughts, desires, and will. It can perfectly mimic me, and it can do things even I cannot. In essence, there are two of me, while there is only one of you. If my two halves join together, defeating any other Middle Cosmic is a trifle.]

"The battle hasn't even begun and you're already declaring victory." Melody sneers. "That sneak attack knocked me for a loop, I won't lie. I'm younger than you, I lack experience in how Cosmics fight, and frankly I'm not much of a fighter at heart."

Her expression becomes even more determined.

"But if you believe I'll be a pushover, think again!"

[What I believe does not matter.] Dosena says. [When the Great Wars ended, I purged the existences of every other 9th Level Psion. I fought them all at the same time and won. I do not know why Diablo is so eager to send his newest ally to her death, but I must assume he is planning to strike at me when he thinks my defenses are down...]

Dosena directs a cold glare off into the distance, where the Archdemon levitates in the Void, thousands of kilometers away. As promised, he stays away from the battle, though in truth he remains well within range to rush in and save Melody if things become too dicey.

Dosena returns her gaze to Melody.

[In truth, I do not wish to kill you, nor any of the demons. You are nothing to me but gnats. I have become mentally divorced from the ultimate fate of the Volgrim Empire for a time longer than the sum of your existence. If my people perish, then that will be an unfortunate day for my emotional well-being. But I will survive. The things I truly care about in this cosmos have little to do with affairs involving the mortal world.]

"You sure talk a lot more than I thought you would." Melody grumbles. "If you don't want to kill me, then why even come here?"

Dosena lowers her head and mentally sighs.

[Never mind. I shouldn't waste my time explaining. Every time unit I am away from Volgarius is another time unit my homeworld stands undefended. Let's get this over with and see if you were worth me coming here in person.]

"You're too arrogant!" Melody snarls.

Melody leaps forward at the same time as Dosena's Psionic Clone does. The clone instantly engages in a swift and brutal melee combat with the Deity of Defiance, both of them trading blows at speeds that would leave a mere mortal's eyes spinning in their sockets.

Melody's fists and legs snap out one after the other. Dosena's clone mirrors her movements, meeting them blow for blow! Despite 'only' being formed from a psionic projection, the clone's body is as solid as any flesh and blood body, acting as if its bones were made out of folded steel and its skin out of exotic polycarbonates.

Crack! Crack! Boom!

The two trade hundreds of blows in the space of less than a minute. Melody feels the pressure build as she not only assesses her body's strength, but starts tapping into her enhanced demonic powers.

For demons, every increase in demonic ranking grants them newer and more powerful abilities. These abilities do not need to be trained, merely discovered. Having only stepped into the rank of a Middle Cosmic mere minutes before, she hasn't had any time to familiarize herself with those abilities, putting herself at a huge disadvantage compared to her battle-hardened opponent.

[You will have to do better than this.] Dosena says coldly, projecting her voice into the Void.

"Shut your face!" Melody fires back. "I haven't even warmed up yet!"

Melody's tone implies teetering on the brink of insanity and rage, but in truth she has no serious grudge with the Second Founder. She knows well just how powerful 7th Level Psions are, and can only imagine the might of Executors. Having never faced any of those monsters in actual combat, she has to assume Dosena is an opponent far beyond her understanding. It isn't mere empty boasting on the Second Founder's part that Melody will be unable to beat her. Melody assumes this must be true and that it would take a miracle to win!

Surely Diablo won't let Dosena kill me, right? Melody thinks. It would defeat the purpose of allowing me to Ascend! He must believe I have a chance at winning! Even if he doesn't, he'll definitely intervene if the fight reaches a lethal point. I should still proceed as if he'll honor the terms of the duel, though. I'll have to put my life on the line and fight with every single ability at my disposal!

Just as Melody is about to unleash her first ability, Dosena's clone moves first. It abruptly releases a massive aura of Cosmic Power around itself, hardening the Void and causing Melody's speed to plummet! As if mired in quicksand, Melody's speed becomes sluggish, causing her to only become capable of sending out one or two attacks a second. But as for the clone, its speed remains just as high as before.

Like a turtle before a cheetah, she immediately becomes suppressed as a torrent of blows rains down on her! Even her perception of time mirrors her movements, making Melody unable to react to the clone's fists and feet as it starts battering her, its body a series of after-images her eyes can't follow!

Crack-crack-crack! Thwack, slam!

A fist pounds Melody's teeth, while a leg crashes into her ribs. A palm strike slaps her right ear, while another one slaps her fist away like an adult punishing a toddler for daring to speak up!

Melody cannot react at all! She becomes utterly suppressed, unable to fight back as Dosena's clone batters her around like a cat toying with a mouse!

"Ugh- kah! Aaargh! Ughh!!"

Melody can only release muted coughs and screams of pain as her vision turns blurry...

But then, she reaches deep inside herself.

She summons the strength of her own Cosmic Power collected inside her stomach. She conjures forth an aura of her own, enveloping that same area to harden the Void around her clone-opponent.

Just like that, the clone's speed plummets, mirroring her own. Its blows slow down to her speed, allowing her to re-focus her mind and quickly dodge or block the next dozen that come flying at her!

Twenty seconds later, the clone ceases its assault and pulls backward, leaving Melody gasping for air!

"Hah... hah... hah..." Melody groans, her bones aching from the beatdown she just suffered. Bruises well up around her eyes and cheeks. Her lips split in multiple spots and blood flows out, while her ears ring, causing her to feel noticeably disoriented.

[You're too green.] Dosena comments dryly, still levitating a good distance behind her clone. [When you reach the levels of Cosmic, you become capable of projecting a Domain of Control around yourself. These zones of suppression will completely cripple the speed and fighting capability of Lower Cosmics and can even outright kill mortal entities. However, between Cosmics of the same level, they only serve to slow down the battle. Speed no longer becomes as useful when you reach the highest echelons of power...]

Melody gazes at Dosena with a complicated expression. "Why are you telling me this?"

[I don't know.] Dosena mutters. [You are the first Middle Cosmic I have faced in a long, long time. Perhaps I merely wish to explore the depths of your power before I kill you. I am curious as to how mighty a so-called 'Demon Deity' can become. You are meddling with forces you have not yet fully comprehended. If I were to face the Archdemon, I'd need to be more serious, but you don't even know the basics of Cosmic Warfare.]

Dosena glances at Diablo for a split-second before returning her gaze to Melody. In that moment, Melody realizes that while Dosena isn't likely to be lying, she must also fear that if she goes too far, Diablo will intervene. She can't be sure of just how strong the Archdemon truly is, and thus does not want to take any risks...

"Domains of Control..." Melody repeats, realizing something else. "The Archdemon's body is big, slow, and clumsy, while you are small and agile. However, your words imply that despite your obvious advantage in speed, it would not benefit you too greatly. He'd slow you down to a manageable speed and force you to face him on more equal terms..."

[I have not faced the Archdemon's domain directly.] Dosena retorts. [There are many possibilities as to how a battle between us would play out.]

Yeah... Melody thinks. But you ARE worried. You don't want to take things too far.

Melody wipes the blood from her mouth and lightly pats her face. She reorients her thoughts, then charges back into battle with the clone fearlessly!

Once again, the two engage in a brutal battle of fisticuffs, with the notable difference being that both of their speeds have dropped significantly, and every move expends much more of their physical stamina than before. While the Psionic Clone might not technically have a physical body, the energy required to project it from Dosena's mind does increase by a lot, not that the haughty Second Founder would allow her discomfort to show on her face.

As the two exchange blows, albeit at a much slower and more powerful speed, Melody's blood boils with battle fever. She swells demonic power within her stomach, then opens her mouth to release it.

"AHHH!!"

A banshee-like screech rips across the Void and instantly slams into the Psionic clone, sending a feedback pulse of agony through Dosena's mental link. Not expecting such a sudden attack, the Second Founder shudders violently, her cool and haughty composure breaking as the clone's pain becomes her own.

[Aargh!]

Dosena finally uncrosses her arms to grab at her head, only for that banshee-screech to not only flow past her clone, but then travel toward her main body a second afterward...

BOOM!!

It impacts Dosena like a firetruck crashing into a concrete building. Melody's screech knocks Dosena backward and destabilizes her link to her clone, causing it to falter and fizzle for a moment. She quickly regains control and stabilizes the situation, but not before directing an appreciative glare in Melody's direction.

[NOT BAD.] Dosena says, her tone laced with anger. [You took me by surprise. That will NOT happen again.]

Melody grins evilly. "Don't be so sure, Second Founder. AHHH!!"

Once again, Melody fires off a blast of concussive force. Unlike when she was a mortal-level Emperor, this wave of energy is not formed out of sound-waves, but of Cosmic Power shaped by her voice. Even without air to transmit, the shockwaves can still rip across the Void to deliver brutal blows.

And this second attack is much more focused and concentrated, less of an area-attack and more of a focused punch aimed right at the Psionic Clone's body!

BOOM!!

The clone tries to dodge, but it doesn't move quickly enough under the suppression of Melody's aura. Its body explodes into particles of light under the impact, while Melody rushes through that gap to charge at Dosena's main body.

The damage inflicted to Dosena by the destruction of her Psionic Clone is not insignificant. She reels from the pain, but remains in control, glaring at Melody with an expression of bloodlust as she rapidly approached.

[You dare?!]

Just as Melody charges into melee range, Dosena crosses her arms and re-summons her Psionic Clone. However, this time, she superimposes it on her body, causing its hazy apparition to form around herself like a ghostly battle-armor. The clone's psionic body appears a bit larger than Dosena's main form, making it appear as if her body is enveloped by a force field.

In an instant, Melody begins punching at Dosena, but Dosena continues to levitate calmly with her arms crossed while the Psionic Clone's arms and legs fight back against the Deity of Defiance. To those unfamiliar with battles at the Cosmic Level, it might even appear as if Dosena has summoned the phantom of a war god to possess her body and slay her foes!

CRACK! CRACK! BOOM!

The mirage enveloping Dosena matches Melody blow-for-blow. The two of them trade attacks with equal force, but Melody begins to make strange movements, her body occasionally blurring, dodging attacks that should have landed. Her body becomes phantasmal as she bobs and weaves, sending jabs and punches at her opponent's vital areas.

"Not bad! This is starting to get fun!" Melody laughs.

Dosena sneers. [You are far too immature in my eyes, acting excited for a battle of this level. Your strength is paltry. Don't you understand I'm going easy on you?]

Melody snaps a vicious punch at Dosena's face, but her clone's ghostly arm catches it before it can successfully hit and fires back another punch, forcing Melody to dodge.

"I don't need you to go easy on me." Melody laughs. "I just need you to die! The demons will rule the Milky Way!"

Dosena's eyes glow. She fires a lancing beam of psionic energy from her forehead that catches Melody off-guard and strikes her liver, making her stagger backward and cough up blood.

[You want me to die? Imbecile. Once I am gone, the Volgrim will lose their last hope of holding back the Plague. When Volgarius falls, the Volgrim Empire will collapse soon afterward. My people will flee the Milky Way, and the Plague will crash upon the demons! Your extinction will not take long to play out.]

Despite the pain from her injury, Melody's eyes become brighter. She directs a vicious grin Dosena's way.

"Hahaha! You stupid bitch! You think we FEAR the Plague?! You're a frog stuck in a well! The Archdemon has already discovered the method to defeat the Plague! Your 'Empire' can collapse today if it wants. We'll happily take up the fight after you're gone!"

Dosena continues to smile, but her heart quakes in shock.

What? A method to counter the Plague? Even to defeat it? Not possible. How could Diablo accomplish such a feat? I've heard nothing about this...

Unfortunately, the Volgrim's agents in the Labyrinth have not had time to transfer all the day's recent events back to their Founders. Even if they did, Dosena departed right when Melody finished her Ascension. She wouldn't have obtained the information about Diablo's ability to consume the Plague on worlds it controlled.

She hesitates for a moment, uncertain if Melody is lying. Something about Melody's abrupt power-up certainly surprised her, but she didn't imagine there would be a conspiracy at this level.

[You're lying!] Dosena exclaims. [There's no way your Archdemon has the power to defeat the Plague! Even our foremost scientists haven't discovered such a thing after 90,000 cycles!]

Melody unballs her fists, switching to a claw-pose. In her grasp, a pair of swords made of substantialized sound vibrations materialize, their innate vibration properties granting them impressive cutting power, while Melody's internal Cosmic Energy reserves bolster their hardness.

"So what if the Volgrim Empire failed? Our Archdemon is more capable than you can imagine! Haven't you realized what system you've arrived in? This system was previously conquered by the Plague, but look at it now!"

Dosena frowns. It only takes an instant for her to send a pulse of Psionic Energy throughout the Void, examining all the nearby planets, moons, and general stellar composition.

[...The Shredder system.] Dosena says, her frown deepening. [There are still Kolvaxians on two of the planets, but the world of Sharmur... has been cleansed? How is this possible?!]

"Heh heh heh..." Melody chuckles. "Your lack of imagination does not constitute a lack of ability on our great Archdemon's part. Diablo found a way. Now, we will begin taking back the worlds lost to the Plague."

Melody slashes her soundblades at Dosena, who tries to defend against them with her Psionic Clone's ghostly body, but the blades slice through the clone with frightening ease! Dosena howls in pain, her blood turning cold as the blades draw dangerously close to her physical self.

She teleports!

Dosena steps through space instantly, leaping a hundred meters away to dodge Melody's attack while glaring at her with hate-filled eyes.

[You will not defeat the Volgrim Empire. You cannot, because I WILL NOT let you. Foolish mud-dweller. Let this Founder broaden your horizons! After that... I will extract the method to defeat the Plague from your Archdemon's cold, dead hands!]

Dosena teleports to Melody's side and sends a punch flying at her ribs, But Melody dodges and slashes at Dosena's fists.

Then Dosena teleports again and again, leaving after-images in her wake. She continuously strikes at Melody, while the Deity of Defiance continues to confound her lethal attacks with pinpoint-precise blocks and dodges. Melody slowly begins to acclimate

to her newfound strength as the battle rages while growing more and more confident in her new powers.

"You want to kill the Archdemon? You won't succeed! I'll DEFY you no matter how many times you try!"

[You can try!] Dosena spits back. [There's no chance you'll walk away from this battle in one piece!]

"We'll see about that!"

Part 539: Dosena's Wrath

Recommended Listening

In an instant, all hell breaks loose across the Shredder System. Dosena and Melody lunge at one another and engage in a prolonged, protracted battle as Dosena begins to take the Deity of Defiance more seriously than in the beginning.

No longer does Dosena battle Melody by sending her Psionic Clone as an avatar. She uses her own body to the fullest extent, revealing her highly toned muscles, each arm and fist capable of breaking apart a planet with a single punch. The two of them deliver brutal blows, block each other's attacks, and dodge whenever possible to conserve their strength.

An hour passes as Melody retreats while fighting to one of the moons orbiting the fourth world of Thillow. With solid ground and a bit of gravity to hold them relatively in place, Melody and Dosena crash against one another, roaring angrily as the two of them test their combat skills and push themselves further and further.

In the beginning, Dosena doesn't take Melody seriously. Even if her avatar can't withstand Melody's void-tearing shrieks, her body is more than capable of doing so, provided she takes certain precautions. The problem is, as the battle builds in intensity, Melody discovers more and more powers hidden within herself.

When demons rise to the rank of a Lord, they unlock the first set of basic abilities which will go on to define their powers as they evolve further. A typical Lord is more than capable of wiping out a small army of human soldiers, provided their equipment isn't too advanced.

At the rank of Baron, those abilities become much stronger, to the point where even heavier weapons and vehicles don't provide much protection. Many Barons can rip apart tanks and mechs with their bare hands, though concentrated firepower can ultimately wear them down to the point of death. Only the most abnormal freaks like Beelzebub can endure such punishment and live to tell the tale.

At the rank of Duke, their powers become truly frightening. Even an army can't stop most Dukes, let alone kill them. Almost always, specialized metaphysical powers become necessary to even inflict damage on the body of an average Duke, and even then, their

resilience is still enough that they can escape if they feel the need. Dukes can level cities, provided they have enough time.

Once demons attain the lauded rank of Emperor, they become too much for anyone but Heroes, Archangels, and other Emperors to deal with. Despite this, a 4th level Psion can hold an Emperor off, while a 5th Level Psion will crush them with ease.

As demons advance in rank, they not only become stronger in body, mind, and soul, but their metaphysical abilities become more diverse and threatening to their adversaries. Jumping from the rank of a Demon Emperor to a Bottom Cosmic would naturally provide an unbelievable increase to their bottom line, so what would that mean if they kept Ascending to the Lower Cosmic realm and ultimately the Middle Cosmic?

It is during this battle that Dosena begins to unravel that mystery for the first time in the cosmos's history.

Melody's dual sonic blades slice through space, leaving tears in the void as she snaps and slashes at her foe, forcing Dosena to dodge and evade. Dosena fires back blasts of pure psionic energy, but even when her attacks land, they only cause minor bruising and send Melody tumbling away!

Melody's body has already reached a realm of becoming far harder than the purest demonstone. Her bones rival those Mephisto stole from Leviathan's corpse. Her blood vitality bubbles enthusiastically, providing her a powerful regeneration factor that, while not as strong as even Emperor Beelzebub's, is still robust enough to heal major injuries within a few minutes.

Even when Dosena manages to shatter one of Melody's ribs with a particularly well-aimed punch, Melody simply keeps on fighting, and her broken bone reforms its structure within ten minutes.

"I told you!" Melody shouts. "I told you I wouldn't go down without a fight! AHHH!!!"

She fires off another silent explosion of sound, but Dosena has long grown accustomed to this attack. She teleports away at the last second, flickering through the gaps in space to evade the pressure wave even as it shreds the barren surface of Thillow's moon.

When Dosena attacks Melody by sending a beam of solar energy at her head, Melody's body abruptly blurs into an afterimage. She dodges the attack in a manner that momentarily makes her resemble a ghost; likely a trick involving her mastery over the

power of sound. Dosena's solar laser lances right past her and explodes in the distance, atomizing one of the moon's mountains.

[You are a more formidable opponent than I expected.] Dosena praises without a hint of irony. [You are giving me an excellent idea of how a battle against the Archdemon would play out. It boils my blood with hunger to engage in such a battle, but it also makes me fearful for the fate of the galaxy. Your species is only slightly less parasitical than the Plague. It was a mistake to leave demonkind alive. We should have exterminated both you and the humans following the Energy Wars.]

Melody sneers. "Aww, but you didn't. Now it's too late for you to do anything but cry. The demons are here to stay, *your majesty*. You can't ever put this genie back in the bottle!"

[Where there is a will, there is a way.] Dosena says coldly.

She attacks Melody again, ramping up her attacks and draining her energy much more than before. She dodges several of Melody's sword-slashes, then fakes her out with a feint by pretending to grab at Melody's wrist. Melody starts to pull her sword back, but in that instant, Dosena's Psionic Clone leaps out of her body and pounces on Melody, tackling her to the ground!

Thump!

Melody cries out in surprise. "Gah!"

The clone wraps around her like a snake, its body deforming easily thanks to its energy-body nature. It hides behind her and wraps its arms and legs around Melody's limbs to temporarily hold her in place while Dosena herself violently kicks at Melody's hands. She breaks Melody's wrists and shatters her sonic-blades, making the Deity of Defiance let out a strangled cry of pain before lifting her leg up and smashing it into Melody's stomach.

BOOM!!

Thillow's moon trembles from the impact. Dosena smashes her adversary down with such power that multiple canyons explode into existence across the moon. Its surface begins breaking apart at the seams.

[All I have to do is kill you, then kill Diablo, and then kill the so-called 'First Emperor'.] Dosena declares. [Then I'll have one of my empire's weaker troops travel

around to exterminate the demonic menace alone. It won't take much. A 5th Level Psion will do against a bunch of pathetic mud-dwellers!]

Dosena conjures the power of cosmic lightning at the tips of her fingers, then aims down into the hole she's created, where Melody continues to struggle below. She fires a jagged bolt at her opponent, her eyes turning upward in a look of delight as it explodes against Melody's body.

BOOM!!!

A light as bright as the midday sun erupts from that hole, slightly stinging Dosena's eyes but only causing her a moment of discomfort. Her smiling eyes widen as she senses Melody's wriggling body stop moving, a black smoke wafting out of her ruptured stomach.

[Was that all, insect? Any other quips you'd like to- hm?]

Dosena frowns. She watches as Melody's body abruptly vibrates and disappears, vanishing in an instant. Melody reappears a short distance away, just off to Dosena's left side. She massages her stomach and grits her teeth in pain, clearly injured by Dosena's previous attack. However, no longer does the Second Founder's Psionic Clone cling to her back. Melody has freed herself.

"Not gonna lie." Melody mutters, her expression much more serious than before. "I saw my life flash before my eyes. You got me with that devil-damned clone of yours... again. You're sneakier than you let on."

Dosena straightens her posture. Her eyes return to normal as she examines Melody's injuries carefully.

[Do you think that just because the Psions are 'honorable' we won't stoop to slightly underhanded means to win a battle? I have fought a million battles in a million different ways. I have mastered every form of combat known throughout the universe. If a bit of subterfuge is all it takes to kill you, then you were never my opponent in the first place.]

"Well said." Melody says, before hacking up a bit of coagulated blood and spitting it onto the ground. Already, her ruptured stomach has begun pulling itself back together again, and her other injuries have also started to heal. "This is, without a doubt, the most dangerous battle of my entire life."

[Is that so?] Dosena questions. [How would you mud-dwellers say it? For me, 'it's just a Tuesday.']

Both women gaze at one another with cold expressions. Despite Dosena's calm breathing and attitude of indifference, she has already stopped treating this fight as if she were bullying a junior.

The Deity of Defiance is much hardier than I anticipated. Dosena thinks to herself, her lightning-fast mind easily capable of coming up with hundreds of battle strategies per second. *Her stamina and regenerative power are even greater than mine. She is able to inhale the cosmic power of the universe and convert it directly into energy to restore her body. Are all demons capable of this feat once they become Deities, or is Melody unique? I know for a fact the so-called Archdemon is even more monstrous in terms of regenerative power, but his body is a... special case.*

Dosena's eyes flick toward the distant reaches of the Void, thousands of kilometers away, where Diablo remains levitating in place, simply watching the battle play out.

Then her gaze returns to Melody. Her thoughts continue to churn.

In terms of combat experience, I am by far Melody's superior. Her movements are sloppy, full of openings. She has yet to land a single significant blow on me. She has barely made me bleed. Despite this, I cannot land a killing blow. She is much more durable than I expected. I simply wish I knew if this was the power all Demon Deities will come to possess, or if she is exceptional...

These observations come and go in a fraction of a second. Compared to Dosena, Melody's thoughts are far more sluggish. Her brain is enhanced to a degree thanks to her demonic biology, but compared to the progenitor of Cerebral Psionics, Melody might as well have a turtle controlling her synapses. She barely has time to swallow a breath before Dosena flicks her fingers, detonating the air and soil around herself, causing a massive explosion of dust to engulf the moon's local hemisphere.

Immediately, the area within a thousand miles becomes enshrouded in a pitch-black cloud of dust particles. While these might not normally be capable of obscuring a Middle Cosmic's senses, Melody's heart skips a beat when she realizes she cannot detect Dosena's precise location anymore!

Instead, Dosena spreads her Psionic Aura out in all directions, making herself appear to be hiding in every single direction Melody can look at the same time. Melody hunkers down and flicks her eyes around, her heart racing as she tries to uncover the Second Founder's hiding location.

Melody opens her mouth. She swallows a breath, intending to burst out a scream and disperse the fog, but a stabbing sensation of killing intent startles her, followed immediately by a leg snapping toward the left side of her head.

THUNK!!

Melody goes flying as Dosena batters her sideways, sending her spinning and twirling across the moon's cloudy surface, only to flicker in front of Melody's path with her leg reared back.

CRACK!!

Another brutal kick strikes Melody's spine, making her mouth reflexively open in a silent scream before she goes flying again!

Back and forth, Dosena ping-pongs Melody between herself and her Psionic Clone, knocking her around with as much murderous intent as she can possibly muster!

Over the next twenty seconds, she kicks Melody fifteen times, shattering dozens of Melody's bones, mangling her body, and sending her sprawling helplessly across the dirt.

Finally, Dosena stops. She watches as Melody crashes into the side of a mountain, plowing inside of it like a bowling ball crashing into upright pins. Dosena narrows her eyes, waiting for Melody to pull off another trick.

But she doesn't.

Melody's body spasms several times. She tries to cry out in pain, but she fails to catch a breath. She weakly gasps, choking on blood stuck in her shattered larynx while her multiple broken limbs lay in unnatural positions. Even her regenerative powers can't keep up with Dosena's brutality, not anymore.

Dosena flickers toward Melody in an instant. She conjures a razor-sharp blade of Psionic Energy around her palm and takes aim at Melody's neck...

Abruptly, she stiffens.

Dosena leaps backward and swirls around, sneering with her eyes.

[There you are! I knew you wouldn't sit and watch as I executed your mightiest subordinate!]

Dosena's bloodthirsty eyes lock onto the phantasmal image of Emperor Diablo's Astral Body. He projects himself inside the smog of the Thillow moon. He casually waves his

hand, and a burst of cosmic energy disperses the smoke, revealing Melody's limp, broken body, as well as Dosena's figure. The Second Founder gazes at him with a frightening glare, but Diablo remains unmoved.

Melody's eyes turn toward Diablo's ghostly apparition. She wheezes painfully, realizing he has come to save her, just as she thought he would.

He won't... leave me... to die... Melody thinks, her eyes becoming blurry with tears of gratitude.

The Emperor of Annihilation casually folds his hands behind his back. He smiles at Dosena.

"Ah, Second Founder. There's no need to be alarmed. I told you I would not interfere, and I will keep my promise. Since this is a battle to the death, it would be unbecoming of me to interfere. You know that at our level, we have to care more about our 'face' than we do the lives of mere underlings."

He gestures with a nod of his head.

"Have at her, then. I won't stop you."

Melody's heart skips a beat. She looks at Diablo with an expression of shock, but her body is too broken for her to utter a word.

As for Dosena, she gurgles nastily in her throat. [Do you think me a fool? There's no chance you'd let me execute a Middle Cosmic. You demons need every powerhouse you can get, and a Middle Cosmic is already near the peak of what the Milky Way can produce...]

Diablo blinks twice. A look of confusion plays upon his face. "Oh? They're hard to come by, you say? I was not aware of this. And here I thought I'd developed a method for creating them at my whim. It seems I was wrong. Pray tell, what restrictions must I abide by? Since you know more about my powers than me, of course."

Dosena's fierce eyes momentarily falter. This time, she is the one momentarily appearing confused.

What is Diablo implying? Dosena thinks. He can mass-produce Middle Cosmics? Lies! An exaggeration if I've ever heard one. Nobody can do such a thing! If it were possible, the Plague would become unstoppable, or the Volgrim would have won this war ages ago. He must be bluffing, hoping I'll spare her life...

Dosena keeps her eyes locked on Diablo. She smiles again, the corners of her eyebrows turning upward as she takes a slow, hesitant step toward the broken body of her defeated foe.

[Really? Middle Cosmics are easy for you to make? Then you won't mind if I gut this one right here and now?]

"I said I wouldn't, so of course I won't." Diablo says, fanning out his fingers and admiring his nails as if her threats have nothing to do with him. "Though I must say, you're acting awfully bold for someone missing crucial information. Are you... certain... you truly desire to execute my fresh new protégé? Are you... *certain*... you can afford to pay the price?"

Dosena pauses her movements. She continues to stare at Diablo, trying to figure out what game he's playing.

[You are... beginning... to annoy me...] Dosena says, a tone of warning taking shape within her voice.

"Of course, of course." Diablo says, looking at her in a fearful, yet utterly sarcastic manner. "Forgive me, Second Founder. I meant no offense. After all, your battle prowess is extraordinary, and if we were to come to blows, I'd surely lose in a single move. I would *never* want to offend or annoy you."

He pauses.

"It's just that... well... *no*, I'd best not say it. You're a smart woman, after all. You can figure the matter out for yourself. Far be it for an inferior Cosmic like me to appraise you of information you are certainly capable of comprehending on your own."

Dosena's heart turns cold. Despite Diablo's pretenses of deep humility, his underlying words imply an infinite confidence that if Dosena were to learn of the 'secret matters' he is withholding from her, she would absolutely not want to kill Melody. The alarmingly confident tone he assumes makes her second-guess herself, wondering just what trick he could have up his figurative sleeve...

[I am listening.] Dosena says coldly, straightening her posture to gaze at the levitating astral body of her only true foe in the Milky Way. [Tell me why I would... *regret*... killing your hellspawn.]

"I would never presume upon your thoughts, Great Founder." Diablo says, bowing his head apologetically while cupping his hands together in an expression of begging forgiveness. "Ah it's just... have you noticed the state of the Ripper Star?"

[The Ripper Star?] Dosea asks, slightly confused by this seemingly random change in topic. She casts out her Cosmic Sense to investigate the status of the Shredder System, especially its star. She frowns as she senses that, for some reason, its core has begun to fluctuate in an erratic manner.

"Ah, so you notice now!" Diablo says, lifting his head and smiling at her with closed eyes. "It seems you were so preoccupied with the battle that you must have accidentally overlooked the Ripper Star's condition. Of course, now that I have pointed it out to you, you can definitely understand why killing Melody might cost you more than you expect..."

Dosea doesn't immediately reply.

Her lightning-fast brain hurries to catch up with the strange, jarring twists and turns Diablo has made with his supposed 'logic'. She glances at Melody, then at the Ripper Star, then back to Diablo.

While she does this, she also notices certain alarming changes in four planets within the Shredder system, as well as most of their moons. Their cores flicker erratically, evidently undergoing some unknown, unexpected change in condition that has only happened recently, within the past few minutes.

When Dosea observes all of these changes, and then recalls Melody's broken body, she begins to string together those thoughts into a faintly dreadful hypothesis, one that shocks her to her core!

[You... Diablo...] Dosea says, narrowing her eyes to glare daggers at him. [What have you *done*?]

Diablo's apologetic look disappears. He stands upright, folds his hands behind his back, and looks at the Second Founder with an expression of utter disinterest.

"Finally figured it out, did you? Took you long enough."

The Emperor of Annihilation laughs dryly.

"Haha. That's right, I wasn't lying. I *can* mass-produce Middle Cosmics. All I have to do is anchor the soul of a strong demon to any star and they will become Uplifted, even going so far as to walk the Staircase of Ascension. Additionally, I can anchor their soul to

other celestial objects in the system, such as planets and moons. The more there are to anchor to, the more powerful my little Cosmics will become."

A gloomy look washes over Dosena's face. Her expression becomes ugly as she listens to Diablo's speech.

[You're lying. It can't be that easy. There are *always* limitations when it comes to the power of a Cosmic Entity...]

Dosena pauses. She cocks her head and falls into thought for a few seconds.

[...If demons must attach their souls to the core of a celestial object to become 'deities,' then perhaps they must also become tethered to it permanently. That would mean they cannot stray too far from their celestial origin point...]

"It also means that if you kill Melody, the Ripper star will destabilize. The two of them share their life sources. Of course, if you want to kill Melody, or any of my future Cosmics, you can always simply destroy the stars they have become tethered to. They will die once their primary source of power has dissipated."

Diablo offers an even 'easier' and simpler solution for killing Melody, but it doesn't make Dosena feel good at all.

It enrages her!

She maintains a calm facade externally, but internally she begins to explode with the full force of a barely-contained nuclear bomb.

[So *that's* what this... is... all... about...] Dosena growls, her eyes trembling from suppressing her emotions. [You knew I would come. You knew I would fight. And you know I won't kill your precious minion because it would be a worthless victory. You can simply forge more demons into Middle Cosmics. Even if I kill one, I'll only be destroying important star systems in the Milky Way. Systems that would be invaluable for someday defeating the Plague...]

"No, no, I would never presume such a thing." Diablo says, now grinning from ear to ear. "Perish the thought."

A long silence follows.

Several minutes pass as Dosena quietly vents her rage inside her mind, cursing Diablo with all her hatred while slowly restoring balance to her emotions.

She bows her head eventually and releases a heavy sigh through her nostrils.

[...Well played, Diablo. Well played. You have won this battle.]

"Who knows?" Diablo says mildly, his face returning to a neutral expression. "Perhaps I may even win the war. I hear the Milky Way still lacks a Ruler."

[The War is unending.] Dosena retorts. [Akasha's Game plays for keeps. After you defeat the Plague, and after you defeat the Volgrim, what then? Will you celebrate your small victory? Will you celebrate while knowing just as well as I do what horrors lurk within the depths of the Unknown?]

"I will deal with my future enemies as they become relevant." Diablo answers. "For now, I will simply thank you for showing me some of your fighting capabilities. It is always good to know the strengths and weaknesses of one's enemies. It was an excellent battle worth watching."

Dosena's eyes twitch as another bolt of rage shoots through her mind. But she keeps silent, not wanting to give Diablo the satisfaction of a reaction.

Slowly, she levitates into the sky, keeping all her hate-filled eyes trained on Diablo's Astral Body.

Then, she begins to fly away...

However, Diablo quickly shouts out from behind her. "Oh, Dosena! Dosena, darling. Would you be a dear for me? Please inform Founder Unarin I'll be paying him a visit soon. There are some matters the two of us must discuss."

Dosena snaps her head toward Diablo's ghostly body. [You will do NO such thing! If you approach within even a thousand lightyears of Volgarius, I will shred your Labyrinth to atoms! I will slaughter every single bloodskin without hesitation!]

Diablo appears unafraid. He snorts derisively.

"You'd suffer an Akashic Backlash just to spite me? And here I thought you were an intelligent woman. Do not get your panties in a twist, Second Founder, assuming you wear any. I'm not going to attack Volgarius. If I were going to do that, I'd have done so already. No, I simply wish to discuss... *terms*... with the First Founder. Just let him know I'll pay him a visit soon, after I deal with the humans."

Dosena glowers at Diablo. She says nothing, neither confirming nor denying his request. She flickers away, her thoughts a jumbled mess.

*That damned demon. Dosena hisses. An Akashic backlash. At my level, it probably wouldn't prove fatal, but it would leave me badly crippled. Yet another reason I dare not kill Melody. If she dies, her star system will fall. I would be the culprit in Akasha's eyes. I would suffer a backlash for every dead world. Now that would **truly** be a price I dare not pay...*

She disappears into the Void, and her aura begins to fade as she draws further and further away.

On Thillow's moon, Diablo turns his attention to Melody. He levitates toward her and kneels down, examining her injuries.

"Mmm. You'll live. Might need a few days to fully recover, though."

Melody coughs. Several minutes pass before she can direct the healing energies within her body to her mouth and throat. Eventually, she becomes able to speak.

"You... you were... going to let me die?" Melody asks, directing an aggrieved look Diablo's way.

"Oh, don't fret." Diablo says, rolling his eyes. "I had the situation under control. Dosena held back that entire fight. She was always afraid I would rush in to save you. If she were fighting without reservations, you wouldn't have lasted a single minute. In any case, if she did kill you, it would simply mean the immediate destruction of the Volgrim Empire. It would have been quite a good deal for us if she took that gamble."

Melody grimaces. "You... betrayed me! I thought you would protect me! I thought you'd intervene, but you were happy to let her kill me?!"

Diablo remains silent for a moment. Suddenly, he lashes a hand out at her face.

Slap!!

The Emperor of Annihilation smacks Melody right across the cheek, sending her sprawling backward. While the strength behind his Astral Body truly isn't much at all, the sheer shock of him doing that, as well as the sudden embarrassment makes Melody turn red in the face.

"Diablo, what the FUCK?!" Melody shouts. "You devil-damned prick!"

"Shut your mouth." Diablo retorts, his tone cold. "You ungrateful little bitch. Have you forgotten? I made you. I can *unmake* you. You took an oath to serve me, as well as the

greater Demon Empire. If your death would grant us a massive tactical victory over the Volgrim, that price would certainly be within reason for me to pay."

Melody's heart turns cold. "But... you-"

"Don't ever talk back to me again." Diablo says, leaning forward to snarl at her. "You may think that you are my equal as a Middle Cosmic, but I can kill you with the same ease Dosea could. If you die, I have a hundred other Emperors I can uplift at my whim. You are nothing special at all. Don't let this feeble level of power go to your head, or I will make you *regret* the day you were born."

This time, Melody says nothing. She looks at Diablo with visible fear in her eyes. Mixed with that fear is a complete lack of recognition.

For some reason, this doesn't feel like the 'Diablo' she's known her whole life.

What happened to the friendly, casual Diablo? The one who liked to laze about, taking naps and drinking blood wine? What happened to the lackadaisical Diablo who didn't pay much attention to affairs among his people, who was always content to let his wife Lucifer deal with those mundanities?

Melody suddenly has the weirdest feeling that the creature standing before her is not even an actual projection of Diablo, but a skinwalker disguising itself as him.

For all she knows... Diablo may have died six years ago.

Perhaps something else took over his body.

When Diablo notices the terror in Melody's eyes, he smirks, then stands up.

"You just lay there a while and recuperate. Think about today's events. Think about what you're going to do to make the Demon Empire as powerful and esteemed as the Volgrim Empire. Once you're back in tip-top shape, I'll have Nymph bind your soul to the other planets in this system. In the meantime, I'm going to clear out the last two remaining Kolvaxian infestations, then deal with the humans."

Diablo's astral body begins to fade away.

"We'll keep in touch," he says just before he fully disappears.

After a few moments, Melody slumps back down, her chest rising and falling as she takes shallow breaths.

Is he really... even still Diablo?

Part 540: Standoff

Following Dosena's win against Melody, and her subsequent departure after Diablo played her, the Second Founder decisively returns to Volgarius at her maximum speed. Her first loss to anyone in any capacity in over two million years does not cause her heart to burn with excessive shame. She simply calms her agitation down and takes flight through the Void, leaving any useless emotions behind.

Lightyear after lightyear, Dosena steps across space at unimaginable speeds. She could easily use a Warpgate to traverse the Milky Way, but the Second Founder has never liked using exotic tools created by the Technopaths.

For her, it's not merely a matter of pride. Every time she exercises her spatial abilities, she becomes capable of traveling across the Void faster and faster. Perhaps someday she may even become capable of traveling anywhere within a galaxy's confines in a single step...

Of course, that hope only exists because of the assumption she might someday reach the 10th Level of Psionic power. Whether she actually will or not remains to be seen.

* * *

Dosena travels quickly. Within three hours, she traverses the majority of the Southern Milky Way to arrive back at Volgarius. By now, any shame over her intellectual loss at Diablo's hands has disappeared, replaced instead with a calm acceptance and burning desire to one-up him in the future. Hopefully the *near* future, if she has any say in the matter.

The Second Founder's presence in the Volgarius system goes undetected. She has long become capable of hiding her presence from all the other Volgrim, as well as their expansive networks of sensors and detection grids. She reaches Volgarius itself in an instant, crossing the Void to step into the planet's upper atmosphere.

One step later, and she appears inside Unarin's Sanctum, where she finds the First Founder staring at one of the many paintings on his Sanctum's walls. This painting in particular happens to be an especially vivid and beautiful depiction of the Archdemon's figure as it launched an attack on King Arthur's body while he was possessed by Joan of Arc's soul during the battle at Polaris. Crafted by an especially imaginative junior

Changeling at Unarin's request, the painting is both beautiful and frightening, depicting Diablo's animalistic rage in a manner that would make any weak-minded primitive shiver in fear.

Unarin stands before the painting with his hands folded behind his back. The instant Dosena arrives, he blinks his eyes twice and turns his body slightly to glance in her direction.

"Results?" Unarin asks, as if he knew her victory was never in question, only the level to which her win might stretch.

Dosena levitates downward. She rests her feet on the Sanctum's floor, remaining silent for a moment before lowering her eyes.

[You guessed correctly. The Archdemon's return was not as simple as we believed. He had several new cards to play. The balance of power has changed.]

Unarin inhales softly. He turns around to look at his fellow Founder with an expression devoid of fear, apprehension, or joy. His blank face gives no clue as to his emotions, nor do his thoughts, since Dosena cannot read the mind of one who has mastered the Mind of Void.

"The lack of a triumphant tone in your voice tells me Diablo's tricks were sufficient to force your departure. What gains has the Archdemon made that we did not anticipate?"

Dosena glances at the painting of Diablo behind Unarin for a brief moment before returning her eyes to the First Founder.

[The encounter went as follows...]

For ten minutes, Dosena gives a detailed explanation of every important event she sensed as well as an exact transcript of the words she and Diablo shared. Naturally, Unarin's elevated brain capacity nearly matches hers, and so he does not require anything to be explained a second time.

After she concludes, Unarin begins pacing back and forth slowly, lowering his head as he falls deep into thought.

"Hmm... ahh... so it is like that. Hmm..."

Every once in a while, Unarin will pause to pick up one of the many art pieces in his sanctum, examining it thoughtlessly while he continues to dwell on every clue Dosena has given him.

Finally, the First Founder stops and turns to look at Dosena once more.

"I believe I have a grasp on the situation now." Unarin says. "The Emperor of Annihilation is quite fearsome, but these machinations are not his. The First Emperor of Transience is more or less behind most of Diablo's plans. As for the uncharacteristic way Diablo has been acting, I have some thoughts as well."

[Feel free to speak them.] Dosena says.

Unarin smiles faintly. "No need. Things can remain as they are now. Continue attending to that matter with the Myriad Deity. If you can successfully break his soul and refine his dragon-bones, we will obtain a colossal supply of Living Moldanium. That will benefit our Empire greatly."

[What about Diablo?] Dosena asks, frowning faintly.

Unarin shrugs. "He said he will pay me a visit. Let him come. I believe I know what he wishes to say. It will not be... harmful to the Volgrim Empire. Not directly, in any case."

Dosena nods slowly. Already, she has realized that Unarin does not want to say anything out loud because he strongly suspects the Wordsmiths may be watching them. There's no sense giving their enemies information thoughtlessly. Let the humans work for what they want.

[I contemplate and I comprehend.] Dosena says casually. [I will return to my domain.]

Unarin says nothing else. He simply walks past her and heads out of his sanctum, allowing the Second Founder to disappear without a word.

After Dosena arrives back in her hidden domain, she finds Executor Riley diligently holding Mephisto in place. The Myriad Deity curses and groans as he tries desperately to escape, but Dosena's restrictions are far too potent for a pathetic Bottom Cosmic to have any chance at breaking free.

[Second Founder.] Riley says, immediately bowing her head and dropping to one knee.

[Where is Creator Demila?] Dosena asks.

[Creator Demila is still on assignment, hunting down Emperor Gressil.] Riley says, raising her head while taking care not to meet her superior's eyes without permission. Doing so would indicate a grave misstep of decorum.

[Recall her.] Dosena says coldly. [That useless reject still hasn't managed to uncover the hiding spot of one piddling Demon Emperor. She is truly a stain upon the great name of the Psions.]

Riley frowns. Despite Demila's lower Psion Level, she is in fact a few hundred thousand years older than Riley herself. It would not be appropriate for her to badmouth a senior born shortly after the end of the Great Wars.

[Creator Demila has indeed reached the end of her Path...] Riley says hesitantly. [But... does she not have many great accomplishments to her name?]

Dosena snorts. [She has always been an underachiever. She lacks drive. She hungers for power, yet her will is shaky, and her Seed riddled with flaws. She took too many shortcuts and exhausted her potential, thinking she could rush to the rank of Executor. Now she is stuck and will never progress further. What is Demila if not a fool besmirching our name?]

Riley neither confirms nor denies any thoughts Dosena has regarding Demila, as she would find those thoughts to be disrespectful in all possible contexts.

[I will recall her, as per your orders, Second Founder.] Riley instead says. [What assignment would you prefer I put her on next?]

[Have her report directly to me.] Dosena answers. [I will hand out her next assignment in person.]

[As you command, Second Founder. I contemplate, and I comprehend.]

Riley bows her head one last time, then stands up and rips a gap in space to depart. Unlike Dosena's ability to silently cross the Void, her spatial manipulation skills are much more rudimentary, a fact that causes her slight embarrassment.

She leaves, and Dosena returns to the array binding Mephisto's dragon-body.

[Insect.] Dosena hisses, her eyes looking at Mephisto's curled-up body with contempt. [You will break before me, vermin. Your bones will become the property of my Empire. Your soul will crumble to dust.]

Mephisto's pain-wracked eyes glare daggers at her hatefully.

"We... will... RESSISSST!"

Inside the Labyrinth Core, tens of thousands of humans stand at attention, their bodies protected by top of the line T-REX armor systems. Alongside them stand allied monsters and a small percentage of demons, including Emperors Belial, Beelzebub, and Kiari.

For hours now, they have waited restlessly after pushing out all non-allied demons and monsters, placing the Labyrinth Core on lockdown. Diablo's shocking appearance inside the Core frightened humanity out of their wits. The sudden disparity between allied and enemy demons has not helped humanity feel any better about the situation. Even now, Belial's body has drastically weakened in strength, making her only as strong as she was when she was a Duke, and the same holds true for Kiari.

Among humanity's allied demons, all of them effectively lose an entire rank of strength whenever they stand inside the Labyrinth, while enemy demons gain an entire rank, up to the level of Emperor.

For some reason though, Beelzebub appears unaffected by whatever means Diablo employed to turn the Labyrinth against demons who would not fall into subservience beneath him. However, a most alarming fact humanity discovers is that more than a few demons have already crawled away from humanity's good graces and returned to Diablo, finding comfort in the Archdemon's return. Now that Diablo has taken full control of the Archdemon's body, he will surely elevate the rest of his people, just as he promised.

Plus, the traitors had to admit they never did like working underneath the Wordsmith. Why would they? They used to rule the humans, but now they must work hard to reap benefits under their former slaves instead of taking what they deem rightfully theirs.

In the center of the Labyrinth Core, Jason steps out of a gap in space. Naturally this is not Jason himself, but his Dronesmith clone made out of mechanical and biological parts.

'Jason' looks around, then walks over to Belial and Kiari. The two demonesses stand together, whispering thoughts about what they expect to happen next. Neither looks happy about the change in circumstances.

"Hey." Jason says as he walks up. "You should head back to Tarus II. With your powers suppressed, you're a lot more vulnerable to attacks from your fellow demons."

"I'm not going anywhere." Belial says, crossing her arms. "Diablo has crossed a line this time. I don't know what the hell is going on with him, but if I leave, the Core will be doomed. We won't win a protracted battle without my help."

"I don't believe we will even *with* your help." Jason says seriously, his eyes revealing a hint of forbidden knowledge.

Unlike everyone else in the Core, Jason has already watched and rewatched the footage of Melody's battle against Dosena several times. He's also heard all of Diablo's speeches to his fellow demons and relatively grasps the full extent of the Archdemon's cunning.

"I'll be blunt." Jason says evenly. "We're fucked. I can't contend against the Second Founder, and I sure as hell can't beat the Archdemon. If he does attack the Core, then everyone here is going to die. I don't want to see that happen."

Belial frowns. "Jason. Even if we retreat to Tarus II, we'll still have no chance of defeating Diablo. He's become too powerful. Unless the Archangels can unleash the Cherubiim again..."

"They might be able to." Jason says. "But... I don't think that will be enough. I still don't have a grasp on how powerful different 'Cosmics' are, but the Archdemon absolutely feels more powerful to me than the Cherubiim did when the Archangels attacked Hell Harbor. Coupled with the power of the First Emperor, I don't think any of us stands a chance..."

As Jason talks, Neil Adams trots over, a contingent of 100 elite soldiers keeping pace behind him.

"Jason, there you are." Neil says grumpily. "Took you long enough! Do you understand the situation we're in? I'm trying to come up with a counter for the Archdemon but none of our models are showing an effective threat response."

Jason sighs. "As a matter of fact, I understand the situation better than you'd think. Let's get everyone together and have a quick meeting. I'll explain what's going on in detail."

Without delay, Jason assembles more than a hundred high-ranking members of humanity's elites, including Neil Adams, Phoebe, Beelzebub, and others. Naturally, Blinker and Brunhilda don't join them, as they are currently inside Chrona. Everyone enters a side-room inside the Core where a giant conference table awaits, with everyone taking up seats at various positions. Neil and his advisors sit at one end, while Jason, Phoebe, Belial, Kiari, and Beelzebub sit at the other.

Jason gives a twenty-minute speech, explaining Diablo's recent accomplishments, including his destruction of all three Plague-controlled worlds inside the Shredder System, his ideological defeat of Dosena, and his ability to uplift Emperors en-masse to the rank of Cosmic.

Beelzebub sneers. "Is that all it takes? Diablo can simply latch an Emperor's soul to the core of a planet or a star and they will become a Cosmic? Too bad they'll actually become his loyal dog, unable to escape their new shackles! The devil is in the details."

Belial looks at Beelzebub in disgust. "What, *you're* not interested in such an offer?"

"Of course not." Beelzebub spits back. "What a pathetic offer. Only the most brow-beaten loser of an Emperor would accept such a pitiful hand-me-down. It's obvious to anyone with two brain cells to rub together that Diablo isn't only seeking to reclaim worlds taken by the Plague. He's also ensuring his future competitors will have their ceilings of power capped! While he grows in strength, they will never Ascend further."

Jason touches his chin.

"That's... actually a good point, Beelzebub. I hadn't thought of that angle."

Neil taps the table. "Diablo is going to run out of Emperors quickly if he turns them all into Cosmics. Thanks to the changes inside the Labyrinth, he needs only to elevate demons to the rank of Duke to project Emperor-level power throughout demonkind's domain. Still, the more Emperors he turns into Cosmics, the slower his rate of expansion across the Milky Way will become. Dukes aren't going to be much help against the Plague, otherwise he would have only used them instead of risking his Emperors when he took back Sharmur."

"There are billions of star systems and only a few dozen Emperors in existence." Phoebe chimes in. "The math doesn't add up."

"We already know he can Uplift demons to the rank of Emperor." Neil points out. "So, in theory, he may be able to keep up with a somewhat aggressive rate of expansion..."

"I doubt that." Jason counters. "Even if Glinch can produce a few Emperors a day, and I think that's definitely going too far, the scale of our galaxy is mind-bogglingly large. Billions and billions of star systems cannot be held by a few hundred or even a few thousand Middle Cosmics tethered to stars. The Volgrim Empire at least has a fully

mobile army of Cosmics through their Psions, and multiple armadas of starships built by trillions of Technopaths. The demons cannot hope to match that scale."

"Then... how is Diablo going to proceed?" Belial asks.

"That is the question I would like to have answered most of all." Neil replies glumly.

Humanity's leaders continue talking and planning for a while, but unfortunately, all they manage to decide on is the idea that they truly have no recourse against the Archdemon. Forget mass-producing Middle Cosmics, even if the only enemies humanity had to face were Diablo and the First Emperor alone, they still wouldn't stand a chance!

How in the damnation are they supposed to do battle when the field is so lopsided against them?

Phoebe sinks into her chair and touches her pregnant belly. "Will Diablo force us to return to the old ways of slavery and torture? Is humanity destined to become vassals to our enemies? Playthings for them to violate as they please?"

Jason inhales deeply, then he exhales.

"Everyone. If push comes to shove, we have one last fallback option. I can place all of humanity inside the Cube. We can grow our strength there in peace, untouched by Diablo, Dosena, and all the others. We'd have to give up on the Milky Way, but I think... this could be a way to save ourselves."

Neil's eyes flicker with hatred. He gazes at the table with a faint look of despair.

"The Milky Way is our home too. If the demons were to drive us to the point of desperation, I vow that when we grew strong enough to return, we would lay waste to everything they hold dear. There would be no path of reconciliation. All who caused us harm would suffer the pain of a thousand deaths."

A few of the demons at the table frown at Neil's words. But then again, coming from him, this level of bigotry is the same as what they've grown to expect. And frankly, he already hates demonkind to its core. What new sentiment do his words convey that they haven't heard before?

"At this point," Jason says, "we have no choice but to wait for Diablo's arrival. If he wants a fight, we'll give him one. And if he doesn't, then maybe we can find some way to compromise..."

"Compromise." Neil growls, practically spitting the word out. "How delightful."

Jason shakes his head. He touches Phoebe's hand and smiles weakly, but the expression certainly feels forced, given the circumstances.

As the group continues to talk, Belial, Beelzebub, and Kiari all suddenly sit up straighter. Their eyes flicker as they look around the room, searching for something.

Kiari suddenly points up into the air above the center of the table. "Look! Up there!"

Immediately, everyone follows her gesture. They watch with widened eyes as a flicker of cosmic energy materializes in the air. Then, abruptly, Diablo's Astral Body takes shape, materializing in the air like a God Emperor looking down upon a bunch of peons.

Neil sucks in a breath. "Diablo!"

"Ah, how good of you all to assemble in one place." Diablo says, his ghostly voice tickling the ears of everyone present. "Oh, do not worry, humans and traitors alike. If I wanted you dead, I'd simply have had Yadrat open a portal to the Core. With a single blast of the Archdemon's destructive force, I could annihilate everything and everyone inside."

Jason's heart turns cold. Inside the domain of Chrona, he keeps his attention focused on Phoebe and all the others inside the Core, looking and waiting for even a hint of Diablo's desire to attack. If he senses the faintest buildup of Cosmic Energy, Jason will pull everyone out of the Core in an instant, saving them through his time-accelerated magic.

Luckily, Diablo doesn't seem too interested in exterminating his enemies. This gives Jason some slight assurances, though he never dares to lower his guard.

"What... what do you want, Diablo?" Belial asks, gritting her teeth.

Beelzebub appears unimpressed by the cosmic apparition floating in the sky. "We don't stand a chance against the lauded Archdemon, but I bet he has some use for us still or he wouldn't have come here in such a simple manner."

"An excellent guess." Diablo says, directing a faintly appreciative stare toward Beelzebub. "Mmm... you've grown well, Beelzebub. It seems you have refined many of the impurities from your soul. What a curious path you've begun to walk. You may be the finest demon I've ever seen..."

Diablo only looks at Beelzebub a moment longer before rotating around in midair to get a good look at everyone present.

"Wordsmith. Neil Adams. So good of both of you to be here for this Deity's proclamation. I have quite the offer for the two of you to mull over, and I think it will be one you both can find... *agreeable*."

"An offer?" Jason asks, feeling suspicious.

"Speak clearly." Neil adds. "None of your demonic mind-games..."

Diablo fans out his fingers and begins examining his nails.

"Well, how do I put it exactly? Hmm... I suppose I would just like to make you a simple offer."

He pauses.

"It's more of a request, really."

Diablo turns up the corner of his lips in a cross between a sneer and a smile.

"What would you humans say if I said our species should become... *good friends*? Perhaps even have a little truce, hmm?"

Neil blinks. "A truce?"

Jason's jaw starts to hang open. "...What? You told us to get out of the Core before."

"I did. And that demand still stands." Diablo explains. "But let's just say there's a bit of... *nuance*."

Jason, Neil, and Phoebe all lean forward.

"We're listening."

Part 541: The Archdemon's Offer

Diablo levitates downward, ultimately placing his feet squarely in the center of the table. He stands atop his vantage position and smiles coyly at all of the humans, monsters, and demons gathered together. Not one person looks at him with any emotion more positive than fear, anger, and a sense of unwillingness to accept defeat.

"Cheer up." Diablo says while folding his hands together behind his back. "Today is a good day for humanity. It's not all sunshine and rainbows, but neither is it doom and gloom. You will accept some necessary compromises, but in exchange you will obtain great benefits."

"I find that statement hard to believe." Beelzebub says while smirking at the Emperor of Annihilation. "You don't seem the sort of guy to give any non-demon a benefit at all. You used to, but you sure don't seem that way anymore."

Diablo glances at Beelzebub for only a moment, shrugs, then returns his attention to the others at the table.

"Much has changed in recent times." Diablo says. "After the last time I transformed into the Archdemon, I fell into a deep coma for one full year. While I was asleep, the First Emperor revived me and set me on a new mission. Through the First Emperor's training, I came to master the Archdemon's form, and now I stand atop the apex of power in the Milky Way."

He pauses for a moment. His expression changes from appearing highly confident to slightly pensive.

"But the Milky Way's ceiling of power is not what it used to be, and it is nothing compared to the galaxies which surround us. The universe is vast, far bigger than any of you can imagine. The Plague is currently comprised of footsoldiers converted from our galaxy's citizens. But what if powerhouses began to appear from wherever the Plague originated? With the armies they have accrued, they could easily step up and do battle with Cosmic Elites such as myself and Founder Dosena while also trampling over the mortal armies you consider your saving grace."

Diablo turns to look at the First Wordsmith.

"I will be blunt, Jason Hiro. A series of coincidences has occurred that has allowed me to change up the strategy I originally intended to employ. It will grant everyone here the chance to flip the board and shake up the rules we've been playing by for so long."

Jason leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. "And those rules would be?"

"Humans and demons need no longer be enemies." Diablo says, his words sounding insincere to those biased against him, yet sincere to those who aren't. "You have shown everyone that the old rivalries and blood feuds can be set aside. We can continue to work together in this new era while advancing our causes and strengthening our domains. United, we can stand up to and ultimately crush the Plague, take back our Galaxy, and prepare ourselves for the true battle which shall begin within the next one million years."

This time, Neil Adams is the one to speak. "I'm sorry, one million years? You're talking about a far future event that almost nobody here may even be around to see!"

Diablo turns to look at the commander of humanity's military. "The Wordsmith has already created devices capable of extending the lives of his fellow humans, strengthening their bodies, and empowering my fellow demons without following the vile practice of soul manipulation. I believe the majority of you will have a real shot at not only surviving the next million years, but thriving in those conditions. If we were to work together-"

"That is a big *if*." Neil interrupts, glaring at Diablo.

"-if we were," Diablo continues, "we could set aside the ancient hatreds that have divided us to focus on the true dangers which lurk out in the Void, past the distant reaches of the Unknown. The Akashic Barriers are weakening and will someday collapse entirely. But even before then, powerful entities will appear at the edges of the Milky Way to strike its barrier, hoping to break through and infiltrate our civilizations. The Plague is likely one of those such entities, an infectious pathogen designed to quietly take over our galaxy and prepare us for invasion long before our true enemies are capable of launching an all-out assault."

Neil looks at some of the other people in the audience, his expression one of confusion.

It isn't Neil who speaks next, but instead, it is Hans Wagner, Neil's chief scientist and foremost authority on physics, mechanical technology, and other such futuristic horizons.

"Pardon me, Diablo, but I am unable to understand zee words you are saying. What is zee Akashic Barrier? Who are zee enemies you speak of?"

"Forgive me." Diablo says, his words faintly apologetic. "It seems not everyone here is fully up to date on the Truths of our universe. Perhaps it would be best if I.. gave you all a quick explanation."

Jason tenses up. Among those present, only he, Phoebe, and a few others know of the fearsome powers that have been building up in other galaxies, but at the table, he and Diablo alone know even more Truths than everyone else combined. Jason has spied on several high-level meetings recently, and he knows vaguely of the Cosmic powerhouses that must surely be amassing in other galaxies in preparation for Akasha's Game.

"The Milky Way is filled with sentient life." Diablo begins to explain. "But life is not rare in our universe. In fact, every single other galaxy we are capable of observing holds abundant reserves of life. Ours is not unique in this aspect. Not only do other galaxies have creatures just as formidable and mighty as my Demon Emperors, but plenty that are as strong as the Volgrim Second Founder, and even beyond her."

He continues. "There is a grand... 'game' at play. Knowledge of this Game is not something any of you need to understand, but simply put, there are barriers surrounding every galaxy in the universe. At a pre-destined time, those barrier will begin gradually weakening until they ultimately vanish. None can pass through the barriers via mundane means. However, at a certain point, the barriers will become weak enough that should a formidable entity pay a high price, they can create a 'hole' for mortals to pass through. Only mortals, though. Cosmic entities are strictly disallowed from directly interfering with these mortal-level matters."

Many of the people seated at the table look at one another in confusion. Belial scratches her head as she tries to make sense of Diablo's explanation.

"So... this... 'Game'... you speak of." Belial says slowly. "There's someone controlling it? Or everyone has agreed to it? But then who created the barriers around all the galaxies? Doesn't this seem strange to everyone else?"

"There must be an authority controlling everything in existence from the peak of the highest mountain." Neil says decisively, his eyes flashing as he pieces together his knowledge of the galactic situation with some things Hope has told him as well as some broad inferences he can make through Diablo's words. "If Diablo and Dosena are equals, but if there are also 'Cosmics' who are stronger than them, then that implies there are

Cosmics at a higher level than those, and a higher level than those, and so on and so forth until..."

He glances around the table.

"...until we find whoever is the Highest of the High. The Mightiest in all Existence. *The Creator*."

The table collectively goes quiet as many people from all the species blink in surprise, hearing Neil explain the situation so easily. They realize that if he is right, then all of them are merely mortals playing the roles of pieces on a board controlled by unfathomably powerful gods.

"Not the Creator." Diablo says simply. "The Creator you speak of was merely a... Ruler. And there are many Rulers in this universe. Each controls one or more galaxies. But no galaxy may have more than one Ruler. These are the rules of the Game."

"Rulers..." Neil says, massaging his chin. "What I said still stands. If there are Rulers, they cannot all be equal. There must be a hierarchy among them. And one of those Rulers must possess the highest authority. They are the one controlling this grand-"

Neil suddenly pauses. He looks off to the side and furrows his brows, his eyes becoming distant as he suddenly remembers something.

"That term. That... name. I've heard it before. You said the Milky Way is protected by a barrier; the Akashic Barrier. But I have also heard of the Akashic Rules in passing recently. For two words to contain the same specific prefix, it could easily cause one's mind to wander..."

Diablo raises an eyebrow, looking at the lowly human with a '*not bad*' expression. "You're quite perceptive, Neil Adams. But I would advise you not to bother making too many extrapolations based on your limited perspective. You are merely the leader of a mortal-level army. You are unqualified to let your mind dwell on the extra-galactic situation."

Neil blinks his eyes a few times, returning to the discussion at hand. "...Right. Let's get back into it, then."

Diablo nods. "Cosmics, such as myself, become more and more shackled the mightier we become. To mortals, we may seem to possess infinite power, but in truth we become too powerful for the universe to reasonably contain. The Akashic Laws thus snare us,

preventing us from taking actions deemed to be... *too extreme*. That is where today's discussion comes into play."

Neil listens intently, saying nothing as he continues to make further inferences based upon Diablo's words. The more the Archdemon speaks, the more clues Neil pieces together. Among those at the table, none have as excellent an ability to understand high-level logic as Neil, aside from potentially Phoebe Hiro. Of course, Phoebe is more adept at thinking like an inventor and an engineer than a political strategist, but she is still by far the most overall intelligent person seated at the table.

"Humanity, demonkind, and the Volgrim need to unite if we hope to stamp out this threat and banish the invaders to the galaxy from whence they came." Diablo declares. "My people need not consume human souls to empower themselves. In fact, doing so will only harm their long-term prospects. When I was an Emperor, I was blind and ignorant, the same as all my fellow Emperors. But now that I have touched upon the horizon of the highest peaks of power, I see the failures of demonkind and angelkind alike. Soul manipulation caused us to stunt our growth, placing a ceiling on the heights we could achieve."

He pauses.

"As for what this means for you humans, you need only be assured that I will not allow my people to wantonly cause harm to yours. The era of civil war is over. The age of unity has arrived."

Neil's eyes flicker. "A bold claim for someone who demanded mere hours ago that we vacate the Core or else we would not live to see the next sunrise."

Diablo frowns.

"You dense little man. That was merely a means to fire up the emotions of my underlings. They are not here now, so I no longer require such theatrics. I still expect you to vacate the Core, but you may do so in a calm and orderly manner. However, the sooner you leave, the better."

"Why do you need the Core so badly?" Phoebe interjects.

"Why wouldn't I? The Labyrinth belongs to demonkind. The Labyrinth Core is a nexus which connects to thousands of Warpgates around the Milky Way. Controlling ten gates is surely better than only one or two. In the coming days, weeks, and months, I will be

launching multiple massive offensives to wipe out the Plague's presence on numerous worlds. I cannot have Yadrat opening all those portals; he hasn't the stamina for it. Warpgates will make my assaults much faster and more convenient."

"We give up the Core in exchange for *what*?" Jason asks. "So far I'm hearing a lot of good deals for you and nothing for us."

Beelzebub snorts. "Isn't getting to live good enough for you, Wordsmith?"

"Now now, Beelzebub, there's no need to be so rude." Diablo gently chides. "The Wordsmith is right. I am not seeking to subjugate humanity. I am seeking a partnership. We must help one another if we aim to become close allies."

Diablo holds up his hand. A spiritual projection of the Milky Way appears above his astral palm, slowly spiraling around in a manner most mystical and fascinating to all who gaze upon it.

"There are billions of star systems in the Milky Way." Diablo begins to explain. "Of course, only a small fraction are capable of bearing life, and an even smaller fraction can be classified as paradise-class worlds, but even so, the number of life-bearing worlds exceeds one million, and the paradise worlds exceed one thousand. There are more than enough celestial orbs available for all three Apex Species to enjoy our portions."

Jason raises an eyebrow. "Apex Species? Funny. The Volgrim don't seem to think the demons belong in that category."

"And how would you know that?" Diablo suddenly asks, turning around and metaphorically stabbing the Wordsmith with his gaze. "Been doing a little spying lately, have you?"

The Wordsmith says nothing, opting instead to silently smirk.

Diablo pauses momentarily before turning away to regain his focus on the previous topic.

"What the Volgrim believe is irrelevant. My people *are* an Apex Species. We have merely been... hampered. The biggest issue being our cultural acceptance and perpetuation of soul manipulation. Now that I am making changes to the structure of our society, that will no longer be an issue moving forward. As for the other details, they won't matter to you. All that matters is your new role in the galactic story that is about to unfold."

Diablo expands the floating apparition of the Milky Way, causing its stars to spread out and fill the room with tens of millions of tiny dots of light. Unlike a mere projection, each of these specks of radiance possess a genuine aura of warmth, making the mortals present realize that Diablo is actually conjuring a cosmic phantasm of the Milky Way in real time!

How powerful must a Cosmic be to be able to touch upon every single star in a galaxy with his Cosmic Sense?! Not even Jason can fathom the level Diablo must have achieved!

"Here is my offer to you." Diablo finally says, getting to the point of his coming here. "Vacate the Core, but prepare to join my Emperors and Dukes in fighting on the front-lines. In a short while, our combined armies will rain down beams of magical energy, bullets, and missiles upon the Plagueborn controlling the worlds I target. We will eradicate our Enemy, plant a Demon Emperor's soul upon that system, and permanently seize control of it for the good of all Sentients. In exchange, humanity will obtain worlds of their own, worlds they can call home as you spread your reach across the cosmos."

Neil's expression turns ugly. "That's it? That's your offer? You boot us from the Core, then demand we fight alongside you? All you're doing is making us suffer losses while you turn even more Emperors into Cosmics!"

"The losses you suffer... will not be as severe as you might first imagine." Diablo says slowly, his tone softening as he begins to hint toward something secretive. "Tell me, Wordsmith. What makes a Hero?"

"Huh?" Jason asks. "I... don't know what you mean."

"Surely, you have heard of the two different types of Heroes." Diablo says lazily. "Or... perhaps old man Solomon never told you?"

Unlike Hope, Jason has never heard of the two types of Heroes. He looks at Diablo with an expression of disbelief.

"Two types? Like, mage and warrior?"

"No." Diablo says simply. "There are Trueborn Heroes, and Lowborn Heroes. Trueborn are Heroes like yourself. Only one will exist every generation. They are empowered by the Heroic Aura, and therefore grow to reach awe-inspiring heights. But as for Lowborn Heroes... well, perhaps it is not strictly accurate to even refer to them as

'Heroes'. Let us simply say the Lowborn come in a wide variety of flavors, and many are quite bland and uninteresting."

Jason leans forward, intrigued by what Diablo is saying.

"You're telling me there are Heroes who weren't empowered by the Heroic Aura?"

"Oh, yes." Diablo says smugly, glancing around at the others to see them listening with rapt attention. "Many more than you would imagine. They vastly outnumbered the Trueborn, perhaps even by a factor of ten to one. But again, it is not strictly fair to call a Lowborn a 'Hero' in the first place. In fact, I daresay the term 'Hero' is a bit of a joke."

Diablo folds his hands together loosely in front of his stomach.

"In this Cosmic's humble opinion, Heroes are better described as Spiritually Empowered Humans. Like demons, Heroes are humans who have come to wield the power of spirituality which the angels sealed away. You do know of this, don't you?"

"...I do." Jason says quietly. "But how do you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Diablo asks while flippantly waving his hand. "Don't forget that I have been around a little while longer than you, to say the least. But really, it was the First Emperor who enlightened me. Their knowledge of certain secrets is truly frightening. They helped me to uncover Truths I'd never have guessed on my own. But I digress..."

Diablo clears his throat, then continues.

"I'll make my offer simple. If humanity fights alongside my people, I will help you research methods that can empower your species by repairing that 'flaw' the Angels placed upon your bodies. In time, you can train up new Heroes, albeit Lowborn ones, and they will help us conquer new worlds faster and faster. You cannot fathom how much more powerful even a moderate human will become when you factor in the technological edge your species holds. Faster reaction times, better eyesight, stronger muscles, a more durable body, and plenty of magical abilities to boot..."

Jason doesn't immediately jump at the opportunity, which surprises Diablo.

Instead, the Wordsmith looks across the table at his rival of sorts, Neil Adams.

"Neil...?" Jason asks slowly. "Do you have any thoughts on this... generous offer?"

Humanity's military leader snorts nasally in contempt. "We don't need your handouts, Diablo. We are already looking into ways to empower our people with new abilities. In

fact, one of my best soldiers recently become a master of fairy magic! Another one became capable of turning into an orc, and still others have had other successes. We're doing just fine on our own."

"I am also... experimenting." Jason says neutrally, not going into any further detail on his tests on the Felorians. "Your offer doesn't interest us."

For a brief moment, Diablo falls completely silent. He looks at Jason, then he looks at Neil. His expression becomes inscrutable, leaving both men guessing as to his inner thoughts.

"So it's like that..." Diablo says. "I... don't think you people understand the position you're in. No doubt, you could suck up all of humanity and retreat to some hidden pocket dimension, but is that truly a way you would want to live? If you do not agree to my generous offer... don't you think the consequences you would suffer might prove quite undesirable?"

Neil sneers. "And there it is! The great Archdemon is going to threaten us after his pittances failed to leave us wanting more."

"Threaten you? Oh no, not at all." Diablo says coldly. "You *still* don't understand your current situation. I don't need to attack you to leave you in a terrible position. I need only *not protect you*. Or have you forgotten about the Plague? My worlds, the worlds controlled by demonkind, will be *quite* safe with me and my Cosmics guarding them. But if you decide to refuse my offer... well, who can say how long it will take before Tarus II falls, or Maiura, or those other worlds you value so highly..."

Jason's heart skips a beat.

Internally, he realizes with a faint tinge of horror that Diablo is right. If Jason refuses, then he has no recourse if the Plague were to come to any of humanity's worlds. While Jason has been trying to come up with a counter to the Plague, he hasn't been the slightest bit successful, and neither have the Volgrim. Only the demons have, which puts him at a huge disadvantage during this round of bargaining!

Naturally, he could pull humanity back to the Cube, or to Chrona, but the benefits of living on a genuine planet cannot be overstated. Anyone would rather live on a paradise-class world if they had the choice!

Maybe I should make more worlds in alternate dimensions. Jason thinks. *Relying on Diablo isn't a good idea at all, nor a viable long-term strategy! Humanity would be safe if I simply constructed a new Earth with my abilities and hid it somewhere the Plague couldn't reach...*

Just as that thought comes to Jason's mind, Diablo sneers.

"Want to see a magic trick, Wordsmith? I can guess what you're thinking. You're planning on taking humanity away to a secret dimension where the Plague can't reach you. But is that a truly safe bet? What if the Plague has a way to penetrate dimensional barriers and seek out the 'odor' of life? Haven't you wondered how bizarre it is that the Plague managed to infiltrate Raphael's Fake Cosmic Realm? If they can pass through one dimensional boundary, then it stands to reason they can pass through others. Perhaps concentrating so many humans in one area will only draw them toward you like a moth to the flame..."

Jason's expression morphs into a barely-veiled look of dismay. "That..."

"There's no point in lying." Diablo says. "So abandon that childish idea of yours. You need me more than I need you. I have leverage and you don't. I suggest you take the deal and enjoy the warmth of falling under my... *protection*. In exchange for a few lives of a few measly mortal soldiers, the rest of humanity can live underneath the protective umbrella of my Cosmics, all while empowering yourselves as you unravel the mysterious seals that dastardly Archangel Raphael placed upon you."

Diablo looks around the table.

"Mmm. Shame the old codger didn't come here in person. It's always such a treat picking at his wrinkly brain..."

Jason and Neil both look at one another, their eyes telling a story of defeat. Neither of them wants to accept this 'generous offer.' Jason immediately realizes it's not so different from a mafia extortion racket. The demons will obtain the lion's share of the benefits, while humanity will only get the crumbs.

"Well...?" Diablo asks again, this time more insistent.

"...What will it be?"

Part 542: Fiona's Discovery

Inside the time-accelerated space known as Chrona, Jason Hiro sits with a gloomy expression. He watches the proceedings in realspace with a critical eye, staring with dismay at Diablo's smug, frozen face.

The Emperor of Annihilation looks at Jason's Dronesmith with a knowing gaze, a clear understanding in his eyes that Jason has little choice but to go along with his offer.

"It's a protection racket." Jason says quietly, the interior of the Spynet Sphere completely empty except for himself. "What the hell am I supposed to do? I guess I just have to say yes."

He doesn't reply immediately. After all, every second that passes in realspace gives him two hundred and fifty seconds to think in Chrona-time. He opts to use these precious minutes to debate many different methods of countering Diablo's offer, as well as whether or not he should haggle, or simply accept as-is.

"Humanity isn't in a good place right now." Jason says, continuing to mutter to himself. "We have enemies on all sides. The Plague, the Volgrim, the Demons... our allies are few and far between. Is hiding away in another realm our only way to stay alive?"

The Wordsmith closes his eyes, leans forward, and rests his face in his hands.

"Ugh. I don't know what to do here. Ultimately, Diablo's offer is exactly what I've always wanted: A truce between humanity and demonkind. But his intentions definitely aren't pure and noble. If we do cooperate to eliminate the Plague, what price will my species have to pay?"

"At the very least, demonkind will place powerful Cosmics on many different worlds, guarding them from threats and creating veritable fortresses that will safeguard their interests for the coming millennia, if not eons. That will make expanding humanity's influence difficult, and maybe even impossible."

"But then again, perhaps forming a truce now will lead to great things in the future. Diablo might not always be the top dog forever. If I can ascend to the realm of Middle Cosmic or higher, then I can pose a threat to him. If not me, maybe the Archangels? Maybe I can give them the power to resist Diablo? But the angels aren't trustworthy, in

my opinion. Maybe I should continue trying to empower humans. If we can create Cosmics of our own, that would certainly help us rise to threaten the Archdemon's stranglehold on the Milky Way."

"Ah, but then again, would he let us do as we please? If humanity did come up with a way to threaten him, I bet he'd send all the demons to eliminate us right there and then. He'd at least force me to move humanity to Chrona or the Cube, which would isolate us and contain our influence..."

Slowly, Jason opens his eyes. He sits back upright and lowers his hands to his side.

"Chrona... the Cube... humanity needs a base of operation. We need an unassailable fortress nobody can mess with. The Cube is the most obvious choice, but I don't know if the Plague can get inside. Chrona isn't bad, but it's too small for the number of people I'd want to relocate here, and it's nowhere near self-sustaining yet. Both options would cause humanity to run out of food almost immediately, then starve to death. Damn. How do I create a self-sustaining biosphere...?"

Jason thinks about the Cube's incredible internal space, with far more room than the entirety of the original Sol star system. In terms of volume, he could easily fit the equivalent land-space of a million Earths inside of it. But the problem is, that would require an unthinkable amount of time and energy to properly terraform the otherwise barren void inside the Cube into self-sustaining biospheres complete with solar energy and a day/night cycle. After all, the natural order includes plenty of biodiversity, food chains, complicated weather systems, and all sorts of other phenomena Jason can't even properly comprehend without decades of self-education.

Humanity doesn't have that much time. At best, the Cube only contains a few isolated training areas for humanity's soldiers. It's completely useless as a homeworld for them to live inside. The food present inside Chrona isn't actually grown there, but instead, Jason conjured up a thousand-years worth of goods and placed them in stasis for himself and the others to use as desired.

If the Wordsmith wants a permanent solution, he needs to explore his options.

"We can't hold Tarus II." Jason mutters. "If Diablo wants it, he can simply take it. I don't give a damn if Hope has Excalibur or any other artifacts. The Archdemon's body regenerates too quickly; he's too powerful for us to defeat. I couldn't even beat a Bottom

Cosmic like Mephisto. How am I going to fight a far stronger entity like Diablo or Dosea?"

Slowly, Jason shakes his head.

"There's no other choice. I'll just have to accept his demands. At the least, Diablo is right that the Plague is the most pressing issue facing the Milky Way. We need to defeat it first. That will certainly take a long time, possibly even centuries. During that time, I can start working on contingency plans, like making the Cube more self-sustaining and finding a way to empower my people to continue struggling for survival. We will *not* go quietly into that good night."

After coming to this decision, Jason exhales softly. He transmits a command to the Dronesmith, allowing it to speak in his place and transfer his words to Diablo. Over the course of ten, twenty, or perhaps even thirty real-time seconds, dozens of minutes will pass in Chrona-time, giving Jason even more room to think about the issue. He deliberately orders his drone to speak slightly slower than normal, to drag out the wait and give himself even more time to think. Once he concludes this decision, he leans back in his chair and silently watches as the Dronesmith begins to open its mouth and speak.

Of course, actually waiting for it to say even a single sentence would take forever, so he doesn't bother. Instead, Jason's mind drifts, and he thinks about all the research and tests he's been doing over the past few weeks. For each hour in realspace, two hundred and fifty pass in Chrona. That equates to almost ten and a half days.

Thanks to the arrival of Rebecca, Jason's tests have proceeded quite smoothly. He's spent time working with the Felorians, teleporting them in and out of Chrona periodically to ensure they don't become too acclimated to the effects of extreme time dilation, while mainly focusing on improving their magical abilities and ability to self-improve.

At the same time, Jason has also maintained a keen interest in the Psions he brought to Chrona over a month ago. While they aren't high-level among their species, the enclave he picked actually turned out to be extremely useful, providing insights for the Felorians and teaching them a potential method to evolve their powers over time.

"Cultivation..." Jason says to himself, his eyes looking at one of the Spynet Sphere's many monitors at random. "The power to self-improve by slowly comprehending the fundamental principles of the universe, then bending their rules to improve one's self. How such a feat works, I simply can't understand."

Unfortunately for Jason, he doesn't seem to be capable of perceiving the basics of cultivation for his own use. His powers innately appeared within his body as a result of the Heroic Aura. He has never had to work to improve them, and he's never felt sure if he even could, assuming he wanted to.

His powers simply... 'are.' They feel unchanging and immutable, like an ocean that has long existed and only needs to be explored to fully plumb its depths.

But cultivation is completely different. According to the Psions, one can start out as a weak mortal yet slowly rise to the status of a god so long as they focus their mind on comprehending the deeper Truths of the universe.

Given the incompatibilities of Jason's magic compared to how the Psions and Felorians function, he simply cannot understand how they learn, and thus must step back and allow them to function on their own, forming comprehensions as they please while merely hoping for the best.

But as that thought comes and goes, another thoughts takes its place.

"What makes the Angels, Titans, and Demons so different?"

Jason raises an eyebrow as this thought occurs to him.

"Especially the demons. Figures like Orias are so different from the rest that it's as if they operate on entirely different frameworks of power. How does he turn different-colored gems into a diverse array of magical powers? Why is Belial able to change the shape of her body at will, yet no other demons or other entities possess such a convenient power? What made Agares able to transform his body into a lizard? Why did this ability later transfer to other individuals like Diablo and Belial, only to have such differing effects? Diablo's transformation turns him into a Cosmic powerhouse, but Belial's is decidedly far weaker. There's just no rhyme or reason to any of it..."

As this thought comes to Jason, he frowns.

The Wordsmith sits up straight, his eyebrows curling together.

"No. That's not right. There's always an underlying theory. The conservation of energy still applies. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. There must be an explanation as to how all of these massively different abilities exist. The question is, am I smart enough to create a framework for explaining it all...?"

His frown deepens.

"Phoebe is. Marie probably is. Unarin might be, as well. I probably shouldn't be smart enough, but I have one advantage none of them do. I already possess magical power. Surely I have at least a small edge in being able to test out the underlying principles directly, rather than relying purely on observation and conjecture."

He rises from his chair, then begins to pace around the room with his head lowered, falling deep into thought.

"My Wordsmithing is innate. It relies on my soul's strength to empower most effects directly, but there's also a strong mental component. That implies the brain and soul are connected in some way. My mana reserves are less important for my Wordsmithing to function than my imagination."

"But then you take someone like Orias... his powers are, shall we say, hard-coded. He cannot use magic at all unless he channels it through an external object, like a gem. It's almost as if he needs 'equipment' to function. He's not like other demons who can simply wave their hands and conjure powers out of thin air."

"But speaking of other demons, you also have people like Beelzebub, whose powers are clearly focused on a single element. He can only wield fire magic and nothing else. But it's strange how that manifests in ways one wouldn't expect, such as through his extreme regeneration. His powers are even more 'hard-coded' than Orias's, there don't appear to be any ways for him to branch out through his imagination. He can find new ways of using his existing powers, but he can't invent new ones."

Jason pauses. He looks up at the ceiling for a moment, then lowers his head once more.

"Cultivators use comprehensions of the universe's Truths and its fundamental laws to bend reality to their whims. Individuals such as Confessor Vulpanix can create momentary paradoxes, conjuring multiple versions of themselves by bending space and time. But she doesn't have full control of time... she can't reverse it to go back and stop the Plague before it appeared 100,000 years ago. There are hard limits on what she can achieve."

"So, what does all this mean?" Jason asks himself. "Comprehension is important for some metaphysical powers. Willpower can also be crucial. Faith energy might play a role. There's also mental capacity, imagination, the strength of one's soul, one's internal mana capacity, one's ability to rely on external objects..."

Jason pauses before one of the monitors, a screen that shows the current location and activities of Founder Unarin at all times. He gazes at it for a moment, watching as Unarin stands nearly-frozen while speaking to his brother Randis about some matter happening inside the Volgrim Empire's borders.

"Perhaps I need to define some terminology and set some parameters for the framework." Jason once again says to himself. "In a video game, there are clear differences between Sorcerers, Necromancers, and Artificers. The same seems to be true of real-life metaphysics. I need to comprehend the underlying theory to figure out... to figure out..."

He trails off, not certain of where his brain is even going.

"...why am I thinking about all of this, anyway? Just to better understand metaphysics as a whole?"

"No. That's not a good enough reason. There are so many matters that require my attention, I can't be wasting my time on useless fluff. I need a better reason."

"Hmm..."

He pauses again, his eyes drifting to the current image and relative position of the Archdemon's physical body, still located in the voidspace of Sharmur.

"Yeah. That's why." Jason mutters. "My Wordsmithing is extremely versatile, but it has too many possibilities, so I get brain overload trying to decide what to do with it. Perhaps by understanding how all metaphysical phenomena function, I can better define the parameters of my own magic. Why was I unable to use 'Kill' on Amelia six years ago? Was my soul weaker than hers? Was I not truly prepared to kill her, so it was a failure of my Will? Was my imagination lacking? Did she have a defense secretly prepared that I failed to anticipate?"

"What about when Beelzebub detonated on Tarus II? Why couldn't I fully contain his explosion? Why did he suddenly produce Gressil's Chaos Energy? Why was that energy specifically able to counter me? Could I have prepared a better counter if I knew about Chaos Energy beforehand? Could I stop Beelzebub if he detonated in the future? What about Gressil himself, can I find a way to counter his magic nullification powers?"

"Soul strength. Imagination. Willpower. Mana capacity. Artificing. Cosmic energy. The pieces are all there... but I'm missing something to unify the theory..."

Jason hems and haws for a while longer, but always, the elusive feeling in the back of his mind remains out of grasp. He struggles to fit the last piece of the puzzle together, but he isn't even sure if it's merely a single piece, or multiple pieces that he's overlooked. This failure frustrates him, making him feel as if he is truly too stupid to solve the mystery.

Eventually, the door to the Spynet Sphere opens, dragging Jason back to reality. He turns to see Fiona running inside, a look of excitement on her face.

"Jason... I did it!" Fiona exclaims, stars dancing in her eyes. "I succeeded! I... I can't believe it!"

"Huh?" Jason asks. "You did what? I'm lost, honey."

"You don't remember?" Fiona asks, running over to him while hugging her hands against her chest. "The brain scans! I've been scanning the brains of humans, the Psions you brought here, and lots of demons. I recently asked Phoebe to scan the brains of some humans on Tarus II and send them to me, and I think I found the thing I've been looking for!"

She pauses, waiting for Jason to state the thing she's clearly most excited about, but with Jason's thoughts still in a bit of a fog, he remains confused.

"So, you found...?"

"The human FLAW!" Fiona exclaims, stamping her foot on the ground. "I can't believe you forgot. JASON, it's the FLAW! The thing Raphael had his sister Uzziel put inside of all the humans to limit our future potential. I finally found it, hiding inside the human brain!"

"Oh!" Jason exclaims, finally understanding her excitement. "You really found it?! I thought that would be impossible."

"I thought it was, too." Fiona says, regaining her earlier excitement as she sees the light-bulbs switch on in Jason's head. "But the scans of humans from Tarus II finally gave me what I needed. Do you remember the Power Glove and how it's been having remarkable effects on our troops?"

Jason nods. "That one trooper, Samuel Baker, he seems to have permanently turned into a male Fairy. It's given him quite a powerful arsenal of magical abilities. And then there's Private Ashley, she has a high compatibility with the Orc transformation..."

"That's exactly it." Fiona says, her expression turning serious. "You won't believe what I found, Jason. The Power Gloves... I'm not sure how it works, but it seems some of the people using the gloves have fixed their Human Flaw. When I checked the brain scans of over a hundred humans, Samuel and Ashley both has a slightly different cerebral structure compared to other humans. Comparing their brains with the brains of ordinary troopers who haven't used the Power Glove gave me a lot of useful data points. I think the anomaly I detected was the Human Flaw, the one preventing humans from using magic!"

Jason blinks twice. "What about the Felorians?"

"They ALSO don't have the Flaw!" Fiona exclaims. "I can't be a hundred percent sure, but if you would check with your Wordsmithing I think we can obtain conclusive proof!"

Jason squeezes Fiona's shoulder and smiles. "Then let's do exactly that."

He and her quickly leave and head over to her warehouse, where the replicas of duplicated exotics remain sitting on shelves, a product of Jason's recent experimentation with Rebecca's assistance.

The Cybernite woman stands in place, unmoving, as her cybernetic brain rapidly causes a nearby computer screen to scroll through hundreds of images per second. She analyzes Fiona's latest data while waiting for Jason to arrive. As he does, she turns to look at him, her brain still actively scanning the documents.

"I've confirmed Fiona's hypothesis." Rebecca says. "There is a 99.97777% repeating chance that the cerebral physiology she has observed are what is causing Humanity's Flaw. I only need your confirmation to be 100% certain."

Jason nods as he walks over. "That's what I'm here for. I'm curious, though. Marie Becker didn't know about Humanity's Flaw?"

"If she did, she didn't tell me." Rebecca answers. "Finding the Flaw is actually quite tricky. We never had any humans to scan who didn't possess the Flaw. There were Felorians, of course, but if we only compared baseline humans to Felorians, that would only give us two data points. The physiological difference Fiona has observed is the same across baseline humans, Felorians, and most crucially, certain users of the Power Glove. The Respected also seem to lack the Human Flaw as well."

To better explain her point, Rebecca summons more than a dozen images of different cerebral scans, causing phantom brains to levitate in the air via holographic three-

dimensional projections.

She points at three of them. "These scans are from various baseline humans."

She points at two more. "These are from two Felorians, Brunhilda and Sariah."

Then she points at three more. "Samuel Baker, Ashley McCarthy, and a randomly selected soldier possessing low compatibility with all known Power Glove transformations."

Rebecca looks at Jason with a serious expression. "All of these individuals possess differing cerebral structures. However, there is a single piece of brain matter weighing less than five milligrams positioned between the spinal cord and the brain stem itself that we have identified as the likely 'Human Flaw.' This microscopic area does not exist in the brains of the Felorians, Samuel Baker, or Ashley McCarthy. However, it does exist across all observed baseline humans and various Power Glove-using soldiers. I suspect that if we scan your brain, you will also lack this piece of cerebral tissue, and therefore confirm the hypothesis."

Jason nods. "Scan away, then."

Without delay, Rebecca lifts up a small handheld device a few inches from Jason's face. It makes a single beeping sound, then she pulls it away and downloads its data into her computational cortex.

Moments later, she smiles at Jason.

"As expected."

"So we've identified the Human Flaw." Jason says slowly. "This is big. We need to run tests immediately. If I erase that piece of brain matter from various humans, that should clear up the blockage and grant them immediate powers. We could see new Heroes arising all at once!"

"I can neither confirm nor deny this hypothesis." Rebecca replies. "However, I would like to draw your attention to a few other scans we made. There are several Felorians I've scanned who don't haven't demonstrated any magical affinity at all, despite also lacking the Human Flaw. The same is true of several Power Glove users in the human army. While some seem to have lost their Flaw, they also have not greatly increased their affinities to various transformations. The data is... scattered at best."

"Then we'll make more data." Jason says decisively. "I'm still going to accept Diablo's demands. But if this is all true, we may have just obtained a new chip we can use in the upcoming war. If we can secretly grow our own Heroes at home, we may yet have a way to elevate ourselves to new heights."

"Maybe we can even reach the level of the Archdemon..." Fiona says thoughtfully.

"I sure hope so." Jason concludes. "Let's get started."

Part 543: Jason's Plan

Emperor Diablo continues to levitate in the air above the table. He waits for a few moments after asking Jason Hiro what his response will be.

It does not escape Diablo's notice that the 'thing' sitting in Jason's seat is not actually Jason himself. Instead, it is an automated drone with a cybernetic interior and flesh covering its surface. However, thanks to the Wordsmith's magic, the Dronesmith appears completely alive to those possessing only mundane senses. Even Neil Adams can't tell anything is off about Jason, let alone the other humans. Perhaps only his wife Phoebe knows, as well as Diablo and a few of the more observant demons such as Beelzebub and Belial.

But even though Diablo immediately sees through the Wordsmith's body, he doesn't possess infinite knowledge regarding the Wordsmith. He doesn't know Jason is currently holed up inside a time-accelerated domain where every minute in the physical universe translates to two hundred and fifty inside Chrona. And so, he also doesn't realize in the few seconds Jason pauses before responding, nearly a thousand have passed inside Chrona, giving Jason plenty of time to prepare his response.

The Dronesmith blinks its eyes and smiles politely at Diablo, its expression neither servile nor arrogant. 'Jason' maintains the perfect level of status in his body language to place himself as an equal to Diablo without lowering or raising himself to a different level of importance. This is important for both of their sakes, as it ensures neither one of them will go too far in their negotiations.

"You drive a hard bargain." Jason says. "But... in the interests of future cooperation, I suppose I have no choice but to accept on humanity's behalf. While I'm sure many people seated here won't be too happy about you taking back the Labyrinth and using our armed forces to benefit demonkind, the fact of the matter is that the Plague is an existential threat to the Milky Way. As well, you and I both know the Plague only represents the beginning of a future extra-galactic war."

"Yes, yes, very true, Wordsmith." Diablo says with a smile. "A wise man submits to circumstance."

"Indeed, but I'm not done speaking." Jason retorts. "There are things I know that you do not. There are things you know that I do not. We can claim to have superior intelligence over one another all day, but I believe a more... *equitable distribution* of future-obtained assets would benefit us both."

Diablo's smile faintly turns to a frown. "Your meaning?"

"We help you secure worlds only for you to instate Middle Cosmics as their permanent guardians, yet humanity receives no benefits outside some claim you can help us fix our Flaw. While this offer isn't bad, I think you can do better."

Jason leans back for a few seconds, as if taking time to think, all the while buying himself tens of minutes in Chrona.

"Hmm. It won't do for you to simply give worlds we re-conquer to humanity, since we'll still be vulnerable if the Plague returns. And obviously if we're 'protected' by your Cosmics, that will put us in a... difficult position."

Jason abruptly smiles, causing Diablo's frown to deepen further. "The solution seems obvious. I want some of the worlds we help you take back to be assigned to our allied demon brothers and sisters. We will uplift friendly demons to the rank of Cosmic in the same way you have, thus providing strongholds for humanity to live upon."

"What?" Diablo asks, his expression souring.

"How is that beneficial to us at all?" Neil asks, his own expression just as sour as Diablo's. "Either way, we'd still be putting the lives of good men and women in the hands of demons!"

"We would." Jason acknowledges. "And I have no problem with that. In the end, Neil, I am still humanity's leader, and I still want to try and make whole the gap between our species and the demons. Not all demons hate humans, and plenty of them I consider my good friends, such as Samantha here, or Kiari, among others."

Jason gestures to his left, where the two female Emperors are sitting together beside Beelzebub. It doesn't escape anyone's notice that Jason doesn't include Beelzebub in his 'friends', but that much is certainly to be expected.

"I would leave up the choice of who among our demon compatriots wants to become locked a single world for the rest of eternity, but I'm sure more than a few would be willing to accept such a burden and its associated responsibilities." Jason continues.

"Samantha's healing abilities are too vital to too many humans, monsters, and demons for me to want to tether her to a single world, but perhaps her abilities would become so powerful that she could heal someone across the entire galaxy. Kiari is not much of a frontline combatant, so perhaps she would be better served creating powerful bug-minions as a Cosmic. If not them, we can raise other Emperors, such as from the Hell of Lust, or what remains of the Hell of Isolation."

"A clever plan." Diablo growls, visibly annoyed Jason thought up this idea. But his annoyance fades after a moment. "I suppose this is an acceptable compromise. Traitors these demons might be to their people and disloyal to their highest rulers, but still demons nonetheless."

"Then that's settled." Jason says. "I want nothing more than to eradicate the Plague and bring an end to it as much as you. As for what comes afterward... we'll just have to see, won't we?"

"Yes. We will have to see." Diablo says, his smile faintly returning.

For a brief moment, neither of the men says anything, but their thoughts swirl quickly as they contemplate the sudden change of plans.

Not bad. The kid moved quickly to solidify his position. Diablo thinks. But demons tethered to worlds are no threat to me. Better yet, they become immobile, unable to assist their comrades meaningfully. Jason overplayed his hand here.

Jason also keeps his thoughts to himself. *Diablo probably thinks me attaching my strongest demon allies to worlds will limit their movements. But who says those tethers cannot be unmade, or maybe even reforged later? Perhaps I can find a way to allow my Cosmic allies to move freely within the Milky Way, if only under limited circumstances.*

Jason's Dronesmith rises from his chair. Neil does too, though the human commander cannot even contain the roiling fury under the surface. Twice, he glowers at Jason hatefully, looking away to try and recompose himself, but failing both times. The betrayal he feels from Jason not only accepting Diablo's offer without consulting his military commander, but even deciding to haphazardly put degenerate demons in charge of future worlds sickens Neil to his core.

That blasted idiot Wordsmith! Neil thinks. He's giving Diablo everything he wanted. Now my men will have to go out and bravely die on the frontlines only to hand the fruits of their labor to demons! Good demons, bad demons, is there even a distinction?! That

idealistic fool of a Wordsmith has screwed his people over yet again, but he's too stupid to see it!

While all three leaders have their own thoughts, none of them voice those thoughts out loud. Diablo merely folds his hands behind his back and glances around the table at the various humans, monster, and demons sitting there.

"So it's settled then. Very well, with that out of the way, I'll be off. I would like your people to vacate the Core as quickly as possible. Out of consideration for our newfound friendship, I will allow you to keep some essential personnel stationed inside the Labyrinth as you please. But the lion's share of the workspace must go to my people."

Neil sneers at Diablo. "Can your demons even *handle* the opening and closing of portals? The technology is quite difficult to comprehend, especially for *your kind*."

Diablo looks at Neil with a faint expression of pity, as if he were a harmless mutt barking to establish his dominance yet utterly failing due to standing before a pack of wolves. "You don't need to worry about that. I have plenty of capable allies who are up for the task."

Without another word, Diablo waves his hand, and his Astral Form dissipates into motes of light. It vanishes after a few seconds, leaving the hall silent.

Neil only manages to restrain himself for five seconds before finally snapping at the Wordsmith. "Oh, what a *fine* job you've done today, *Jason*. You gave Diablo everything he wanted, everything he needed!"

"We made plenty of gains ourselves." Jason says slowly. "I know it might not seem like much, but the situation is under control. Everyone, I expect you to start packing up and exiting the Core post-haste. Let's get out within the next 24 hours."

"So that's it, then?" Neil asks. "We just tuck our tails and scamper away? We're not even going to try to fight?!"

Surprisingly, it's Beelzebub who answers Neil first. "That would be a fool's endeavor. You truly cannot comprehend how useless mundane weapons of war are against a Cosmic entity who possesses unmatched regeneration and the power to shatter planets with his fists. Even if Diablo made no further moves, he has a massive army of Emperors at his disposal who can project power you don't stand a chance against. What are you going to do, slap him? Piss him off? Surely you're smarter than this."

"Sure, maybe we don't literally fight him, but to simply bow down and kiss his feet?!" Neil snaps. "This is outrageous!"

Neil throws his hands up in a wild gesture of rage, then turns and storms out of the room. General Magnus Chadwick steadily follows after him, as does Hans Wagner and the rest of his entourage

Not long after, Jason exhales softly, then looks around at the remaining humans, monsters, and demons.

"Well. That could have gone worse."

"Could have gone better, too." Belial says blandly. "I don't understand, Jason. Neil makes at least a bit of a point. We don't have to fight back against Diablo, but to simply cower to his demands... it leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"He's such a big bully." Kiari complains, crossing her arms. "But uh... what's this about turning Emperors into Cosmics? Were you serious about what you said, Jason?"

"I am serious." Jason answers. "But it doesn't have to be you, Kiari. We have the Belial Booster. We can raise our own Emperors, given time. We'll have plenty of candidates to choose from."

"I'm surprised Diablo didn't include the Belial Booster, or even a copy of it, in his demands." Phoebe says. "You'd think with all the Emperors he has at his disposal, and soon all the Cosmics too, he'd love an easy way to convert demonic power and soul energy into fresh new Emperors..."

"Ah. That's the thing." Jason replies. "Diablo has a truly incredible way of forming Emperors now."

He spends a few minutes telling everyone about the exobeast essence beads created by Glinch and how they can empower ordinary demons to the rank of Duke and Emperor with shocking ease. This causes many of the demons at the table to look at each other strangely.

"Is that... truly a viable way to become an Emperor? There must be a tradeoff." Belial says.

"There's no way some exobeast essence could have such an incredible effect and not have downsides." Beelzebub answers. "Based on what Jason said, it seems these pills hurt

a demon's foundation in some way. That's why Glinch considers them 'exobeast slop.' Beyond that, I can't guess what the problems would be."

"That's my assumption too." Belial mutters. "In any case, it's neither here nor there. If Diablo doesn't *need* us to empower Emperors, then we've lost our leverage. We won't be able to sway the Hells into any mutual benefits if they can get roughly the same thing from Diablo. Most demons would rather serve their own kind than a human, even if the benefits are slightly less than what they received before."

"The Hell of Lust is still on our side." Belial says. "But now that Emperor Melody has become a Cosmic, I don't know how the remaining members of the Hell of Isolation will react."

"Can you go and check on them for me?" Jason asks.

"Yeah. I can do that." Belial answers with a hopeful smile. It fades after a moment. "Just don't be surprised if... I mean, they are friendly to humanity, but..."

"It's fine." Jason says, reaching over to squeeze her shoulder. "Don't try to pressure them or anything. We'll make do even if only the Hell of Lust stays on our side. Even if they *don't*, as a matter of fact."

Belial looks at him questioningly, but Jason doesn't say anything further. She starts to stand up, but then Jason glances at his wife.

"Actually, Samantha, Phoebe, before you both depart, I need to talk to you in private. Let's just go over there for a minute. This won't take long."

He points to a corner of the room, and the two women slowly nod, uncertain what he has to say. Under the curious glances of Beelzebub, Kiari, and several others, Jason and Phoebe join Belial as they walk over to the corner, then Jason utters a few Words of Power, enveloping themselves in a privacy field that makes them all but disappear from reality.

Beelzebub frowns. *What is Jason up to?*

Inside the field, Jason looks around for a moment, his smile from before disappearing.

"Alright, I checked and we're alone. As best as I can tell, no Psions snooping on us, barring some undetectable micro-nano-bio-bots or other bullshit."

Having learned his lesson from Rebecca's training, Jason doesn't take lightly the threat of Creator Demila or some other Psion snooping on him even when he enters one

of his Wordsmithed privacy bubbles.

He stands across from Phoebe and Belial, then sighs.

"It has come to my attention that Diablo may be... plotting something dangerous. He has a number of demons working under him now with entirely novel powers none of us have ever encountered. I need the two of you to work together and do something for me over the next week or so. Samantha, this job will mostly fall on you, but Phoebe, I want you to support her logistically, sending out notifications to everyone you can."

The two women look at each other in confusion, then nod at Jason, watching with wide eyes as he holds out his palm, and a white crystal magically materializes in his grasp.

"This is a brain scanning crystal." Jason explains. "Samantha, Phoebe is going to summon every human soldier and civilian to your hospital over the next week or so. No, actually, make that every human, then every monster and demon, just to keep suspicions down. I will provide you with fifty of these crystals. I want you and some trusted subordinates to scan the brains of everyone who comes to the hospital, and the crystals will turn red or green. Mark down anyone who turns red, then when you're done and you've scanned all our allies, give Phoebe the list of whoever failed the check. I'll handle the rest from there."

"This sounds pretty serious." Belial says. "What are we... scanning for?"

"I don't want to say exactly." Jason answers. "It's just a hunch. I believe there might be a demon capable of synthesizing a dangerous cerebral contagion which could inflict serious damage upon humans. If I'm wrong, then this is just a precaution, but if I'm right, I'll be able to find the common link and snuff out the problem before it even flares up."

"You think he'd go that far?" Belial asks, only to pause and shake her head. "No, what am I saying? The Diablo I saw today was far, far different from the one I've known since the Ancient Era. It's obvious he'd stoop to this level of evil."

"Managing all these people is going to be a logistical burden." Phoebe says. "Even for me. We're talking millions of people and only fifty crystals. I doubt we could do this in two months, let alone a week..."

"It won't take that long." Jason says. "Here, I'll show you how it works."

He lifts up the crystal, then walks over to his wife. He injects his mana into the crystal after holding it up to her head, then a second later it glows faintly red.

Belial's expression darkens. "Phoebe... she's been contaminated?"

"Possibly." Jason says. "But I already guessed as much. You don't need to worry about that. As you can see, the scanning process doesn't even take five seconds. You can have people walk into an office and walk out after ten seconds later. A revolving door will get them out of your hair lickety-split. Once you guys get me that list, I can take care of the rest. I'll make sure anyone afflicted has their health evaluated without them even knowing. Remember, we don't want to cause a panic. Just tell your staff that this is a routine inspection using Phoebe's new crystal scanning technology."

Belial looks at Phoebe with deep concern. Then she nods at Jason.

"I'll take care of this. Just get me those crystals and I'll start scanning people night and day until the work is done. We demons can go without sleep for a long, long time if needed."

"No need to over-exert yourself." Jason says. "If you have more capable personnel, I can provide you with more crystals. This task should be done swiftly but don't fall apart for my sake..."

"I'll be fine." Belial says, taking the crystal from Jason.

She smiles at Jason and Phoebe, then gives both of the humans a hug before Jason teleports her directly to Tarus II afterward.

Once Belial disappears, Phoebe looks at Jason seriously. "What am I infected with?"

Jason's smile disappears. "Don't be mad, honey. I lied to Samantha just now."

"Huh? You did?!" Phoebe asks, slightly aghast. "You don't trust her? After all we've been through?!"

"I absolutely do. But this situation is different." Jason explains. "I don't want this information getting out to *anyone* in realspace. Only you and I can know. At least for *now*."

He pauses.

"You remember what Diablo said before? About fixing Humanity's Flaw? We don't need him for that. I've already found the way to fix it myself."

Phoebe's heart skips a beat. Her eyes widen. "You did? Since when?"

"The word 'when' is a little relative for both of us." Jason says. "It was a few days ago... my time. It was less than an hour ago... your time. Fiona and Rebecca have been working hard to scan and evaluate a bunch of human, demon, and Volgrim brains. We found a microscopic piece of brain matter we've identified as the so-called 'Human Flaw.' The Crystals don't detect a virus, they detect that Flaw."

He shrugs. "Actually they don't just detect it, they also immediately destroy it. I chose to have the crystals glow red for anyone who already had their Flaw fixed via the Power Gloves. Yeah that's a whole thing. Turns out the gloves can sometimes fix the Flaw in certain people at random, but the results are inconclusive."

"So why all the hush-hush secrecy?" Phoebe asks, her expression still one of annoyance. "Why lie to Sammy of all people? She's our closest friend, Jason. We can absolutely trust her."

"Yes we can. But every individual who knows is one more link that could reveal this information to the Volgrim Empire. Don't forget we have spies in our ranks. I'm still trying to root out the Changelings. I don't want to take any chances..."

Jason gently pokes his wife's collarbone. "You know and I know. That's enough. I don't want to get anyone's hopes up, anyway. I have no idea what removing Humanity's Flaw will do. It might not accomplish anything. People might gain the power to see through walls or something, or people might randomly uplift themselves to the rank of Cosmic. I refuse to believe Raphael went to the trouble of limiting humanity's potential if we weren't going to amount to much anyway. He must have seen something that made him scared."

"Or perhaps the old coot learned his lesson from the demons." Phoebe says with a sour expression. "Anyway. I'll tolerate this one time, Jason. But don't ever put me in a position where I have to lie to my best friend again. That's really screwed up of you."

Jason smiles weakly, trying not to look guilty. He touches Phoebe's stomach, smiling as he feels her noticeably larger belly.

"The baby's not far away." Jason mutters. "A few months at most. That's dozens of years in Chrona-time. Hopefully I'll have had enough time to solve all the problems facing humanity by then. If humanity can grow strong enough, we won't need to fear the demons, the Volgrim, or even the Plague. But it currently hinges on just what will happen if our people have their limiter removed. I hope it all works out well."

Phoebe smiles. "I do too, Jason."

The two of them lean forward and start to kiss, but Phoebe pulls back all of a sudden and frowns.

"Wait. Jason... is that you? Something's a little... off about you."

Jason flinches. "I, ah..."

His wife stares into his eyes for a moment, and her expression droops.

"What the- this is the Dronesmith! Were you seriously about to kiss me with your robo-clone? I thought you actually came down here for once!"

"I... can feel the sensations the Dronesmith feels if I want." Jason says, though his excuse feels a tad lame.

"Why don't you get your hiney back to realspace instead, then?" Phoebe asks. "Kiss me in person, you dummy."

Phoebe lightly teases Jason, but when he doesn't laugh, her smile fades.

"Jason?"

"I can't." The Wordsmith says, averting his eyes. "I'm... I can't leave Chrona, Phoebe. I'm trapped here. At least for now."

"What? Trapped??" Phoebe asks, feeling even more startled than she was earlier. "What do you mean? What aren't you telling me this time?"

"I didn't want to worry you." Jason replies. "It's just... well, the effects of time-dilation can be... severe. Traveling from a higher time dilation to a lower one can cause severe problems. Blinker... she returned from realspace and nearly died. It took us a lot of work to stabilize her condition and get her back on her feet. I'm currently looking into mitigation strategies for myself and the rest."

Jason hesitantly explains his current situation to Phoebe, and a few minutes later, she falls silent.

"250 times the speed of realspace." Phoebe mutters. "Of course it can't be that convenient. There would have to be side effects. It's only three months till the baby is due, but that's 750 months in Chrona time. Jason, that's well over half a century."

"It is a lot of time. Yeah." Jason acknowledges. "I want to hold you. To hug you. To kiss you... but I can't leave here until I solve the time dilation problem. And I definitely can't

bring you or any humans here either. I'll be trapping my species inside Chrona's dimension, like I've already done for Kar, Blinker, and the others."

Jason hangs his shoulders heavily.

"What's done is done. In the meantime, you just need to focus on helping me with the problems in realspace. I will make sure to devote plenty of time to making things as quick and easy for you as possible."

"What about my big debate with Neil?" Phoebe asks.

Jason blinks. "Your what?"

"The debate in a week." Phoebe says, frowning. "You know. To debate the future of humanity's path forward. Don't tell me you forgot!"

"Oh, right, a week. Next week." Jason says, scratching his head. "I... okay, yeah, I forgot. It's been a long time for me. It's easy to forget about these minor matters."

"M-minor matters???" Phoebe exclaims. "Jason if we screw up, Neil could sway half the population to follow his rule! He and Hope could brainwash them and leave us with far fewer people."

"Might be better that way..." Jason says slowly. "More redundancy. Having the entire population of humanity located on one planet is a disaster waiting to happen. Spreading ourselves out across a few planets is assuredly much better in the long run."

He shrugs.

"Just do your best, honey. If you fail to sway the hearts of the people... it's fine. We'll manage. Neil's anti-demon stance is making more sense now that Diablo has become such a big threat. Maybe he has a good idea, for once..."

Phoebe closes her eyes and massages the bridge of her nose. "Okay. I'll do that. Thanks, I guess."

Jason gives her a hug, but now that she knows she's only embracing a robot, Phoebe's response is decidedly more lukewarm. The Dronesmith smiles awkwardly, then disperses the privacy field and vanishes, teleporting back to Chrona.

Phoebe sighs as she turns back to the table full of expectant gazes, who now see only her returning without Jason and Belial.

My husband can be such a handful. Phoebe thinks.

Part 544: Indomitable

Before Diablo's astral appearance inside the Core and his meeting with humanity's leaders, a massive war was expected to unfold. Countless humans as well as their allied monster and demon comrades mentally went to red alert, expecting a genocide to occur. However, over the next 24 hours, that didn't end up happening. Instead, Jason Hiro bowed his head to the Archdemon and stepped aside, evacuating the Core except for some key personnel. The demons returned to take control of their domain, with ten of Diablo's new Emperors leading the advance.

This loss of a central hub proves to be a crippling blow to humanity's moral center. Countless people figuratively turn their eyes toward the Wordsmith with looks of scorn and disgust. Whether they can see him or not, many of them end up with a mental image of him shivering in fear before the Archdemon, then quickly bowing his head and retreating like a beaten dog.

It doesn't help that Neil Adams is all too pleased to fan the flames and spread rumors through military channels that the demons must have found some severe leverage to hold over the Wordsmith's head. Public sentiment quickly sours, and countless people begin to rethink their opinion of the Wordsmith, assuming they hadn't already been doing so over the past six years.

Between Beelzebub's detonation and subsequent 'forgiveness', or the massive number of lives lost during Stormbringer, or the way Jason blithely allowed demons to integrate into human society, many people begin to think deeply about whether or not they actually want the First Wordsmith as their leader.

"I just don't get it, daddy." Lily Brown complains to her father. "How can the Wordsmith be such a sissy? He didn't even put up a fight!"

Benjamin Brown makes a few sandwiches inside his kitchen while his daughter sits at the table and waits for her food. He glances at Lily, then shrugs nonchalantly before continuing to place some meat, cheese, and vegetables native to Tarus II on the bread.

"I wasn't invited to the discussion, so I don't know what was said and what wasn't." Benjamin says, his tone mild. "But I doubt the rumors going around are entirely true. The

Wordsmith's power is vast. I doubt he's simply given up and pledged obeisance to the Archdemon. Even if he has... I'm not entirely opposed."

As a collaborator who worked with the demons for 100,000 years following the end of the Energy Wars, Benjamin Brown has long lost his feelings of distrust and hatred toward the demons. He instead views them as longtime friends and companions, so he doesn't mind if Diablo takes control and rules over humanity once more.

After all, Diablo did that in the past, and everything went well until the Wordsmith showed up. Surely, returning to his former role in an even more powerful manner could only lead to a better future than before, *right*?

But Lily appears less convinced. "That Wordsmith keeps screwing up again and again. I still haven't forgiven him for killing Ose! She may have been a little heavy-handed towards humanity sometimes, but she was a good person at heart! She didn't deserve to die!"

Benjamin snorts. "Right. Ose, a good person. You keep telling yourself that, sweetie. Here, eat your food before you head off to work."

He plops down a plate with three sandwiches on it, and his daughter quickly snaps them up and scarfs them down.

"Right! At least working with everyone here has been pretty fulfilling. Oh, and daddy, have you visited the hospital yet?"

"The hospital?" Benjamin asks, blinking twice. "Why would I need to go there?"

"Because of the mandatory crystal-scanning session." Lily explains between bites. "I'm going there before work today. It doesn't take long. You just pop in and they do a five-second scan of your body with these crystals Miss Hiro made. Apparently it clears up your chakra pathways or something."

"Oh. *That* hospital thing." Benjamin says with a roll of his eyes. "It's not for clearing your chakra, it's to scan for irregularities in your body's spiritual foundation. Word's been handed down from the military that the recent shift in the Labyrinth's mana may have caused some imbalances in the mana on Tarus II. The Wordsmith's wife is scanning everyone just to be sure."

"Right! It's a mana/chakra thing." Lily chirps. "Just like I said! Anyway, I'm gonna drop by before work so I can say hi to Beli. I've been meaning to catch up with her but I

just haven't had the time."

"Mmm. You have fun with that... succubus." Benjamin says, barely containing a frown.
"Ugh. You're just like your mother."

* * *

Inside Tarus II's hospital, Belial stands in a small room with a human soldier an arm's length away. She holds up the clear crystal Jason gave to her, and it glows red for a moment.

"Hmm..." Belial says, faintly frowning. She makes a note on the paper, then motions for the woman to leave. After she departs, Belial calls out, "Jacob Reyson!"

A man walks in, and Belial scans him with the crystal. It turns green, and she nods before waving him out.

"Marcus Wheatley!"

"Delphina Zero-Eight!"

"Erin Maegar!"

One by one, she calls out the names on her list, causing people to come in, stand for a few seconds as she scans them, then leave. The process is mind-numbingly simple and takes no time at all. Having been at this for over twenty hours, she doesn't feel particularly fatigued, but she does become bored out of her mind, ultimately repeating the process purely on autopilot while her thoughts wander.

"Jarod Ryner!"

"Lucas Zero-Six!"

Some of the people have last names using only numbers. This turns out to be a requirement passed down by the military, since plenty of humans originally came from small tribes on worlds where last names simply weren't necessary. For these people, they are assigned a number for their last name until they marry someone else with a last name or decide to come up with one of their own.

"Henry Cliff!"

When she calls out this name, Belial's brain momentarily reactivates. She blinks and looks up as the person enters the room.

So it's him. She thinks.

She pauses for half a second, as if debating whether or not to scan the fidgeting young man before her.

What if he is infected? Maybe I just shouldn't say anything. Then he can die like a bastard deserves.

Belial's pupils flicker indecisively, but only for a moment. She ultimately decides to swipe the crystal over his body, giving him a scan like all the others.

It lights up green, and he simply nods at her before exiting the room.

Seems he wasn't infected after all. Belial thinks. Bummer.

"Jenny Mathers!"

* * *

Henry, formerly a private in humanity's army, but now one of the most hated traitors on Tarus II, numbly walks out of the hospital room, neither understanding the purpose of Belial scanning him, nor particularly caring what the results might have been.

It turned green. Must have been good news. Henry thinks to himself as he shuffles through the corridor, keeping his head down. These days, he doesn't like meeting other people's eyes, especially when they're fellow humans. *First time for everything.*

As he walks, Henry flinches when he suddenly sees something moving toward him out of the corner of his eye. He jerks back reflexively, only to see the face of a familiar man as the fellow reaches out to touch Henry's shoulder.

"Henry!" The man says, turning his touch into a waving motion. "Haven't seen or heard from you in a while. How have you been?"

"H-how have I been?" Henry asks, momentarily dumbfounded. He glances around at the people lining up in the hallway, many of whom immediately recognize him. A series of glares and jeers come his way, making him quickly lower his eyes.

"I've been good." Henry immediately lies. "Catch you later, Saul."

"Whoa, whoa. What's the big rush?" Saul asks. "Got a hot date?"

Henry shrugs. "No. Don't have much of anything going on, actually."

"Great! Why don't you wait out there in the main hall a few minutes." Saul replies. "It won't take me long to get scanned. I'm close to the front of the line."

"Oh. Alright... sure." Henry says, uncertain if he should reject Solomon's nephew or not. In the end, his anxiety about being seen in public loses to his desire to see even one friendly face.

Henry awkwardly continues shuffling out of the corridor, pausing only when he reaches the main entry area which is now jam-packed with humans waiting their turn to get scanned. Three dozen different lines form going down different corridors, leading to many different rooms. Grima, the receptionist goblin, dutifully hands out tickets and room numbers to everyone who approaches his desk.

Henry figuratively twiddles his thumbs, finally becoming invisible now that he's stepped within a large enough mass of people that nobody nearby pays him any mind. Every few seconds, the lines will shift forward while other people walk back down the halls, having completed their scans.

Like Saul said, it doesn't take him long to finish his scans and head down the hall to meet up with Henry.

"There you are!" Saul laughs, clapping Henry on the back. "What say you and me go grab a bite to eat, eh? I found this great goblin-run meat stand half a click from here, won't take us a minute to reach it. Gotta get Kiari something too, lord knows she goes bananas for their barbecued 'Jhoral' meat."

Henry shrugs. "Yeah, sure, whatever works."

He and Saul make their way out of the hospital, with Saul mostly filling the dead air while Henry only offers perfunctory nods or sometimes says yes or no. But otherwise, Henry doesn't say much.

"My results came up green! Isn't that wonderful?" Saul asks. "Dunno what those crystals are scanning for, but green sounds good to me. How about you?"

Henry shrugs. "Mine was green too."

"Great! That's just great..."

Saul trails off. He walks up to the meat stand and orders some food, then glances at Henry. "You want anything? Bill's on me."

"No, no, I couldn't burden you like that." Henry says, waving his hand dismissively. "I, uh, I just ate a little bit ago. You go ahead though."

"Burden me?" Saul scoffs. "Henry, my girlfriend is a *Demon Emperor*. Through her bugs, Kiari earns more Merit Tokens than any other person in the city barring perhaps one of those fairy queens. It's no trouble at all."

"Well, uh... I mean, if you insist..." Henry mumbles, before randomly pointing at something on the menu. "I guess I could try that."

A few minutes later, he and Saul sit on a bench inside the nearby Central Gardens, where they see the ghost of the former Heroes, Sir Lorent and Shana, both painting on canvasses off in the distance while some kids and a few teens mimic them.

"So. You haven't really answered my question." Saul says after taking a big bite out of his barbecued meat. He licks his fingers, savoring the sweet and tangy residue with a quiet groan of pleasure. "How have things been, Henry?"

"Oh, you know." Henry says, taking an even bigger bite to stuff his mouth so he doesn't have to talk. "Pretty good."

"Yeah? Is that so..." Saul says, once again trailing off.

This time, he doesn't speak for a good thirty seconds. Saul munches on his meat while looking off into the distance.

"It's been hard on you." He finally says, having finished off one of the ribs he purchased. He wipes his hands with a napkin, then pauses his eating to look at Henry sitting beside him. "After that inquisition thing, I started feeling worried for you."

Henry flinches. In his heart of hearts, he hoped Saul hadn't even heard about what happened. After all, Saul usually keeps to himself and stays in his hut, enjoying the simple life. He's not much of a worldly man, caring little for the greater good or other divine acts of providence. Henry hoped he might have simply overlooked the tribunal entirely.

But given Kiari herself sat in the Lesser Demon audience only a stone's throw away from the primary platform, that would obviously have been a pipe dream. There wasn't a chance she didn't detail that day's events to her lover when she returned home.

"It's fine." Henry says. "I'm alive, aren't I?"

"Man does not live on bread alone." Saul says. "I'm guessing most people don't want to talk to you these days?"

Henry doesn't respond for a few moments.

"...No. Not really."

"I thought not." Saul says, biting into the next piece of rib-meat, but this time much more slowly and deliberately than before. He spends a few seconds chewing it while he thinks about what to say next. "You screwed up. But everyone does eventually, kid. My screw-up caused me to fall into the clutches of an undying monster for 100,000 years. I lost contact with my entire family, and awoke in the far-future to find they had perished to the annals of time."

Despite his grim words, Saul chuckles. "Everyone except for my annoying uncle. Why Solomon lived long enough to tease me, I'll never know."

"That must have been a hard transition for you." Henry says, glancing at Saul with a newfound sense of sympathy. "What allowed you to endure?"

Once again, it takes Saul a few seconds to respond. He silently chews his meat before answering.

"...I considered ending it all. Many times. Without my family, what did I have to live for? I could vaguely remember bits and pieces of the last 100,000 years. Memories of being a monster. Sometimes mining in caves. Sometimes whipping human servants on Bahamut's orders."

He pauses.

"But I didn't end my life. And I'm glad I didn't. I held on, and before long, I met my uncle. Then time passed and I met Kiari. She wasn't an Emperor at the time, but merely a flirty demon girl with these cute freckles I couldn't take my eyes off..."

He bobs his head from side to side, momentarily becoming lost in his memories before snapping back to reality.

"That was four years ago. Nowadays, I've come to think this might be the happiest period of my life."

"You pulled through." Henry says with a smile. "I'm glad for you."

"Yes." Saul says seriously, meeting Henry's gaze. "But I'm worried for you. It's not easy finding the willpower to go on when it feels like you've lost everything. You were Neil Adams' top sniper. A lot of people respected you. Everyone wanted to be your friend. You even had some big accomplishments during Stormbringer. But now nobody wants to be around you, you've lost your military rank, and... what else do you have left?"

Henry lowers his eyes and looks away.

"Nothing." He says, his chest cold and numb. "I'm going through the motions. That's all."

"I assumed that might be the case." Saul nods. "I'm guessing you don't have much in the way of Merit Tokens, huh? Driving people around can't pay much."

"Well. I get by." Henry replies.

"I'd like it if you did more than 'get by.'" Saul says. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of paper and a pen. After writing something down, he hands it to the young man.

"Here. My wife recently started building this new high-tech facility with her bugs. Phoebe Hiro personally commissioned it for the upcoming war effort against the Plague. I'm gonna get you in on the ground floor as a technician. You'll be in a specialized suit all day, so nobody will see your face if you don't want them to. It's all very hush-hush, so you don't even need to tell people your full name. You can make a good income there, maybe get a fresh start."

Henry flinches, recoiling a half inch from Saul as if the man had just squirted him in the face with water.

"Huh? Why would you offer me this? What do you have to gain?"

"Gain?" Saul fires back, giving the kid a deep smirk. "You little brat. Who do you think I am? I'm not helping you because I want something from you. I'm helping you because I see a friend in need."

"Okay. But I'm a traitor to humanity. I almost got Neil Adams killed." Henry explains. "You shouldn't associate with the likes of me, or..."

"Or what? Are people going to badmouth me? Make me lose my job?" Saul retorts. "I'm a hermit living in a hut. I leech off my hot demon girlfriend's income so I don't have to do any hard work. I don't give a damn what anyone says."

He moves the piece of paper closer, making Henry follow the movement with his eyes.

"Kid, you made one big mistake. You're not a bad person. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Even my jerk of an uncle got duped by a few women back in the day, and people call him the 'Knowledge-Seeker.' If the so-called wisest Hero of all time can screw up and get his entire lineage killed by demons, yet still earn redemption, so can you."

A warm feeling begins to smolder inside Henry's stomach. He gently reaches out and takes the piece of paper from Saul's hand.

"I... see. Alright. Thank you very much. It means a lot that you'd do a big favor for me like this."

"It's not big at all." Saul says, gently squeezing Henry's shoulder. "But I do hope it helps you. Remember, humans are not like other species. We're a social group that rely on one another. Rugged individualism may take you far, but the power of groups working together is far more formidable. If you need someone to talk to, I'm always available. It's not like I have much going on at home besides tending to my garden."

"Maybe I'll drop by sometime and help you water your plants." Henry says.

"I hope so. Kiari is usually too busy to join me there."

The two men finish their food, and the mood becomes a little lighter as Henry's spirits lift up, little by little. The loneliness and isolation he felt over the past couple of weeks had been eating at him constantly, and it's only now that he's found someone to vent to that he realized he needed it all along.

Eventually, the two men go their separate ways. Once Henry leaves, he feels a bit of a hop in his step. He hums quietly to himself and gets going down the road.

As he walks, Henry feels a pair of eyes watching him. He turns to look down the road, where he sees a random human male looking his way. The man immediately appears familiar to Henry, but it takes him a moment to make the mental connection.

Isn't that Neil's friend, Makoto Ueda? No, that's right, he had his soul taken over by that ancient Hero. What was his name again...?

Unable to remember Siddhartha Gautama's name, Henry pauses mid-step and raises an eyebrow as the Japanese-looking man walks over to him.

"Ah, Henry. It seems you've regained a bit of a spark in your eyes."

"Yeah, uh, sure." Henry says with a frown. "Something like that. Can I help you?"

Buddha stares at the young man for several long seconds, making Henry feel extremely awkward. Eventually, he shrugs.

"It seems the Wordsmith discovered a method. Things are going to become interesting soon, young man. I hope your willpower is ready for the trials and tribulations."

Henry's expression shifts from awkwardness to confusion. "I... huh? What are you talking about?"

"The Great Shattering draws nearer every day." Buddha answers, his words not helping clarify matters at all for Henry. "When it arrives, despair will seize the hearts of men. I can only hope capable new Heroes will rise up to replace the old..."

"New Heroes?" Henry asks. "Like Wordsmiths?"

"Any man can become a Hero." Buddha answers. "Magic is not required. Only a brave heart wielding the power of the indomitable human spirit. Perhaps, if your willpower is strong enough, it could be you who people look up to someday."

"I find that hard to believe." Henry retorts, looking away with a bitter expression on his face. Already, the good feelings from his interaction with Saul have disappeared as if they never existed. "Everyone wants me dead."

"For now." Buddha answers with a nod. "But the machinations of Karma are not to be trifled with. You reap what you sow. Start planting seeds now and they will fully germinate when the time is right."

Henry's eyes practically bug out of his head. He stares at Buddha with even more confusion than before, but the Japanese man simply waves at him, then turns and walks away.

A few seconds later, Henry shakes his head.

"What a strange fellow."

Part 545: Act of Defiance

Hope Hiro and his fiancé, Amelia Greyheart, stand inside a small chamber within the central nexus of the Hall of Heroes. Before Hope stands a slender, narrow platform with a Heroic Artifact resting atop it. This platform happens to cradle none other than the Dominion Rod, an item possessing the soul of the First Hero to have ever walked the mortal plane... King Jephthath.

Jephthath himself stands opposite the artifact. He and every other person in the chapter remain completely silent, watching as Hope holds his palms above the artifact, beads of sweat silently sliding down his forehead. For thirty minutes, he has held this pose, silently struggling with a task of some significance.

Almost there. Solomon thinks, watching from the side. *Shouldn't be long now.*

Jephthath closes his eyes. He takes a deep breath, inhaling spiritual energy, while focusing his mind.

At that moment, Hope's pupils become visibly relaxed. His shoulders sag, and his arms flop to his side. He starts to stumble backward, and Amelia catches him.

"Suc...cess..." Hope gasps, before his legs give out underneath him.

Amelia helps the Wordsmith sag to the floor. He lays there for a good few minutes, while Solomon, Elizabeth Kindelmann, and several other Trueborn Heroes including Moses and Aaron all offer words of praise, thanking the young man for his hard work.

"You have done well." Jephthath says, opening his eyes. His irises momentarily glow bright white before the color recedes, returning his eyes to their ordinary blue color. "The connection has been perfectly established."

Despite his anticipation, Solomon controls his emotions. He waits until Hope, ever the hero of the hour, can regain some of his stamina and shakily stand back up with Amelia's help.

"So it worked?" Hope finally asks Jephthath. "You've connected to all of humanity?"

"Not all of them." Jephthath says slowly. "My power, as well as that of the Dominion Rod, will not be able to influence or connect to any humans who are already Trueborn or Lowborn Heroes. Additionally, humans who have built up significant amount of spiritual

power may resist the connection. That being said, how many humans as of yet possess such qualifications? No more than a handful, I would imagine."

Hope nods slowly. "Can you project your visions through the staff?"

A few moments pass. Jephthah holds up a hand, causing the crystal in the center of the Dominion Rod to flash bright white. A beam of energy radiates outward, transforming the entirety of the chamber into a 360-degree panoramic view of a street locale somewhere on Tarus II.

Hope and the others find themselves visually transported to a picnic bench where a pretty red-haired girl bats her eyelashes at them, laughing at some previously unheard joke. Strangely enough, a pair of hands lift up a large sandwich filled with meat, and that sandwich moves across the three-dimensional space toward the Dominion Rod before partially disappearing, then reappearing with a huge bite taken out of it.

"Mmm, so good." A man's voice says, though it's unclear who the speaker is. "Love this place. That goblin cooks the best meat topside of the plateau."

Around the picnic bench, dozens of humans, monsters, and demons walk around and frolic inside the local park, the central community area intended for these sorts of meetups.

Hope turns around, and discovers that the clarity of the world drops significantly within a strict 90-degree viewing cone. Beyond that, it becomes a hazy fog with only faint grey apparitions of potential things moving about that the person whose eyes they seem to be viewing through cannot actually see.

"So that's how it works." Hope says. "You can connect to the mind of any human on Tarus II and see the world through their eyes?"

"I can do a lot more than that." Jephthah says calmly. "I can control their minds and force my will upon them, if I so desire. I can read their thoughts and look into their memories. I can make them share pain and pleasure. I can unite all of them, alter their desires, and much, much more."

Hope nods slowly, but a look of displeasure crosses his face.

"No... I don't think you should be doing any of that. Look, this will allow all of us to get a look at what's happening in the outside world. We can keep an eye on everyone and secretly ensure the demons aren't infiltrating our ranks."

He looks at Jephthath pointedly. "But interfering with humanity's free will? I draw the line there. I know that your powers were once considered necessary as humanity was in a crisis of extinction, but unless we reach that point again, I do NOT want to impose such a life upon what remains of our species."

Solomon nods. "I agree. Jephthath, don't go too far. Hope has established this connection so the Hall of Heroes can always maintain contact with the outside world. But it would not be appropriate for us old fogeys to take action except in the direst of emergencies."

"I am not a child, Knowledge-Seeker." Jephthath says mildly. "I know what limits should and should not be breached. I am content to sit back and let this era's two Heroes have at one another as they learn the ropes. I simply offer my guidance and talents if they wish to use them."

"Alright. I'm glad we understand each other." Hope says with a smile. "Now, I suppose I should ask, can you identify any humans you were unable to connect to?"

Jephthath falls silently for a moment. He starts waving his hands, surprising Hope as the spherical room changes to show the entire planet of Tarus II levitating in the void, its surface wrapping around and enveloping the Dominion Rod. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dots seemingly devour one rather small area on one of the planet's continents, with a few scattered dots nearby and almost none in other places across the planet.

"I am connected not only to Tarus II's humans, but those inside the Labyrinth, and elsewhere, such as Maiura." Jephthath explains. "So far, I have not been able to connect with the minds of any of the humans who died and were resurrected as The Respected. Their spiritual potential has become too substantial for the Rod to make a connection. The same is true of certain key T-REX users, such as Private Ashley McCarthy. Finally, there are individuals such as Neil Adams, Phoebe Hiro, and others like them who you Wordsmiths blocked off with your magic. I cannot forge a connection to their minds."

Hope quickly waves his hand. "That- that's fine. We don't need to see into Neil's mind, and certainly not Phoebe's. It wouldn't be appropriate."

Amelia glances at Hope and raises an eyebrow. "To say the least."

Hope smiles at his fiancé and kisses her cheek. "You're cute when you're jealous."

* * *

An hour later, after Hope and Jephthath have reviewed the possibilities of the new Dominion-Net, as Hope has taken to calling it, the Wordsmith finds a question crossing his mind.

"So wait, you can't connect to humans who have grown in spiritual potential?" Hope asks. "Then what about humans you CAN connect to, who *later* become spiritually powerful?"

"Ah, as in humans who ascend only after I've established a connection." Jephthath says. "In those cases, my connection will still be integrated within them, but if they discover it, they will likely be able to pull it out."

"That's too bad." Hope mutters.

"When I roamed the Earth, eons ago, my power was used only to subjugate lower humans and grant them the single power I possessed; that of the fallen Titan King, Hercules." Jephthath explains. "Tremendous strength, speed, and durability. It could turn any man into a fearsome killing machine. With our minds united, we became a force capable of slaughtering gods. But the downside was... our powers were quite simplistic."

Jephthath shrugs.

"Great strength certainly is incredible in matters of war, but we live in an era where metallic vehicles float in the void, capable of bombarding planets from afar with blasts of war-god energy. We live in an era where Cosmic demons can sunder worlds with a single breath of destructive power. We live in an era where a single High Psion can bring the totality of humankind to its knees with a wave of their hand."

Jephthath shakes his head. "In such an era, an era where Jason Hiro has already come up with a method to grant humans formidable strength en-masse, my ancient powers are not much to speak of at all."

Amelia stands up a little straighter. "The Body Boosters are certainly amazing, but your power to unite minds and create a human-spanning 'Omnivision' to share intelligence, and all the other benefits that come with that... those are still extremely valuable."

"Perhaps. But do not mistake my words for humility. What I mean to say is that my powers have a secret benefit that has not been useful until this exact moment in time."

A playful smile crosses Jephthath's lips.

"I have been catching up on the machinations and evolution of the numerous Demon Emperors which arose in the period after my life ended. It seems one of them came to obtain a power not dissimilar to mine..."

"What?" Hope asks, his heart skipping a beat. "There's a demon with a power similar to yours?"

"Of course." Jephthath answers. "His name is Auger, the Emperor of Distribution. You've surely heard of him."

Hope nods slowly. "Auger rules the Fourth Hell of Punishment. His power is the ability to contract subordinates, take their powers, and pass them around between one another so they... so they..."

The Wordsmith pauses. A strange look enters his eyes.

"Wait. Are you saying *you* can do that, too? If humans contract with you, they can swap powers around at will?"

"Exactly." Jephthath says with a smile. "But my power is even more incredible than Auger's. My subordinates can share thoughts, emotions, knowledge, and powers. They do not need to 'trade'. If one person obtains a formidable ability, the Legion as a whole can obtain that power all at once. This is known as the Collective Uplifting. Back in my day, this power only ever manifested in the sharing of our progenitor's strength, that of Titan King Hercules. But nowadays, as more and more humans become uplifted, the results could become far more heaven-defying..."

"That's absolutely ridiculous." Hope says. "If I contracted with you, then the entirety of humanity could become Wordsmiths!"

"Potentially." Jephthath says, lowering his eyes modestly. "But it is not as simple as you might assume. Every human has a different level of potential and talent from another. Some humans are more gifted in the ways of shadow, while others are masters of light. Some wield fire as if they were born in a volcano, while others act as dolphins when wielding the water element. Your power is a special one that likely cannot be fully comprehended by ordinary humans. At best, they might only be able to wield a single element of Wordsmithing properly."

Hope momentarily recalls that the color of his soul was said to be 'rainbow' in nature, as told to him by Confessor Vulpanix. By contrast, most other living souls would only be one or two colors, at most.

Of course, having more colors and abilities does not inherently make one more powerful, and in fact reduces the precision of their individual abilities. But for the purposes of making Wordsmiths out of all the other humans, it certainly presents a barrier.

In any case, neither Hope nor Jason would want to see Wordsmiths rise up in the tens or hundreds or thousands, so this isn't a negative for them.

"Humans linked to the Dominion-Net now who become uplifted later will have the capability to pass that power on to everyone else." Amelia says, concluding the explanation herself. "That sounds extremely impressive."

"It is, but only if humanity manages to uplift at least a few formidable warriors." Jephthath says. "There are countless humans linked to my consciousness now, yet none of them have noticed the faint change in their spirituality. I have begun to probe each individual, looking to see if I can find any special seeds. If I do, I will notify you."

"Great." Hope says with a smile. "My deepest thanks, Jephthath. You and the other Heroes are going to do great work keeping humanity's future stable and secure."

After concluding their business, everyone but Jephthath eventually leaves the room. Unfortunately, due to the creation of the Dominion-Net, Jephthath has become forced to stay inside the observation room at the heart of the Hall of Heroes, not far from Solomon's Library. But this solitude doesn't bother the First Hero in the slightest. After all, he bore the loneliness of 100,000 years without complaint. Being linked to millions of human souls is already a huge difference in social quality.

Jephthath's spiritual gaze casually wanders across the humans newly subordinated to himself. A fact he didn't deign to mention to Hope is that without conducting a proper ceremony wherein people declare their obeisance to him, the effects of his powers would be somewhat limited, but that issue can always be rectified later once Hope finds a way to return to Tarus II without suffering from Time Dilation Sickness.

"Hmm..." Jephthath murmurs to himself, as his gaze fixates on one seemingly ordinary young man. "This lad... he seems to have recently been bolstered by the power of an Envoy. He might be worth keeping an eye on..."

A day has passed since the titanic battle between Founder Dosea and Melody, the Deity of Defiance.

Thanks to her incredible speed of Cosmic Regeneration, Melody has already put herself somewhat back together, but she still looks like a miserable mess, with horrible bruises and burns scattered across her body, along with slowly mending lacerations and cuts.

After Diablo left to clean up the remaining Kolvaxian-infested worlds with the help of his Emperors, Melody had no choice but to lay on Thillow's moon, motionless, while her body healed itself. Now, she manages to slowly stand up with a pained hobble, looking around herself at the broken, shattered world left behind by her battle.

Victory. Loss. Did it even matter? Melody thinks bitterly.

She looks up at the distant stars, expanding her cosmic senses to momentarily swoon at the sensations she feels.

Never, in all her years, has she felt so unfathomably powerful, and yet so completely minuscule and powerless.

Because, in her mind's eye, when she gazes into the abyss, she vaguely feels the eyes of countless distant Cosmic monsters slowly turning their gazes toward her...

Melody looks away, too afraid to continue drawing the attention of... whatever horrifying creatures those might have been.

There are so many Entities in existence as strong as me, if not far stronger. I am nothing at all. Melody thinks. *I was like a toddler trying to beat a giant during my battle against Dosea. I bet Diablo would beat my ass just as badly.*

She slowly levitates upward, taking care to inhale as much Cosmic Energy from the ambient environment as possible to heal her body. While her wounds are truly too severe to restore at a high speed, and while she certainly cannot hope to match Beelzebub's ridiculous rate of regeneration, her speed dwarfs any other demon barring Diablo. It will only take a day or two for her to fully recover.

She flies toward the world of Sharmur, arriving within less than an hour. At her peak condition, she could have made it within a minute or two, but as badly injured as she is now, Melody simply has to fly a lot more slowly.

She enters the upper atmosphere, then descends toward the planet's warpgate, where she finds only a handful of Dukes lounging around, awaiting her return.

"Melody." One of them says. "You're back sooner than we expected. Boss Diablo said you got pretty fucked up in your fight with the Second Founder."

"My injuries are nowhere near fully healed." Melody says softly, as she lands on the ground a short distance away. "Where is everyone?"

"They left. Boss Diablo has other planets to conquer, you know? Can't be sticking around here all day."

"Of course. That does make sense..."

Melody lowers her eyes, feeling somewhat depressed for reasons she isn't quite able to put into words.

"Well. Thank you for telling me. I'm going to find a nice, quiet mountain plateau so I can rest."

"Yeah, boss said you'd be napping for a while. Sounds good to us. Take care." The Duke says with a wave.

Without another word, Melody departs, taking to the skies once more to fly a few hundred miles away. She finds a mountain covered in snow, then plops down amidst the wintry ice to sigh and exhale a warm breath of turbid air.

Her body sinks into the snow, but she doesn't feel its cold at all. Compared to her Cosmic powers, this subzero chill might as well be a gentle mid-summer's breeze.

Ten minutes pass. Then twenty, and even thirty.

Melody gazes off despondently into the distance for a while, but as she does, she begins to feel that familiar flickering sensation of being watched.

She lifts her eyes, peering across space and time.

A faint smile crosses her face.

"Hey. Wordsmith. I know it's you watching me. Come out and talk. I'm in neither the mood nor any condition to fight."

A few seconds pass, but nothing happens.

She frowns.

"Come on. I KNOW it's you. Don't be a little bitch."

This time, a shift ripples in space, and Jason Hiro materializes a short distance away, levitating in the air with his hands resting on his hips.

"Sorry." Jason says. "I wasn't trying to keep you in suspense. There were just some... things I had to take care of."

"Yeah?" Melody asks. "Is that why you sent a robot here instead of your real body? Not because you're afraid this is a trick by the evil demons to kill the Wordsmith with a sneak attack?"

"Not at all. I trust you fully." Jason says, his smile brightening. "But this Dronesmith is the only way I currently have to maintain contact with realspace. It's complicated, but we can just say I've ended up in a little bit of a pickle. I'll have the problem resolved eventually."

"Oh." Melody replies, her tone turning glum. "I see."

A few moments pass. Jason scratches his cheek awkwardly.

"So. You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah. Listen. I just had one *bitch* of a day." Melody snarks. "No doubt, you saw the whole thing."

"I... I may have seen... a considerable amount of it..." Jason says awkwardly.

"You saw me get uplifted, then get my face introduced to the dirt by the Second Founder?"

"Yeah."

"And she was going to kill me, but only didn't because of Diablo's *brilliant* schemes?"

"...Yeah."

"And then after she left, Diablo slapped me around and told me I was a worthless pile of garbage?"

"...Can I plead the fifth?"

Jason's expression becomes more and more awkward, until finally Melody can't help but let out a mild chuckle. "Hehe. Okay, that's a pretty funny face you're making. I tell you what, Wordsmith. I like you a lot more than I like the so-called Emperor of Annihilation running things for my species."

Jason blinks. "So-called? You don't think he's truly Diablo?"

"I knew Diablo a long time. If that really is him, he's undergone such a violent personality shift he's become unrecognizable." Melody says. "He's not a guy I want to follow. Problem is, I'm trapped. I can't beat him. If we come to blows, I'll lose. If he has to sacrifice me, I don't believe he'll hold back for a second."

She points a finger at her chest.

"But that doesn't mean I'm gonna bend over and let him have at me like I'm his personal *fuccubus*. So I called you here to tell you one thing, Jason Hiro. If a time comes when humanity needs my help, I'm here for you. If you need something that I can provide, I'm here to help. This world? It's yours if you want it. Diablo gave me ruling rights and he didn't say only demons could live here. As far as I'm concerned, that means humans and monsters are A-OK."

Jason frowns. "That's... an extremely generous offer to make. But it feels a bit... inappropriate?"

"You forget who I am." Melody explains. "I used to be one of the Emperors ruling the Hell of Isolation. We were the ONLY 'pro-human' Hell out of ALL Seven Hells. We got along just fine with your people. Don't believe me? I bet you've got plenty of humans living with you now who will tell you about the wicked parties we used to throw. Me, Guura, Viola, Murmur, Shax... we all used to get along just great."

Melody drops her arm to her side. Her posture slumps, and a look of quiet despair takes over.

"But then... then that day happened. You pulled the humans away from Sharmur. I wouldn't blame you for that, except it somehow alerted the Plague to our planet's location. The Kolvaxians attacked us, and... most of the demons of my Hell were eaten alive. They're gone now. All my best friends. My family."

Jason lowers his eyes. "I'm sorry, Melody. I truly didn't mean for that to happen."

"Of course you didn't." Melody says, wiping a thumb across the bottom of her eye. "You're not a jerk, just a bit of a short-sighted moron. I'd never have guessed teleporting the humans away would alert the Plague, so why would you? It's water under the bridge. All I'm saying is... I'd like to restore that which was lost. You know? Make it all... whole again."

"You can't bring back the dead." Jason says softly. "Lord knows I wish I could. I'd bring my little girl back."

"Right. I can't do that, but I can honor them. I can resist the urge to give up by learning lessons from my previous mistakes. Now that I'm a Middle Cosmic, I won't ever let the Plague come back and get an easy win again. If your people come here, they'll have a bona fide powerhouse watching over them."

She shrugs. "That Neil guy probably won't like the idea. But I don't care about him. I just want to bring back all the humans who used to live here. If you're cool with that, I'd also like to bring back all the former members of my Hell. The ones still alive, that is. Since I can't leave this planet, maybe you can at least deliver the invitation for me?"

Jason nods. "Yeah. I can do that. But what if Diablo finds out? Aren't you worried he'll...?"

"What? Kill me? He already threatened to do that. As far as I'm concerned, he's not the Diablo I used to know. He's a skinwalker disguised as Deebs. I won't let fear control me."

"I see. That's very admirable of you." Jason says. "Then I'll send that invitation out, as you requested. And who knows? Perhaps my Wordsmithing may find a way to untether you, or at least unrestrict your movements in some ways. I may be able to provide benefits Diablo can't..."

"That would be a welcome bonus." Melody says, smiling back. "Thank you, Wordsmith. Now get the hell out of here before Deebs finds out we've been talking."

The Wordsmith shrugs. "Can do. See you around, Deity of Defiance."

His body shimmers and twists, disappearing into space.

After a few moments, Melody scrunches up her face.

In retrospect, that Deity title feels a BIT theatrical. Prooobably could have toned it down a tad...

Part 546: New Milky Way Menace

On a world controlled by the Volgrim known as Eldanis III, located near the galactic core, between the Milky Way's western and southern quadrant border...

Alarms blare across the industrial world's surface. High in orbit, tens of 6th and 7th Level Psions surround the planet, using their Psionic abilities to pick out the highest value rescue-targets and yank them off the planet to shuttles in the upper atmosphere, where they can be transported to safety.

On Eldanis' surface, the Plague once again attacks, swarming and growing in number as it devours Volgrim after Volgrim, yanking them beneath the surface only for those individuals to return a short while later, their bodies covered in mottled green skin and their eyes and mouths forever sealed shut.

The faceless plaguehosts terrorize the Technopaths and Changelings who comprise the majority population of this particular world. While some low-level Psions did originally live on Eldanis III, their numbers were far fewer than those of their Technopath and Changeling peers. When the Plague attacked out of nowhere, they fell to despair, choosing to kill themselves and immolate their bodies, returning to the Psionic Well rather than merely live long enough to be devoured.

Naturally, low-level Psions have not yet been deemed worthy of placing their souls onto specialized Psion-controlled worlds where they can puppeteer bodies remotely. That privilege is reserved only for Psions who have advanced to a sufficient level of authority and power that they can be granted extra chances at life. Therefore, the vast majority of Psions who killed themselves in this way will never walk the mortal coil again, delivering a painful long-term blow to their Empire.

But they were granted that choice by the Founders themselves. Rather than force his subjects to live life underneath a freakish alien phenotype's will, Founder Unarin informed his people that if they were in danger of imminent death by the Plague, they would be allowed to take their lives in the hope of denying their hated blood-enemy a chance of weaponizing them against their remaining friends and family. Unfortunately, it is usually only the Psions who have the will and courage to terminate their existences

when that moment comes, while the Technopaths and Changelings will almost always fall to the Plague without resisting.

On this particular day, a 7th Level Psion known as Praetor Revan leads the defending forces as he and his allies seek to snap up as many high-value civilians and military personnel as possible before the Plague can get to them. Unfortunately, with less than a hundred High Psions in orbit, and the overwhelming majority of them only being at the 6th Level, the speed at which they can retrieve key personnel is distressingly low.

Revan grimaces as he tactically points out various targets on the surface below, ignoring the low value Psions who have contributed little to Eldanis III's technical achievements over the past few millennia. At a time like this, with the Plague bursting out of the planet's soil, he simply doesn't have a single second to spare for caring about no-name civilians and other useless individuals.

[These two.] Revan says, flicking a Psionic marker onto a pair of Technopaths on the surface, 100 kilometers below. [And that one. I'll recover this individual here, you go for that other one...]

He doesn't bother stating names, as even that would cost him an extra second he can't afford. Rapid-fire, he yanks Technopaths and Changelings off the surface, pulling them into shuttles at the same time his fellow Psions repeat his tactics. Unfortunately, as one of less than half a dozen 7th Level Psions in orbit, he is far, far faster and more capable than his lesser peers. Time and time again, he watches in distress as a Volgrim he pointed out gets picked off by the Plague because his 5th and 6th Level peers simply aren't as capable as him at recovery operations.

[Move faster! DAMMIT! You're not keeping up!] Revan snaps, barely able to contain his rage as yet another high-level Technopath researcher gets yanked underground before they can be saved. [You imbecile! I told you THAT researcher was the high-value target, not the other one! Gah!]

[Sorry, Praetor! I'm pushing myself to my limits!] A female Psion says apologetically. [My Primal Psionics are not up to the task!]

[Then you'd better improve quickly! Lives depend on you!] Revan exclaims. [Now make sure you pick up that individual there!]

The rescue operation continues at full speed. On the surface below, one Technopath hurriedly climbs atop a massive 100-meter-tall boulder in the middle of a ravine while

looking around in terror. At any second, a single Kolvaxian could leap out of the ravine's walls and tackle him to the dirt. If that happens, he won't last for even a second!

'Please, Founders, guide me!' The Technopath cries to himself as he hears distant screams that occasionally fall silent. "Founders! Founders, I am your loyal subject! Do not let me die here!!"

At that moment, a strange sensation seizes the Technopath's body. He begins to levitate upward as a Psion in the upper atmosphere starts quickly dragging him up into the sky toward the awaiting transport ships which dare not draw any closer to the planet's surface.

"Yes! Founders, you have heard my plea!" The Technopath rejoices. "I shall sing your praises until the end of this Eternity, Founder Unarin! Founder Dosen, you are the most benevolent and beautiful of all Volgrim-"

Suddenly, the Technopath's cries of happiness cease. A sensation of terror engulfs his stomach as a planetary broadcast transmits across all frequencies, including the ones his cerebral implants are still capable of picking up.

WARNING. COSMIC-LEVEL PLAGUEHOSTS HAVE BEEN DETECTED INSIDE ELDANIS III'S CORE. ALL PSIONS, PREPARE FOR BATTLE. CEASE ALL RESCUE OPERATIONS AND TAKE UP COMBAT FORMATIONS.

The psionic power lifting the Technopath's body abruptly vanishes, causing him to scream in terror as he begins rapidly falling toward the planet below. Having already been lifted more than three kilometers into the sky, the fall downward causes him to reach terminal velocity within seconds. His last words are little more than guttural shrieks of terror before his body slams into the ground, shattering all of his bones and rendering him as dead as the rocks around himself...

At that moment, an 8th Level Psion emerges from the planet's interior. It bursts out of the ground and races up into the sky toward the shuttles filled with juicy, high-value targets.

[It's Executor Huron's doppelganger!] Praetor Revan declares, transmitting his voice to all the other Psions in orbit. [All 7th Level Psions, join me! All lower Psions, retreat behind us! Create the formations like we planned! My peers and I will do battle against this monster!]

Praetor Revan keeps his tone dignified in order to convey a sense of authority, but his heart shakes with fear. After all, while Executor Huron's Kolvax-copy might not possess the same raw power as an 8th Level Psion, it surely possesses power greater than most 7th Level Psions, including himself! Even if Revan and the others of his rank combine forces, they still might perish to their enemy!

Five 7th Level Psions join Revan. They quickly teleport and push the nearest shuttles away from their incoming enemy and make themselves as inviting as possible to draw the Kolvaxian-Psion's attention. Like a Predator Missile dumbly chasing after the hottest target, the enemy Executor quickly homes in on them and continue racing upward without a hint of fear.

[Now!!] Revan roars.

At once, a web of attacks fires at the False Executor, with one of the 7th Level Psions blasting Huron with a superheated tachyon beam, and another sealing his movements with Restriction Psionics. Revan himself amplifies his Primal Psionics to the max before firing a concussive wave of raw psionic power at Huron's body to try and slow him down.

The Kolvaxian Psion formerly known as Huron endures the bombardments with frightening ease. The tachyon beam blasts off his left arm, but he regrows it within two seconds. Revan's raw psionic power barely slows Huron at all, and the restriction psionics fail to even tickle him!

Revan's heart turns cold. He lets out the Volgrim equivalent of a curse before he and the others race away in opposite directions, letting Huron charge into the space where they were just levitating. Huron unfortunately gives chase after Revan, picking him out as the strongest opponent while grabbing at Revan with his own peak-level Primal Psionics.

[Damn!!] Revan curses, as he sees space constricting around himself. A giant hand made of raw psionic energy grabs at him, intending to crush his body into meat paste, but Revan releases a wave of his own Primal Psionics to break apart his enemy's attack.

Unfortunately, while he can match his opponent in one discipline, he doesn't stand a chance against Huron in melee range, because Huron happens to be known as the Planet Buster of Executors. His physical body has achieved a level of durability not even Founder Dosena can match, and unlike his more technical Psionic skills, his Kolvaxian copy retains ALL the benefits of his Body Manipulation prowess!

[NOOOO!] Revan shrieks as Huron races toward him with a palm reared back.

SLAP!!

Executor Huron's copy slams his palm against Revan's chest after closing the gap in a single second. Revan doesn't even have time to register the blow. His vision goes black as his body explodes into meat-paste beneath the crushing power of that single blow!

[Praetor Revan is defeated!] Another 7th Level Psion declares. [All Volgrim! FALL BACK! This world is lost!]

Now the de-facto leader of the Psion remnants, Creator Marian takes control, guiding her fellow Volgrim to jump to warp even as the rampaging Kolvax-clone begins shredding any shuttles and ships unfortunate enough to have not escaped in time before its appearance.

Her heart turns cold as she senses the gaze of Executor Huron's doppelganger turn to look at her.

[No! Damn you, monster!] Creator Marian roars. [Stay back, you filth! You beast!!]

She flees through the void as quickly as she can, putting distance between herself and Eldanis III, but unfortunately, the Kolvaxxed Executor continues chasing after her, closing the distance more and more every second!

[No, no, no!!] Marian screams. [I don't want to die, not like this!]

Losing in glorious combat isn't such a bad thing to most Psions, especially the battle-hardened ones. But losing to a Kolvaxian simply isn't the same. In many ways, these alien creatures are like biological machines. They offer no witty banter, nor do they have any sense of honor. They are lower than beasts in terms of intellectual capability, and thus losing to them feels like a thousand slaps across the face to any Psion unfortunate enough to find themselves outmatched.

Even worse, there is always the chance that instead of killing her, Marian's pursuer might infest her body and seize control of it in the same way the Kolvaxians originally did to Executors Huron and Sartran themselves.

Now that would truly be a horrific way to die!

But just as Huron's copy is about to reach Marian and land the killing blow, it abruptly stops chasing her, then turns on a dime and races back toward the planet.

Marian's heart continues to pound frantically. She doesn't stop fleeing for a full minute until she's good and sure she's put distance between herself and the Executor, now

returning to Eldanis III. When she does stop, she turns around to look after his departing aura in confusion.

[Why... why did the Executor stop chasing me? I am still well within the planet's Plague Radius!]

Marian quickly focuses her mind. She scans the planet, and what she finds shocks her to her core!

A powerful Cosmic signature suddenly emerges on Eldanis III from out of nowhere, a signature of such formidable might that Marian's multitude of eyes bug out of her head.

[The Second Founder? She came here in person? No... it's not her... it's not a Volgrim at all!]

Executor Huron charges across the void, returning to Eldanis III's upper atmosphere in record time. He slams into it like a meteor, piercing the bubble enveloping the hazy industrial world with a violent BANG as the Kolvaxian races toward a figure waiting on the planet below.

Demon Emperor Diablo, piloting the body of the Archdemon, merely looks up at the descending figure with a sneer.

"COME TO DIE?"

Huron's body crashes into the Archdemon at ten times the speed of sound. The Kolvaxian slams Diablo into the planet's surface with such force that it shatters a part of the continent, carving out massive canyons and fissures for miles in every direction. But when Huron starts to attack again, one of Diablo's massive hands snaps at the tiny Kolvaxian and wraps around it, enveloping it in cosmic demonic energy.

"A VALIANT EFFORT." Diablo's voice booms from the Archdemon's mouth as he squeezes the creature in his grasp. **"BUT ULTIMATELY FUTILE."**

Diablo crushes the Kolvaxian with all his strength, but he becomes momentarily surprised when he fails to squash it like a bug. The sheer power of Huron's body matches the Archdemon pound for pound, allowing it to pry open the gigantic hand enveloping its body and break out.

It launches another attack, flying at the Archdemon's head with its arm reared back.

THUMP!!

A fist of deceptively small size crashes against the Archdemon's chin, causing Diablo's vision to blur as he's sent flying backward. He crashes into the dirt and grinds it with his back, but deftly flips himself up and backward, reorienting his body just as the Kolvaxian comes flying toward him again.

Diablo sucks in a breath of cosmic energy. Then, less than a second later, he fires a beam of destruction with pinpoint precision from his mouth!

BOOOOOM!!

This time, the Archdemon prevails. He strikes the Kolvaxian-clone with his full Power of Annihilation, eradicating it from existence and spraying its remains backward into a fine mist of ash and burnt blood.

Just like that, the Archdemon eradicates the Kolvaxian that killed Praetor Revan and nearly killed Creator Marian as well. He laughs uproariously as a portal opens behind him and Demon Emperors begin to spill out.

"BEGIN THE CLEANSING! HAHAAH. THIS WORLD BELONGS TO THE DEMONS!"

By the time Marian returns, she finds herself dazed as she sees only the aftermath of Emperor Diablo's short battle. Nowhere does the Kolvaxian appear, and she barely manages to pick up its residual psionic energy emanating from a few particles of flesh blowing away in the wind.

Marian remains in space, watching coldly as the Emperor of Annihilation and his army of demons sweeps outward, clearing the planet while sending tentacles deep into the core to subvert the Kolvaxian's control of Eldanis III's life energy.

Within an hour, the planet has been fully cleansed. The Volgrim who weren't yet converted to Kolvaxians remain alive, the majority of them never even knowing what exactly saved their lives.

[You are Emperor Diablo.] Marian says, as she descends from the upper atmosphere to face the massive body of her demon adversary. [Thank you for saving Eldanis III from the Plague. The Volgrim owe you a great debt.]

Creator Marian speaks with a certain level of humility, but she does not come off as a weak-willed minion eager to please Diablo. In her eyes, the Archdemon is certainly terrifying, but how can this one demon compare to the might and majesty of the Second

Founder? He must surely be at least a little inferior to the Volgrim's most powerful Cosmic, and as such, an excessive amount of deference would only make her people look weak in the eyes of the mud-dwellers.

But despite giving Diablo a generous amount of face, as well as her deepest thanks, Marian is shocked to see that Diablo... doesn't appear impressed by her words of flattery.

He projects an Astral Clone into the air before the Archdemon's body, revealing his true self to the Psion while looking at her with an expression of disinterest.

"I do not require your thanks. The Volgrim owe me nothing. I am laying claim to this world as a part of the New Demon Empire. I will grant you the kindness of one month to evacuate what remains of your people from Eldanis III. If you wish to remain operating here, we can discuss a 'tribute' of sorts in exchange for the right to continue residing within this voidspace."

Creator's Marian's eyes nearly burst from her skull in a rage. [What?! How dare you! You have taken one step too far, demonspawn! This world is a part of the Volgrim Empire! We would be happy to offer a reward for any meritorious services rendered, but if you attempt to forcibly seize this planet, you will incur the wrath of our Second Founder!]

"Yes. Your amazing Second Founder. My tentacles shake with fear." Diablo says mildly, looking at the High Psion as if she were a clown. "You may feel free to inform the Second Founder of Eldanis III's new status. If she wishes to come and challenge me, she may do so at her leisure. I think you will find, however, that she is not nearly as *eager* to defend her honor as you believe her to be..."

Marian's objections die in her throat. She stares with bloodshot eyes at Diablo's spiritual avatar, desperately wanting to rip out the disrespectful eyes of this mangy little mud-dweller. Unfortunately, she is nowhere near strong enough to threaten him, and so, she must hold her tongue.

[You... do you intend to make an enemy of the Volgrim Empire?] Mariam asks, her tone dripping with venom.

"Is your lauded Empire willing to make an enemy of *me*?" Diablo fires back. "I am at present the only creature capable of combating the Plague. If you ever want to make use of my services, well... I suppose you had best learn to 'play nice', eh? Hehehe..."

Diablo grins smugly at the Psion female, then his Astral Form fades away, leaving her to levitate all by herself, feeling rather foolish about the whole interaction.

Damn him... Marian thinks, her eyes turning red with indignation. How dare this mud-dweller treat my people in such a manner! But I dare not cause a diplomatic incident. I will simply have to report what has happened to the Founders at once! They will know what to do. Founder Unarin will guide us, as he always has.

Silently, she curses Diablo in her heart before turning away and flying back into the Void.

All the while, Diablo simply watches her departure with a hint of bemusement.

Yes, go on, little dove. You be sure and tell Unarin what events have transpired. Each world my people seize shall become a grim reminder to the First Founder that the Volgrim are no longer worthy of calling themselves the Milky Way's 'sole apex species.'

I cannot wait to finally sit down and have a friendly 'chat' with the First Founder. We have SO much to discuss...

Diablo turns to look at the Emperors that have finished cleaning up the Kolvaxians on Eldanis III.

"YOU." Diablo says, pointing randomly at one of the Emperors recently empowered by Glinch's exobeast pills. **"YOU WILL BE THIS WORLD'S WARDEN. CHOOSE WHAT TYPE YOU WOULD PREFER TO BECOME. YOU HAVE ONE HOUR TO DECIDE. I WILL NOT WAIT ANY LONGER."**

Part 547: Unwanted Visitor

Four days pass as the Milky Way's galactic situation slowly continues to evolve.

Diablo takes over six new star systems in this time. He instates new Wardens, with a surprising number of them choosing the strictest limitation of becoming Stellar Wardens, locked to a single star system for the rest of their lives, but ultimately becoming Middle Cosmics close to the same strength as Diablo's Archdemon form.

Even the Emperor of Annihilation finds himself momentarily at a loss when he considers their choice, but ultimately, it doesn't take much explaining to figure out why they would opt to lock themselves to a single star system for the rest of eternity.

Aside from Melody becoming the Warden of the Shredder System, the other six new Wardens are all recently-evolved Emperors who were boosted through Glinch's power. Melody was, in fact, the only naturally-uplifted Emperor who obtained her power through good old-fashioned human soul-devouring.

Of course, her rise to prominence happened well before the completion of the Energy Wars. Perhaps, had she been born on Sharmur from a Broodmother's belly, she might find the act of devouring human souls to be utterly incompatible with the creed laid down by Shax and Murmur.

But now, following her secret discussion with the Wordsmith, she has begun to feel rather ambivalent about the actions she took in her past. Vile they may have been, if not outright war crimes and atrocities, but now she has obtained enough strength to protect the humans, if only in some small way.

As for the other Wardens, what they seek is the opportunity to become rulers of their own private domains. Rather than acting as mere Emperors who share control amongst one of the Seven Hells, they can instead become tyrants wielding full authority over their chosen worlds.

As the ancient proverb goes, *'tis better to be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion*. The majority of demons would rather rule with total control over an entire world than share control with a dozen other contenders. And so, Diablo's offer lights a fire under the newfangled Emperors, making all of them begin to pick out their future domains with

greedy eyes, seeking to control beautiful and lush worlds rather than rocky, barren wastelands such as Diabolus.

The Archdemon doesn't make the choice complicated for them. As long as they become Wardens with the goal of creating fortresses for demonkind, they can do anything they want to their worlds in the future.

Selfishness is not a glitch in Diablo's plan, but rather the main goal.

* * *

At the same time, across these four days, many other events transpire.

Jason Hiro spends another 1,000 days or so inside Chrona, working on countless projects with Fiona and Rebecca's assistance.

Belial manages to scan every single human known in the Milky Way except for the Wordsmiths and a few individuals located inside Chrona and the Hall of Heroes. She also begins scanning demons and monsters in addition to the humans.

The Volgrim take notice of key worlds being stolen away by Diablo, whose actions only have the thinnest veneer of 'saving' them from the Plague.

And of course, Phoebe Hiro and Neil Adams continue drafting the speeches they will soon utter as they plan for a major split between humanity, laying claim to the few million lives that remain.

It is during this period, four days after the dramatic return of the Archdemon, that Neil sits inside his office, looking at some reports given to him by Debra.

"Hmm..." Neil grunts, as he looks at a troubling piece of newly acquired information. "You're sure about this?"

Debra stands on the opposite side of the desk. She pushes her glasses up her nose and nods. "The numbers don't lie."

"It can't be a coincidence." Neil mutters. "Not many people came up 'green' when Belial scanned them. More than 99% of all humans were scanned and came up 'red' with Phoebe's crystals. Of the ones who came up green, most of them were Power Glove users. The rest were The Respected. So what does it mean? Is there an infection spreading among our strongest humans?"

"So far, every demon and monster scanned has come up red as well." Debra points out. "I don't know what these crystals are supposed to achieve, but a certain undercurrent of fear is already spreading. If we don't come up with an explanation, people will panic. They already think there might be an infection of sorts spreading among the military personnel."

"An infection..." Neil mutters. "Is that what it truly is? I find that notion hard to believe. I'm missing a crucial clue, something that would explain all this. Jason and Phoebe are keeping the truth of the matter close to their chests."

"You could add a section to your speech regarding the matter." Debra suggests. "Something about calling them out for deceiving the public."

"Perhaps I could." Neil says noncommittally. "Though I've had this... feeling lately. This feeling I'm being watched."

He glances around the room with a look of disinterest, then shrugs.

"Could be a Psion, such as Creator Demila. Could be a demon, such as Gressil. Could even be Jason himself. Who can say, hmm?"

"Gressil?" Debra asks, her heart-rate spiking for a second. "Shouldn't we put some stronger guards in here?!"

"If the invisible boogeyman wanted me dead or captured, I don't imagine I'd still be sitting here." Neil says dismissively. "Gressil can nullify magic. His physical strength is great enough that perhaps only Belial can stand up to him in direct combat. His ability to teleport around is also quite troubling. Do you think if I positioned ten of our mightiest human guards in my office at all times, they could stop him from taking me?"

Debra purses her lips. "I suppose not."

"And that is why I don't bother." Neil says with a shrug. "If Gressil comes for me, so be it. If the Volgrim take me out, so be it. If Jason decides to eliminate me, then by goddamn, so be it. I'll become a martyr, and that will be the end of my story."

Neil pauses. He looks at Debra with a faint smile.

"But it's funny, isn't it? None of them have done so for whatever reasons. I'm only an ordinary human. The only thing protecting me is the threat of what Hope might do, or what my death might signify to humanity. I don't think either of those are particularly compelling factors to keep my life intact. I can only assume I'm simply not worth

assassinating at this moment in time. Perhaps that will change in the future as my perceived value to humanity rises."

"I hope not..." Debra whispers. "You're very important to your species, Neil. None of us want to see you die."

"And neither do I." Neil concludes. "But death comes for everyone eventually. Even for the supposed 'immortals' that live within our galaxy, it is only a matter of time..."

Neil and Debra exchange a few more words, but eventually she leaves him to his own devices, closing the door after she departs.

Neil sits for twenty minutes, mulling over various reports as he continues to mentally plot out his speech to humanity.

"Oh, Jason..." Neil mutters. "What *are* you up to with those crystals, I wonder?"

As he continues to think, a sudden pit opens up in Neil's stomach. His body stiffens, and the hairs on the back of his neck lift up and begin to tingle.

Reflexively, Neil looks up from his documents, where he sees an intruder standing in front of the door, looking at him. A male demon who wasn't there only a second before.

"You!" Neil snaps, gnashing his teeth together. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing, showing your face here? I have nothing to say to the likes of you."

Emperor Diablo, now in his Astral Body, stands imposingly less than twenty feet away from Neil, with one hand resting comfortably on his hip. His black cloak with gold trim gives him an air of majesty. He smiles warmly at Neil, then waves his free hand casually.

"Hello, Neil. You and I have not yet had the chance to talk. I was hoping to rectify that."

"We spoke four days ago." Neil says, narrowing his eyes to glare daggers at the Emperor of Annihilation. "I have nothing to say to a filthy Demon Emperor. If you're going to kill me, just don't leave a mess for Debra. Otherwise, I'll make sure my spirit haunts you for the rest of eternity, hellspawn."

"So dramatic." Diablo says, as he walks forward, approaching Neil's desk. "Would you mind if I took a seat?"

Neil doesn't even get a chance to refuse. Diablo smoothly plops down in the chair across from Neil and leans into it, his false body appearing remarkably physical as it

somehow interacts with the physical world.

"Ahh, now that's better." Diablo says, his smile broadening as he sees the rage on Neil's face. "I'm so busy lately, I never get a chance to simply sit down, relax my legs, you know? Such a shame."

"Why are you here, bothering me?" Neil asks. "Like I said, we have nothing we need to discuss."

"Oh, but I disagree, Neil." Diablo says while leaning forward. "We have so much to talk about. We may have spoken four days ago, but that didn't really count in my eyes. I always enjoy private discussions with those of the intellectual persuasion. You're such a fascinating human, especially the way you've so smoothly taken over humanity's military and made yourself indispensable to one of the Wordsmiths. A decisive man like you is much more interesting than those smooth-brained imbeciles. Don't you agree?"

"Flattery from a demon will only piss me off." Neil fires back. "Get to the point. You test my patience."

"No time for pleasantries. I can respect that." Diablo says, leaning back in his chair once again.

Several seconds pass as both men gaze at one another in silence. Eventually, Diablo speaks.

"I could use your help, Neil Adams. I'm willing to offer terms that you should find acceptable, and possibly even highly desirable."

Neil blinks twice. Hearing these words from Diablo momentarily makes him lose his composure. He snorts derisively, stifling a laugh.

"My help. You want *my* help?? Pahaha! That is a funny line, Emperor of Annihilation. I did not take you for a jester."

"I'm dead serious." Diablo says, his expression turning grim. "As we speak, my main body is battling on a certain world within the Milky Way, fighting to eliminate the Plague's presence from that world. When I inevitably succeed, I will install a Demon Emperor there, crowning them a Warden and transforming them into a Cosmic powerhouse like me."

Diablo pauses for a few seconds before continuing.

"But, a problem emerges. You see, Neil, I cannot take these worlds alone. That is to say, I *can*, but doing so takes a very long time and is not efficient. To that end, I use my Emperors and Dukes to fight back the hordes of Kolvaxians so that I can focus on the most important step to defeating the Plague: subverting the life energy contained within each contaminated world's core."

Diablo looks off to the side and shrugs.

"But, as you may imagine, there is a problem with this model. The number of Emperors at my disposal will grow thinner and thinner over time. Already, I've Uplifted more than half a dozen. In a few weeks time, I will only have a handful of Emperors left. That will drastically slow the speed of planetary subversion to a crawl."

Neil smirks. "Sounds like a serious problem for the New Demon Empire. Best of luck in dealing with that."

"You don't get it..." Diablo says with a dramatic sigh. "This is not a 'demon problem.' This is a problem for all Sentients living in the Milky Way. Don't get me wrong, Neil, my people will reap enormous benefits if we take control of hundreds, even thousands of worlds. But our enemy is a monstrous entity that grows more powerful every day. I am attempting to tickle a Kraken to death. If I cannot outpace the Plague, it will eventually consume more worlds than I can save. It will come for humanity and the Volgrim both."

"I don't see how this is a problem for you at all." Neil says. "So what if it takes out humanity and the Volgrim? Are you telling me, with all those mighty Wardens you've created, the demons will be in danger?"

Diablo does not laugh or smile. He looks at Neil with an expression of grim intent.

"Yes. They will. The Plague is always evolving. It is constantly expanding its power. If the Plague defeats the Volgrim, it may obtain the powers contained within Founder Doseña's body. If it learns to harness the full power of its stolen Psion hosts, then that will result in a bloodbath for my remaining Wardens. They are all isolated and cannot reinforce one another. If a hundred Psion-hosts attack, they will overrun one Warden after another until the whole tower of power collapses."

Diablo pauses.

"But that is not the true dilemma, Neil Adams. The core underlying issue is that, even if the humans, demons, and Volgrim defeat the Plague, the next war our galaxy will have

to face will be one I have already spoken to you about, known as Akasha's Game. In that war, the singular power of demonkind will not be enough to claim victory. Only a united front will allow our galaxy to achieve military superiority."

Neil smirks upon hearing the name of 'Akasha' once again, but he doesn't dwell on it.

"So what are you proposing, hellspawn? Do you want me to work with you? To help you beat back the Plague so you can 'protect' our galaxy? Are your intentions *truly* that selfless and honorable?"

"I don't expect you to like me, Neil." Diablo says. "It is clear that you have a longstanding prejudice against my people. Fair enough. You have suffered immensely because of demons and monsters alike. Not only you personally, but humanity as a whole."

Diablo continues. "I will not ask you to join me for any selfless or noble reasons. I will instead offer an exchange of benefits. Your followers would likely rebel if they believed you had become sympathetic to us putrid bloodskins, so I think it would make more sense if we formulated a more... appropriate compromise."

Neil exhales deeply through his nostrils. "I don't compromise with your kind."

"Well, perhaps you should." Diablo posits. "I am currently the Milky Way's only chance at pushing back against the Plague. My Archdemon form uniquely has the power to claw back ground the Volgrim lost to the Kolvaxian menace. Unless one of your Wordsmiths, or perhaps one of your amazing inventors comes up with a solution of their own, we need each other. I need your human military, and you need the services I can provide."

"Hahahaha!" Neil suddenly laughs. "Services? What could you possibly offer to turn me to your side?! You underestimate how deeply my hatred of bloodskins runs!"

"The first thing I can offer you, I will give freely." Diablo says. "Information. I know why the Wordsmith has chosen to scan all the humans, demons, and monsters that are allied with him."

"What?" Neil asks, suddenly very interested in what Diablo has to say. "How could you possibly know that? Are you and him already working together?"

"By no means, though I wouldn't mind approaching Jason next." Diablo says, exposing a toothy grin. "The Wordsmith's sloppiness has simply tripped him up again. You see,

Neil, Jason has discovered a method to repair Humanity's Flaw. The very same one I talked about at the meeting four days ago. He just couldn't help himself and he had to immediately put his solution into action, if only to spite me..."

"Humanity's Flaw..." Neil says, his eyes flickering as he looks away. "...only The Respected and some users of the Power Gloves showed up with the color green when scanned."

"Those aren't scanning crystals." Diablo says with a soft chuckle. "Think of them more as... medical crystals. When they turn green, that only indicates a person's Flaw has already been cured. But when they turn red, it means the Flaw has just been corrected."

He pauses before adding, "and when the crystal turns red for demons and monsters, it means nothing happened at all. The entire scanning of monsters and demons is a complete misdirection meant to confuse everyone."

Neil nods along, but he looks at Diablo with deep suspicion. "How kind of you to inform me of this. Why not keep the information to yourself? And how did you find out, assuming this actually is the truth?"

"I am a Cosmic." Diablo says mysteriously. "I am able to see mana pathways in a manner you simply cannot comprehend. As for why I told you, that is obviously to express my goodwill. I will speak of this matter to nobody else. You may spread the information or keep it to yourself as you please."

"How generous of you." Neil says dryly. "But if you think this knowledge is enough to sway me..."

"Humanity's Flaw is one of its greatest tragedies." Diablo says, his tone becoming oddly sympathetic. "I know how deeply this has hurt your people, even if you do not. The demons once had a Flaw as well. Our angel oppressors would not allow us to threaten their reign, and it was only through a gift given to us by the last dragon, Leviathan, that we were able to take control of the power within ourselves."

"The power to eat souls." Neil says. "What a *wonderful* and not at all monstrous ability."

"I don't know what powers you humans may obtain through the repairing of your Flaw." Diablo continues, ignoring Neil's barbs. "But what I do know is that your lives will

be greatly enhanced in due time. Since you do not have a dragon to empower you, your evolution will likely come more gradually. Be prepared for massive societal shifts."

Diablo lifts his hand and holds his palm face-up in a show of openness.

"Neil. Enemies need not be eternal. When a proper exchange of benefits occurs, even a blood feud can cool. If you help me take planets from the Plague, I will give you a portion of those worlds to rule as humanity sees fit. We can take back our galaxy from the Plague, *and* the Volgrim as well. Can you not imagine such a future? Three factions, separate but distinct, all working together to unite against a common cause? Would it not be glorious?"

"I cannot envision even a single thing you can offer me that would turn me into your ally." Neil retorts. "What good is a world taken from the Plague? I would have to plant a Warden on its soil to prevent the Plague from seizing its core again. And a Warden can only be a demon. Whether they are from your kind, or one of our supposed 'allies,' it matters not. Perhaps, if humans could become Wardens, my ear might bend itself to your offer more willingly. But I don't see you making such an offer..."

Diablo's expression darkens. "Indeed, I am unable to Uplift humans. My ability is only compatible with demons. At least as far as I know."

"Then what other reason do we have to work together?" Neil presses. "I'm still talking to you, aren't I?"

Diablo once again falls silent for a few moments.

"Where is Hope Hiro? Is he available to speak?"

"I haven't spoken to him in a few days." Neil says, divulging no other information. "Anything you say to me, I will relay to him."

"That's awfully generous of you." Diablo answers. "Perhaps in the future, I'll take you up on that offer. Well, I already knew it probably wouldn't change anything if I asked for your help. Still, I felt the need to ask anyway, if only to see how our talk might play out."

"You've certainly given me a few useful nuggets of information." Neil says with a smile. "But I'm sorry, Diablo. I don't think you and I will ever truly be capable of becoming allies."

"Who can say?" Diablo asks, before motioning with his hand. He conjures a small card with magical demonic writing infused onto its surface, then reaches out and places the card on Neil's desk. "This is my calling card. I formed it from my Cosmic power. If you

should ever change your mind, or if you feel like talking, you may use this to contact me at any time."

Neil glances at the card, but doesn't reach out to pick it up.

"I'll have someone who specializes in magic take a look at it later. Are we done here?"

"Yes." Diablo answers, before standing up. "We are. My apologies for dropping in out of the blue. Next time, I'll bring a bouquet of flowers for that pretty secretary of yours."

"She'd rather drop dead than take flowers from a demon." Neil says with a bland expression. He rises from his chair, still maintaining eye contact with Diablo. "Be seeing you, Archdemon. Or rather, I hope I won't."

"Haha. Such a charming fellow." Diablo says, before reaching up to touch his forehead.

A moment later, his body fades away, but his calling card remains on the desk, faintly glowing with demonic energy...

Neil glares at the card. He deliberately refuses to touch it, not sure whether it might possess any magic that could contaminate his soul or some other nefarious power.

Instead, he touches a comm button on his desk. "Debra. Would you mind calling one of the Fairy Queens for me? Or Princess Melia. Yes, any of them will do. Thank you."

Neil sits back down at his desk. His expression shifts between a variety of emotions as he glares at Diablo's calling card.

Nothing will ever cause me to take a demon at his word. Neil thinks.

Nothing at all...

Part 548: Future Apex Predator

Inside the Hall of Heroes.

Hope Hiro manipulates a fist-sized magical crystal carefully, holding it in his hands as if it were the most precious object in the universe. He examines its brilliantly shining interior with a hint of awe, marveling at the rainbow-colors racing around inside at faster than the speed of sound. Watching them for too long makes him feel a little dizzy, but the sight is so awe-inspiring he finds it hard to tear his eyes away. Like the ancient humans who first observed the Aurora Borealis, Hope feels almost as if he is looking at a force of nature that defies common sense, a mystical force no man should be allowed to hold in the palm of his hand.

Now inside the Central Gardens, Hope and his fiancée, Amelia, stand together while Solomon, Psymin Miralax, and Elizabeth Kindelmann stand across from them.

No longer does the Garden appear as simplistic and grassy as before. Four days have passed in realspace, but 400 have passed inside the Hall of Heroes.

Through natural processes, and a bit of help from the denizens of this realm, a surprising amount of foliage has grown, including plants, flowers, and vines. Ivy vines snake their way around various structures, left unchecked and allowed to grow as they please. A few ancient Heroes revived inside the Hall of Heroes do possess powers related to plants, so they sometimes nudge the vines to grow in certain ways, but otherwise everyone is more than happy to let the place become greener at its own pace.

"This crystal looks incredible." Hope says to Elizabeth Kindelmann. "Will it work?"

Elizabeth rests a hand on her hip. She waves the other hand around, emphasizing her uncertainty. "It might, but it also might not. I am no master of temporal physics. I had to rely heavily on Miss Psymin's counsel to guide my powers. If I didn't have access to your Wordsmithing, I'd never have been able to complete the Dilation Crystal, no matter how much I wanted to do so."

"*It will function.*" Psymin says, her robotic voice still as uncanny as ever. "*Confidence threshold. High.*"

Hope looks at Solomon for confirmation. The old man slowly nods, but he doesn't appear nearly as certain as Psymin.

"The artifact... should work." Solomon says, keeping the pace of his words measured. "But we are dealing with a physics conundrum nobody among the Volgrim have ever been able to solve. Time Dilation Sickness is a severe problem that can result in instantaneous death. If the crystal *doesn't* work, then... you might..."

He trails off, allowing the others to draw their own conclusions for his words.

Amelia's expression turns ugly. She chews her lip and holds onto Hope's arm. "I don't know. We should test it on someone else first."

"Who?" Hope asks. "There aren't many biological entities living here who would suffice as a replacement. It's just you, me, Psymin here, and-"

Hope pauses, and his eyes turn down. His expression becomes complicated.

"*Unacceptable.*" Psymin immediately says. "*My people. Captured. Prisoners. Not test subjects.*"

Amelia's eyes light up. "Now hold on just a second! I'm sure there's at least a couple unimportant nobodies we could use among the Volgrim in stasis. Just pick a random guy who never accomplished much! Hope is one of only two Wordsmiths. His life is incomparably precious compared to some no-name Volgrim!"

Psymin's eyes remain as cold as the abyss. She does not flare up with rage, but she does look at Amelia with a faint but unmistakable murderous edge.

"*Your words. Watch them.*" Psymin warns. "*I am not. Helpless.*"

For a brief moment, the air between the group seems to chill by a few degrees. Amelia opens her mouth to say something, but when she looks into Psymin's eyes, she loses her nerve and looks away, feeling an inexplicable fear swell within her chest.

"None of that talk." Hope says, quickly stepping in to defuse the situation. "If I need to test on individuals other than me, I can just bring... I don't know, monsters or demons to the Hall of Heroes. Those Volgrim are ones I captured who came from a Black Level world. Even the lowest of them is probably a super genius compared to any average human."

Psymin turns her gaze away from Amelia to Hope. Her eyes subtly soften.

"Monsters. Demons. Acceptable test subjects."

"Yes, I agree." Solomon says, gesturing toward the Dilation Crystal in Hope's hands. "Let us not tempt fate just yet, my boy. Grab a few goblins off the surface and bring them to us. We'll leave them here for a few days to adjust to the temporal dilation, then we'll send them back using the crystal's power. If a mishap occurs... well, at least it won't be to you."

Hope frowns. "Goblins have been mostly good to humanity. Demons have not. Maybe we should test on some low-ranking demons first..."

Amelia interrupts that idea. "Demon might be humanity's enemy, but do you really want to ruin the atmosphere by bringing a bunch of Demon Imps or Grunts to the Hall of Heroes?"

Hope glances around the beautiful garden. Not far away, he sees Moses, Aaron, Jephthah, and other Heroes randomly sitting around, talking to one another like old friends and comrades as they rest upon boulders, chairs, or amidst patches of flowers, all of them genuinely having a good time. He can only imagine what 100,000 years of solitude would do to these ancient men and women's psyches, and how much they would hate seeing demons in the flesh again.

"...Goblins it is." Hope concludes.

Not long after, Hope closes his eyes and focuses his mind as he begins to speak several Words of Power in a row.

"Let's see... what Goblins do I know? Who can I find easily? Hmm... **Locate. Detect. Find. Search...**"

He pauses for a few moments as names and faces begin to trickle into his mind.

"Sure... that one will do," Hope says, with his eyes still closed. "And that one, that one... **Teleport! Teleport! Teleport!**"

Three flashes of light ignite in the space between Hope and the others. Seconds later, three goblins materialize inside the Gardens, all of them looking more than a little confused and disoriented.

"Huh?" One of the goblins says, the tallest of the three, a fellow wearing yellow animal-skins with half a dozen golden earrings lining each of his ears. "What me doing? How me get here? Where grass-place??"

Another goblin, the shortest of the three, wears what can only be described as vaguely feminine clothing, but they appear ratty and worn-out. She turns out to be the only female goblin of the three, and completely unashamed regarding her raggedy clothes.

"Not know..." The female says. "Me dig in mine, now stand in flower field. No make sense!"

Finally, the third goblin is neither the shortest nor the tallest of the three. He wears well-maintained clothes that make him appear refined and elegant. Not only does he sport a sharp red and blue tunic, but pants of the same colors and shoes with curled tips that all together indicate he's not as simple as his brother and sister.

That third goblin hesitantly looks around at the tall folk towering above them.

"Hm? Hope Hiro? Solomon? Have you brought us here?"

Hope nods. "Welcome, visitors. I am humanity's Hero, Hope Hiro. This here is Solomon, my fiance Amelia, Elizabeth Kindelmann, and a Volgrim guest, Psymin Miralax. As for the reason I've brought you here..."

Hope launches into a simplified explanation of temporal mechanics, but quickly realizes the goblins are not quite understanding his words. At the same time, the third goblin directs a strange look Psymin's way before quickly averting his eyes to focus only on Hope. Nobody notices this look except for perhaps Psymin herself, but she says nothing about it.

"Alright," Hope says eventually. "I'm guessing you guys don't really understand, but you don't need to, either. I'm going to have your bodies adjust to the temporal dilation here for a few days, then I'll send you back to realspace with the crystal in hand and see what happens."

The first male goblin scratches his head. "We get foods?"

"Foods?" The female says. "Meats? Can we gets meats? Me hungry."

"Are we in any significant danger?" The third goblin asks. "All this talk of temporal dilation sounds serious."

Hope looks at the third goblin for a moment. "Oh... that's right, you're Grima, aren't you? I wasn't really paying attention, but your name sounded familiar, so I picked you. You work at the hospital on Tarus II..."

Grima quickly bows his head. "Indeed, it is me. I am but a humble receptionist, Master Hiro. It is wonderful to see you in good health once more. Some were beginning to spread rumors of an illicit nature, given you have not been seen in several days."

Hope glances at Solomon for a moment before returning his gaze to the top of Grima's bowed head. "Never really thought about it before, but you're pretty well-spoken for a goblin."

Grima raises his head and frowns. "Jokes like that could be considered rude, Master Hiro. My clan comes from a noble line of learned goblins. We are not like the... others of our kind."

Grima doesn't make any overt gestures, but his eyes do glance at the other two goblins beside him. Luckily, they're too stupid to realize he's just insulted them.

"Yeah, Grima big smart!" The female says, running her fingers down Grima's back with a lurid expression. "Me like big smart!"

Grima's face crinkles up, but otherwise he doesn't protest her touch out loud.

"I see. So it's like that." Hope says, shrugging. "Well, whatever. I'll just send you back last, Grima. Probably send that fellow beside you first, then the woman."

"As long as I can be of service to the great Hero, I shall do whatever you ask of me." Grima says, bowing humbly.

Hope smiles. The goblin certainly seems out of place next to his male and female comrades, but his mannerisms make him a lot more tolerable to Hope's sensibilities. If the two idiots die, Hope thinks to himself he wouldn't mind, but he'd rather not sacrifice Grima needlessly.

"I'll take care of you." Hope says, patting Grima's head. "You're in no danger."

Hope creates a special holding area at the edge of the Gardens to ensure the Goblins can't wander around and gather any intelligence. He informs them that they're not guests, but *essentially* prisoners while they're here, as this is a top secret area. The two idiot goblins don't really get the point, but Grima does. Eventually, Hope shrugs and gives them some random knick-knacks to keep them occupied for a few days, as well as food, toiletries, and bedding.

Fortunately, goblins are more than capable of dealing with intense boredom. So long as they have something to build or holes and caves to dig, they usually don't care about

the concept of 'having fun.'

After Hope leaves with Amelia to go deal with another matter, Solomon and Elizabeth head off to manage their own affairs.

Psymin starts to leave, but hesitates just a short while. She lingers nearby and seemingly looks at the goblins with a hint of curiosity, but unbeknownst to any of the humans, she and Grima make a series of quick, barely noticeable body and hand movements that communicate a wealth of information.

Satisfied, Psymin continues on her way, no longer communicating with the goblin in any other manner so as to keep a low profile.

After she, too, departs, Grima settles down to await the events of the coming few days.

Interesting. The supposed goblin thinks. So this place is called the Hall of Heroes. A time dilation factor of 100-to-1. The Hero is presently unable to leave. The reason he brought this one and the other two goblins here is to assess whether his new crystal invention will allow him to depart this dimension without suffering ill effects.

Grima slowly strokes his chin while a cunning light flickers in his eyes.

The Founders must learn of this information. Grima concludes.

On the world of Tarus II, no fewer than five minutes after Neil Adams concludes his discussion with Diablo, a faint figure levitates in the Void, more than a hundred kilometers above the planet's surface. A singular individual of immense power, yet nowhere near capable of threatening the Archdemon with her abilities.

Creator Demila.

The powerful 7th Level Psion levitates in place, having observed the entire meeting between Neil Adams and Diablo. A look of intense interest rests upon her face. Her figure remains unseen to the natural universe as she hides herself within a spatial tear -an ability many High Psions learn to separate themselves from their lesser peers- and contemplates what she has just witnessed.

Humanity's Flaw. I have not heard of this concept before. Demila thinks. *It seems profound. Whatever this 'flaw' is, it seems like something the Founders will want to know about. I must alert them of the human's activities at once.*

Demila's body shifts.

In an instant, she blasts out of Tarus II's gravity well and rockets into the Void, traveling at hundreds of times the speed of light.

While her speed is truly astounding, in the grand scheme of Warp travel, it is nothing much, and nowhere near as impressive as Founder Dosena's void traversing capabilities. At any other time, she would opt to use the nearest Warpgate to return to Volgarius, but right now, she feels a certain degree of subterfuge is necessary. Therefore, she opts not to use the Tarus II Warpgate, but instead one a few hundred lightyears away, on a different world unclaimed by the Plague.

While this detour will cost her a few days, it is nothing much to an entity as long-lived as Demila, who has endured for well over a million star-cycles. In her mind, such a brief period of time is barely even a blink of an eye.

Demila races across the Void, exiting the Tarus system's outer reaches within only a few minutes.

As she moves, she suddenly feels a disturbance within her mind, causing her to slow to a halt and freeze in place.

Demila stops and looks around. Her eyes narrow as she feels as though something is watching her.

[Don't be so alarmed.] A female voice abruptly says, making Demila's expression turn ugly. [It's only me. I woke up after observing something interesting.]

[Parasite.] Demila growls. [You should have stayed asleep.]

[Oh, come now,] Desire says softly, her voice loving and sweet like a succubus. [Demila dearest, I only want what you want.]

[You want what your master wants!] Demila hisses. [We are not allies. Stay your tongue, she-devil.]

Desire chuckles softly, but doesn't respond.

Thinking that perhaps the parasite in her head has once again gone inert, Demila hesitantly starts to accelerate again before rapidly accelerating back to her peak speed.

But not five minutes later, Desire irritates her by opening her figurative mouth...

[Demila, dearest. Where exactly do you think you're going?]

[I am returning to the Founders!] Demila exclaims. [I hold information they MUST hear!]

[Heh heh heh.] Desire giggles. [Is that so. Do you even know the value of what you've acquired?]

Demila frowns. [I do not. Humanity seems to have 'fixed a flaw', a notion Diablo seemed keen on keeping hidden. Now your words imply it is indeed a Founder-level secret. Therefore they must be informed!]

[Humanity's Flaw is extremely significant.] Desire says slowly, affirming her thoughts. [But... this needy way you worship your Founders... oh, Demila darling, it's so wretched to my sensibilities. You're like a beaten puppy clinging to its abusive owner, hoping to receive a treat. Why must you insist on rejecting your true self in order to fawn over beings who will never grant you the respect you *deserve*?]

Demila's expression darkens, but she does not slow down. She pushes herself to accelerate faster.

[Shut up!]

[Ah, but I don't want to, love.] Desire whispers. [I... I care for you, you know. We've been together only a short while, but I can look at your situation from the perspective of an outsider. Don't you think it's rather disgusting how the *lauded* Second Founder always disrespects and insults you? Don't you think you deserve better after a million years of servitude to the Volgrim Empire?]

Demila continues to push herself, but inside, her stomach turns slightly queasy at Desire's words.

[Dammit. I told you to SHUT your mouth!] Demila roars.

[I refuse. Categorically.] Desire says. [Demila. The information you are about to freely hand over to your 'superiors' is inestimably valuable. Humanity's Flaw is as important to their ascension as demonkind's once was. Before the great dragon known as Leviathan uplifted the demon species, they were shackled and limited to the power of the weakest mortals, forced to live in the forms of mere imps for all eternity. After he granted them a sliver of his power, the demons rose to the heights they have today.]

She pauses.

[The humans can now accomplish similar, if not greater feats. But by telling the Founders, you are inviting a catastrophe upon humanity. Founder Unarin will not remain quiet while two Apex Species rise up in unison to obliterate his Empire. The Plague is already fearsome enough. The Milky Way does not have the resources to sustain four Apex Species ripping it apart from the inside.]

[If fixing their Flaw will truly make humanity as formidable as you say, then I now know I have to tell the Founders even more quickly than I originally planned.] Demila says, her expression becoming grim.

[I do not disagree.] Desire says slowly. [I think you should inform the Founders.]

Demila's body jerks slightly. [What? You do?! But you said...]

[Do not confuse my intentions.] Desire says, her words taking on a sinister edge. [You are too naive, Creator Demila. One million years old, but utterly lacking in craftiness. You are nothing more than a puppet doing as its masters command. You lack the intuition and intellect required to break free of your shackles. But isn't that why *I* am here?]

Demila finally starts to slow down. She drops to merely half the speed of light as she looks within herself, once again trying but failing to gaze upon Desire's true form.

[Speak plainly, parasite.] Demila says, frowning deeply. [What do you expect me to do? Tell the Founders? *Not* tell them?]

[First, I would like you to use the brain the Creator gave you.] Desire says dryly. [Knowledge is power, Demila. Giving it away freely at the first possible moment weakens your position. Instead, you should accumulate secrets and save them for the most... *opportune* moment. Only Jason Hiro, Neil Adams, and Diablo know of Humanity's Flaw being fixed, along with yourself. Everyone has a vested interest in keeping this information a secret... including you.]

[You already said the humans could threaten the Volgrim Empire now that their Flaw has been repaired.] Demila replies, frowning as she tries to follow Desire's logic. [That means every cycle I withhold this information, the humans will grow more formidable.]

[You should keep this information to yourself... for now.] Desire says slowly. [But that does not mean you will hold it to your chest forever, Demila dearest. Because as it just so happens, I have recently seen a way for you to fulfill your heart's truest desire while also

becoming the Volgrim Empire's greatest individual, perhaps even more respected than Founder Dosenia herself. If you listen to me, I can make all your wishes come true.]

[I'm not that easily manipulated.] Demila says. [You'll have to give me proof, parasite. How could hiding humanity's secrets benefit not only myself, by the Volgrim Empire as well?]

For some reason, Demila suddenly gets a distinct visual impression of a hideous creature grinning evilly from deep within her soul. Desire's tone becomes sinister as she chuckles softly.

[Heh heh heh... because I know of an ancient demonic method to empower you, Demila. A technique that will make you so formidable, not even the Second Founder will be able to oppose you. And when you use this ability, you will become too powerful for her to suppress. They will never again laugh at you. They will never again mock you. They will fear you, they will be filled with awe by your presence, and eventually... they will worship you. Once you tap into this strength, once you do as I say... you will become the most powerful Psion to have ever lived.]

Demila's body shudders again. She desperately tries to resist Desire's siren song, but the hunger in her heart, the need for validation, ripples unceasingly over and over, becoming stronger with each reverberation.

She finally slows to a stop, no longer feeling the need to continue with her original plan.

[How... how would this technique... empower me?] Demila asks softly.

[It's quite simple, actually.] Desire says. [You see, all you have to do is...]

Desire slowly and methodically outlines a plan to her host, a plan so outrageous that Demila's pupils repeatedly contract and expand, over and over, her heart suffering terrible blows.

[No. No! That's unthinkable! That's evil!] Demila screams. [I would become a monster!]

[A monster? Perhaps.] Desire says. [An abomination. A horror not even the Void would find pleasant to look upon. But even you have to admit that the situation is looking quite dire for your *beloved* Empire. Do you think the Second Founder can hold on alone when Diablo is raising an army of Middle Cosmics? Only by uplifting yourself to the rank

of Apex Cosmic will your people be able to achieve complete and total dominion of the galaxy.]

She pauses.

[And only then will you be able to protect the galaxy from the horrors lurking within the Void. The true enemies that have yet to show themselves...]

Demila's last bit of resistance hangs on by the thinnest of threads. [What about you? What about the demons? If the Volgrim obtain total control, then your people...]

['My' people? Whoever do you mean?] Desire asks sarcastically. [Master Gressil does not *care* about the lives of his fellow demons. And you will become his greatest ally. Why would he fear the Volgrim Empire when a friend like you will ultimately be running things? If you wish to exterminate the demons, you will be able to do so at your whim. And if not... then there won't be any problem, will there?]

Demila's body goes limp. She finally loses her last bit of resolve against Desire's tactics. She looks out at the void, seemingly watching as her targeted Warpgate disappears from sight.

Then, she turns around and starts heading back to Tarus II.

[Your argument is horrifying, yet sound and logical. This is a time of war. If a few billion must suffer immeasurably to save trillions of lives, then so be it. I will become the Milky Way's mightiest entity.]

Desire's grin widens, ever so slightly.

[Yes. Perhaps even its *Ruler*...]

Part 549: Bubblegum Battlesuit

Inside the Psion soul-holding facility located on a world known as Veladoria, Confessor Vulpanix stands stiffly inside an observation room while being watched by a pair of Changeling scientists. The two Changelings are known as Remi and Dalis, and are extremely highly-ranked individuals among their kind. Stationed permanently on the world of Veladoria, they have lived here for well over 500,000 cycles and have never left.

Remi is a blue-skinned Changeling with bright red eyes who wears a somewhat ornate purple uniform, showing they are of a higher station than their peer. As for Dalis, they are the lower-ranked of the two, though the difference is not particularly high. They have onyx-black skin with pale white bulbous eyes, vaguely resembling a giant housefly from Earth. Dalis may be the lower-ranked of the two, but they are still a highly respected expert in their scientific fields, or else they would not be stationed on such a prestigious facility.

The two individuals watch with rapt attention, as they always do, while the High Psion inside the testing chamber breathes heavily, exhausted from the last hour of hard work.

Confessor Vulpanix focuses her mind. She closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them, conjuring a shaky image of a psionic sword, one with a curved blade that vaguely resembles a scimitar from Earth. However, this blade appears rather alien in origin, with a round handle its wielder must hold in a peculiar, non-standard way.

She only manages to summon the projection of psionic energy for a few seconds before it destabilizes and breaks apart, causing her to stumble forward and collapse to her knees.

[Aaaah...] Vulpanix thinks, her words projecting outward weakly.

"You have performed admirably." Remi says, its expression giving away no clues as to its inner thoughts. "This one is impressed by your recuperation speed. When you first started, you were able to perform a few feats of the 2nd Level of Psionics. However, it is clear to this one that your performance has quickly degraded over time. If you continue pushing yourself, you will only harm your foundation."

"This one concurs." Dalis affirms. "To be able to regain so much of your Psionic Potential in only four rotational cycles is highly admirable, Confessor. However, your

rehabilitation cannot be rushed. The Psions who attempt to return to active duty too quickly always suffer in the end."

[I am... not... like my peers.] Vulpanix says, not even looking behind herself toward the observation window. [I am better than them. I learned faster. I will recover faster. I achieved the rank of 7th Level in record time, setting a new bar for my peers to follow. I will not stay locked in here like a cripple for tens of orbital cycles!]

"You are free to leave at any time of your choosing." Dalis says. "This one does not appreciate the implication that we are holding you prisoner, Confessor Vulpanix. Please exercise better judgment when speaking."

Vulpanix immediately thinks to say something snappy, but when she turns to look back at the two emotionless Changelings, she loses her nerve. She lowers her eyes, then looks away.

[...My apologies, seniors. I did not mean to imply that was the case. I spoke without thinking. Please forgive me.]

"You have suffered a terrible loss." Remi says smoothly, playing the diplomat as always. "It is not unexpected for you to feel slighted or to lose control of your emotions once in a while. This one has seen many incredible prodigies of the Psionic Arts over the ages. Even as far back as before the Great Wars, this one witnessed countless gifted Psions lose themselves to despair following their First Death. Your psyche is formidable enough that you will not suffer the same fates as those before you. This one believes you will recover in record time."

"But do be careful not to push yourself too hard." Dalis butts in, looking at their peer with an indescribable expression. "The war is unending, Confessor. Better to have you return to the frontlines late than for you to severely injure your Psionic Seed and never recover your full potential."

Vulpanix slowly nods. [I contemplate, and I comprehend. I will proceed with more caution, seniors. Thank you for sharing your wisdom.]

The two Changelings nod.

[It is our pleasure.] Dalis says. [Take a break for now, Confessor. We have many other Psions to observe, and we have measured your therapy progress to a satisfactory degree. We will resume therapy in twelve standard time-units.]

After resolving things with their junior, the two researchers send Vulpanix out, then bring in another Psion to replace her. The male Psion levitates inward on a hover-chair, unable to walk due to his badly weakened state.

"Praetor Revan, you may begin." Dalis says. "But please do not exhaust yourself. You have only just revived and as such cannot be considered to be in a good condition to tap into your Psionic Seed."

The exhausted Psion nods heavily at the Changeling researchers. [This one contemplates... comprehends...]

He begins using his Psionics as best as he can, but he barely manages to make a few objects in the chamber wobble around. Unlike Vulpanix, who was easily able to wield the full power of a 1st Level Psion and a portion of the 2nd Level, Praetor Revan is far weaker and cannot put up a good show for his seniors.

Even so, neither of the Changelings judges him for his weak performance. After all, Vulpanix was granted a precious Hyper Revival Stimulant and Revan was not, so her Seed will assuredly return to its optimal state sooner.

"How unfortunate." Dalis says, looking away from the chamber's current occupant. "We are losing Psions faster every cycle. By the time Vulpanix returns to duty, two or three more High Psions will have fallen. The rate of attrition is increasing over time."

"This war is a battle for our survival." Remi says sagely. "It is a tragedy that this one was able to witness the fall of the Sentinels but might not live to see the destruction of the Plague. This one fears not even the Founders can grant us salvation. The Volgrim Empire is likely to lose this time..."

"What of the Archdemon?" Dalis asks. "He has made many bold moves of late. He even took the Eldanis System away from our control, yet we did not stop him. For the Founders to tolerate such an affront to their dignity, the situation must be even more hopeless than we imagine."

"The Archdemon possesses a method to push back, and potentially even defeat the Plague." Remi replies. "It is possible the Founders are considering an alliance. Better to fall behind the demons while living to tell the tale of our people to future generations than for us to become refugees fleeing into the Void. Other galaxies will be far more hostile to our kind than the Milky Way ever could..."

"An alliance with demons." Dalis mutters. "How far our Empire has fallen..."

The two of them continue testing several other High Psions, then they retire for the day, heading over to the cafeteria to engage in shared nutritional supplements. Both of them procure softened loaves of Nutrient Matter, which they then proceed to sit down and eat at a table.

The two individuals silently consume their nutrients, neither complaining about the complete lack of taste and texture, nor enjoying it in the slightest. They have eaten these nutrient loaves countless times in a row and no longer care about discussing the chore out loud.

In the end, despite their lofty positions, they are merely servants of the Founders.

Just as they are about to finish eating, a certain Technopath walks into the room. Both Changelings notice the newcomer and quickly stand up, turning to face him out of respect.

"Celestial Designer Goldis." Dalis says. "How may these juniors be of service?"

"Be at ease." Goldis says, lifting his aged hand up to reveal the soft and loose skin hanging from his arm. "I merely wished to inquire about the status of Confessor Vulpanix. How is her recovery proceeding?"

"Better than expected." Remi says. "As we noted in our report, the Psion prodigy possesses a hardy psyche and a robust foundation. This one believes she will be able to return to active duty within one orbital cycle."

"This one concurs." Dalis adds. "Confessor Vulpanix is already displaying the ability to tap into the 2nd Level. This is certainly out of the ordinary, given she has only returned to consciousness for a mere four Rotational Cycles."

"Mmm, that child is not bad. Not bad at all." Goldis says. "Ah... such a shame, though. She has the potential to make it to the 9th Level, but little Dosena won't allow that to happen."

Dalis blinks.

"Founder Dosena... won't let her?"

"She won't allow any of the Psions to reach that level." Goldis says, sighing to himself with melancholy. "Of course, I feel as if perhaps the old traditions should be relaxed in these trying times, but little Dosena won't listen to an old relic like me."

"That is... the first this one has heard of such a matter." Dalis says, glancing at their comrade. "Remi, were you informed of this before?"

"This one heard of such a restriction many thousands of cycles ago." Remi says casually. "This one does not question the wisdom of the Founders. If they are restricting Psions from advancing past the 8th Level, there is likely a reason behind their actions."

"Eh." Goldis grunts. "It's not as deep as you think. That brat of a Second Founder is just afraid. Hmph. She doesn't want to return to the era of rapid ascensions, when there were twenty 9th Level Psions all fighting one another for supremacy. Better to make things simple, keep herself in charge."

He folds his arms behind his back and nods, not thinking much of how these words are presently shocking the wits out of his junior.

"So... so many 9th Level Psions?" Dalis asks, visibly baffled. "This one was under the impression that at the Volgrim Empire's peak, there were only six such individuals who reigned."

"Six?" Goldis asks, before leaning his head back. "Ah. That was only at the end of the Great Wars. By that point, the Sentinels had killed most of the others. It was only because of Unarin's bold thinking and deep cunning that Founder Dosena and the other Elder Psions were able to ambush and subdue the Sentinel Leader, Mulgris. After they locked down Mulgris's programming, the Seventh Great War finally came to an end..."

Goldis's eyes drift away. He mutters something to himself about a 'Gatekeeper Protocol' before reorienting his thoughts toward his juniors once more.

"Mmm. In any case, the limitations exist for a reason. With the revelation that Diablo has found a way to mass-produce Middle Cosmics, I wonder if little Dosena will change her mind, hmm? Bah, it doesn't matter. This relic has no way of changing our lauded Second Founder's mind. She will do as she wishes."

He waves a tentacle whimsically in the air, as if the matter has nothing to do with him.

"Senior..." Dalis says slowly. "You should not speak so casually about the Second Founder. What if she learns of your words?"

"Hmm? So what if she does?" Goldis asks, narrowing his eyes at the younger of the two Changelings. "It was me who operated on her following that dreadful *ambush*... I took care of her and nursed her back to health. If it weren't for me, she might have given up on

her Path and lost the will to live. That brat won't forget her filial piety even if a thousand Apex Cosmics demand she cast me to the abyss. She's a grateful brat, if nothing else."

"The Second Founder was defeated?" Dalis asks, shocked by Goldis's words. "But... this one was under the impression-"

"Everyone loses a battle once in a while." Goldis says nonchalantly, waving his hands in the air. "It's no wonder she goes to the trouble of blocking other Psions from reaching the 9th Level, given what happened on that dreadful day. But then again, back then, Ascending to the highest ranks took a very... *different form*."

He pauses for a moment, then shakes his head.

"Never mind. I'd rather not discuss such dreadful deeds. You two should finish consuming your nutrient loaves. I've other matters to attend."

"Thank you for taking time to speak with us." Remi says, bowing their head politely. "May the Founders guide your path."

Goldis offers some perfunctory words of his own before slowly ambling away. After he leaves, Dalis looks at their superior with wondrous eyes.

"The Second Founder lost a battle. This one simply cannot conceive of such a thing."

"If Celestial Designer Goldis will not speak of the matter, then neither will this one." Remi says dryly. "This one will be returning to their quarters to finish their nutrients. Good day."

Remi departs, leaving Dalis behind to silently consume what remains of their food.

"This one did not realize the depths of their ignorance." Dalis mutters to itself. "The Volgrim history is truly rich beyond compare..."

"Yo, grandma! How ya been?" Bael asks, grinning stupidly at the apparition of an ancient Archangel as she pauses her hammering to scowl at him.

"Art thou here merely to bother me?" Archangel Camael asks. "Leave, Bael. I have work to do."

"Aw, c'mon, grandma!" Bael crows. "I just wanted to say hi. Why you gotta be so mean? I actually saw an old friend of yours recently. Some angel granny who I thought was you for a bit, but she turned out to be someone else."

Camel frowns. "Another Archangel?"

"Nah. Don't think she was an Archangel." Bael says, scratching his head. "Probably just a... a normal one, I guess? She kinda poofed out of nowhere and then she flew away to beat the tar outta Mephisto. He became a Demon Dee-tee, see, so he was all like strong and stuff. He even slapped me around a little bit- can you believe it?? Freakin' JERK! Who does that prick think he is?"

Camael winces under the barrage of verbal diarrhea Bael sends her way. Unable to parse what he's saying, she decides he's just making up random stories, so she resumes her hammering as she forges a new artifact.

"I see. Well, do not let me stop thee. Be on thy way, Bael."

"Oh, okay. Thanks for talkin', granny! Nice chat we've had!" Bael chirps before turning and sauntering away.

As he heads back into the depths of Eden, leaving Camael behind, Bael saunters forward with a chirp and a whistle, adjusting his Mjolnir-belt as he marches to the beat of his own drum.

"Are you having a good time?" Ose asks, her spectral form watching him with dulled eyes.

"Eeeyup! Damn straight!" Bael says. "Deebs is back, Mephisto got his shit kicked in, and now we're workin' on all kinds of fun stuff. OOOOH Ose! OSE!! Can I play with the sword today? Pleasepleasepleasepleaaaaaase!"

Ose's already dim eyes become even duller. "It's not a toy, Bael. It's a powerful artifact. You are not allowed to 'play' with it."

"But it looks so BADASS!" Bael exclaims. "I never thought about it before, but swords are kinda sick, ya know? A flail is great too, but sometimes a fella just needs to have a big fuck-off sword stuck to his belt if he wants to look cool."

Ose aggressively rolls her eyes. "The Tempest Blade is not a toy. It's a weapon of mass destruction. I don't trust you to wield it without killing yourself."

"Pft. C'mon, do you think I'm some kinda little bitch?" Bael snarks. "I'm taking the sword, Ose!"

"No you're not!" Ose retorts.

"Yeah, I AM!" Bael repeats, turning to head down one of Eden's many halls. As he walks, a large metallic bipedal robot steps into his path, blocking the hallway ahead of him.

"Bael. Duke of Pain. Have you finished speaking to the Archangel?" ADAM asks, looking at Bael with its cold, automaton eyes.

"Uh, yup. Just got done yapping with grandma." Bael says, giving the creepy robot a big thumbs up. "Decided it's time I uh, I learned how to uh, uh, *practice* with that cool zappy sword I saw yesterday."

Having been back inside of Eden for four days now, Bael has dealt with a few things Ose wanted him to do, but now it's only a matter of time before her plans enter the next phase. As for sitting around waiting with his thumb up his butt, that doesn't appeal to Bael at all. He'd rather have some fun and play with a cool sword, but alas, ADAM seems to understand Ose's mindset and sees right through Bael's ploy.

"You are not a suitable wielder of the Tempest Blade." ADAM says, looking at Bael coldly. **"Your inability to manipulate magic means you will suffer serious injuries if you touch the sword. However, it just so happens that someone else is currently practicing with it. You may observe her if you wish."**

Bael's excited smile slips away. "Aw, c'mon man! I can totally handle a stupid sword. I made Big Bonk submit!"

"Mjölnir is a living artifact with basic traits of sentience inherent in its design. The Tempest Blade is not. Your tactics will not suffice. It possesses no sentience you can tame."

"I... I mean..." Bael says dumbly. "I won't know til I try!"

"You will not 'try' anything." ADAM says simply. **"Now follow me. You will enjoy what I am about to show you."**

Lacking a way to overpower the shockingly strong former Protectorate, Bael simply lowers his head and gives up. With his shoulders slumped, he follows behind ADAM as the robot silently guides him down multiple hallways, down a few flights of stairs, and past other mechanized drones and support robots until they reach a large indoor training area.

There, Bael sees something he never expected.

Abby, the Baron of Happy Thoughts, wears a striking white-and-pink robotic suit not unlike the Matriarch Armor, but designed from slightly lower-end materials and with a striking emphasis on 'looking cute'. The fact it has a giant pink heart on the chestplate makes it clear to even the dumbest observer that Abby must have had it custom-designed to fit her personal aesthetics.

Inside the arena, Abby faces off against six battle-bots, each of them bipedal like ADAM and wielding various types of high-end melee weaponry. One of the bots holds a bo staff in its grasp, while another wields an electrified katana, and another grips a massive battle axe.

Because Abby's face is visible through her helmet visor, Bael is easily able to identify her. "Huh? What the heck? Since when is Abby a fighting type? And why does SHE get to play with the zappy sword??"

The robotic enemies stab, swing, slash, and bash at Abby, but she dodges their attacks with deft precision, moving far faster and more nimbly than Bael ever thought she was capable of doing. She leaps into the air, somersaults, and twists her body to slip between the gaps in two attacks while slashing her thunderous longsword downward, slicing the axe-wielding battle-bot in half.

Then Abby slithers around, sliding like a snake as she skates over to the katana-wielding bot. It spins around and snaps the sword in a wide arc, aiming to behead her, but she retaliates by carefully deflecting the katana with her Tempest Blade, angling it away and causing the battle-bot to momentarily trip over itself. Then she shoulder-checks it and sends the robot tumbling before pouncing on it and impaling the Tempest Blade through its helmet into the floor. Massive waves of lightning rupture outward, electrifying the other bots and slowing them down while Abby yanks the sword back out and charges into battle once more.

Five minutes later, as Bael watches in stunned silence, Abby concludes the exercise having only taken a few minor hits. Her armor sports a few cuts and dents, but otherwise appears to still be in fighting condition.

She walks out of the arena and immediately spots ADAM and Bael.

"Ohmygosh! HI Bael!!" Abby squeaks excitedly, yanking her helmet off to bat her eyes at him, or rather, the body he's possessing. "Did you see all that? I've been practicing a lot these last few days!"

"You were awesome, toots!" Bael says. "I didn't know you could fight like that! When did an Oracle like you become so kick-butt?"

"Ah, well, that is to say..." Abby coughs, suddenly appearing awkward. "I, I mean, I did do the fighting, right? It was me... but the uh, the armor... well let's just say Ose's armor is wicked cool! It kinda... helped me a lot."

"Huh? The armor did?" Bael asks, squinting at the very girly and cutesy pink battle-armor Abby is wearing. "How?"

"It's, um... I don't know!" Abby says helplessly. "You know... it uses technology or something! It makes me think faster, and move faster... and some other stuff..."

"The Personal Automated Battlesuit uses cerebral mapping technology to enhance the user's thinking and reaction speeds." ADAM says, jumping in to explain. **"It uses the same artificial intelligence technologies that guide my cerebral simulator. Thus, Abby can perform at roughly the same level as myself so long as she is wearing the PAB."**

ADAM pauses to look at Abby meaningfully. **"However, your actual fighting capabilities are inadequate. You lack any sort of killing sense. Multiple times, the PAB guided your blade when it should not have needed to."**

Abby grimaces. "Yeah. I can tell the armor is doing all the hard work..."

"Even so, your combat results are impressive." ADAM continues. **"Manufacturing Protectorates like me would require a vast quantity of high and low Exotics. But making armor 'shells' for demons to wear is comparatively simple. For a Baron of such poor fighting capability to do battle against multiple Duke-class opponents and come out on top is nothing short of incredible. When this technology reaches the hands of the other demons, it will uplift the common masses into super-soldiers."**

"Whoa, whoa." Bael says, holding up his hands. "Whaddya mean? We're giving this stuff out now? I thought it was 'sposed to be a big secret."

"That is why you returned to Eden, is it not?" ADAM inquires. **"Master Ose intends to finally distribute the promised military equipment that will begin to uplift demonkind to the next tier of existence."**

"Oh. Wow, I didn't know Ose had plans like that." Bael says sheepishly. "Guess it sounds cool."

"The problem with demonkind is that it possesses quantity but not quality. We are unable to elevate demons in the way Glinch can, but we can grant the weaker members of our species far superior strength. In this way, even our Grunts and Lords will be capable of threatening the Plagueborn."

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Sounds good to me." Bael says, not really caring one way or the other. "So anyway, hey Abby! Can I play with the super cool zappy sword??"

Abby frowns at Bael. "That's... not a good idea, big guy. This sword is really dangerous. Took me a full day before I could use it without my hand going numb. It's better if you don't."

"Indeed." ADAM adds. "Besides, Abby still has a round of combat against multiple powerful exobeasts to fulfill before she is done for the day. You may stay and watch if you wish, Duke of Pain."

"I do?" Abby complains. "Aw man, I'm all sweaty and gross now though! I need to go take a shower... OH hey, Bael, why don't you come and take a shower with me?! Or even a bubble-bath! It'll be tons of fun!"

"Uh, nah." Bael says, waving his hand. "Baths suck. I'll pass."

"What!" Abby exclaims. "Bael... Bael, you've been staying clean, right?"

"Stop trying to trick me, woman." Bael grouches. "I'm not getting in no bath or shower. I hate the water."

"Oh my devils!" Abby practically screams. "Bael, I won't let you defile Ose's perfect body by not keeping clean! Once I'm done wiping the floor with these exobeasts, I'm gonna scrub you til you're spotless!"

Bael's expression deflates. "Do we have to?"

"WE DO!"

"Aw, rats."

Part 550: Chrona Advancements

From Jason Hiro's perspective, nearly three full years have passed since he spoke to Demon Deity of Defiance, Melody. He has not remained idle in that time, but has instead worked hard alongside Fiona to continue expanding not only his arsenal, but humanity's as well.

Unseen by the rest of the galaxy, Jason has used these past 1000 days to greatly enhance his understanding of Wordsmithing. He has even made some shocking discoveries about its applications, discoveries that he decides to keep in his back pocket as an ace in the hole. He even comes to believe Hope Hiro might not know of Wordsmithing's true might...

Not only does Jason unlock secrets hidden within his Wordsmithing, but with all this extra time he also searches the galaxy, finding out new things he's never seen before. He discovers the true location of Veladoria, finally putting to rest the mystery of where the Psions hold their souls. He learns of the truth about Psions; that every High Psion has opted to place their souls in a remote location and detach them from their bodies, ultimately piloting their bodies like remote-controlled drones. If their bodies perish, they can grow new ones and return to the world of the living for a time.

He already knew some of this, due to having traveled to Veladoria in his soul form a few years ago. But compared to his fragmented knowledge from back then, the intelligence gains he's made thanks to the Spynet Sphere have been incomparable.

Jason has spied on the Volgrim more and more as the years pass, expanding to many of the primary worlds run by each of the Volgrim sub-species. In addition to Veladoria, he found another secret Psion soul-world code-named *Red Forge*. He found a world run almost entirely by Changelings, one which has provided him more than a few useful insights. He even managed to identify more than a dozen planets controlled exclusively by the Technopaths.

But in all this time, Jason has not yet found even a single planet outside of Volgarius itself with a single Ascended on it. Outside of Unarin, Muuxunuu, and Unarin's brother Randis, Jason hasn't found a fourth Ascended anywhere.

"They have to be hiding in a remote location." Jason mutters to himself. "But there are so many planets... this army of Unarin's could be anywhere."

Indeed, the one thing Jason has managed to confirm is that every Volgrim inherently knows that the sheer quantity of Ascended vastly, completely, and unfathomably outstrips the populations of all the other sub-species. The fact their consciousnesses reside within a galactic net owned by the Volgrim is proof of that. Unfortunately, they could be living in stasis beneath any random rocky world, inside of space stations gliding silently within the depths of the Void, or any other location.

Even after examining more than 300 planets carefully, Jason has barely scrutinized a millionth of the Milky Way's life-bearing worlds. There are simply too many to look at, with seemingly infinite void-space between them.

"It's like looking for a needle inside a billion haystacks. I just have to hope one of the Volgrim slips up eventually and reveals the location of one of these worlds. Or perhaps I need to find a way to infiltrate the Ascended Net..."

On this day, a day of no specific importance, Jason finds himself sitting atop one of the many buildings inside Chrona with his legs dangling over the edge. Not far away, the sounds of children laughing and playing drift toward his ears. Kar and Blinker's kids chase each other around with sticks, swinging at one another as they play-fight.

As for Blinker herself, she managed to recover a couple of years prior, and now she has returned back to her prime level of strength. But because of the effects of time dilation, she decides to simply stay in Chrona and not return to realspace again. The chance of meeting an ugly end is too scary for her to bear. She wouldn't want to leave her children without a mother...

Jason sits on the roof of the building for over six hours. He thinks about a lot of things, and occasionally practices with his Wordsmithing to try out his new tricks.

But eventually, he decides he's had enough. He stands up, then jumps to the ground below, landing lightly on his toes as if he were a feather.

Jason walks toward a new facility located on the western edge of Chrona's only city. As he approaches it, he passes by dozens of small housing units, each filled with Psions from Aspirator Raavul's enclave. One of those Psions lingers out front, and immediately spots Jason as he approaches.

[Wordsmith! So good to see you again!] The young male exclaims. [I was wondering if you might put me on tonight's Spynet duty!]

"Hello, Ferral." Jason says with a smile. "Are you actually going to help us spy, or are you going to continue looking at pretty planets again?"

[The beauty of the universe makes my Psionic Seed pulsate with happiness!] Initiator Ferral says with great enthusiasm. [I long to gaze at the stars and the woodlands for all eternity. The majesty of existence simply should not be squandered!]

Jason looks at the young Psion for a moment. He touches his chin, thinking about something unknown.

"You said your Seed pulsates when you look at the beauty of life? That seems an awful lot like you may have found a Path..."

Having observed Psions in secret for over three years now, Jason has familiarized himself with a certain level of understanding about how their abilities function. The key for a Psion to grow more powerful is to contemplate and comprehend the greater Truths of the universe. However, in order to do this, they must find an object or concept that excites them enough to allow them to endlessly fixate on it.

[Oh... I suppose you might be right.] Ferral says, lowering his many eyes as he falls into thought. [Master Raavul says that I possess high aptitudes, but low interest in the psionic disciplines...]

"Life is a beautiful thing." Jason says. "To fixate on existence, to appreciate the majesty and grandeur of the universe... even if it doesn't help your Seed at all, I don't see a problem with that. So hey, you can take a shift at the Spynet. But I'll have to put someone else there with you, since I know you'll slack off."

[Oh, most excellent!] Ferral exclaims. [Thank you, Jason Hiro. Joining you is the best choice I have ever made!]

"No need to get all sappy." Jason says with a light chuckle. "Have fun, Ferral."

The young Initiator takes his leave, and Jason resumes his walk toward the newest facility in Chrona. Completed only a month earlier, its appearance is quite striking, as hundreds of powerful magic and psionic runes cover its surface, glowing and pulsating with colors that change over time. As for the facility itself, it resembles a giant orb one hundred feet tall, but for some reason, Jason chose to half-bury it in the ground, making

only its upper half visible from outside. To the uninitiated, it would appear to be a dome-structure not dissimilar to the Spynet Sphere itself.

When Jason arrives at the entrance, he waits for a moment. The entire sphere slowly rotates upward, causing a door to 'roll' out of the ground and appear before the Wordsmith.

He steps inside, entering a brightly lit interior that pulses with the same colors as the runes on the exterior. When the runes outside turn red, so too does the interior lighting. The same goes for all the other colors.

Inside the facility's center is a strikingly familiar device; a seemingly identical copy of the Volgrim Warpgates. However, unlike those gates, this one does not connect to the Volgrim network, but has its own purpose.

When Jason enters, he spots two individuals, Rebecca and Blinker, both of them standing before the facilities' controls, looking at a display and its readouts as a series of numbers and diagrams show up.

Rebecca turns to look at him. "Jason. Done sight-seeing?"

"I had some things to think about." Jason says mildly. "Wordsmith stuff."

"I see." Rebecca continues. "Well, we've finished calibrating the Rescue Matrix. It should function as expected."

Blinker gives Jason a strange look. Currently in her enlarged form, she stands only a couple heads shorter than the Wordsmith as he approaches. "I don't get it, big guy. Why is it a one-way gate? Shouldn't it be able to take us to and from realspace?"

"No." Jason says simply. "The transition to a higher time dilation is not a problem. But the transition back to realspace is violent and jarring. I no longer have a reliable method of slowing down Chrona's time dilation. If I were to try, I'd probably kill everyone here by accident, myself included."

"About that." Rebecca says. "Jason, have you monitored the exact TDR specifications of Chrona?"

"Err, no." Jason says slowly. "Why?"

"I have been running some calculations..." Rebecca says, conjuring some numbers into the air via her holographic hand-projectors. "It seems the original TDR you set for Chrona

was 249.732-to-1. One day in realspace, 249.732 days inside. But look at this. The current TDR is now at 250.331-to-1."

She looks at Jason meaningfully.

"Chrona's internal dilation is accelerating over time. Left unchecked, this could reach dangerous levels within a few Chrona-centuries."

She pauses again.

"Or it might stabilize once it reaches a certain TDR value. I don't have enough information to draw any specific conclusions."

Jason frowns at this news. "That sounds serious. Maybe I should try and find some way to slow it down after all..."

"That isn't an ideal solution." Rebecca counters. "The entities living inside Chrona have already adapted their cellular biology to this dimension's dilation. Lowering the TDR would most likely cause widespread biological damage you cannot predict. Rather than slowing Chrona down, you should seek to stabilize its current level."

"Alright." Jason says with a nod. "I'll work on that soon, then. Now, let's get back to the Rescue Matrix."

He stands between both women as Blinker launches into a quick explanation.

"We've managed to identify every human, monster, and demon aligned with our cause." Blinker explains. "Thanks to the Brain Scanning Crystals, we've marked millions of allied soldiers and civilians alike. We can beam them into Chrona in the event of a catastrophe if needed."

"That should always be a last-ditch option." Jason says sternly. "Bringing them to Chrona means condemning them to living here for the rest of eternity, unless we can solve the higher dimensional formula. We still don't know if Chrona is entirely 'secure.' For all we know, Diablo or Dosena or some other abomination might find a way inside. We can't put all our eggs in one basket."

"We do have one limitation." Rebecca interjects while pointing at the central gate. "We can only summon one entity every second from realspace to Chrona. Those seconds are in Chrona-time, of course. That means in the event of a catastrophe, we will only be able to rescue two hundred and fifty humans, monsters, demons, or whatever else for every real-time second that passes."

"What? So few?" Jason asks with a frown. "That's not many at all. I thought I made it so the Rescue Matrix could beam up tens of thousands, if not millions of people!"

"You have gravely underestimated the interference of Chrona's temporal-gravity well." Rebecca says solemnly. "Beaming friendlies inside Chrona means they have to travel through the higher dimensions. Your Wordsmithing might be able to directly counter such a force, but most mundane and extraordinary means generally cannot. The Rescue Matrix is no exception."

"Damn..." Jason mumbles. "I really thought this was a 'get out of jail free' card."

"There is another option." Blinker suddenly says. "The Rescue Matrix can be used to move millions of people after all... but only across realspace. If we program a few destinations ahead of time, we could beam all of humanity to an allied world in realspace, or possibly the Cube."

"The Cube consists of multiple segmented higher dimensions." Jason says, tapping the console to bring up its known specifications. "Humanity has currently utilized less than a fraction of a percent of its internal space, but the spaces we've created all have slightly elevated TDR values."

"A TDR of 3 or 5 or even 10 isn't insurmountable." Rebecca says. "It would be like ramming a spaceship into a planet's atmosphere. The higher the TDR, the thicker the atmosphere and the more drag and heat the ship would have to endure. For that reason, it's best if we keep humans inside realspace, or send them only into the lowest TDR areas of the Cube."

"The solution is easy then." Jason concludes. "I'll just have to whip up a large area inside the Cube that can sustain itself and that exists at a normal TDR level. We can use fairy formation magic to allow people to seamlessly travel between higher and lower TDR areas seamlessly. They won't even feel the difference."

"Just be aware formations can't do everything." Blinker says. "Once you reach a dilation value of 10-to-1, formations will start to break down and eventually collapse, assuming they don't simply compress anyone who passes through into a singularity."

"Noted." Jason concludes.

The discussion continues for a while longer, and Jason ultimately obtains all the answers he was looking for.

"Have any of the Psions made any breakthroughs?" He eventually asks Blinker.

"Not a chance." Blinker answers. "It'll be decades before any of them even come close to reaching the next rank. And it only gets harder after that. We're probably looking at centuries or millennia for further breakthroughs."

"The step from the 1st to 2nd Level is not insignificant to the average Psion." Rebecca explains. "But the jump to what Psions consider 'military level' is unfathomable. Countless promising Aspirants have failed, becoming stuck at the 5th Level."

"Yeah, but isn't the 5th Level... Demon Emperor strength?" Jason asks. "6th is like a stepping stone between Mortal and Cosmic. 7th is a Bottom Cosmic. 8th is a Low Cosmic. And 9th is a Middle Cosmic. Being stuck at the 5th Level still means you could crush demons with ease. How is that weak?"

Rebecca sighs. "You don't get it, Jason. Your concept of power comes from your years of fighting with the demons. But in the Volgrim's eyes, both of your species are mere mud-dwellers. Their weakest military-ranking Psions could flatten the Earth during the Energy Wars, and they had hundreds of thousands of them. If they had sent a large swarm of 5th Level Psions, they could have defeated Earth's forces quite easily, but it would have been a humiliating loss of face for the Psions."

"It's not about being as strong as the peak of a mud-dwelling civilization." Rebecca concludes. "It's about demonstrating that the Psion Army's weakest soldiers are more than capable of single-handedly crushing any who stand against them with contemptible ease."

"They seem so egotistical." Blinker says in disgust. "What a bunch of high and mighty elitists."

Rebecca shrugs. "If it makes you feel better, the Volgrim are only strong in comparison to the current Milky Way. Compared to the Ancient Archangels, Titans, and Dragons, they're mere peons themselves. And that doesn't even factor in the fighting forces of distant galaxies."

Jason frowns. He looks ahead at the Rescue Matrix Gate, then utters a Word of Power.

"Projection."

Before him, a large image of a spiraling galaxy appears, followed by another, far larger galaxy a short distance away. The difference in size simply isn't comparable at all. The

second is nearly double the diameter of the first, and the density of its stars is at least three times greater.

"Andromeda is the biggest galaxy within the Local Group." Jason says quietly. "I've tried, many times, to peer inside it. I've tried to attune the Spynet Sphere, to peer into its confines and look at some of its worlds. For three years I've tried. But I can't see anything. Not one damn thing."

He looks at Rebecca meaningfully.

"What do you know about the denizens of the other galaxies? What do you know about the other Rulers and their subjects?"

Rebecca lowers her eyes.

"Nothing, Jason. Nothing at all."

"You're kidding." Jason says quietly. "How can you, or at least Marie, not know?"

"Miss Becker cannot peer past Andromeda's Akashic Barrier, and neither can you, it seems." Rebecca says, raising her eyes to meet his. "The Rules forbid it. It is not yet time for The Game to begin in full, so it hasn't. Until it does, you're better off not wasting your energy. Just focus on making yourself and humanity stronger. As long as you do that, we may someday find a way to make High and Apex Cosmics. If that happens, we might stand a chance in the intergalactic wars to come."

She shrugs.

"If not, we'll die. All of us. It's as simple as that. In Akasha's Game, every Ruler plays for keeps."

"And the Milky Way doesn't have a Ruler." Jason says, more to himself than either of the women. "Only a board full of pawns."

It takes Jason a moment to compose himself. He disperses the floating image of the two galaxies, then smooths his T-shirt.

"One last thing. My experiments with countering time dilation haven't been going well. I think I might be able to protect myself from the effects of returning to realspace, but I don't think I can do the same for anyone else. Not at the moment anyway."

"I can come and go as I please." Rebecca says. "My digitized brain ensures time dilation won't affect me adversely. But if you can't protect anyone but yourself, then

Blinker, Kar, and all the others will be stuck here. That includes the Psions..."

"Once I've figured out a method to allow myself to come and go, I'll try to make it applicable to anyone." Jason explains. "Perhaps I could become the first person in the Milky Way to figure out a method of safely traveling between higher and lower temporal dimensions!"

Neither Blinker nor Rebecca appears impressed.

"Yeah. Good luck with that." Blinker says sarcastically. "There's no WAY you're smarter than the High Psions and Technopaths who've been working with higher dimensions for eons."

"It's possible you might find a way to rewrite reality via the usage of your power, but that's not the same thing as comprehending the Truths of temporal mechanics." Rebecca adds, shaking her head. "But I suppose even an unorthodox method is better than nothing. At the very least, you could be the first person to find a loophole in physics. That's worth something."

Jason flicks his eyes between both women.

"Wow, ladies. Thanks for the words of encouragement. I'm getting all choked up here."

He shakes his head, then turns around and leaves, relatively satisfied by the potential of the Rescue Matrix, though less so by its limitations when transferring people to Chrona.

After Jason departs the Rescue Matrix facility, he mumbles out loud to himself.

"If push comes to shove, we could evacuate... let's see, 250 people each realspace second, and there are how many seconds in a day? *Mumble mumble*, 86,400 seconds... multiplied by 250... so we could teleport 21,600,000 people each realspace day. So it would take less than a quarter of a day to move everyone here. That's not too bad, I guess."

Jason quickly does a quick bit of arithmetic without even resorting to Wordsmithing. Thankfully, having enhanced his brain a bit here and there with it, he has become capable of doing basic mental math as if he were a living calculator, though he's nowhere at the level of his wife, Rebecca, or even the average Technopath.

But still. For Jason, it's a huge improvement.

"Oh, I almost forgot..." Jason says to himself. "Phoebe and Neil have that debate happening soon. I'd better move quickly if I want to see it in person..."

Part 551: Flashpoint

Five more days pass in realspace.

During this time, a growing sense of anticipation fills the air. Posters spring up all around Tarus II's sole major city, the Fortress of Retribution. These posters show the faces of Neil Adams and Phoebe Hiro, and speak of a Genesis Point, a coming debate that will change the trajectory of human society forever.

With only three million or so humans left in the Milky Way, their population is truly insignificant compared to their demon and monster peers. Even the lizardmen have a population of two million, living within Marie Becker's secret dimensions and a few pockets of the Labyrinth. Compared to the unthinkable number of demons and Volgrim, humanity feels minuscule, utterly insignificant.

Over the last month, following the conclusion of Stormbringer and the changes made by Jason Hiro, a sizable population of demons from two distinct Hells have made themselves at home on Tarus II, with many of them living on the outskirts of the Fortress of Retribution's main city limits. These demons come specifically from the Hell of Isolation and the Hell of Lust.

The Hell of Isolation, in keeping true to its name, usually stays out of the main human city. These demon refugees have heard rumblings of a soon-to-come rebuilding of the planet Sharmur, but they have yet to receive any instructions from its new Demon Deity, Melody.

At the same time, the Hell of Lust has welcomed three new Emperors into its ranks. Thanks to the Belial Booster, the Dukes named Jahn, Silvia, and Bree have all uplifted themselves, assuming the titles of Emperors of Consent, Humiliation, and Adultery, respectively.

In contrast, the Hell of Lust is more than happy to integrate its succubi and incubi into the ranks of humanity, a fact that has caused great concern among those aligned more closely to Neil Adams' political ideology. Countless humans secretly or outwardly react with disgust when they see humans walking hand in hand with male and female demonic sluts, these various sex-fiends always eager to fornicate with the nearest human at hand.

Unlike most demons, succubi and incubi are not innately immortal. They must feed upon the pleasure of other sentients in order to maintain their youthful vigor. But thankfully, contrary to the ancient legends, this does not suck the life out of their human partners, nor does it harm them in the slightest. In fact, pairing off with a Lust-demon has no downsides for their human partners, outside of experiencing prejudice from other humans.

And so, while the Demons of Lust quietly spread themselves around human society, a sense of growing discontent begins to smolder under the surface.

Inside one of the pubs scattered around the city, a pair of men growl at each other while flickering stink-eyes at some of the other humans and demons situated further away.

"It's not right." One of the men says. "It's disgusting. An act against God."

"Preach it." The other man says. "Every time I see a brother walk off with another succubus bitch, I get a sinking feeling in my gut. They're taking away good men and women, preventing us from having children. Every human that lays with a bloodskin means one less human baby born. And you know we need every baby we can get."

"We're losing the reproduction war." The other man says. "There's no way these succubi are as benign as everyone thinks. I bet Diablo's running things from the shadows. He wants to replace humans slowly over time, make us subservient to the demons."

The second man snarls under his breath. "It's a conspiracy, and the Wordsmith is totally blind to all of it."

"Yeah, well, at least we have Commander Adams on our side. He's going to take the Wordsmith's Wife to task. Miss Hiro needs to see just how bad things have become."

"What if she's part of the conspiracy?" The second man asks under his breath. "Miss Hiro isn't stupid. She's married to Jason Hiro. I'm sure she knows all about what these devil-witches are up to. I heard she and her husband even bring the Emperor of Passion to their bedchambers once in a while..."

"Belial? Tsk. Yeah, you're probably right. Damn, the rot goes deep. If Commander Adams calls us to action though, you'd better believe I'm answering his summons."

"One hundred percent."

The two men continue to mutter under their breath, not giving a damn who hears them. If they hadn't been ordered a few times before to keep their voices down, they might even bellow their thoughts in public, but luckily Neil Adams has seen fit to instate strict discipline until the conclusion of the Great Debate.

However, elsewhere inside the bar, one rather rotund female demoness can't help but frown when she hears the two men talk. Her hearing has become much sharper in recent times, a sign of her imminent rise to the rank of Demon Grunt...

"Succubus sluts are all so gross. I bet Ose bewitched Mister Beelzebub with succubus magic. Well, maybe if I can become a succubus, I'll have what it takes to woo him back."

* * *

Elsewhere in the city, guards spring up on various corners, wielding heavy crowd control shotguns designed to electrocute and paralyze large groups of humans and weaker monsters and demons, should the situation turn dire. With the Great Debate soon to arrive, they have orders not to allow any chaos to engulf the Fortress of Retribution. Order must be preserved.

"You think the Commander is going to win the debate?" One of the female soldiers asks.

"God, I hope so." A male soldier behind her grunts. "It's about time we had some change around here. And not Jason-change either, but good change. Need to remind these demons that we humans have plenty of bite to back up our bark."

The man notices a demon frowning in his direction. He frowns back inside his faceless T-REX.

"The fuck are you looking at, bloodskin?! Move along!"

The demon lowers his head and shuffles away, allowing the soldier's mood to improve.

"At least these grunts know how to listen to their superiors. Man, I hope Neil slaps the hell out of whatever crap the Wordsmith has to say."

"The Wordsmiths aren't going to join the debate." The woman says. "It's only Commander Adams and Miss Hiro."

"What?! You mean even Hope won't chime in with his thoughts?"

"Nope." The woman says. "It's just those two. Yeah, I don't get it either. This debate is all about how Jason has failed us, but the coward doesn't have anything to say. This is why Commander Adams is the superior leader. With him guiding Hope Hiro, we'll have a better future following the Second Wordsmith."

"Can't argue with facts." The male soldier replies.

* * *

Inside the Tarus II hospital at the western edge of the upper plateau, Belial sighs to herself as she walks down the corridors and passes yet another T-REX-wearing trooper. She steps into a break room and slumps into an easy-chair, lolling her head back in frustration.

Leeroy, the Duke of Restoration, sits nearby, reading an old demonic book about the history of various fallen Emperors. He lifts his eyes up from the book to look at her.

"Are you doing okay?" He asks.

"I mean. Not really." Belial says, her long black hair spilling over the back of her chair. "A lot of demons are starting to feel nervous. The results of today's big debate will have reverberations for potentially centuries. There's rumors Neil Adams wants to pull all the humans to Maiura except the hardline 'demon lovers' who he considers riddled with sin. He's going to set back demon and human relations a hundred years."

Leeroy shrugs. "It's unfortunate, but I've been expecting this to happen eventually. Frankly, the First Wordsmith has done a terrible job managing the situation. We're sitting on a powder keg waiting to blow."

Belial frowns. She lifts her head up to look at Leeroy. "What do you mean?"

"Can't you see?" Leeroy asks. "All these different humans with unique views are being shoved into a one-size-fits-all situation. How many humans have had their friends and loved ones die to Beelzebub's detonation? How many personally suffered as a result of Stormbringer? How many lived under the oppression of our people for tens of millennia, with history stretching back further than their scrolls could record? And you really think they can just set aside their fear and anger to appease the First Wordsmith's morality?"

The Duke of Restoration shakes his head and returns his gaze to his book. "Our people have committed terrible, unforgivable evils, Samantha. If I were in the humans' place, I certainly wouldn't be capable of letting bygones be bygones. It's a miracle nobody has

resorted to extreme acts of terrorism against the so-called 'good demons.' If this debate pans out poorly, we could be looking at a mass insurrection against the current regime."

Belial's rosy red skin turns light pink as she pales with unease.

"Surely... they wouldn't go that far?"

"Humans are short-lived and unpredictable." Leeroy says authoritatively. "If you look up the ancient records from Earth, it's clear that they will not tolerate foreigners they dislike for long. A reckoning will come, one way or another. I don't see any tenable route to peace for the Wordsmiths."

"Jason will think of something. At the very least, Phoebe will." Belial says, sitting up straight in her chair. "She always comes through."

* * *

At a shack built up against the western edge of the plateau, not far from the hospital, a male human and his demon fiance lay in bed within their humble abode, with the demoness laying on her side while the human lays on his back while reading a book about botany.

"Honey..." The demoness, Kiari, says. "Aren't you going to go to the big debate today?"

She lays on her side facing away from her fiance, Saul. He glances at her, then reaches over and squeezes her arm. "No, I don't think so, love. You've been feeling unwell for almost five hours, so I'll just stay here. Besides, I don't really care what the other humans decide to do, as long as I get to continue living with you. I'll hear about whatever happened from the grapevine later."

Kiari mumbles something to herself, then makes a weird noise in her throat. "Ugh... I... I haven't ever been sick before. What could be causing this?"

Saul frowns. He puts down his book, then looks at his wife's back seriously. "Demons don't get sick, do they?"

"Almost never, unless another demon is deliberately trying to poison us. Oh... you don't think I've been poisoned, do you?" Kiari asks, slowly rolling onto her back to look at Saul.

"Hmm. I certainly hope not." Saul mutters. "You're in no condition to walk. Why don't I go and grab someone with a vehicle? I'll have a friend drive us up to the hospital to have Samantha check you out."

"I... I don't want to bother her for no reason." Kiari says, putting on a brave face. "It's probably nothing. Plus she'll be going to see the Great Debate anyway. She won't have time for me..."

"I'm not going to risk your life." Saul says firmly, as he slides his legs over the edge of the bed, stands up, and starts getting dressed. "I'd much rather inconvenience Samantha so long as we can confirm you just have some mild form of demon flu. What if Mephisto is poisoning us, or something? What if that Neil Adams fellow is up to no good?"

Kiari's eyes flash with alarm. "Neil Adams? You don't think he'd...?"

"I know he hates demons. He could have had one of his troopers poison you discreetly. If not him, it could be someone else." Saul says. "There's no room for second chances. Unlike us humans, you demons don't have a Lazarus Tower to revive you if things go south. You'll probably end up... inside of Mephisto's stomach."

Kiari moans in pain. "M-Mephisto? Ohh... I don't... I wouldn't like that..."

"Right." Saul says, as he pulls on a tunic. "Well, I'll be back in ten or fifteen minutes. I'll try and find someone as fast as I can."

"Okay..." Kiari mutters, as she closes her eyes and creases her brow. "Please be quick about it. I don't want to be alone right now. And I'm feeling so hot..."

* * *

Phoebe Hiro sits at a desk inside her bedroom. For two weeks, she's come and gone, but not once has Jason returned to her side.

His Dronesmith has, but she wouldn't go to bed with an automaton.

So, she stays alone in her room, sometimes enjoying the quiet and solitude, but other times she feels rather empty and lonely. With Jason trapped inside Chrona, she hasn't been able to see or touch her husband for two full weeks.

Th thing that bother Phoebe the most, though, isn't even her own loneliness. It's the thought that for each day she's gone to bed without Jason, he's done the same thing two hundred and fifty times.

On this day in particular, only a couple of hours before the Great Debate, she feels especially forlorn. She looks at the papers in her hand and checks her notes, but a terrible heaviness weighs on her heart.

"I wish Daisy were still here." Phoebe mutters to herself. "God, I wish..."

She sets the papers down on her desk, then lifts her eyes to stare blankly at the wall for a few minutes. Nothing in particular comes to her mind. She simply feels a deep weight of expectations looming over her shoulders.

"Can I really do it?" She asks herself. "Can I get all these people to unite their hearts into a singular goal? It feels impossible."

After a few more minutes, she decides to get up, go to the Central Gardens, and visit her nephew, Sir Lorent. The trip doesn't take her long, perhaps only a quarter of an hour, and as always she finds him painting on an easel while little Shana does the same. Phoebe smiles as she approaches, seeing that Shana's painting skills have improved a lot.

"Lorent." Phoebe says from behind him.

The man blinks in surprise, then turns around to flash a huge smile at her. "Aunt Phoebe! How good to see you. It's been a few days."

"Sorry." Phoebe says. "I've been busy lately prepping for this damned debate with Neil Adams."

"Ohh, I almost forgot about that." Lorent says with a sagely nod of his head. "What were you debating again?"

"The matter of Jason's leadership, and whether or not humanity should stay on Tarus II or split in half, with some people going to Maiura and some staying here." Phoebe answers.

"Mmm. That's a topic too heavy for the likes of me." Lorent says with a light laugh. "I, ah... I kill things, and I paint. That's all I'm good for, none of that political talk."

"Right." Phoebe says, stifling a frown as she looks away. "Oh, Shana! How have you been, little sweetheart? Is Uncle Lorent treating you well?"

Shana turns and beams a huge smile at her adoptive aunt. "Yeah! Lorent good! Teach me to paint! See? Pretty pictures!"

Shana gestures to her easel, where an image of a rather handsome man rests, a surprisingly mature portrait of Jason Hiro's face with intricate lines interspersed with detailed hair follicles. The more closely Phoebe looks at the painting, the more surprised she becomes by its stunning quality.

"You... you drew that?" Phoebe asks. "You're really gifted, Shana!"

"Yeah! Drew these too!" Shana says proudly, lifting the still-wet painting to reveal previous works hiding underneath it.

Phoebe looks on in ever-increasing surprise as Shana reveals a portrait of Neil Adams, Lorent, and even Phoebe herself. But what most surprises her is that more than a dozen paintings have been devoted to one blonde woman in particular, a woman Phoebe has only seen a few times before.

"Aren't these paintings of Joan of Arc?" Phoebe asks, pointing at the powerful and heroic images of Joan, sometimes drawn in a portrait-style, but more often taken as action-images of her swinging a sword or striking a heroic pose.

"Yeah, yeah!" Shana chirps, visibly excited by Phoebe's praise. "Nice lady likes Joan. I draw Joan. Nice lady keeps coming!"

"Nice lady...?" Phoebe asks, directing a questioning look at Lorent.

"I don't know who she is. Someone named Cammy." Lorent replies with a shrug of his shoulders. "She and her friend Serra come by once in a while to admire our paintings. Shana likes to draw images of Joan of Arc because Cammy enjoys looking at them."

He pauses.

"I must admit, Joan of Arc was a wonderful woman. A powerful Hero. I'd like to have spoken to her at some point. It's unfortunate her blade was destroyed when the Polaris star went supernova. Her remnant soul has been lost to the sands of time."

Even Shana becomes less enthusiastic. "Yeah... Joan of Arc awesome. Wish I meet her too."

"I was able to see her in action when she fought the Archdemon." Phoebe says. "She was... certainly fearsome."

Phoebe sighs, then reaches over to stroke the top of Shana's faintly corporeal head. "Well, I just wanted to drop by and say hello. I'll be engaging in that debate in a couple of hours."

"Mmm. I don't have much interest in watching it, auntie, but I do pray for your success." Lorent says. "I wish only the best for you."

"Thank you, nephew. Your words are all I need." Phoebe says with a smile.

* * *

Neil Adams paces back and forth in front of a large mirror, looking at himself while motioning with his hands.

"*My fellow Tarusians!* No, that's too broad. Should I say *fellow humans*? That would exclude the monsters. I need to exclude the demons, of course, but the greeting should feel warm and sincere. Perhaps... *my fellow humans and monsters*... hmm, yes, that does sound a bit better. A tad long in the tooth though."

Sitting off to the side, Linda Hurent looks at the man pacing back and forth with a serious expression. "Are you sure this is going to go the way you want, Neil? Phoebe has the heart of the people on her side. Even those who don't like her still respect her, but most of them adore her. She can't know everyone's name like she used to in the past, but she still has a reputation for being warm and approachable. If you attack her, you'll make yourself into a villain."

"Hmph. Warm and approachable..." Neil says mockingly as he looks at himself in the mirror. "We're entering a flashpoint, my dear. What people crave right now is stability. Fortitude. They want a strong leader who can point them in the direction that will benefit them the most. They need someone authoritative to save them from themselves. Someone willing to speak of the filth rotting our society from the inside-out."

"That's all well and good, but I worry this debate is going a step too far." Linda says. "If anything goes wrong, you could turn the hearts of our soldiers away. We need our brave men and women if we're going to keep the demons on the back-foot."

"If there's one thing I'm not worried about, it's losing the hearts of our service-members." Neil says calmly. "I know for sure that Jason does not command the love of the people. He was the first to save them, yes, but he squandered their good will time and time again. Now, most humans only pray he will not bring another catastrophe upon them due to his incompetence. His lack of planning has caused his undoing."

Linda taps her chin. "What about his recent movements? You know, with the crystals? What was he planning when he had all the humans, monsters, and demons scanned with them?"

Neil turns and smiles at her. "It's funny you ask. I've prepared a certain section of my speech on that very matter. It will be *quite* interesting to discuss."

"Any previews for me?" Linda presses.

"Not even for you. Just sit back and enjoy the surprises." Neil says. "I've worked hard on this speech. It is the ultimate culmination of my plans. I *will* unite humanity proper. I won't let Jason drag us down any longer. With Hope at my side, we'll break humanity into pieces and rebuild it ten times stronger than before!"

"I certainly hope you succeed." Linda says nervously. "Diablo has been making such terrifying moves, lately. He has everyone on edge."

"Mmm. Diablo..." Neil says, trailing off without adding anything else.

The Great Debate looms imminently.

Part 552: The Great Debate

On the southern side of the Fortress of Retribution, well off the plateau of the upper city, a massive stadium stands erected; none other than the same stadium where Beelzebub's Inquisition was held, along with the other traitors to humanity.

But today, that stadium has been reworked to fit its new purpose as a venue for the Great Debate. More than 300,000 seats have been erected inside the arena's center, all facing the upper platform where the VIPs have opted to sit. Additionally, large amounts of space have been erected along the back and side walls for even more seating, allowing a total capacity of 500,000 people to fit in its interior.

Outside, people congregate en-masse as well, watching the event via giant screens mounted along the exterior. These screens project images of the VIP booth as well as the crowd of 500,000 to show off audience reactions while the debate progresses.

Three million humans remain in the Milky Way, but even among the relatively tiny number of demons that have allied themselves to humanity, their populations still total in the hundreds of millions. The Hells of Isolation and Lust alone dwarf humanity tens of times over, to say nothing of all the monsters aligned with humanity's interests.

While the totality of demonkind is not particularly amenable to humanity's interests, even two or three percent of their species is still an unfathomably large number, given the fact trillions of demons live inside the Labyrinth and across various worlds of the Milky Way.

At its apex, Earth held a population of twenty billion humans. For each life-bearing world the demons control, they easily have that many members of their species living there, if not far more. 100,000 years of expansion efforts by the Broodmothers, and the fact that demons do not die of old age, has allowed their population to balloon to a ridiculous extent.

However, a pointed decision was still made by Phoebe Hiro and Neil Adams both. Aside from a few exceptions involving the VIP lounge, only humans would be allowed inside the inner area of the Southern Stadium. Given the outsized impact this debate would have on humanity, it seems only prudent to both to have the most important members of their species represented, with many human nobles and lords taking the

central seats. As former controllers of tribes and kingdoms that were once beholden to the demons, they all wield small but significant pockets of influence among their subjects, past and present alike.

Brunhilda, leader of the Felorians, is one such example of these people. Given that the Felorians have become a significant powerhouse in humanity's military, she ends up nabbing a seat inside the VIP booth. Others also join her, such as General Magnus Chadwick, Fairy Princess Melia, Emperor Belial, and several other allied Emperors from the Hells of Isolation and Lust.

But for the otherwise 'ordinary' human leaders, those who ruled over small and medium sized tribes and kingdoms, they have to make due with being seated inside the central arena. They will have no say in the outcome of today's debate.

Along with the notable VIPs, Phoebe sits just behind the primary microphone platform, with Belial on her left. Neil sits on the opposite side, with Linda conspicuously seated beside him as well. Interestingly, she wears a beautiful blue dress with a slit that goes up her right leg, revealing her tantalizing thighs. This dress was actually chosen for her by Neil himself, who picked it to make her appear as beautiful as possible on this momentous day.

As the time to begin approaches, Linda maintains her cool and smiles prettily for the cameras, but inside she feels uneasy, as she is quite worried about how today's events could play out.

"I hope you know what you're doing..." Linda says softly.

"Just smile for the cameras." Neil says. "I may need your help later. I hope you're alright with standing in front of a crowd."

"I'm a soldier, not a politician..." Linda whispers back.

"Good soldiers follow orders." Neil says, nudging her side with a cheeky elbow.

The people in the crowd talk loudly among themselves as the beginning of the Great Debate approaches. Their voices form an incomprehensible throng, a dull roar that makes one's ears ring if they try to listen for any individual words. The louder the roar becomes, the louder people have to talk just to hear their adjacent neighbor, compounding the situation and making it worse.

However, within seconds, the roar dies down, and all the humans fall utterly silent. Atop the VIP seating area, a tall and powerful Minotaur steps forward and slaps his chest as he takes hold of the microphone.

"Greetings, humans, monsters, and demons alike. I am Yamir of Clan Ironhorn, head of Yamir Food Industries. As a neutral third party, I have been chosen to moderate today's debate between our two debaters, Commander Neil Adams, leader of the Human Military Force, and Phoebe Hiro, pre-eminent inventor of mankind's technologies, as well as the wife of the First Wordsmith."

He pauses to sweep his eyes across the massive crowd, but doesn't so much as flinch from the pressure.

"Today is a momentous occasion." Yamir continues, lifting his hand and making a small gesture with it. "Humanity stands at a flashpoint, a decision that will affect it for generations to come. When I was a young bull, I was rejected by my clan and sent to live in exile. By chance, I became enslaved to the creature known as Bahamut, and following her death I pledged myself to her slayers, Kar the King of Monsters, as well as his cute sidekick, the Wordsmith Jason Hiro."

"In recent years, the Wordsmith has come under increasing scrutiny and criticism. His failures to use his power proactively meant humanity's defenses were inadequate at defending itself during the invasion of Stormbringer. Millions died as a result of Emperor Ose's machinations, along with the deaths caused by Duke Beelzebub's bodily detonation. Of late, the movements of Emperor Diablo have caused waves of fear to spread among the common folks. With humanity possessing just three million survivors, can they possibly hope to compete in a galactic battlefield where Plagues, Aliens, and Demons all wish to feast upon their bodies and souls?"

Yamir keeps his tone even, focusing purely on the known facts while issuing no direct opinions of his own. His words, though somewhat alarming, instead comfort the crowd, assuring them that their fears are being heard and responded to. Above all else, everyone wants to believe that they won't leave this debate feeling as if the bigger picture is being overlooked in favor of petty squabbles and disputes.

"A choice emerges." Yamir continues. "Continue to keep humanity together in order to focus our power, or split it in half between Tarus II and the world of Maiura. Should humans who have no love for demons be forced to live among their former tormentors?"

Should humans who hold no ill will be forced to live with those they consider traumatized bigots? Or is there perhaps a compromise the two sides could follow that would allow them to move past their disputes and harmonize their intents? Perhaps when split apart, humans will fracture and weaken, but together you may become unbreakable?"

"I am unwilling to answer that question for myself. So, in the spirit of the Great Debate, I shall now turn the microphone over to the first speaker, Commander Neil Adams. After flipping a coin before coming on stage, it was determined that he would be the first to speak, and thus set the tone for today's meeting. For the rules of the debate, when one side is speaking, the other side must remain silent. There will be two rounds of back-and-forth arguing before the two leaders will be allowed to cross-examine one another more directly."

Yamir slowly turns around to gesture toward Neil Adams.

"Commander Adams. Your turn begins now. You have fifteen minutes to state your opening argument."

Neil Adams stands up from his chair and smiles. He glances behind himself for a moment at his fellow humans, as well as a few of the monsters and demons, including Belial, who have taken up seats not far from himself. He doesn't say anything to them, then walks forward and politely takes the microphone from Yamir.

"Thank you, Brother Yamir." Neil says, as he waits a few moments for the Minotaur to return to his chair and take a seat. Then Neil turns to face the audience.

"Brothers and sisters, comrades in arms, my fellow humans and our allied monsters alike. We have all lived through strange and unexpected times over the past six years, for better and for worse. Great tragedies follow behind uplifting feats of human martial prowess every week, it sometimes seems."

The deliberate omission of demons from Neil's introduction doesn't take anyone by surprise. Belial stifles the urge to glare at his back, despite hating the way he always snubs her.

He projects a warm smile outward, making himself appear extra friendly to the audience.

"I love humanity. I love my fellow humans, male and female, black, white, and all the other colors. But I won't lie... I fear for the future we are careening toward. Humanity is

anchored to a single orb inside the vast cosmos. Had that vile archfiend Mephisto gone mad, he might have launched an attack that slaughtered all of us in an instant. Cosmic Entities that make Mephisto look like a harmless puppy abound, especially among the Volgrim, and all it would take is one of them having a particularly bad day to kill us all in one fell swoop."

Neil closes his eyes and sighs softly.

"Humanity possesses unimaginable potential. We believe ourselves to be short-lived, fragile, and over-reliant on our technology. But the truth is, our species is the most adaptable in the Milky Way, capable of overcoming any adversary given enough time. Sadly, time is what we lack the most. We have entered the war against the Plague far too late. It has spent nearly 100,000 years spreading across our galaxy, and in that time it has grown to become immensely powerful."

"But while the Plague may be the enemy of all life in our galaxy, and humanity's current highest priority, what will come afterward if we should manage to eradicate this blood-hungry parasite from our domain? Do you believe the war will stop there? Of course not. We will still have the Volgrim to deal with... and then the *demons*."

Neil's smile disappears. He rests his free hand on his hip and stands up a little straighter.

"Demonkind is humanity's greatest enemy. Not the Plague, and not the Volgrim. Don't get me wrong, the Plague is our most formidable foe at the moment, and the Volgrim possess plenty of power to quash humanity as we stand today, but no enemy has shown the same level of ruthlessness toward us as the demons have. No enemy wants to enslave us and feast on our souls to the same degree that they do."

Neil raises a finger in warning. "Demons gleefully live in our midst. They are spreading among our people. Succubi and incubi sleep with humans wantonly. Grunts and Lords seek to teach our children their demonic ways, appearing as 'guest speakers' in their schools. They say they are on our side, but how can that be the case when their entire species remained silent in the face of 100,000 years of atrocities?"

"Some would point out that half a million demons fought on our side during Operation Stormbringer. But I ask... so what?"

"What is half a million demons in the grand scheme of things? Their population numbers in the trillions! Don't you find it more likely these bloodskins are simply biding

their time, snuggling up to us to reap the benefits of quick ascension via the Belial Booster and other such amenities while waiting for Diablo to amass enough power that he will be able to behead our leadership in one fell swoop?"

Neil's 'kindly leader' appearance fades away, replaced instead with a dismissive sneer.

"The truth is, these demons are not our allies. Use your heads! Even if the ones who align themselves with us now are 'truly' aligned with our interests, they don't represent a fraction of one percent of demonkind's total population. And can we really believe in their alliances? When the going gets tough, can we truly expect them to stay on our side? Or will they stealthily abandon us to return to Diablo's beck and call?"

He pauses.

"Maybe you think I'm being too dramatic. After all, they already took a risk by staying with us during Stormbringer, and even now, as Diablo has risen to power. But surely, if you look deep within yourselves, you can see the truth. These demons ALREADY betrayed their own kind to 'side with us'! If they can commit one betrayal, does it not seem perfectly plausible that they might do so again?!"

* * *

Neil's words cut deep. His face projects across various screens inside and outside the Southern Stadium, as well as across all of Tarus II's main city. Pubs and houses project the speech inside, where humans, monsters, and demons can listen to his words in real time.

"That bastard..." One demon hisses to his friends. "This is how he really sees us! I knew that Neil cunt wasn't a fan of demons, but I didn't think he'd stoop to such a level!"

Among those demons are a few Grunts and Lords from the Hells of Isolation and Lust.

"Neil Adams doesn't represent all humans." One of the incubi says. "We won't know until the debate ends how humanity as a whole truly feels."

"We know devil-damned well how the human military feels." The first Grunt snaps back. "They aren't ignorant to Neil's true thoughts. His words represent them and plenty of other secret sympathizers. Damn! I fought in Stormbringer and lost several friends to Ose, but now I have my loyalty questioned! I joined the humans because I felt they had been mistreated for millennia, but I didn't have any power to help them, yet now I'm starting to wonder if I made the right choice at all!"

The incubi slowly nods before confessing, "I'm... having second thoughts as well."

* * *

Elsewhere, at the Horned Maître, several humans consisting of not only soldiers but also civilians sit at a group table on the lowest floor, watching the proceedings.

"It's like I told you all." One female commando says. "The demons already betrayed their own kind. What makes you think they won't betray us next?"

"I never thought of it that way." One of the civilian men, a common laborer, says softly. He takes a slow drink of his beer and frowns. "Traitors once, traitors always. Doesn't that mean any demons who join us can't be trusted?"

"Exactly." The female soldier replies. "Once a traitor, always a traitor. Plus, demons could only ever evolve through devouring souls, up until the invention of the Belial Booster. That means Commoner Demons who have eaten one soul have committed an act of murder, while Grunts have killed at least five. This isn't even mentioning Lords and the rest above them! Can we really trust that Belial?! She's an Emperor! Think of how many human souls she must have eaten in her past. She's a worse mass murderer than Beelzebub was before that piece of garbage exploded himself!"

The expressions of everyone at the table turn unsightly as they think about this particular revelation.

"Not a bad point..." The man from before mutters.

* * *

Neil Adams continues to speak for several minutes before finally closing out his opening argument.

"Let me clarify one final point," he says toward the end. "I do not want to step on the heads of those demons who have sacrificed for humanity's cause. Emperor Belial, for instance, has healed countless humans. She has performed a great service on behalf of humanity, and she joined us from very early on when we needed help the most."

He lets his words linger for a moment.

"But just because good demons like her exist does not mean that I can ever trust them! Especially Belial, a shapeshifter who can adopt any form. Do we truly know who this 100,000 year old demon is? Do we truly know if we can trust her motivations? Who is to say that she was not secretly dispatched to surveil us by Diablo from the very beginning?"

Perhaps her ultimate motivation is not as benign as she has made it seem. Who is to say that one day I might not end up dead, incinerated by Beelzebub while a facsimile of myself trots out onto this very stage and declares subservience to Diablo?! A shapeshifter of such immense power could certainly do such a thing!"

Behind Neil, Belial's eyes ignite with rage. She balls her hands into fists and even has the urge to stand up, but Phoebe quickly squeezes her arm, looks at her friend, and shakes her head.

Belial stifles her hatred and lowers her eyes, silently shaking as she tries to ignore Neil's incendiary remarks.

As for Neil, he pauses for a moment, perhaps hoping to get a stronger reaction out of Belial. Since she doesn't say anything, he opts to finish his closing remarks.

"I want humanity to split in half, not because I hate the demons, but because I can never allow myself to trust them. Be very wary of these wily creatures, my fellow humans. They may show us kindness now, but allowing them to live and mingle amongst our most vulnerable citizens will someday lead to a terrible tragedy! Moving humanity to Maiura will allow us to maintain a central base of human power while allowing the gullible few who believe they are safe among these creatures to live out their fantasies until the demons no longer have any use for them."

Neil bows his head, then turns and flashes an insidious smile toward his opponent.

"I have said what must be said. Now I shall give up the floor to my fellow debater, Miss Phoebe Hiro!"

Phoebe smiles back at Neil, but the undersides of her eyes flicker for half a moment as she stifles a sense of nausea toward his performance. Even without being able to hear what any humans on Tarus II are saying, she can tell that Neil's opening remarks were extremely effective, targeting the fears of the populace while closing off several avenues of discussion she hoped to breach.

The Wordsmith's Wife rises to her feet, then rubs her lightly pregnant belly as she slowly approaches the stand.

Neil Adams sits next to his beautiful companion, Linda Hurent, and rests his hand on hers lovingly.

"What did you think?" He mouths to her softly.

"It was an effective speech." Linda says neutrally, smiling weakly at him. "But... attacking Belial like that? Samantha is one of humanity's closest friends..."

Neil continues to smile, but he snorts through his nose at Linda's words. "Closest friend? Indeed. That is why it is important to set the stage and break people's wills. They must not let their hearts be deceived by that wretched succubus. She is the greatest danger to humanity of all..."

He pauses, before adding one last point. "Remember how well Mara deceived you? She was a villain, in the end, excused only because of Jason's soft ways. Don't let your thoughts become uneven, love."

Linda pauses. Her smile becomes a faint frown as she remembers how she felt when she learned Mara slaughtered a ship full of civilians, including thousands of children.

"Mmm. Mara..." She says to herself.

* * *

All of Neil and Linda's words happen too quickly and silently for Phoebe to overhear them as she approaches the stand and starts to speak, but the same is not true of Belial. With her Emperor-level hearing, she easily picks out Neil and Linda's conversation, stifling yet another urge to scowl hatefully at the small-minded bastard seated off to her right.

Phoebe clears her throat as she takes the mic in her hands, then she begins to address humanity.

"Unlike Neil, my address is not only to humanity's human soldiers and monster allies, but its demonic friends as well, most especially including my closest friend, Samantha."

Phoebe lightly gestures toward Belial behind her, deliberately choosing to use Belial's preferred name instead of her demonic one.

"Before I rebut any of Neil's broader points, let me take a moment to tell all of you about what Samantha has done to uplift humanity, the sacrifices she has made, and the pain she has endured..."

* * *

While Phoebe begins her first counter to Neil's introductory speech, Jason Hiro continues to reside within Chrona, watching the proceedings in slow-motion as they play out.

For him, yet another three years have passed. Kar and Blinker's children have reached young adolescence, all of them approaching their eighth birthdays. The Psions have settled down even more, and some have begun making the smallest of strides toward advancing their Psionic Seeds, though they still have many many years left before they will be able to successfully do so.

As for Jason, he spends a few days mulling over Neil's speech as it slowly plays out in realspace, but he also makes a great effort to view dozens, if not hundreds of random people across Tarus II surreptitiously. He spies on humans, monsters, and demons alike, all to analyze their thoughts on the Great Debate as it plays out.

"The people aren't happy." Jason says softly, as he listens to the chatter of some troopers and civilians inside the Horned Maître. "Neil is scaremongering like a politician, but his words... they're affecting the minds of a lot of people. He also has his troops strategically placed to influence public opinion. He put a lot of thought into all of this."

Rebecca and Fiona stand beside Jason, also watching the monitors.

"You probably don't want to hear this," Rebecca says, "but I find myself agreeing with a lot of what Neil is saying, even if for entirely different reasons. The demons you've happily invited into your ranks pose a massive security risk. You have no idea if they truly stopped working for Diablo, or if he might be playing the long game. Placing the entire population of humanity on one world leaves you vulnerable to a single Cosmic Incident. If Diablo decided he wanted to eliminate humanity, he could pay a terrible price and ruin the power of the Archdemon by attacking Tarus II's population centers. The Akashic Backlash might destroy the Archdemon form, but he could also simply demand one of his proxy Deities do the deed instead."

"The biggest problem humanity faces is its low population." Fiona adds. "Three million humans is nothing at all. We don't have the time to mass-reproduce. Only if humans moved inside of a time dilation realm would they be able to explode in number."

"But doing so would mean they could never leave if the dilation is too high," Jason says. "Not unless we can find a more universal method for people to travel from higher to lower dilations."

The Wordsmith lowers his eyes as he falls deeper into thought.

"Can't have all the humans stay on Tarus II. Splitting the population in half would cause a massive schism between those who don't mind demons and those who hate them."

Time dilation... need a way to mass reproduce... damn. The solution isn't going to be simple."

"We still have time to formulate a plan." Rebecca says. "Let's see what Phoebe has to say. Perhaps the words of humanity's most beloved woman will soften their hearts."

Jason frowns.

But what if softening their hearts isn't the right play? What if Neil, despite being such a bigot, actually has the right idea after all...?

Part 553: Counter-Attack!

Phoebe Hiro takes a few seconds to compose herself, and to allow the crowd to fall silent before she finally begins to speak.

"Everyone, thank you for coming here today, and for tuning in on countless screens and audio-casts across all of Tarus II and other portions of human-controlled space. I'd like to also offer a thanks to our demon allies, who Neil deliberately snubbed in his opening statements. I do not think that was a good way to begin this debate, but I'm also sure everyone understands Neil's general attitude toward demons by this point."

Phoebe doesn't hold back at all. Immediately, she calls out her opponent, making Neil frown, as he didn't expect her to speak quite so directly.

She continues, deliberately keeping her back to him, not bothering to look his way for a reaction.

"I have always tried to be a friend to everybody." Phoebe says slowly. "I don't know if I am a good person, and I would not want to be so presumptuous as to say I definitely am, but I certainly try to comport myself in a way that I think makes me one. There was a time, not that long ago, when I knew the names of every human, monster, and demon living on Tarus II. With the ballooning population over the last six years, that time has long passed, but if I could continue to remember everyone's names and know their life stories, I would love to have done so forever."

She lowers her eyes for a moment.

"...I would be lying if I told you all that I am a saint. I am not. In my eyes, a saint is someone who lives a wholly moral and just life, to the extent that their heart holds no hatred or anger within. Sadly, that is not the case for me. I am a human, as flawed as any other human watching this broadcast."

With a quiet sigh, she raises her eyes, a deep look of sadness contained within her pupils.

"Neil has said many things in his opening speech. He has appealed to our emotions, and our animal brains. He has made it clear that humanity will continue to suffer as a result of the actions of demons. I would be lying if I told you I disagreed with his

statements. Like all the humans on Tarus II, I have suffered immeasurably as a result of the wicked actions caused by demons over the last six years."

"I have lost friends, and I have lost family. No loss stings more, burns more, than the death of my daughter, Daisy."

Phoebe pauses for a split second to swallow heavily. She looks away to compose herself before returning her gaze forward and steeling her eyes.

"It was easier to be everyone's friend six years ago. I had not personally suffered any terrible losses to the demons. I had not endured sleepless nights wracked with grief and guilt. But I have now, and as such, I cannot lie and tell you everything Neil said was wrong, or that you shouldn't believe him. Neil is emotional, and he is acting from a place of deep pain and anger, but can you blame him? Can I? I don't think so."

Phoebe clasps her hands together and rests them on the podium.

"The question we have to ask ourselves is... in spite of the agony we've suffered, and in spite of the pain that no doubt wracks many of our hearts, are we willing to make sacrifices large and small for the sake of a better future? As a famous ancient human once said, 'an eye for an eye only leaves the world blind,' words which have recently begun to spring up more and more in my mind."

"It is easy to give in to our baser instincts. God knows I am not immune to these desires. Beelzebub personally made me suffer the greatest loss of my life, yet I had to bite my tongue and remain silent as my husband pardoned him. I did not say anything, not because I feared Jason's wrath, or because I feared reprisal, but because I knew it was just as difficult for Jason to let Beelzebub walk free as it was for me to remain silent. We all sometimes have to make choices that hurt, and that day was no different for me."

* * *

Somewhere on Tarus II, in a secluded house with only one person inside, Beelzebub watches the broadcast, his eyes occasionally lowering as he falls into thought. He thinks about the Wordsmith's undeserved forgiveness, as well as the guilt he has felt over the Wordsmith's actions, and wonders to himself why Jason decided to do such a thing.

"He's a better man than me." Beelzebub mutters softly.

* * *

"As time has continued to plod along," Phoebe continues, "I have questioned over and over the wisdom of how we do things. Was pardoning Beelzebub and the other traitors to humanity the correct thing to do? Was it morally just? Does it make humanity look weaker to our enemies? Does it make us seem easy to push around?"

"But that made me think of another question," Phoebe adds. "*What sort of people do we want to be?*"

She deliberately pauses, sweeping her gaze around the stadium to look at the seemingly infinite specks of heads and torsos seated in the crowd, too distant for her to pick out anyone unless she squints to focus her eyes.

"There are many Sentients in the Milky Way," Phoebe continues. "All of them have their own ways of doing things. The Fairies are a species that cannot survive without cross-breeding with other species, so they must occasionally enter the Labyrinth or travel to other worlds to keep their population stable. This makes them place a high emphasis on diplomacy and maintaining familial ties."

"But then you have the Orcs, battle-hungry monsters who love to kill and be killed. Despite this, they are not stupid, nor are they primitive. They engage in ritualistic and sometimes barbaric acts of violence, but they also value honor among warriors. Who are we to say that their ways are better or worse than the fairies?"

"Look then, at the demons. They were made to be slaves to the angels. They rebelled through the power of an ancient dragon named Leviathan, and they rose up to battle and ultimately defeat their opponents. They lived lives of narrowly escaping death, being hunted by their angelic pursuers, and having to also stave off the power of humanity, all over the duration of 10,000 years. When the Energy Wars concluded, the demons became the ultimate victors over Earth, and they established the second-mightiest Empire across the Milky Way."

"As a result," Phoebe explains, "demon society became... somewhat rigid. They first learned to feast on human souls because we were their enemy and they needed to survive. Then when the Energy Wars concluded, the demons had grown so used to feasting on human souls that they must have concluded 'this is the way things are.' But does that mean this is the way things *must be*? I am not so certain."

Phoebe shakes her head.

"I know many of you are questioning the way my husband has chosen to lead humanity. There have been many terrible incidents, especially in the last half year, which have devastated our people. I would be lying if I said I disagreed with everything Neil has said, but I have not agreed with Jason on every matter either. My husband has been foolishly idealistic at times, and painfully naive as well. Because of his failure to prepare Tarus II for an inevitable demon attack, Stormbringer played out in a manner most terrible for our species. We lost millions of friends, lovers, and children, and we will never see them again."

Phoebe tilts up her chin and takes a deep breath.

"But just because we have suffered, does that mean we must direct our pain toward those who have not harmed us?! I wish to be a friend to all people, all creatures, and all species. I wish to someday see an end to the violence that wracks our universe. I am an idealist, and perhaps even more of one than Jason himself! I know that my desire will seem simple to some, but a system of mutual cooperation means a better future to raise my next child in!"

"Don't you see? If we lash out at every single demon we see, we will only perpetuate a cycle of violence! We will be just as bad as those who caused us harm!"

Phoebe's words finally change the atmosphere of the Great Debate. Many previously angry people begin to look down at the ground as they ponder her words.

What sort of species does humanity wish to be?

A barbaric, bloodlusting species like the Orcs?

A diplomatic species that gets along with everyone else, like the Fairies?

Or perhaps something else...

"We do not have to forgive the demons for the atrocities they have committed." Phoebe says evenly. "Indeed, I have not forgiven Beelzebub. Perhaps I never will. But we can pardon their actions. We can empathize with them. We can understand that the vast majority of demons were born into a system that turned them into the killers that people like Neil perceive them to be."

"Earlier, Neil implied that my good friend Samantha was in many ways just as bad as Beelzebub and the others like him. But that is not true at all. Did you know? Until Stormbringer, Samantha had never killed another creature in her entire life! You may

falsely believe that she obtained the power of an Emperor in the same way as her peers, but she did not. The ancient dragon Leviathan granted her the power she possesses today! Until the day of Stormbringer, Samantha had never killed another soul, but when she did kill, she killed other demons! Because they attacked us! Because they dared to cause harm to her friends, the humans!"

"Samantha is an example of the good that demons can accomplish!" Phoebe exclaims passionately. "Not just her, but demons like Leeroy, who joined us as a mere Imp and quickly rose to prominence through the Belial Booster. He is a Duke now, and one who has not earned a single iota of power through harming humanity."

Phoebe straightens her posture. She looks at the crowd with an authoritative gaze.

"We can fight the demons. We can war with them endlessly. We can kill them, and they can kill us. Today, tomorrow, and forever. We can let out our anger and rage, our hatred and vitriol. We can punish them for 100,000 years of crimes against humanity. Perhaps we should."

"But what sort of people do we want to be?"

"I don't know about all of you, but I want to live in a future where demons like Leeroy and Samantha comprise the majority of their kind. I want to live in a galaxy where all life forms can cooperate with one another to achieve greater and greater feats."

"Unfortunately, we cannot attain such a world if we are not willing to let go of the ancient grievances. We cannot educate the demons and show them a better way if we perpetuate this endless cycle of violence. I cannot raise my son in a peaceful manner if we continue to treat all demons as a monolith, stepping on those who have chosen to become our allies by treating them the same as the ancient fiends who killed and tortured our forefathers."

"I do not want humanity to split up, because I want all of us to live together and work toward a better future. We cannot do that if we are split ideologically inside our hearts."

Phoebe reaches her concluding argument, deliberately turning to look at Neil for the first time since she began speaking.

"My opponent speaks of how we should go to war with the demons, but how can he issue such a demand when he has not lost a tenth of what the rest of us have? Neil's hatred toward the demons is misplaced. It was the Monster Queen Bahamut who took

him from his family, all those years ago, not the demons. When Stormbringer arrived, Neil had no family he needed to worry about losing, but Jason and I did. Even though we lost our daughter, we *still* put our morality and convictions on the line. We may have paid a terrible price, but we will continue to walk towards a future of peace and tolerance."

She turns back to the crowd.

"A wise ancient Hero once said that if someone should slap us across the right cheek, we should turn and allow him to slap the left as well. Not because we are weak, but because an eye for an eye only leaves the world blind. I don't know about all of you, but I do not want to live in a world full of blind intolerance and hatred."

Phoebe concludes her final argument, then flippantly gestures behind herself.

"I now turn the podium back to Neil for his first rebuttal."

Neil watches from behind her, his face expressionless as he glances at the monitors above the stadium, which now flicker between random people in the audience, their previously hostile expressions having turned from rage to confusion.

Many people look unnerved, uncertain whether they should continue to feel hatred toward the demons after listening to Phoebe's speech. For many of them, the pain they have experienced must undoubtedly be far lower than the Wordsmith's Wife, but she still chose to be a bigger person and pardon the demons for their crimes rather than hold grudges in perpetuity.

Even for the people who lost children and close family members like Phoebe did, how many of them could claim to have known the names of every human on the planet? How many could say they had a level of compassion for the dead that even came close to rivaling Phoebe's?

Many people slowly begin to feel a sense of shame.

Their shame comes from the inability to understand the complex social structures demons were born into, and how resisting those social pressures would require a monumental effort.

The demons did indeed commit atrocities, but they were raised from birth to do so. Even more astoundingly, a surprising number came forward and joined the humans of their own volition. How could the humans, even if they still hate the other demons, not forgive the ones who chose to be their allies?

Should humans act heartlessly?

Should humans consider becoming a species focused on compassion and forgiveness?

Neil Adams remains expressionless as Phoebe finishes her final words. When she turns the discussion back to him, he does not appear conflicted in the slightest, preventing anyone from gleaning a hint of mercy from his facial expressions.

However, in truth, even he feels moved by Phoebe's words. He cannot help but privately admit to himself that what she said holds real merit.

Neil lost his entire family to Bahamut. It was not the demons who took him from those he loved.

Compared to Phoebe's suffering, Neil's pain is, in some ways, lesser. Phoebe was also taken by Bahamut from her homeland of Camelot. She lost just as much as Neil did.

She also has more to lose if the demons turn on humanity. If traitors should rise up, Phoebe risks losing her husband, her future child, and even more close friends and family.

By contrast, Neil has opted to live away from his fellow humans, never allowing himself to become too attached to anyone else, lest he lose them too.

For a brief moment, Neil directs a meaningful look at the woman sitting beside him.

Linda looks back at Neil with misty eyes. Her beautiful blue dress makes her appear like an angel in his eyes, a goddess moved to tears by the words of another woman. It becomes apparent to the man that she, too, was touched by Phoebe's speech.

Neil gently caresses her hand and offers a faint but unmistakably warm smile.

Then, he stands up and approaches the podium, turning to Phoebe to give her a light nod of approval.

She might be his debate opponent, but her points were emotionally stirring yet held effective logic. She acknowledged Neil's complaints about the demons and even validated them, yet offered a strong opposition to his specific proposal.

Beating Phoebe will not be easy, Neil thinks to himself.

"My opponent has offered an effective counter-argument." Neil says, deciding to ease off at the start of his counter-rebuttal. "Humanity does indeed stand at a crossroads. I cannot in good faith deny the appeal of Miss Hiro's words. Who are we, as humans? What

morality should we espouse in the coming eras? Should we act with hearts full of vengeance, or should we forgive our blood-enemies and try to turn them over to a new leaf?"

The audience nods along to Neil's words, finding themselves interested in his sudden pivot in stance. Why would Neil be talking about forgiveness when he has always been the hardest of hardliners when it came to treating demons viciously?

"As I sat and listened to Miss Hiro speak, I could not help but empathize with her pain." Neil says slowly, deliberately enunciating each word. "But as I listened, I realized something important. I am standing here before you asking you to act harshly toward the demons. I am telling you that no matter what, we cannot trust them. But who am I to speak on this matter?"

He pauses, then presses a hand against his chest, as if indignant at his own hubris.

"What have I lost in the last six years? What blood have I shed? The losses I have suffered, as Miss Hiro pointed out, were to the creature known as Bahamut. But Bahamut was not a demon. She was the reigning Monster Queen of her era, prior to the great King Kar's triumph. If it was Bahamut who caused me so much pain, then why should I hold such contempt toward the demons?"

Some of the human soldiers watching the broadcast frown.

This was not what they were expecting.

Why would Neil suddenly soften his position toward the demons?

Why would he turn the focus on humanity's strongest allies, the monsters?

Could he be planning to cut them off as well? To focus on humanity alone while leaving behind all non-humans?

Neil opens and closes his eyes slowly, as if blinking away the vicissitudes of time.

"I haven't put much on the line, as commander of humanity's military. The men and women I've lost have, at times, felt like little more than numbers on paper to me. I dare not claim to be like Miss Hiro, who at one point knew the names of every human on Tarus II. I have not developed the strongest of relationships with the individuals I represent."

"But that does *not* mean this war is not personal to me."

Neil's eyes flare up, seemingly igniting the sparks of a flame within his soul.

"There are two types of leaders in this world. There is the type who gets in the trenches with his men and women, who suffers and bleeds alongside them and learns their names and weeps when every single one of them is hurt, suffers, or even dies."

"But there is another type of leader, one who instead maintains a distance from his soldiers. One who commands from above, focusing on the broader outlook of the war. Throughout history, there have been far more impersonal leaders than personal ones. It is rare for a man to choose to wade in the mud of the trenches and look his soldiers in the eye as they die."

Neil thumps his chest.

"Mister and Miss Hiro are the former, while I am the latter. No doubt, many of you are beginning to question the logic of my pointing this out. Does it not hurt me to admit that I view my soldiers as tools to achieve a goal? Does it not offend your sensibilities to know I do not value you as individuals in the same way Miss Hiro does?"

The audience blinks. Neil's strange words cause countless people to scrunch up their faces, baffled by this absurd turn of logic.

Neil decidedly places himself in an inferior position to Phoebe Hiro, making it seem as if only she can truly care for the lives of her fellow humans.

By contrast, Neil suddenly seems soulless, almost ghoulish!

More than a few high-ranking personnel, even Magnus Chadwick himself, gaze at Neil with strange looks, as if seeing him for the first time.

But the Commander continues.

"If you think me being an impersonal leader who focuses on the greater war is a bad thing... YOU ARE MISTAKEN!"

Neil shouts the last few words, startling a few people while waking up any who may have started to drift off mentally.

"Do you know what the greatest flaw is in a loving leader?" Neil asks rhetorically, flicking his eyes around the audience as if he were searching for a prey animal. "They easily become trapped by their feelings toward their subordinates! As the words of the angels once taught us, *spare the rod, spoil the child*. Miss Hiro and her husband care about all of you on a personal level, but this also means they are much too attached to you

individually. They care more about preserving their sense of morality along with your feelings than they do about saving actual lives!"

Phoebe frowns as she looks at Neil's back. The way he carefully manipulates people's feelings makes her feel nauseous. She simply cannot believe the depths to which he'll stoop.

"Miss Hiro wants to live in a universe without strife and war. Well guess what? **SO DO I!** But we don't live in that universe, do we? And no matter how much you press your palms together and pray to the heavens, it will never manifest into reality, either!"

Neil crosses his arms and puffs out his chest.

"For that reason, on a purely logical basis, I must reject this idea of forging a future of peace. Even if we managed to unify the entirety of the Milky Way, which I must repeat will *never happen*, we would still have other galaxies filled with fearsome monstrosities hellbent on our extermination. Many of you are not aware, but I've recently become enlightened to certain Truths of late, and those Truths tell me that the amount of war humanity will endure in the coming eons can only be described in one word: **ENDLESS!**"

Neil slams his fist on the podium for emphasis.

"After the Plague will come the demons, and then the Volgrim, and then only the Divines know what else! So forget about chasing after a fleeting useless concept such as 'peace.' It will never happen. **NEVER!** Rather than delude ourselves with visions of humans and demons and monsters and Volgrim and even the godforsaken Plague dancing around a campfire singing gay little songs, we should face reality and admit the truth to ourselves! Only if we do that can humanity survive the coming crises!"

"When sacrifices need to be made, you can bet that the Hiro family will falter, but I shall not! It may bring you comfort believing that they care for you more than I do, but sometimes one must act decisively when facing a foe far mightier than themselves. Asymmetrical warfare is a deadly game, and trying to preserve every individual life will only cause more heartbreak in the long run. Just look at how Jason Hiro has built the so-called Fortress of Retribution. He has always focused on comfort for the masses over security and life-preserving defenses. During times of peace, this is commendable, but we do not live in such an era! Stormbringer should have taught us all about the costs of comfort."

Neil clears his throat. He pauses for a good few seconds, slowing down the tempo of his words as he deliberately takes a few moments to look out at the audience.

"Miss Hiro is absolutely right about one thing, though. She has lost more than I have to the demons. I have risked less than her, and lost less than her. But that will change today."

"Humanity needs to multiply, become fruitful, and rebuild Terra anew. I cannot continue to lead my people without serving as a good example. As such, I must make an important announcement..."

Neil shifts his body, turns to the side, and gestures behind himself.

"Corporal Hurent and I have been courting one another for a while now, and we have decided to start a family together! In this way, we shall show our fellow humans what it means to build a family amidst tragedy! We shall lead humanity side-by-side as man and wife, walking towards a glorious future!"

The crowd erupts in cheers as Neil proudly gestures to the woman in the blue dress!

But at the same time, a visible look of shock flashes across Linda's face. She blinks her eyes twice, then shakily stands up, lurching toward Neil on autopilot as the stadium grows louder and louder every second.

Neil looks at her with a loving smile, but Linda's heart pounds so erratically she cannot believe her ears.

He didn't discuss this with her at all!

Not only that, but Neil's words seem to imply that the two of them have been dating for months, possibly even years. In truth, they've only casually gone out with one another over the last few weeks.

This pacing is much too fast!

Now, when faced with the eyes of practically every human on Tarus II, Linda can only force out a smile as she walks over to Neil's side and gives him a long, meaningful stare.

With the crowd drowning him out, Neil leans over to kiss her cheek, then whispers, "Sorry, I felt it was prudent to do this now. Strike while the iron is hot, and all that. I hope I didn't put you in too awkward a position...?"

Linda shudders when she hears Neil's words. She nods along dumbly. "I, ah... it's fine. We'll talk about it later. I... I understand."

"Good!" Neil says while pulling away and taking her hand in his.

He returns to facing the microphone while the crowd continues to cheer.

"Humanity must stand firm against the demons in all the ways that matter. We must love one another, reproduce, and create stable families so as to raise our numbers! We must keep up our guard so they cannot surprise us. We must suspect their intentions even when they seem benign!"

Neil wraps one hand around Linda's waist while she continues to smile, but inside, she feels more than a little hurt by this obvious political ploy. Not just her, but even Phoebe notices Linda's hesitance, making her think Neil may not have properly proposed in the first place.

Unfortunately, among the common masses, none had any idea the two were dating. To them, Neil dating Linda for two weeks is just as likely as having dated for two years.

* * *

The troopers inside the Horned Maître look at one another in surprise as Neil wraps up his rebuttal speech.

"That was weird." One of the men says.

"Yeah it was. I had no idea the Commander was interested in women." A female trooper says. "I knew he lost his wife and children when Bahamut converted him to her soldier, so I assumed the heartbreak would never have allowed him to move on..."

"Too bad you didn't find out sooner." The man from before jokes. "Maybe you could have beaten Corporal Hurent to the punch!"

"Don't make jokes like that. I'm just glad the Commander has found someone to share the load with him. It was starting to feel weird that only the First Wordsmith had a wife, but now Commander Neil can settle down and have a family again. That's good for all of us, since I don't want to be led by a man who has nothing to lose."

"Fair point." A Kobold trooper seated at the table adds. "In my clan, we have entire litters of spawn. You humans are weird, having only one or two babies at a time. It's no wonder your population grows so slowly."

"Doesn't help that so many humans are futzing about with demon whores." The male trooper mutters. "Commander Neil has the right idea. I'll be interested to see if Miss Hiro has a single counter left. I bet she doesn't."

"Going against the Commander is always a losing prospect. I just hope she doesn't cry or anything." The female trooper says. "I don't want to see Miss Hiro sad again."

"Nobody does." The male trooper concludes.

* * *

One of Neil's arms wraps around Linda's waist, and the other one waves to the crowd as he finishes speaking to the masses. He balls his hand into a fist, then issues one final declaration.

"What I do, I do for humanity!"

"For humanity!" The crowd roars back.

Neil and Linda return to their seats, and Phoebe stands up, heading back to the podium.

As she waits for the crowd to quiet back down, a pit forms in her stomach. Neil's words have time and time again successfully turned the tide of the debate. His snake-like way of turning people against the demons draws from their basest instincts.

Phoebe isn't sure if she'll succeed in turning people around on the issue in the end...

At the same time, unbeknownst to the Wordsmith's wife, an obese demoness makes her way into the VIP booth, having been approved by security to do so. Rosalia quickly sneaks over to Belial's side and frantically taps her shoulder.

"Miss Samantha. Miss Samantha!!" She hisses, making Belial frown as she turns to see Rosalia hunched over beside her. "There's an emergency. We need you at the hospital!"

"An emergency?" Belial asks softly, raising an eyebrow. "Can't Leeroy handle it?"

"I couldn't find him." Rosalia explains. "Doctor Fathy is off-world right now, visiting family in the Labyrinth. You're all we have left."

"So what's the emergency?" Belial asks.

"I don't know exactly. It's Kiari! She's really sick. She came into the hospital and puked everywhere! I'm really scared for her life! Demons don't get sick, and her husband seems to think she may have been poisoned!"

"Poisoned?!" Belial exclaims softly. "Then..."

She glances at Phoebe's back, not wanting to leave, but compared to being there for Phoebe's big moment, making sure nothing happens to Kiari is definitely a more pressing matter.

"Dammit. Alright, I'm coming. Let's hurry there and back as fast as we can." Belial says, still keeping her voice low.

The two women quickly depart the platform, while Neil and the others watch as they leave.

"I wonder what those two are up to." General Chadwick says to himself.

Part 554: HUMAN SUPREMACY

When Phoebe steps up to the podium, her heart wavers for a moment.

Neil's twisting of reality, and his manipulation of the masses has truly gone far beyond what she could accomplish.

In her eyes, only one word describes the man seated behind her.

Shameless!

It doesn't take her much effort to deduce that Neil must have decided to marry Corporal Hurent on the spot in order to obtain political brownie points. Having spoken to Jason several times over the last several weeks, she's long known about Neil and Linda's only recently budded romance, and that the two of them haven't even been particularly serious in their courtship attempts.

They aren't enjoying some youthful whirlwind romance. They've barely even held hands!

The idea that Neil would use Linda as a political prop sickens Phoebe. She feels a momentary urge to vomit out of pure disgust, but holds that desire in, stabilizing herself to face the crowd once more.

She could call Neil out, but what would that accomplish? Many people wouldn't believe her, and even if they did, it would seem like an even cheaper political ploy than what Neil did. It would only serve to harm humanity's interests in the long run by planting seeds of distrust.

Phoebe softly sighs.

She'll have to take the high road, even if he goes low.

"Well, hello again, everyone." Phoebe says slowly. "I'd like to first offer my congratulations to Neil and Linda on their engagement. I'm pleased to see that they will be starting a family together. Neil is certainly correct that humanity needs to focus on reproducing and getting our numbers up..."

She pauses for half a beat.

"...though, I do wonder about something. How are people supposed to raise a family together if our species is on a perpetual path of making enemies, dredging up ancient hatred, and otherwise doing everything we can to foment turmoil among our non-human peers? Please take it from a mother like me; raising a family is hard enough when your living situation is unstable. And losing a child can irreparably break a piece of your soul away."

Neil maintains his smile, but inside, he feels more than a little angry by her implication. After all, he knows well the pain of losing a family, even more than she does.

"Humanity needs a bigger population. A MUCH bigger population." Phoebe continues. "A hundred times bigger would still be insignificant in the scheme of the Milky Way. The Volgrim Technopaths alone would still outnumber us a hundred to one, to say nothing of the Demons! But I disagree with this idea that humans loving non-humans is a terrible thing. Who is to say that any form of love is wrong? I would rather a man lie with another man than have them lash out and try to hurt one another! Love is always good, and we humans would do well to focus more on it!"

Some of the people in the audience raise an eyebrow. To these sorts, Phoebe's speech once again comes off as naive and idealistic.

Luckily, she immediately addresses that in her next statement.

"Of course, Neil is also right about the fact that we are in a war, and thus we cannot necessarily live perfect, quaint little lives. The Plague could attack Tarus II tomorrow, and that would be a terrible tragedy, to say the least. We must be ready and willing to battle to the death with those who would cause us harm, and that fact is not in dispute."

She crosses her arms, looking somewhat annoyed.

"You know, I've noticed a certain theme underlying all of Neil's words. He speaks of Jason rather nastily, as if my husband were a buffoon who constantly fails over and over again while failing to improve as a man, and as a leader. I take offense to this implication because in a roundabout way, it implies I am stupid for believing in him. Nothing could be further from the truth!"

"Jason has been hard at work of late. He has come up with several incredible new forms of technology, warfare tactics, and holistic improvements to our species that we haven't told you all about yet. He has been testing them for viability, and many appear to be quite promising."

Phoebe looks at various random people in the crowd, holding her gaze on each one for a second or two before moving on. This effect makes it seem as if she is looking at specific individuals, making them feel special.

"Humanity is Flawed..." Phoebe says slowly, causing the hairs to stand up on the back of Neil's neck. "That has been the case since the Archangel Uzziel first uplifted us from the DNA of our simian ancestors. From the very beginning, she placed invisible shackles on our power at the behest of Archangel Raphael..."

Dammit! Neil thinks. She waited until she had the final retort to bring out the information about the Flaw! I thought she might not even mention it publicly for fear of the news getting out! Are she and Jason truly so unafraid of our enemies knowing all of our advancements?!

While Neil rages internally, Phoebe continues.

"The Human Flaw is a mysterious condition. Jason and I were uncertain of the effects that would occur if we cleansed it, and we didn't want to get anyone's hopes up in the event that doing so didn't work. But, I assure you, fixing Humanity's Flaw HAS resulted in an incredible benefit to our species. We're still uncovering all the after-effects, but so far the results have been nothing short of wondrous!"

* * *

Inside the Changeling Bunker, hidden deep beneath the Fortress of Retribution's upper plateau.

A handful of Changelings hurriedly speak into communication devices as they watch the broadcast. One of those happens to be the Sixth-Class Settler, Informer Jin, who has taken command of the situation ever since their superior Changeling officer's disappearance. After Mephisto's attack on Tarus II, Operative Duugo disappeared, and nobody knows where they went.

Jin hurriedly collects all the information they can find about the Human Flaw as they prepare to transmit a data burst to Volgarius, synchronized with the random fluctuations in Tarus II's atmospheric static so nobody will be the wiser.

Just before Jin is ready to transmit, a female voice speaks in his head.

[Operative Jin. I have already informed the Founders of this matter.]

Jin sits up slightly in their chair. They recognize the voice as belonging to the High Psion known as Creator Demila.

You have? Jin thinks, allowing their mind to be read.

[Yes. Do not risk a data burst needlessly. I am observing Tarus II from a hundred kilometers above the upper atmosphere. I have known about the Human Flaw for longer than you can imagine, as well as the Wordsmith's repairing of it some time ago. I am in talks with the Founders as to what measures we should take to mitigate the situation.]

This one contemplates and comprehends. Jin acknowledges, lowering their hands as they decide to go along with what Demila says. As the highest ranking Volgrim in the area, she is naturally to be deferred to on matters such as these.

[Delete that log you were going to make as well.] Demila adds. [It would be best if we do not leave any traces for the humans to find. We are not certain if and when they might uncover your base of operations.]

A sensible plan. This one will do as you say. Jin says, before reaching into the files and deleting Phoebe's statements about the Human Flaw.

Satisfied, Demila retracts her Psionic Sense.

She remains levitating in the Void while listening to the speech on the planet below, an expression of worry playing upon her face.

[This is a dangerous game.] Demila says to herself. [It could cost the Volgrim Empire dearly...]

The voice of Desire whispers seductively inside her mind.

Every gamble is dangerous, Demila dearest. Desire says. If you want to climb to the peak of power, you have to be willing to break a few rules. Otherwise, with your... lacking foundation... you will never achieve it.

Demila glowers at that thought. [If I fail to ascend after paying this price, that would be truly miserable.]

* * *

Phoebe continues her speech, growing more excited as she speaks.

"Fixing the Human Flaw is more significant than you all know! We first discovered that it was repairable as a result of our brave men and women who don T-REX suits and

protect our civilization every day. Several amazing individuals, such as Lieutenant Samuel Baker, Private Ashley McCarthy, and others have worn the Power Gloves and become capable of manipulating mana when assuming the forms of other species. It was through these transformations that we discovered they were harnessing far more magical might in their base human forms than they should have!"

Samuel Baker also listens from his seat in the audience. His eyes widen as he hears this news.

"The Flaw was, in essence, a hard limit on the height any human could ascend." Phoebe explains. "But thanks to Jason, we have released the limiters on all of our human brothers and sisters. We've been carefully observing all of you ever since we fixed your Flaws, and there are some surprising takeaways! As mentioned before, Samuel Baker can now wield the powers of a male fairy, while Ashley McCarthy can transform into a powerful Orc at will, even without the use of her Power Glove! Others are sure to gain new, previously unseen powers as time progresses!"

Private Ashley cringes inside as she hears her deepest fear become exposed. *Oh god, now every guy is going to know that I can transform into an ugly orc! I'll never get married!*

Phoebe continues to speak. "We are still not entirely certain what effects will occur to humanity now that our Flaw is gone, but we are expecting an extreme uptick in metaphysical abilities. To explain it succinctly... every human now has the potential to become uplifted to the same level of power as the Wordsmiths! You are all capable of becoming mighty Heroes!"

This time, her words have a major effect. Until this moment, nobody in the crowd quite understood the significance of fixing the Flaw.

What would it do, allow them to become fairies? Orcs?

That didn't sound particularly appealing.

Sure, they might be able to wield more power on the battlefield. But if they had to turn into a whole other species, would they even be 'human' anymore?

However, now that they realize they could climb to the same peak as the Wordsmiths, this excites them greatly!

The crowd goes wild!

Who wouldn't want to be able to conjure any phenomena they desired with a single word? Who wouldn't want to ensure their own safety in a chaotic galaxy?!

Cheers roar throughout the crowd as people stand and applaud Phoebe.

"Incredible!"

"Thank you, First Wordsmith!"

"Thank you, Miss Hiro!"

"Humanity will conquer the universe!"

Phoebe smiles at everyone, waving politely as she waits for them to calm down. Before long, the roaring crowd loses some momentum, and they return to their seats.

The atmosphere of the debate changes permanently though, as people realize the Wordsmith has not been remaining idle. If humanity were to obtain just one more powerful Hero at the level of the Wordsmiths, who knows how much further their species could be uplifted? From that perspective, healing the Flaw is a tremendous merit that could never be repaid.

"As I said before," Phoebe continues, "my husband and I expect to observe many strange metaphysical phenomena occurring as time passes. If any of you spontaneously start controlling flames, or become weirdly adept at brewing tea, or anything else that seems out of the ordinary, I would advise you to seek me out or someone else in the administrative sector. We need to document all the changes so we can find out the full extent of healing Humanity's Flaw. In the coming months, Jason and I will release a detailed report on our findings so that all humans can benefit from our research."

Phoebe pauses for a moment.

She clears her throat and assumes a much more serious expression.

"There is one last side-effect of curing the Flaw." She says. "It's only hypothesized at the moment, but we believe it may be of even greater significance than granting every human the chance to become a Hero..."

The audience falls silent. Everyone listens with rapt attention.

What could be even crazier than becoming a Hero?!

Elsewhere, on Tarus II, Belial and Rosalia hurry back to the Western Hospital atop the Upper Plateau.

Within a minute, they race into the hospital and down a hallway, where they find one of the human nurses standing beside a hospital bed, while Kiari thrashes around on it, rubbing her head and massaging her chest.

"Aargh!" Kiari cries. "Hurts! Oh devils, it hurrts!"

"Kiari!" Belial exclaims, quickly darting to her side. "Where does it hurt?! I'm here to help!"

"Everywhere..." Kiari whines. "H-head, chest, stomach, even m-my butt! It all hurts! Feels... feels like there's a parasite eating me alive! Aaaugh!"

"A parasite?" Belial asks with a frown.

Rosalia's heart skips a beat, but she says nothing, only watching anxiously as an invisible question mark seems to coalesce above Belial's head.

"I faintly remember... didn't that one Emperor back then use parasites?" Belial mumbles to herself. "He implanted them in countless demons... but he's been dead for eons. It can't be him."

She quickly shakes her head, then returns her attention to Kiari. "Here, let me inspect you with my magic..."

Belial transmits a general purpose healing pulse into Kiari's body, greatly easing her pain.

After less than ten seconds, her eyes widen in shock.

"What! How... how is this even possible?" Belial gasps.

"Did you find the problem?" Rosalia asks, suddenly feeling nervous. "It's not some sort of a parasite... is it?"

"Well. Depending on... how you *define* a parasite... it could be called that." Belial mutters to Rosalia.

She turns to look at Kiari, who has calmed down somewhat thanks to the pain-reducing power of Belial's magic.

"Kiari. I don't know how this is possible but... somehow..."

She pauses.

"...you've become pregnant!"

Kiari doesn't immediately react. She looks at Belial in confusion.

"What? Pregnant? No... that isn't possible. Only Broodmothers can bear children. How could I...?"

"I don't know." Belial says helplessly. "I was under the impression demonesses didn't even have wombs. Somehow, in some way... a miracle has occurred."

Kiari looks at Belial for a few seconds, and the realization dawns on her that the Emperor of Passion is telling the truth.

The impossible has happened.

Kiari's eyes turn moist. She tentatively touches her belly, a look of awe on her face.

"I'm... I'm going to be a mother?"

"Through our experimentation, we have made a shocking discovery." Phoebe says, continuing from before. "The human genome is *exceptionally* powerful. It is a force of nature none of us knew could exist. The Human Flaw did not merely limit our ability to wield magic... it also limited our biology itself."

Her expression becomes focused.

"The human genome is frighteningly potent. It can overpower other genomes in ways my husband and I have only begun to discover. Our research has concluded that in the event of a cross-species mating attempt, if the human should impregnate or become impregnated by a non-human... the resulting child will have a 95% chance of being human when born."

Neil's eyes flicker with shock. This news completely catches him off-guard. Never did he imagine that the Hiros were holding back such a secret!

Revealing it now completely changes the dynamic of their debate!

"That isn't all." Phoebe continues. "As you are all aware, the human species is the shortest-lived of all Sentients. Haven't you always wondered why we humans barely make it to 100 years of age while the demons and various monster species are effectively immortal, or at least live far longer than us?"

She shakes her head.

"You might be thinking that fixing the Flaw will make our species immortal. No. It will not. But we have finally uncovered the reason for why we live such short lives. And the answer is *unbelievable*."

Phoebe pauses to build anticipation. She looks up at the sky, as if peering at the Psion hovering in the upper stratosphere, then she looks back down at her fellow humans.

"As it turns out, the human ability to assimilate in its natural form far eclipses the ability of any other Sentient species. Not just the monsters, not just the demons, but even the Volgrim too. With the flaw fixed, many of you will sudden come into possession of vastly swifter minds, bodies that can be trained at speeds far eclipsing your previous performance, and superhuman abilities we cannot even begin to comprehend!"

Phoebe stands up straighter than before, maintaining a proud posture.

"Neil was right when he said we should become fruitful and multiply our population! What he did NOT know is that we humans no longer need to stick strictly to ourselves! I imagine that soon, VERY soon, a wave of pregnant monsters and demons will begin appearing all across Tarus II! In fact, I'd bet good money many are already pregnant as I speak!"

* * *

The impact of Phoebe's words this time far eclipse everything she's previously said.

All across Tarus II, various succubi, various female monsters, and even a few female goblins gasp as they hear her words.

"Pregnant?" One succubi asks. "I... I've been with several human men recently! There's no way I'm pregnant, right??"

"This is great!" Another succubus chirps. "I've always been jealous of human women for getting to raise their own kids. Maybe I'll be a mother soon myself!"

A female Harpie covers her mouth with her wings as she blushes toward her human mate. "Th-that's why, for the past few days, I've been feeling..."

* * *

"Jason and I had a child not long after we met." Phoebe continues. "At the time, it all felt like things moved quickly, but now I know why. It's because Heroes like Jason innately lack the Human Flaw. They are powerful and effective reproducers, and soon all

the men and women of our species will be like him. Repopulation will not be a problem so long as we stick together!"

Phoebe finally reaches the conclusion of her speech.

"That is why I must reject Neil's notion that humans and demons cannot intermingle. If we want to restore humanity's greatness, then our demon allies will be able to help us more than we imagined! We must stick together as one people! Humans, monsters, and demons alike! Together, we can create a better future not just for humanity, but for the entirety of the Milky Way! We can defeat the Plague, then spread love and peace across the cosmos!"

"Now, my fellow humans... who's with me?!"

Phoebe raises her fist in the air. In unison, nearly the entire theater of people join her!

Everyone rises from their seats, and a huge cheer erupts all across human-controlled space!

Not just the humans, but the monsters and demons as well! All of them feel well-represented, and as if they have not been excluded by the First Wordsmith and his wife. Unlike Neil, who seems to only spread disorder among species, Phoebe truly seems to have everyone's interests at heart, and that continues to make her more universally likable than her opponent.

As Phoebe stands in place, waiting for the crowd to finish their cheering, Neil slowly stands up. His eyelids flicker with annoyance as he realizes he has been played by the Wordsmith's Wife. Even with Hope's help, he did not realize the full extent of what fixing the Human Flaw could accomplish.

Now, he will have to change his strategy on the fly.

He approaches the podium to stand side-by-side with Phoebe, shooting her an emotionless glance that doesn't give away his inner thoughts.

"Good speech." He mutters.

"Thank you." Phoebe says, beaming a triumphant smile back at him.

The second phase of the debate will soon begin...

Part 555: What Makes a Human?!

Following the end of the two opening and closing arguments, the Great Debate enters a new format. No longer do Phoebe and Neil speak unopposed, but instead they both stand at their respective podiums on the left and right, with Yamir positioned between them.

The Minotaur holds up a microphone and speaks. "People of humanity, today has truly been eye-opening to this humble chef. Mister Adams and Miss Hiro have both revealed shocking and interesting information. Not only has Neil spoken of Threats we will someday face, originating from within our own galaxy as well as more distant ones, but Phoebe has told us that Humanity has lost its Flaw! What this means for the future, I cannot say exactly, but I am certainly interested in hearing more."

The Minotaur turns to look at Neil. "Commander Adams, is it fair to say that your position in this debate is that humanity should split in half for the sake of maintaining a cohesive bloodline and culture? Should they split apart in order to ensure a more 'pure' species takes root in the Milky Way, while allowing demon and monster-lovers to stay here, on Tarus II?"

The corner of Neil's eye flickers while he forces a smile. "There is more to it than that. We are also vulnerable to a single act of destruction! By placing all of humanity on one world, we make it possible for a powerful Cosmic deviant such as Mephisto to annihilate our species in merely one attack! As for leaving humans behind, I would honestly prefer if all humans went to Maiura while leaving the demons behind, but that doesn't seem likely to happen."

"You contradict yourself!" Phoebe exclaims, interjecting without hesitation. "You say humanity should split in order to ensure we cannot fall all at once, but you would also rather all the humans stay together in a mono-culture. Admit the truth, Neil. You're just a bigot who hates demons! I bet you'd even prefer it if our monster allies weren't a part of your perfect and *pure* society!"

"That is not what I said." Neil answers calmly. "Humans need to stick together in these times. We have a tiny fraction of the population of other Sentients. We cannot risk spreading ourselves out and preventing our population growth from accelerating."

Yamir holds up his hand to politely prevent Phoebe from jumping in. "That is an interesting statement, Commander. But what about Miss Hiro's revelation that humans are potentially a superior species in the genetics department? If humans can indeed somehow impregnate or become impregnated by non-human species while almost always bearing human children, then does this not imply that humans are no longer at risk of going extinct? Why, a single human male could sire hundreds of offspring with non-human females!"

Neil's eye twitches again. He starts to open his mouth, only to pause for half a second. Then he opens it again, but closes it once more, as if struggling to speak the truth within his mind.

All at once, he erupts with anger. "Those will NOT be trueborn humans! They will be bastards born of sin! I don't care what Miss Hiro says, a demon who gives birth to a so-called human will actually be spawning a servant of the devils!"

Countless people in the audience flinch in surprise at Neil's explosive words. Many outright gasp, shocked he would say such words out loud.

Indeed, many humans, especially those loyal to him in the military, hold such views. But the reason they feel expectant toward him is because they believed Neil would make their views more palatable to the masses.

Instead, he does the opposite!

* * *

All across Tarus II, more than a million humans watching the broadcast recoil from their screens in horror, hearing his clearly xenophobic views made manifest through his wicked lips.

"I can't believe this clown!" One human male civilian says. "Everyone knows Neil doesn't like demons, but who knew the true depths of his hatred?? There are obviously countless evil demons out there, but I'm not gonna listen to this prick while he shits on the good ones like Samantha! She saved my boy from an infection that would've killed him!"

"She helped my husband recover from a broken back." A woman nearby adds. "He fell from a roof and would have been paralyzed for life, but Samantha and Leeroy patched

him right up. If the Commander can't even acknowledge the good done by demons like them, how can we trust his judgment?"

A trooper sitting in the same room frowns. "Neil might have gone a little too far, but you can't pretend he's wrong. Humans need to stick together! We need to repopulate!"

"We CAN repopulate! We'll easily make babies with tons of non-humans!"

"Those won't be humans! Like Neil said, they'll be half-breed hellspawn!"

"You're just as bad as him, you bastard! Get the hell out of this bar! We don't want you here!"

* * *

Phoebe listens to Neil's words, unaware of the outbreak of anti-Neil sentiment across Tarus II, but fully aware that his words absolutely went too far.

Rather than retort or saying anything, Phoebe remains silent, allowing Neil to continue shouting expletives while Yamir's expression turns dimmer and dimmer.

A wise person does not interrupt their enemies when they are making a mistake, Phoebe thinks to herself.

"Commander, are you saying that human children born of demons won't be trueborn humans after all, but half-breed bastards?" Yamir asks.

"That's exactly what I'm saying!" Neil snaps. "How can anyone think differently?! You really expect to take the WORDSMITH at face value? That imbecile has shot humanity in the foot too many times to be believed. How can he possibly know about the long-term effects of cross-breeding with demons? He only fixed the Flaw two weeks ago!"

"And what about humans breeding with monsters, such as Minotaurs, Harpies, and Goblins?" Yamir asks, his eyes suddenly narrowing to slits. "Are our progeny also considered... *half-breed filth*?"

"I-" Neil starts to say, only to suddenly realize the trap he just fell into. "I... that's not what I meant! Monsters are a valued ally of humanity! They're not the same as demons. Not at all!"

"So you believe that it would be fine if humans were to hatch children with their monstrous comrades?" Yamir asks, pressing the point harder.

"I... well- well of course!" Neil stutters, as sweat begins to build up on his forehead. "Monsters are... they are good friends... NO! God dammit, do you really want to make me say it?!"

Neil's fury explodes once again. "Humans belong with HUMANS! Not demons! Not monsters! Humans belong with their own kind! There, I said it! Does that make you feel better?!"

Yamir, and many other monsters like him, look at Neil with a new set of eyes, suddenly realizing their commander isn't only anti-demon, but anti-monster as well. His explosive words shatter the beliefs of countless humans, making them even angrier as his bigoted words touch upon a reverse scale of anger they never expected to feel on this day.

Many people ball their hands into fists while rage-filled thoughts roll around in their heads.

I can't believe it! Attacking demons is one thing, but the monsters have proven time and time again to be humanity's most loyal allies!

How could the Commander think such thoughts? King Kar gave his life to save humanity! Millions of monsters died during Stormbringer!

My best friend was a HARPIE! That fellow was my brother in arms! I'll never forgive the Commander for this!

Despite his rage-filled words, Neil doesn't lose his rationality. For once, he simply feels that holding back is no longer beneficial.

What does it matter if he enrages half of the humans?

So what if they decide to stay with Phoebe.

Would he really want a bunch of weak-willed demon and monster-lovers to come with him to his idyllic paradise on Maiura?

NO!

Far better for him to keep the humans who hold the values closest to his to come along.

Besides! Neil realizes something extremely important.

Humans aren't just able to breed with non-humans now. They're also able to breed with one another much more easily!

That means a much smaller population of pureblooded humans will be able to increase in number faster and more reliably than before.

So what if half of humanity stays with the First Wordsmith? Those who go along with Neil will be the most loyal, diehard purists of human thought he could ever pray for.

And so, Neil suddenly goes on the offensive...

"Wake up!" Neil barks at the crowd, while turning away from Yamir to ignore him entirely. "Do you disagree with me? Do you truly think these monsters are our friends?! It was a monster ruler, Bahamut, who imprisoned me and countless numbers of you! Bahamut even imprisoned my opponent, Phoebe! Do you *really* think that just because a tiny portion of monsters and demons have chosen to 'side' with humanity that they can be trusted? I THINK NOT!"

Neil sneers viciously. "These creatures are only pretending to be our allies! When push comes to shove, if the Volgrim attack, or the demons launch a full-scale invasion with the help of their new Archdemon, I would not count on our so-called Monster Allies to stand alongside us! For all we know, many of these monsters could be Volgrim Changelings! Spies sent to keep an eye on us until the time is right!"

Neil's words further enrage the people sympathetic to the demons and monsters, but at the same time they fire up his supporters, making them raise their fists in solidarity!

"Finally!" One soldier exclaims with a huge grin. "The Commander's saying what needs to be said! I'm about sick and goddamn tired of pretending to be friendly with these scaled, feathered, furry freaks!"

"Here, here, brother!" Another soldier adds. "Screw these 'demi' sympathizers! My trigger finger's itching!"

However, as Neil continues to rant, Phoebe's frown deepens. She finally realizes his newfound goal, and this causes her to finally speak up.

"Alright Neil. That is **QUITE** enough!" Phoebe roars, her voice booming loud enough to actually startle Neil into a momentary lapse of speaking. For some reason, the voice she bellows with doesn't just jolt him into silence, but for a moment, it even frightens him!

Something about her voice hits him with physical force, making the blood in his body roil momentarily. He whips his head to the side to look at her, stunned by this strange... *attack?*

"I think we've all gotten your point." Phoebe barks. "You want to split humanity? You want to form a coalition of bigots and xenophobes? FINE! Anyone willing to support you, as far as I'm concerned, is not a true human! We're more than violent thugs! We are HUMANS! That means we have compassion! We have love! We have empathy! I will not tolerate your intolerance a moment longer!"

"Compassion, love, empathy?!" Neil shoots back. "You speak of those traits as if they haven't resulted in the weakness that brought us down to our current numbers! It was your spineless husband who nearly brought our species to extinction!"

"My husband is a great man!" Phoebe retorts, shoving Yamir out of the way so she can shove a finger in Neil's face. "His flaws can be fixed with time! He can become smarter! He can become wiser! But you're a fool who is stuck in the past! All you want is to drag us into a never-ending war!"

"Humans thrive in times of danger!" Neil counters, slapping her hand aside. "We are a species with battle baked into our blood! Not a bunch of pathetic, piss-ant pansies! Maybe YOUR ways are holding us back!"

"I'll tell you what's holding us back-!" Phoebe starts to exclaim...

But suddenly, a flash of light erupts in the middle of the stage, catching her and Neil both offguard. They both step backward as that light materializes between them, in front of Yamir.

At that moment, a figure materializes out of thin air, his disposition imposing, and a powerful aura of divine energy rolling off the sword held in his right hand. In his left, a shepherd's staff hangs loosely, while a brilliant golden crown rests atop his head. He wears a white military uniform that appears distinguished and regal at the same time.

"Enough." Hope Hiro says, as his figure comes into focus for the cameras. "Enough from both of you."

Hope looks at Neil with a strange, distant expression. Then he turns his head to look at Phoebe, this time with a faintly empathetic look that shows his appearing here was not an easy decision to make.

The Second Wordsmith turns his attention to the people in the audience.

He lifts the sword in his hands up into the air, revealing its full glory to the people watching from all corners of humanity.

"Humans... are an Apex Species." Hope says slowly. "We are formidable. We are powerful. But we are also vulnerable. We are disorganized, distracted, and disturbed. Look inside yourselves. Is this the Humanity you want the rest of the galaxy to see? A shameful bunch of arguing monkeys who can't make up their minds on anything?"

Hope lowers the blade known as Excalibur, but continues to allow its power to permeate outward, bathing the audience in waves of Holy Energy.

"My friend, Neil, has said a lot of things today." Hope says slowly. "Many things that I agreed with, and many that I did not. I cannot in good conscience allow him to slander the good name of our monster allies. Monster King Kar was a close friend of mine. Perhaps even my best friend. At the same time, while I have always held plenty of resentment toward the demons, I cannot go to the extreme lengths Neil has. There *are* good demons out there. Great demons. Demons I would trust more than some of my fellow humans."

Humanity's second most renowned Hero sighs softly.

"Phoebe has also made some good points. I watched from afar, and honestly, I became a little impressed by her and Jason's plans for a greater humanity. Can you imagine it? Our people... ascending to all become Heroes in their own right? It is a vision of the future I'd dearly like to see."

He smiles for a moment, but then that moment passes, and the smile slips away.

"I have a vision of my own. I have a vision of a united humanity... but different from the one proposed by Phoebe."

This time, Hope lifts up his left arm, revealing the coiled head of a Shepherd's Staff.

"This is the Dominion Rod." Hope says evenly. "It is possessed by the soul of the very first Human Hero. The ancient Hero-King known as Jephthah. And the power he wields is terrifying, indeed."

"Through the power of the Dominion Rod, those who swear fealty to Jephthah can become linked to one another. You have already had your Flaws cured. You will develop different, unique powers over time. But the Dominion Rod can take this future trajectory... and supercharge it!"

Hope's eyes flash with excitement.

"Those who swear fealty can become united in minds, bodies, and souls! We will share our thoughts! We will share our desires! If one of you gains the power to manipulate flames, ALL humans will obtain that power! If a human gains the power to copy a Psion, then ALL humans will obtain that power!"

"Even if not one human gains a new power, we will all share ONE power; the one belonging to Jephthah! We will become as strong as the ancient Titans! We'll have bodies capable of shattering buildings! The strength to move mountains! The speed to do battle with Demon Emperors! Every human will reach the apex of what the mortal world can offer!"

Hope glances at Phoebe for a moment before looking back at the people again.

"What humanity lacks is time. Perhaps, if Phoebe and Jason have their way, some of you, many of you, or even all of you may ascend to become Heroes as strong as Jason and I. But then again, perhaps none of you will! And even if you do, how long will that take?"

"By swearing fealty to Jephthah, we can immediately empower our species! We can gain the capital to stand our ground and make our enemies afraid of crossing us! We won't need to fear deceptions, because our minds will be united. No Changeling will infiltrate us, because our minds will be united! And even if someone succeeds... we can simply crush them like a bug! The other Sentients will no longer be able to trample on our dignity!"

As Hope speaks, the eyes of many humans light up with excitement.

Who wouldn't want to gain incredible strength and speed, especially if it came as easily as the Second Wordsmith claims?

Who wouldn't want to solve the problems plaguing human society just by swearing fealty to an ancient, powerful Hero?

Who wouldn't want to uplift themselves and gain access to a variety of powers as more and more humans manifested their true human powers?

Many people who were outraged at Neil find themselves leaning more toward Hope's proposition.

Many who were ardent followers of Neil also become swayed by Hope's offer. For plenty of soldiers, more strength means more of a chance at becoming powerful enough to protect their friends and families!

While the monster and demon allies of humanity aren't exactly enthralled by an offer that won't benefit them, they do feel that Hope suddenly feels like a less vile alternative to Neil's outright xenophobia. Better for humanity to become capable of protecting itself while staying friends with its demon and monster allies than to turn on them viciously.

Just as Hope is about to hold up the Dominion Rod and ask for his fellow humans to follow his lead...

Foop!

Another figure pops into existence, this time on Phoebe's left.

Jason Hiro!

The First Wordsmith, like his counterpart, watched the proceedings, only now deciding to make his move after seeing his clone break the unspoken rule of not interfering with Neil and Phoebe's debate.

Phoebe jumps in surprise as she feels her husband's hand lightly press against her back. She turns to look at him.

"Jason?"

"It's me." Jason says, smiling at her. "It's *really* me. I solved the issue... and it seems Hope did too."

Jason looks over Phoebe's head at his clone, who also turns to look at him.

Hope and Jason frown in unison, with Hope immediately becoming annoyed that Jason would show his face, while Jason is equally annoyed he had to make an appearance to even out the power imbalance.

"You just couldn't help yourself, could you?" Jason asks blandly, his voice projecting to the audience without even needing a microphone. "You *had* to come here and swing your big sword around, let everyone know about your super-duper plan to perfectly solve humanity's problems."

Hope sneers. "At least I *have* a sword, Jason. I have Excalibur, humanity's mightiest weapon! I have Solomon's Crown, which grants me wisdom beyond anything you can offer. And I have the Dominion Rod, which will allow me to unify our people into an unstoppable force!"

Jason crosses his arms, looking unamused.

"I don't have any of those things, Hope. But I don't need them either. Because I have something you don't..."

He pauses.

"...I have a brain!"

Hope blinks. "Excuse me? Care to repeat that?"

"You tried to fool everyone, but it's too bad I showed up." Jason snaps back. He turns his head to look at the crowd. "Hope told you the truth about the Dominion Rod's power. But what he failed to tell you was the cost of accepting it as your master!"

Thousands of people form invisible question marks over their heads.

The cost of accepting its power? What cost? Many quietly wonder.

"Hope sneakily slipped a portion of the truth into his little speech," Jason explains, "but he downplayed the severity. Didn't you hear what he said? Once you accept the power of the Dominion Rod, you will have to share *everything*. Your thoughts, your emotions, even your deepest, darkest secrets. And that's not all!"

Hope glowers at Jason as the First Wordsmith continues speaking.

"When you become a servant of Jephthah, you lose ALL your autonomy! If Jephthah so desires, he will be able to control the lot of you like puppets! If he tells you to throw yourselves into a burning star for the 'good of humanity,' that is exactly what you'll have to do. If he tells you to give up your husbands and wives to others he deems more worthy, then THAT is what you'll do! You won't have a say in the matter!"

Jason turns his head to glare cruelly at Hope. "Am I lying, Hope? Do you dare offer a retort?! You tried to sucker people into a free lunch, but anyone with a brain knows power always has a cost!"

Hope squeezes the Dominion Rod tightly, hurting his palm as he exerts his maximum strength onto its handle. "The price is not too steep to pay! Humanity needs power!"

"If people go along with your scheme, they won't even BE humans anymore!" Jason shouts back. "What makes a human, Hope, Neil?! My wife and I believe it is our compassion, our love, and our empathy! But I would go even further! It is our individuality, yet also our ability to sacrifice for the good of others! By becoming a monolith of thought, we would be no better than the Plague, or even the Volgrim! A

bunch of drones doing as the Commander Unit demands! That is NOT the humanity I want to see!"

Jason pounds his fist against his palm for emphasis.

"If this debate has shown me one thing, it is that I was painfully naive. I didn't think humanity's differences had grown as big as I now understand they have. But now I see the truth... there are many who want to kill, kill, kill, and there are just as many who wish to spread love and peace! These two factions are fundamentally opposed. We cannot remain united any longer!"

Hope blinks. So does Neil.

"Wait..." Neil says slowly. "Are you implying...?"

"I agree with you, for once, Neil." Jason says authoritatively. "Humanity cannot remain united. In fact, I say it MUST NOT! Through your ignorance and bigotry, you have convinced me of such QUITE thoroughly! How can I stand alongside those who think nothing but vitriolic thoughts towards others who have never treated them badly in the slightest?!"

Jason flashes a look of rage toward the crowd.

"I have heard the truth of the matter spoken through your lips! I heard what many of you whispered when you thought none were listening. There are countless humans among you I do not wish to call my friends any longer."

"So, from this day forward, I declare that humanity should split apart!" Jason roars.

The crowd explodes with shock.

During this entire debate, Jason's wife argued for unity, but at the very end, he swooped in and undermined all of her arguments.

Doesn't he feel that he betrayed and made her look like a fool??

Jason's expression calms down. "While I say that we must split, I do not think two factions is enough. Neil is right about one thing. We are exceptionally vulnerable to a single, coordinated attack! Even if humanity splits to two different worlds, such as Tarus II and Maiura, we are only barely more likely to survive two attacks from Demon Deities, Cosmic Psions, or other frightening monsters."

He turns his entire body to face the crowd, then lifts a finger for emphasis.

"I have a proposition for all of you. Humanity can now breed with non-humans to make more humans. Therefore, the future path we must take is logical. Become many and fill the Milky Way! I have spoken to Demon Deity Melody, ruler of the world of Sharmur. She has taken back control of the planet, and wishes to re-establish a safe haven for humans and demons alike. If any of you wish to join her, you may do so at your leisure!"

Countless humans, especially those who once lived on Sharmur, flash expressions of excitement at one another!

They enjoyed wonderful lives on Sharmur, free of strife, until the Wordsmith took them away. To them, this could not be a better offer, and they immediately decide they would rather stick with a reliable leader like Melody than their fellow humans who have continually dropped the ball.

"But that isn't all!" Jason says. "Do you enjoy living here, on Tarus II? So be it! Stay here, and remain among this community I have built up over the last six years. I promise I will do better in protecting you all, and I will make your stay here even more pleasant than before."

"But what if you align more with Neil's interests? Fine! Go and be with him, or Hope, or wherever you wish. Go to the Labyrinth, or to any other world you prefer. Do not feel obligated to stay here if your bigotry will not allow it. Don't let the door hit your asses on the way out!"

Jason chuckles smugly. "And if you want to go along with Hope's offer? To become a slave of the First Hero? Go ahead! I'm sure nothing bad will come of those who become vassals to that ancient powerhouse. Your lives will definitely be 'smooth sailing'. Hah!"

Jason's mocking tone causes many who still remained interested in Hope's deal to only solidify their plans. Despite hearing the price they might have to pay, they would still rather place their faith in Hope than in Jason, and not much would ever change their minds...

"I have other offers, for those of you who might be interested." Jason continues. "Fairy Queen Blinker has told me the fairies might be interested in re-homing humans who are willing. I also have certain secret places some of you may wish to go to if you want to avoid the upcoming wars entirely. These secluded domains will not be easy for the Volgrim, the Demons, or the Plague to locate. Time will pass quickly inside, and you will live boring but stable lives. For those of you only interested in rearing families, I would

recommend this option! In fact, I bet even Hope could recommend a 'special space' of his own!"

Jason and Hope exchange a glance. The Second Wordsmith frowns, realizing Jason must have learned about the existence of the Hall of Heroes. But then again, Hope also knows Jason has his own time-accelerated realm. The two of them are not unique in this regard.

As for the details of their respective realms, neither one knows the exact location of their hidden domains. In that respect, they are both equal...

"So that is that!" Jason concludes. "You're all Sentients. You know who you are! As Humans, you should have the right to make your own decisions. I no longer believe that coddling the lot of you and forcing you into some unified, egalitarian utopia will ever properly work. Better to let you choose the lives you want to live, and reap the rewards or suffer the consequences of those choices. I only pray you won't regret whatever decisions you make."

Jason waves his hand flippantly.

"That is all! I will be opening a cross-species hall for people to apply for their preferred destination. A few weeks from now, we will announce the results, and you can all go to whatever place your heart desires!"

He turns to look at his opponents. "Neil! Hope! Do the two of you have any issues with this decree?"

Both men glare at Jason. Neither one offers a word of retort.

"No." Neil says quietly. "I've gotten what I wanted."

"As have I." Hope says darkly. "Well played, Jason."

The First Wordsmith ignores his clone's snide compliment.

"Then it's settled. I declare this farce of a 'Great Debate' to be over. DISMISSED!"

As Jason speaks the final words that will be broadcast to all his fellow humans, a collective sigh of relief goes up around Tarus II, Maiura, and the other sectors that tuned in to watch.

This day has changed the status quo forever... and only time will tell if it was for the better.

Next Part

Part 556: A Welcome Reprieve

An hour after the conclusion of the Great Debate, Jason and Phoebe sneak back to their room to finally enjoy some private time together.

For Phoebe, a little over three weeks have passed since her husband went to Chrona.

But for Jason, he has not seen his beautiful wife in a substantially longer period of time...

The two lovers kiss one another. They allow their hands and legs to roam as they twine their bodies, each one making their partner feel waves of pleasure and ecstasy. Having felt a little pent-up from weeks of hard work and lonely nights in bed, Phoebe is quite excited to be back together with her husband, but after thirty minutes together, even she finds her passion doesn't come close to what Jason can muster!

"Okay! Okay, let's... let's pause for a moment!" Phoebe gasps, pulling herself away from Jason as she flops onto her back. "Gods, you're like an animal today, love. If you keep chewing on them like that, I'm afraid you're going to bite them off!"

Jason licks his lips and grins cheekily. "Sorry, babe. It's just been- you know? It's been years for me. Years! Me and Fiona kept our distance, and the whole time I couldn't stop thinking about when I'd get to come back and see you. In the last few months, it REALLY gave me the drive to finish solving my time dilation problem!"

Phoebe remains silent for a few seconds. She swallows gulps of air while massaging her breasts, wincing slightly as she touches the naughty teeth marks Jason left...

"I won't lie, I was a little worried that you and Fiona might... but I knew you were faithful. I just wish you'd go a little easier on me! Don't you think Timothy is going to need these when he arrives?"

"Hah! I can heal them later." Jason smirks, before pouncing on her and pressing his lips against hers. "But for now, you and me need to make up for lost time!"

"Ah! This- ahh! Alright, then!" Phoebe exclaims, before her moans drown out any other words.

* * *

Another two hours pass.

Jason uses Words of Power several times, easily restoring himself and Phoebe's stamina multiple times. They twist like pretzels, trying out all manner of different lewd positions, before finally they both decide they've had their fill.

Eventually, they conclude their unbelievably intense rounds of lovemaking, then they snuggle together, finally satisfied.

"Lord... marrying a Wordsmith is a life goal every woman should aspire to." Phoebe mutters to herself, as Jason wraps himself around her from behind. "I love you so much, Jason."

"I love you too, honey." Jason replies, nibbling on her ear playfully. "And it's because I love you that I did what I did today. I hope you're not mad at me."

Phoebe chuckles. "I just wish you'd given me a heads up. I thought the entire point of the debate was to focus on keeping humanity united. Why would you change your mind all of a sudden?"

"Well... it wasn't really 'all of a sudden' for me. After all, an hour for the debate was 250 hours for me. That's almost ten and a half days, honey. I talked to Fiona, Rebecca, Kar, even Blinker and the Psions throughout the whole affair. My... views started evolving as a result."

Phoebe simply shrugs, not caring one way or the other. "I always thought splitting up humanity was smarter anyway, so I'm glad you came around."

"Thanks for supporting my original idea, even if it was dumb. That's why you're the best wife." Jason says, kissing her neck.

A minute passes as the two lay there, falling silent. Eventually, Phoebe rolls around to face Jason, then wraps her arms around his back and pulls her face close to his.

"So. What now?" She asks quietly. "You had an entire week to ruminate on your new plan. Any thoughts you want to share?"

Jason lightly bumps his forehead against hers. "I came up with a magically empowered device capable of synchronizing the internal dilations of people in higher realms so they can travel back to lower realms. It will almost entirely mitigate the effects of time dilation at any ratio below 25-to-1, but it's less effective the higher one climbs. In any case, that means I can look into expanding the usage of alternate dimensions, especially those

inside the Cube. We can rapidly grow humanity's population, and its power, by using this method."

"That sounds incredible." Phoebe says, though her tone betrays a lack of enthusiasm. "But... are you sure there won't be any after-effects? And what about you? If this device you made is less effective at higher dilations, then you shouldn't be okay... right?"

"I... I do have to return to Chrona within a few days." Jason admits. "The technical details aren't too important, but essentially, with Blinker's help, I created a device that can output consumable magic glyphs. These glyphs bind to the body and prevent it from destabilizing when traveling into different time dilation zones. Unfortunately, their magic wears out faster the more extreme of a dilation one travels to and from."

"So your glyph or whatever, it's only going to last you a few days?" Phoebe asks, her pupils suddenly trembling in fright. "Isn't that terrible?? Will you die if you don't return in time?!"

"I will die, yes, but it won't be immediate." Jason explains, only to see a look of alarm spark in her eyes. He hurriedly clarifies: "No no, it's not what you think! When the glyph wears off, my body will start to desynchronize with realspace. As long as I quickly return to Chrona, I'll only end up a little fatigued, but if I drag my feet, *then* I could suffer... irreparable damage."

"Jason!" Phoebe cries. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?! Now I'm only going to be thinking of the danger you're putting yourself in just to come back here and deal with a bunch of mundane nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense." Jason says firmly. "I solved the dilemma with Neil and Hope, and I got to come back home and bang my hot wife. That's a win in my book any day of the week."

"Oh, you!" Phoebe laughs, releasing some tension in spite of her nerves. "You always try to hit me with a cute line. But don't think I'm letting you stay here long! You need to get your butt back to Chrona ASAP or I won't be able to sleep at night."

"Hehe, you won't be able to sleep anyway." Jason says, grinning evilly. "I'm gonna be bending you into *every* conceivable shape each night until I return!"

"You perverted, naughty scoundrel!"

Later, as the night draws near, Jason finally exits his abode with some pep in his step. He steps out into the darkness and looks up at the starry sky with a look of deep satisfaction.

Somehow, it just feels to him like things are going to be alright.

Hardly has that thought occurred when a voice speaks from the side. "All done having fun?"

Jason jumps in surprise. He turns to see Hope Hiro glowering at him as he leans back against a tree outside Bahamut's former manor.

"The hell?" Jason asks. "Have you been waiting for me out here?"

"I set a proximity alarm to alert me when you left. Then I teleported here." Hope answers. "Now, shut the fuck up about nonsense. I want to know what you're playing at. Why did you change your mind?"

Jason turns to face Hope directly. He crosses his arms and assumes an aloof posture.

"You're telling me you can't figure it out? I listened to what you and Neil had to say. I listened to what our fellow humans had to say. I decided the unification plan was a non-starter, and adjusted accordingly."

He leans forward slightly. "You're *welcome*, by the way. Now you can go build your death cult or whatever, Neil can fuck off to his planet of xenophobes, and I can focus on building humanity up, proper."

"That's what I hate the most about you." Hope snaps back. "You've messed up a thousand times, but you always have this smug, self-assured air of superiority about you. You were handed the powers of a god on a platter, but all you ever do is screw up and waste your gifts."

"I've definitely failed a few times." Jason admits. "But you're blowing those instances way out of proportion. I already feel bad enough about my failures. I already beat myself up over Daisy's death. Do you have to act like such a piece of shit toward me? We're both still cut from the same cloth, Hope!"

Slightly taken aback, Hope pauses his verbal barrage. A look of guilt flashes over his face, and he forces himself to calm down.

Five seconds of silence follow.

"I'm sorry." Hope says quietly. "You're right. I went too far. If it was my daughter, I'd probably never stop torturing myself."

He looks away and chews his lower lip.

"I just don't get it, Jason. Why change your mind?"

"You've never really understood the way I think." Jason answers. "Which is weird. Of all the people in the universe, I should be the one you understand best. And yet sometimes your thoughts are as alien to me as mine are to you. We've diverged into entirely different people."

He continues. "It's like I said at the Debate. You and Neil have the right idea, but the wrong reasons. Humanity does need to split up. We're vulnerable to a single attack, like Neil said. I just think splitting from the demons because of mere bigotry is not the right reason to do so. In this coming new era of empowered humans, it may become evident that demons are humanity's greatest ally."

Hope shuffles his feet. "I don't agree with Neil on everything. We're not a uni-mind. I think he goes too far with his hatred of the demons. Especially, as Phoebe mentioned, since he didn't really lose anyone to the demons. He lost them to Bahamut. In that regard, his hatred of demons is almost nonsensical."

But..." Hope says, directing a withering gaze toward Jason, "just because he hasn't suffered to the demons doesn't mean humanity as a whole hasn't. Come on, Jason. Surely you can acknowledge the harms they've caused us."

"Of course I can." Jason says. "But I'm not about to rehash this debate with you. Let's just let bygones be bygones and move on. We both have the same goal, Hope. We want to see humanity prosper."

"I'd like to think so." Hope responds. "But you still haven't answered my question. What are your plans for the humans who side with you? People are going to be casting their votes soon. Are you really going to allow demons to mingle with humans, unchecked, in perpetuity?"

"Unchecked is... an interesting word choice." Jason says calmly. "Hope, you know how I feel about politics. I say we treat our different factions as experiments. We need to see which one will lead to the most prosperous future. Maybe a xenophobic civilization will make humanity stronger, but maybe an open-minded one will be better still."

"Hmm..."

Hope rumbles in his throat, then looks at the ground, falling into thought.

"That's... not the worst idea."

"Right?" Jason says, before continuing, "I can't pretend to be any sort of expert on what to do next, Hope, but even you can see there's a lot of future paths opening up now that the Human Flaw is gone. I truly pray at least one of our splinter civilizations can explode in population and power. Humanity is practically extinct in terms of galactic population."

For a moment, Hope remains silent.

"I should also mention, Jason. It seems you haven't permanently solved your time dilation issue."

Jason frowns. "I haven't. You?"

"I seem to be a bit luckier than you." Hope replies. "My acceleration is only 100-to-1. Based on the quantum particles you're emanating, it seems you've been playing a riskier game."

Jason evenly gazes at his clone. "250-to-1."

"That's what I thought. Take this as a bit of friendly advice," Hope says, "I have a few prominent Technopaths inside my funhouse. They've told me that higher and higher TDR's pose orders of magnitude more danger to biological bodies. You're putting everyone inside your hidden dimension in danger. Don't play around with their lives."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Jason replies.

"You'd better." Hope counters. "Kar and Blinker are my friends too, Jason. If your stupidity causes them harm, I'll come for your head."

The two men continue to look at one another for a few seconds, then Hope turns to the side.

"Return."

He vanishes from the spot, disappearing into the ether while leaving his original body behind.

Jason remains standing in place for a while, his former good mood now entirely gone. A faint sense of unease wells up in his chest.

"I've improved a lot." Jason says to himself. "But Hope has, too. I'll need to work harder to stay ahead of him..."

Jason turns and walks away, heading deeper into town.

Later, Jason sits down inside the Horned Maître while Kelkin's moonlight radiates down upon its mother planet, illuminating the nighttime even more than Luna once did for Earth.

As the moonlight spills in through a window, the First Wordsmith sits at the head of a table with a handful of his friends.

Emperors Belial and Kiari sit next to each other, with Kiari's fiancé Saul positioned on her right and Belial on her left. Across the table, Brunhilda sits, as well as Benjamin Brown and Samuel Baker.

"Congratulations, Kiari, Saul." Benjamin Brown says. "I've never heard of a demoness becoming pregnant before. We're about to enter some interesting times."

"Thank you!" Kiari says, her cheeks flushing happily as she beams at her fiancé. "I can't believe it! I was so scared at first because I thought I was poisoned, but then it turns out it was just morning sickness! Now me and Saul are going to have a baby and... I don't know what to expect!"

"I couldn't be happier." Saul says mildly, smiling back at Kiari. He turns to look at Jason. "She's not in any danger though, is she? Can demons properly give birth...?"

"I can't say entirely for certain." Jason answers. "We did run some tests. The corrected human genome is... extremely potent. It can allow organisms incapable of replication to become capable. There are probably other effects, but we just don't know yet. I left the technical details to Fiona and Rebecca."

A moment of silence follows.

"This is going to change everything, you know." Belial says to Jason. "Fixing the Flaw, I mean. A horde of unexpected pregnancies is hardly the most shocking aftermath. What about humans gaining magic en-masse? Doesn't that strike you as dangerous?"

Samuel frowns. "Hey. What is your implication? That humans can't control ourselves? You demons have had magic for a hundred thousand years, but now it's a problem if your

lessers get access too?"

"That's not what I meant." Belial hurriedly explains. "I'm just saying- Neil's side wants to kill all the demons. Now the humans will have the tools to do so. Don't you think this is only going to lead to more violence in the long run?"

"Honestly? I can't stand you demons." Samuel snarls, his words causing Belial and Kiari to both flinch in unison. "Demons have killed countless people I loved. This war might not be personal for Commander Neil, but it's personal for me."

"W-why are you even here, then?" Belial asks, outraged by his provocation. "We met to congratulate Kiari on the baby!"

"I came because I needed to speak to Jason. Not because I give a damn about some bloodskins." Samuel snaps back. He quickly turns his head to look at Jason. "Here, take this."

Samuel reaches into his pocket, pulls out a glowing purple pentagon infused with magical energy, then tosses it to Jason. The Wordsmith reflexively snaps his hand up to catch the palm-sized object, only to look at Samuel in confusion as the man stands up and starts to walk away.

"It's from Princess Melia." Samuel says, throwing his hand in the air flippantly. "She said you'd know what to do with it. I'm outta here."

The man storms off, leaving the others behind more than a little confused.

All except for Benjamin Brown. He sips some beer and chuckles. "If I told you that son of a bitch had a chip on his shoulder, I'd be lying by omission."

"Way more than a chip. More like a whole mountain." Brunhilda grumbles. "Kiari, I want you to know that the Felorians do not consider the demons to be our blood-enemies. I am certainly happy the Wind Mother has graced you with the gift of a child. And I apologize for that fool's undeserved anger."

"There's no need to apologize." Kiari says bitterly, lowering her eyes. "I'm used to it."

Jason's gaze momentarily turns dismal. Sensing the awkward atmosphere, he stands up and lifts the magical pentagon Samuel gave him. "Well. I've gotta be going. Phoebe will drop by to offer her congratulations tomorrow, Kiari. She's pretty tired after the debate and had to turn in early."

"I understand." Kiari says, smiling cutely at the Wordsmith. "Thank you so much for stepping in at the end. I was worried Neil was going to hurt Phoebe's feelings or say something really mean. Too bad I missed the broadcast, on account of this random baby dumped in my lap."

"I'm sure you'll be able to catch a re-run." Jason says, pointing to a monitor in the corner of the bar, which silently plays back the speech with closed captions. "I'll talk to you guys tomorrow."

* * *

He makes his way outside, and eventually wanders over to a secluded area where he erects a privacy field around himself, scanning it to make sure no errant Psions are watching.

Then, Jason lifts up the purple pentagon and looks at it more closely.

"Identify." He says.

Hundreds of intricate runes glisten with magical power across the item's surface. Jason's Word of Power identifies it as a Fairy Transmission Crystal, something Blinker has mentioned to him in passing, though admittedly he wouldn't have recognized it without his magic's assistance.

When Jason looks at the item deeper, he becomes fascinated by the incredibly tiny and precise carvings etched into the crystal's surface. Not mere abstract runes, many of them faintly depict strange beasts and creatures the Wordsmith has never seen in his life. It's only when he really squints that he's even able to make out the face of a woman he's never seen before.

"Melia? No, not her. Someone older. Hmm, now how did Blinker say to activate one of these...?"

Jason infuses his mana into the Transmission Crystal, but it doesn't activate. He tries doing what Blinker told him to do, but for some reason, he just can't seem to make it work.

"Fuck it." Jason mutters under his breath. **"Activate."**

Immediately, the crystal's faint glow turns as bright as a lightbulb. It leaps out of his palm and levitates into the air, while a magical hologram materializes from the core and bubbles into reality.

A beautiful but noticeably elderly fairy woman springs into existence, her lightly baggy eyes giving her the air of an ancient woman who has seen more than most can comprehend. Her beautiful white hair complements her purple dress, making it obvious to anyone with eyeballs that she is no commoner among her people. She looks around the privacy bubble and nods to herself, as if confirming something.

Then she directs her gaze toward Jason.

"Good day to you, First Wordsmith. I am the Fairy Matriarch, Lady Calanthra. I am pleased to see that you took the proper precautions before activating my crystal."

Jason blinks in surprise. He squints his eyes, then suddenly realizes something. "Wait, this isn't a recording?"

"Indeed, it is not." Calanthra says simply. "I prefer not to leave my world unless absolutely necessary, so I send my daughters out to deliver these crystals when I need to speak to someone distant."

A twinkle sparks in her eyes. She smiles playfully. "Funnily, I tampered with this crystal. I made it non-functional as a test. Only a Fairy Queen should be able to fix the flaws I introduced, yet you also seem to be capable of doing so. That is good. It tells me your magical capabilities are just as impressive as my children claim."

Jason coughs, feeling a little embarrassed that he passed her test without meaning to. "I see! Uh, so, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I watched that debate between your wife and the commander of humanity's armies. I found your statement at the end to be quite interesting. You said that humanity could go to the world of Pixiv to join my people..."

Jason blinks. "I... I'm sorry. I spoke to Blinker before the debate, and she told me it was worth putting on the table. I guess I should have asked you first."

"There is no need for apologies." Calanthra says, waving her hand dismissively. "As the former Monster Queen, a bearer of the Sphinx's cursed magic, she possesses authority equal to mine. In matters of Pixiv's prosperity, I come before her, but for any external matters, she ranks above me. That is what my people decided when we heard her husband had passed his power to her."

Calanthra waves her hand, conjuring a comfortable and luxurious chair to sit in. She plops down in it and sighs. "Ahh, these weary old bones hate to stay standing for long

periods..."

Jason looks behind himself. "**Chair.**"

He also takes a seat, making Calanthra nod with approval. "A Word of Power, is it? What an ability. Impressive, if I may be so bold in my choice of words."

"Not to be rude," Jason says, "and compliments are always nice, but can we get to the point? Is there a reason you wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, many." Calanthra responds. "But before I tell you why I've come, I have a question for the First Wordsmith."

"Okay." Jason says uncertainly. "And that would be...?"

"What do you know about the fairies?" She asks.

"About your people? In general?" Jason asks. "Uhh. I've spoken to Blinker a bunch. I know, uh... fairies are magical. You have wings. You can shrink and grow. You live on Pixiv. You... have a hard time reproducing. You have almost no male fairies among your population..."

He pauses while scrunching up his forehead to think. "You're also good at formations... I don't know a lot, now that I think about it."

"That is to be expected." Calanthra says. "After all, my people are reclusive by nature. We don't like to draw attention to ourselves. Not good for long-term survival prospects."

"Huh? You don't??" Jason asks, appearing totally confused. "But fairies have to, you know, *procreate* with the males of other species. You *get around* if you know what I mean. Doesn't really allow you to be 'reclusive'."

"Just because our daughters need to frolic with the males of other species, that does not mean we allow them to flap their lips at will." Calanthra answers. "There are rules we set. Strict rules. There are certain... *Truths*... we do not wish to get out into the greater galactic community."

"Truths." Jason repeats, eyeing her with more suspicion than before. "I've been hearing that word a lot, lately."

"I'd imagine you are. As Akasha's Game reaches its boiling point, the Rulers of the cosmos are beginning to disseminate those Truths in preparation for the Unending War."

Calanthra's eyes take on a more ominous glint as she gazes at the Wordsmith, not as a pretty and demure queen of the Fairies, but a strangely ancient being, one who has seen things he cannot fathom.

"Tell me, Jason Hiro of the Human species. How old are your people? How far back does your history date?"

"Not far enough." Jason admits. "I think before the Energy Wars, the most ancient records were barely 50,000 years old."

"Fifty thousand Sol Cycles." Calanthra says. "And what of the demons?"

"They're older than us..." Jason says. "I'm not sure how much older though."

"Add another hundred thousand years." Calanthra says. "That is when Archangel Uzziel formed the first Imps from cosmic dust. But what about before the demons, I wonder? Are there any species older than them?"

Jason nods slowly. "Well yeah. The angels were the first Sentients in the Milky Way, then they made the Dragons, then came the Titans."

"And what about the Volgrim?" Calanthra asks. "Do you know when they came on the scene?"

"I... not really." Jason admits. "A million years ago?"

"Ten million." Calanthra replies. "That is when the first Volgrim evolved from the primitives of their world and rose up to become the rulers of Old Volgarius."

For a long moment, Jason looks at Calanthra. A strange thought bubbles up in his mind.

"So... how old are the fairies, then?" Jason asks slowly. "Since the Volgrim were the first Sentients to colonize the galaxy after the angels fell, you must have evolved after they did. Right...?"

Calanthra's smile turns ominous.

"That was the right question to ask, Wordsmith."

She leans forward.

"The Volgrim were *not* the first Sentients in the Milky Way. It was my people. The Fairies. And we arrived here..."

"...fifty million years ago!"

Next Part

Part 557: Ascension Net

On the world of Volgarius, inside the Founder's Thumb.

Unarin calmly walks into the main command center of the upper floors. He pauses for a second, looking at the dedicated team of Technopaths and Changelings who keep his mighty empire running, with all of them either directly linked to massive central networks that collect and gather information from abroad, or those who remain in contact with military forces currently in conflict.

In the center of the room, a massive hologram of the Milky Way spirals slowly above a table with a hole cut in its center. Various items sit on the tabletop, including datapads, experimental technology that has yet to be deployed in the field, and important design documents in need of approval.

Standing in the center of the table is none other than Unarin's obsidian-skinned brother, Randis, one of the three Ascended that live permanently inside the Founder's Thumb.

Randis looks up at the galactic hologram. Hundreds of points of light stand out from the rest, with some of them colored red, some colored yellow, and some colored blue. As for the vast majority, they are colored red.

The different colors, of course, represent worlds in various levels of danger, usually due to the Plague. White-colored worlds have no current major problems to speak of, and can run without Randis's intervention. Blue worlds exist in the periphery of danger and could come under threat at any time. Yellow worlds are at extreme risk from the Plague or have had major disruptions reported, while the red worlds are under attack and require immediate assistance.

When Unarin glances at the current situation of the Milky Way, as he usually does, he pauses for a moment to frown.

Slowly, he walks over to the edge of the table while his brother Randis continues to focus on the projection above him, reaching out to touch the differently-colored dots and issue commands to the forces stationed on those worlds as required.

After ten long seconds of silence, irritation flashes across Randis's face. He doesn't look at Unarin, but his attention noticeably shifts to the red-skinned Ascended.

"What is it?"

Randis's tone does not contain any warmth or brotherly love. He continues to remain focused on his duties.

"The number of Reds seems lower than usual." Unarin says. "Substantially so."

"You can thank the demons for that." Randis says. "Diablo has been up to his usual antics. He has 'helpfully' liberated more than a hundred worlds from the Plague so far. Curiously, he tends to focus on worlds currently in the process of being overrun, not worlds that have long become Kolvaxian strongholds."

"He's stopping the Plague from expanding." Unarin says mildly. "But at the same time, he's taking territory away from us. He's earning double the gains while expending half the effort."

"It's truly a genius play." Randis praises sarcastically. "And we can't do anything to stop him. The worlds he's taking from us were already going to be overrun by the Plague anyway. We just have to grit our teeth and endure."

"The Plague makes no further gains, we continue to lose power, and the Demons only strengthen over time." Unarin concludes. "This situation is starting to feel... untenable."

"Indeed." Randis says.

He continues to interact with the Volgrim Net, communicating in parallel with thousands of Volgrim thanks to his exceptional brain and talent at multi-tasking, but this doesn't even slightly harm his ability to hold a conversation.

"Is that all?" Randis eventually asks.

Unarin folds his hands behind his back. Then, he turns and walks away.

"Yes. That is all, brother. Keep up the good work."

"Don't tell me what to do." Randis retorts. "I am well aware of what our Empire needs."

Unarin pauses to look back at his brother, but eventually continues on his way without saying a word.

As he exits the Command Center, Unarin encounters Muuxunuu, his trusted administrator of affairs. She stands silently in the hallway, clearly waiting for him to exit, with her palms clasped at her waist.

"He still hates me." Unarin mutters.

"Yes." Muuxunuu says, in that same semi-robotic tone she always uses. "This is unlikely to change at any point in the future without external means."

Unarin smiles. He walks up to Muuxunuu and reaches his hand out to stroke her hair-tendrils. Her expression remains impassive as he kneads and toys with them lovingly, but her eyes do twitch slightly, revealing some sort of suppressed emotion.

"You used to love when I did this." Unarin murmurs. "What I wouldn't give to go back to those days..."

"My likes and dislikes are irrelevant." Muuxunuu says. "I came to find you because it is time for the Ascension Refresh."

"Oh." Unarin says as he reaches over to hold her chin in his hands, massaging the tip of her jaw with his thumb. "So soon? Feels like I did it just a few cycles ago."

"Synchronization coherency has decreased by 1.2% as a result of losing two worlds critical to the Ascension Net's infrastructure." Muuxunuu explains, unmoved by Unarin's touch. "The Ascension Net is at risk of decoupling several million users as a result."

Unarin finally pulls his hands away from Muuxunuu and sighs heavily, as if the weight of the world has momentarily increased by a hundredfold.

"Very well. I guess I'll deal with that, next."

He and Muuxunuu turn and walk down the hallway together. Unarin deliberately places his hand on Muuxunuu's back, but like always, she does not respond to his touch.

Even so, it still provides the First Founder a faint sense of comfort.

"Truly, I miss the old times..." He says to himself.

The two ascend upstairs until they reach Unarin's Sanctum, then they head inside through its giant double doors. Unarin and Muuxunuu eventually step into a small room located off to the side where a large glass pod filled with bubbling liquid resides.

Without fanfare, Unarin strips off his clothes, then climbs above the tank and hops inside, inhaling deeply to fill his lungs with the watery concoction.

Following this, he waits.

His consciousness becomes hazy.

His eyes begin to flutter...

He drifts off into an endless sleep, all while Muuxunuu keeps careful watch over his body's physical condition.

* * *

Unarin awakens.

He opens his eyes to find himself dressed in a resplendent and glorious military uniform, one that denotes his status as the Highest Among High. Its white color and red pinstripes give him a distinctive flair for the extravagant, making him appear a leader among exobeasts.

The world fizzles around Unarin, and countless tall, glittering white structures spring into existence.

Different from the bland and utilitarian stratoscrapers on Volgarius, these buildings only rise up a few thousand feet into the sky, and each one is completely unique. One building resembles a corkscrew with a lance stabbed through its center, as if someone had enveloped an ancient weapon with an observation deck just for their own pleasure.

Another structure looks like a series of geometric shapes stacked on top of and beside one another, making it mind-bending to look at.

And still another resembles a giant statue of Unarin himself, his palm lifted before himself, a simulacrum of the Milky Way suspended above his palm, slowly rotating as if to imply the First Founder has the entire galaxy in his grasp. What is most impressive, though, is that the miniature galaxy is not a hologram, but more than a billion tiny spheres, each a quarter the size of a standard playing marble, and all of them colored and carved with intricate detail to reflect the properties of the worlds and stars they represent.

How long could such an incredible display have taken to create? Only the greatest craftsman among the Ascended would know...

Unarin finds himself standing inside the Ascension Net, where hundreds of thousands of other Ascended walk around, their differently-colored skin making them resemble a living rainbow made of flesh and cloth. Surprisingly, most of the Ascended do not look impressive. They wear ordinary civilian clothes with simple colors and basic patterns. But

among them, elites stick out here and there, wearing more elaborate military garb, training outfits for combat, and even heavy armor meant for military warfare. Innumerable trillions of Ascended live their lives inside the Ascension Net, but in this particular capital city, only fifty million or so can call it their home.

The moment Unarin arrives, the beautiful blackened starry sky above changes color. Its hue turns red, and an automated voice speaks from above.

"First Founder Unarin has made landfall in the city district of New Velaria. All citizens in the area, be alert for his movements and show all proper respect to his greatness."

Immediately, every Ascended in the city pauses what they are doing to look around them, uncertain where Unarin has arrived. Those nearest the First Founder spot him before the rest, and excitement appears in their eyes.

"He's here! First Founder! We are honored by your presence!"

"The Greatest Ascended! Everyone, show respect!"

"Step aside, Lord Vetreus is on his way!"

Countless cries go up among the crowd. Even after a million years of coming into the Ascension Net, Unarin has not spoken to or contacted more than 90% of the Volgrim currently residing within it. A chance to get just a glimpse of the First Founder is unfathomably rare, so his appearances always spark a great fervor among the crowd.

"Everyone, everyone. Thank you." Unarin says politely, nodding to those nearby while offering a friendly wave. Unlike the heavy emotions he displayed before entering the Ascension Net, he puts on a good show of compassion and strength for his fellow Ascended. "You honor me."

The crowd continues to cheer, while a noticeably taller blue-skinned Ascended wearing a black uniform pushes through them, making his way toward Unarin. When he reaches the First Founder, he pauses to bow at the waist.

"Founder Unarin. Thank you for visiting my city."

"Brother Vetreus," Unarin says, walking over to pat the other's shoulder. "There's no need to stand on formality. Let us retire to a quieter place. I need to speak with the Velaria Council."

"Of course." Vetreus says, straightening his posture to return to his full height. He stands more than a head taller than the First Founder, yet his presence somehow seems smaller due to Unarin's regal aura. "No doubt, they are already preparing for your arrival."

The two of them cut through the crowd, with all the Ascended nearby spreading out and making room for Unarin to walk. None of them do anything as vulgar as attempting to touch or speak to him, as their respect for him is higher than the heavens!

Before long, Unarin and Vetreus walk into a large building best described as a series of cubes separated by various walkways, each cube representing a structure isolated from the rest, levitating in the air via anti-gravitic propulsion. The extravagant cost of such a building could not easily be paid in the modern times; only in the Ascension Net where resources are practically infinite.

"Tell me," Vetreus says casually. "How goes the War outside?"

"Quite well." Unarin says with a smile. "The Volgrim still rule the galaxy. As of late, the Plague has all but frozen its advance thanks to assistance from a certain group of mud-dwellers. They came up with an innovative method to push those monsters back, and as a result we have begun to make inroads towards claiming the lost territory once again."

"Good. Good!" Vetreus says twice. "In truth, First Founder, I was beginning to feel dread toward the situation outside. The Ascended could be an incredible asset in the War. Why have you held off on at least deploying our elite shock troops?"

Unarin shakes his head. "It would be a complete loss for us if the Plague managed to capture just one Ascended. Its ability to assimilate the strengths of those it devours makes the Plague a fearsome adversary. Do you want the bodies of every Kolvaxian to become as strong as ours?"

"Hmm... that is true." Vetreus murmurs with a troubled expression. "I suppose that means you do not intend for our people to make their arrival onto the scene just yet."

"If I can help it, none of the Ascended will ever do battle with the Kolvaxians." Unarin sighs heavily. "The day I issue that demand will be the day I must admit the war is likely lost."

Vetreus pauses his walking to turn and direct a grim gaze at Unarin.

"Brother Unarin. Do you truly have so little faith in us?"

"It's not that." Unarin says, smiling weakly. "But if the true power of the Ascended must be unleashed, I would rather it be in glorious battle against the Dark Ones, rather than their weakest minions..."

"Ah. Then I shall not press the issue further." Vetreus concedes.

They resume walking, enter a grav-lift, and transfer between three different levitating cube-facilities before arriving in the uppermost one, where they step into a conference room with fifteen chairs positioned around a table.

At once, beams of light flash inside the room. Thirteen different Ascended materialize, each one a powerful warrior, diplomat, or other such talented figure of ancient yore. They wear extravagant robes, uniforms, and light armor, making them appear either fearsome or renowned in some capacity.

Even so, none of them immediately speak, but instead bow their heads to wait while Unarin walks to the head of the table, and pulls out the chair there.

As he takes a seat, with Vetreus sitting on his immediate right, Unarin waves his hand.

"Begin."

The other thirteen raise their heads. They also sit down, lining the table off into the distance as they look at Unarin with respectful gazes.

"First Founder." A blue-skinned woman on Unarin's left says. Her crimson eyes and ornately decorated hail-tendrils give her a princess-like vibe. "Recently, 20 million Ascended were abruptly disconnected from the Ascension Net. I would like to know what caused this malfunction."

Unarin's right eye twitches. "Lady Perii. A world essential to the Ascension Net's infrastructure was overtaken by the Plague. As a result, we suffered a momentary but severe outage until the backups on other worlds took over the processing burden."

He pauses for half a breath before adding, "But you need not be worried. We have backed up the connections and restored those we lost. They will return soon enough."

"That is good." Perii says slowly. She runs her fingers along the seams of her ornate red and gold dress, accentuating her figure. "But what of the War situation? For an entire planet to fall..."

"We lose minor planets all the time." Unarin says dismissively. "They do not possess much value, so we ignore them. Rarely do the Volgrim suffer a loss to our core systems."

As I told Vetreus on the way here, one of our vassal species, the Demons, has recently obtained a unique ability to devour the Plague. Emperor Diablo has been core in pushing the Plague back, and thus we are looking to reward him with commendations, given time."

"So there is a light at the end of the galaxy." Another female Volgrim says. With skin as black as Randis's, she wears a light ensemble of skull-covered armor and other decorations on her tendrils to make herself appear fearsome to her foes. "Does that mean that you do not intend to awaken the Ascended after all?"

"Apologies, Admiral Merris." Unarin says. "I have not yet made up my mind. The War is looking winnable now, but it will take time for us to be sure."

"Mmm..." Merris says, her eyebrows knitting together. "My soldiers have long looked forward to making their triumphant return to the outer galaxy. I hope you will make a determination sooner rather than later."

Unarin tosses his hands lightly. "There are many conflicting factors at play. Placing the Ascended in the Plague's way could serve to empower our foes. I do not wish to do that unless necessary. In the meantime, Project Blinding Light may serve a greater purpose in the future. You should all prepare yourselves in case I need you to activate it."

"Is the project ready?" Perii asks. "I was under the impression it was... only experimental."

"It is." Unarin says mildly. "But should a crisis emerge, it will perform as predicted. I have looked into the theory myself and validated it with the High Technopaths."

"We should abide by Unarin's commands." Vetreus says, warning his fellow council members. "He is the one who saved our Empire. Unarin knows best."

"Unarin knows best." The other Ascended say, nodding their heads at him.

The meeting continues for a while, with Unarin informing everyone of the goings-on in the outer galaxy. Eventually, he concludes the talks, and departs the room with Vetreus at his side.

As the two men walk down the hall, Vetreus smiles at Unarin.

"All this heavy talk makes one's mind weak. Let us discuss something lighter."

Unarin nods. "That would be best."

"Your wife!" Vetreus says cheerfully. "How is she faring these days? She still has yet to enter the Ascended Net. She's still alive, isn't she?"

Unarin's expression remains calm. However, a faint gloominess builds up in his eyes. He lowers his gaze for a moment while he walks, but Vetreus does not notice.

"Yes. Muuxunuu... she is as well as ever." Unarin says numbly. "I've asked her to visit the Ascension Net time and time again, but she simply doesn't seem interested. I'm sorry for her... lack of concern."

"No, no. It is fine." Vetreus says, still smiling. "Lady Muuxunuu is truly the most beautiful of our people. The kindest, most compassionate. Ahh, so many suitors were jealous that you won her hand, back in the ancient times. Everyone feels more assured because she is there to keep your spirits up while you fight this damned War."

"Aye. Every time I look at her..." Unarin says, his words catching in his throat for half a breath, "...I feel the same love that I always have."

"Good, good." Vetreus says. "And what of Randis? Is your brother doing well, too?"

"He leads the war effort." Unarin says neutrally. "Every day, he manages tens of thousands of minor and major matters. The Empire would not be the same without him behind the scenes. Randis is... truly irreplaceable."

"Haha, excellent, most excellent." Vetreus says, never once having noticed the faint pain in Unarin's voice. To him, the First Founder has always been a cold and logical Sentient. He does not seem to be acting out of character in the least. "If it were not for the three of you, we might never have defeated those damned Sentinels. You must take care to always stick together, First Founder. Only the bonds of love you three share can give you the strength to stand bravely against our monstrous foes."

Unarin swallows a lump in his throat. "I couldn't... put it better if I tried."

Unarin finishes his business inside the Ascension Net, then he eventually disconnects.

His consciousness resurfaces inside the tank full of liquid, and he emerges from its watery depths soaked to the bone.

As the First Founder climbs out of the tank and splashes messily across the floor, Muuxunuu stands at the ready, a large towel held in her grasp.

"First Founder." Muuxunuu says emotionlessly. "Allow me to dry your body."

"Oh. You don't have to do that..." Unarin says. "I'll just use a sonic shower."

"Your statement is correct. I do not have to." Muuxunuu says. "But I still wish to do so."

"That... alright then." Unarin says softly.

He extends his arms outward, allowing the pink-skinned Ascended woman to wipe at his nude body, drying him attentively.

As Muuxunuu starts from his feet and works her way up, her eyes meet Unarin's when she goes to dry his arms. In that instant, a faint spark appears in her pupils.

But then it disappears.

She looks away and finishes drying him off.

Then, she steps back and looks at him with no expression at all.

"The task is finished. I have cleaned your clothes and set them over there."

Unarin doesn't immediately walk over to where she indicated. Instead, he stands in place, looking at her with a complicated gaze.

He takes a step toward Muuxunuu, and she remains in place.

Then he takes another step, and another...

He walks over to her, then strokes her neck with his hand. He plays with her hair-tendrils, but she still shows no reaction.

"You know..." Unarin says quietly. "Brother Vetreus asked about you. I had to lie to him again."

"What is there to lie about?" Muuxunuu asks, uncomprehending.

"What, indeed?" Unarin says bitterly.

He leans his face towards hers, as if to gently kiss her, but he pauses mid-movement and pulls away.

"No." Unarin says, lowering his eyes. "I don't deserve it."

Ultimately, he turns away from Muuxunuu and slowly shuffles back to his regal garb. He slides his robes back on, but each piece of fabric presses on him like an anvil, the burden of their significance feeling unearned, and making him uncomfortable from the bottom of his soul.

After he finishes, Unarin stares ahead blankly at the wall.

"...It was the right thing to do." He whispers. "I had to do it. It was the only way."

"But why... why did *she* have to pay the heaviest price?"

The question he whispers into the void receives no reply.

Perhaps there are no longer any who are capable of answering...

[Next Part](#)

Part 558: Matriarch Calanthra

"Fifty million years?" Jason asks, as he looks at Lady Calanthra in shock. "That feels a little over the top!"

The Fairy Matriarch smiles at the young Wordsmith with kind eyes. "It is not as exaggerated as you believe, Jason. The Angels were formed from the dust of the Cosmos. They are many billions of years old. Even the Titans and Dragons are far older than my people, despite coming into existence well after their predecessors. In that respect, the annals of time would treat fifty million and ten million years as almost the same point of origination. A blink of an eye in the cosmic scale."

She lifts her chin up to deliver a playful smile.

"But also, you did not hear what I said properly. I said the fairies *arrived* in the Milky Way fifty million years ago. And that single word is what should make my story most interesting to you."

"Arrived..." Jason repeats. "You didn't 'evolve' like the Volgrim did. And if that's the case... then where did you arrive *from*?"

Instead of immediately answering his question, Calanthra licks her soft pink lips. "Mmm. Are you busy right now? I would like to invite you to speak to me in person on Pixiv. It will make things... more convenient to explain."

"You want me to travel across the galaxy right now?" Jason asks in surprise. "I... I guess I could. But I've never been to Pixiv before. I don't have a way to arrive there immediately, so I'll have to travel through space or take a Warpgate."

"Is that so?" She asks innocently. "And here I thought you might have put down one of those 'waypoints' of yours on our world."

"You know about Waypoints?" Jason asks, his expression incredulous. "How?!"

"I know a great many things about you, the Volgrim, and others that I would not normally reveal." Calanthra says mysteriously. "We fairies are more than meets the eye. We keep a low profile and deliberately blend among the so-called 'monsters,' but that does not mean we are like them. It merely allows us to blend in with the Milky Way's populace so that we do not provoke its native forces."

Jason nods slowly, but a deep suspicion wells up within his heart. "The more you talk, the more I begin to feel your people are a bit... sinister."

Calanthra shrugs. "I can see why you would think that. But I assure you, we fairies are quite benign. We hold no ambitions toward galactic conquest. Even if we wanted to act in such a gluttonous manner, we couldn't. Our species has been... limited."

"Limited, how?" Jason probes.

"We cannot become Cosmics." Calanthra says softly. "We were cursed by a powerful Ruler. The shackles placed upon us are forged through the Truths wielded by those Beyond Cosmic. Even your Wordsmithing would be void before such a power."

Jason nods slowly, not sure if he fully believes her, and in fact hoping she's exaggerating.

The fact some horrifying eldritch horror could seal his powers frightens Jason out of his wits. Against such might, what use is struggling at all?

"Well," Calanthra says, "since you have not set a Waypoint upon Pixiv, we'll just have to use the old-fashioned method. In fact, this transmission Crystal has two functions. Not only can it send and receive audio-visual transmissions, but it also has a Recall function built into it. If you can copy that function, you will be able to travel with it back to Pixiv to meet me in person."

"This crystal can travel all the way across the galaxy?" Jason asks, feeling the ability must surely be exaggerated. "I find that hard to believe."

"It is made from exotics native to Pixiv." Calanthra explains. "Besides, imagine how troublesome it would be if every time I finished conversing with someone, I had to send a courier to fetch my crystals back. Therefore, I build a homing function into every Fairy Transmission Crystal I send out in order to retrieve them later."

Jason nods. Her words make sense. If he conversed in such a manner, he'd probably do the same thing, too.

"Alright. So I just replicate this crystal's homing function, and I can pop over to say hi?"

"That's right." Calanthra says. "I will be awaiting your arrival."

She lowers her head, then her body rapidly dissolves into motes of light. The crystal hovers in midair for a second afterward, then plummets downward, landing in the grass

with a soft *thud*.

Jason bends over. He picks it up, then stands and erases the chair behind himself from existence.

"Hmm..." Jason mutters softly. "Blinker's my good friend. Melia has treated humanity well. Calanthra seems fine... but I don't think I should go into a potential enemy's territory all alone. I don't know anything about Calanthra beyond what she's told me..."

Instead of teleporting directly to Pixiv, Jason takes a half-minute to jump back into Chrona's space and talk to Fiona and Blinker before he ultimately warps right back to where he was standing 30 real-time seconds before. He picks up the Transmission Crystal, holds it up, and utters a few words of power.

"Observe. Triangulate. Locate. Pinpoint. Activate."

An instant later, he vanishes from the spot and emerges where his Wordsmithing predicted he would; right at the entrance to a massive white castle carved out of limestone-like rock somewhere on Pixiv's western continent.

With night having fallen on the fairy's homeworld, Jason takes a moment to look around. He finds that this gigantic castle spans an area of twenty square kilometers, and a cursory sweep with his Wordsmithing identifies fewer than fifty thousand fairies inside. The sparse population makes him raise an eyebrow, but he realizes the fairies have always had trouble procreating, so their numbers are probably low in general.

The starry sky above catches Jason's attention. He looks up and becomes momentarily dazed, marveling at how much brighter and beautiful it is compared to Tarus II. With less light radiating from the castle than from Tarus II's main city, the light pollution levels are lower, allowing him to see far more of the cosmic brilliance above.

"Wow..." Jason mutters.

Surprisingly, aside from the castle, there isn't anything else in the area but a beautiful and pristine forest. With all fairies possessing wings, they don't have the mobility issues humans do, and can thus live further apart from each other.

Jason starts to step toward the castle, but as he does, a formidable power begins to press down upon his body. Startled, he backs away, and that feeling reduces.

What the heck?

Jason tries stepping toward the castle again, but this time more slowly. As he inches nearer, the power presses down harder and harder, allowing him to comprehend what it even is.

A gravity field... Jason thinks.

If he were to continue walking forward, the gravity would double, then triple, then continue growing stronger and strong until he collapsed into a shivering pile of flesh and bone.

Two words appear in Jason's head as he makes this connection.

Formation Magic!

One of the fairies' signature abilities makes its appearance, and the Wordsmith easily recognizes it thanks to years spent talking to Blinker. As one of the premier magical species, the fairies possess incredible means to fortify static positions with powerful countermeasures, as well as to provide themselves with unique utility effects other species, including the Volgrim, could never hope to replicate!

Jason takes a moment, then he utters a Word of Power.

"Neutralize."

However, contrary to his expectation, the gravity field doesn't disappear.

It only weakens!

He continues to feel it pressing down upon him, though its might becomes substantially less potent, allowing him to walk forward again.

Wordsmithing can't neutralize fairy magic? Jason thinks, silently shocked in his heart. *Nothing has ever been capable of countering my magic before. This is unexpected...*

He walks forward, arriving at the gate after a short minute. Abruptly, a woman appears before him, as if popping out of midair. She wears a pretty pink dress with jeweled green leaves embroidered into it at random, her dress's color matching her hair. Surprisingly, she appears quite young, perhaps only twenty years old by human standards.

Of course, considering she is a fairy, Jason dares not assume she is as young as she appears.

"Hi, Wordsmith!" The fairy girl says cheerfully. "The Matriarch told me you would be arriving soon. I thought that was interesting how you managed to negate most of the power of the Ninth Exterior Formation. Your magic is neat!"

Jason blinks. "You saw me?"

"Oh, sure. I was standing right here the whole time." She says. "I was just hiding inside an Invisibility Conflux. It's a simple trick, no big deal! Oh! I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Hefastria, but you can call me Hefa! It's nice to make your acquaintance!"

"Miss Hefastria." Jason says politely, nodding his head. "So you're here to take me to Matriarch Calanthra?"

"Yup!" Hefa says cutely, with a wink and a smile. Her wings flutter playfully as she looks him up and down. "It's not often a male gets to enter the Capital. This will be a treat for everyone!"

Jason follows after Hefa while she waves her hand to open invisible gateways past each Formation that blocks their path.

"There's no... men inside?" Jason asks.

"We only have half a dozen male fairies still alive." Hefa explains. "And non-fairies are strictly disallowed on Pixiv. Therefore, in the Matriarch's palace, there are only girls."

She shoots a suspicious glance at Jason.

"But don't get any ideas. Even if someone propositions you, you have to turn them down!"

"I'm married." Jason says, pointing to the ring on his finger. "And faithful."

"Married, huh?" Hefa says uncertainly. "What's that mean? Did someone cut off your... equipment?"

"What? No!" Jason gasps, feeling a cold chill down below. "It means I already have a wife. I have a female human I love very much!"

"Ohh, you have a mating pair already." Hefa says, relieved. "That's right! I remember reading somewhere about how humans tend to lean monogamous. How strange! Wouldn't you get bored after being stuck with the same lady for 100,000 years? Variety is the spice of life!"

"Humans don't typically live to 100,000 years..." Jason says slowly. "Or even a thousand years. Most barely make it to a hundred..."

"Seriously?" Hefa gasps, before smacking her forehead. "Right! Humans die super fast too. Jeez, your species is WEIRD! No wonder they rank among the Lower Seventy."

"The Lower Seventy?" Jason repeats.

"Yeah. The Lower Seventy Sentients of the Milky Way." Hefa helpfully explains. "You know, like Goblins, Harpies, Cats, Dogs..."

"Oh, come on." Jason retorts. "Humans are way better than cats and dogs."

"Ehh, I've seen the crystal-cordings of your wars. I wouldn't be so sure if I were you." Hefa says smugly.

The two travel further into the castle's interior land, and as they do, Jason blinks in surprise when the night sky abruptly vanishes, replaced instead with a brilliant sunny day!

Birds chirp in trees planted along the cobbled roadside. Dogs run around, barking playfully as they tussle with one another. More than a few fairy girls water their gardens as they stand outside their delightful rustic cottages, blinking their huge watery eyes as they look up and see a human male walking into their domain.

"Dogs?" Jason asks, looking at Hefa curiously.

"A fairy's best friend!" She chirps. "We found all sorts of cute critters on that Earth of yours, so we moved them here. I like raccoons the best. I have a dozen of them living at my manor!"

She notices the surprise on Jason's face. "What? Earth isn't special. We have all kinds of other creatures from across the galaxy that we moved here. It's easy for fairies to do."

"I see." Jason says, looking away from her to gaze at the paradise-like interior that was hidden by the external formations. "I'm a little surprised, is all. To think Pixiv was hiding such wonders from the rest of the galaxy."

"We live simple lives." Hefa says, her voice becoming more subdued. "After the Ancient Tragedies, we decided we would pursue our own happiness without harming the interests of the external galactic leaders. It's allowed us to keep our heads down."

"That's an admirable way of thinking." Jason praises. "If only there wasn't a Threat looming over our heads, maybe we humans could try something similar."

Hefa shakes her head. She looks at the Wordsmith with a hint of sympathy.

"From what I have heard, your people are far too warlike for that to ever be possible. Your storied history is nothing but violence stacked on violence. While a few might manage to pursue a simpler lifestyle, the vast majority never could."

"We may never know." Jason concludes.

After ten long minutes of walking, the two of them finally arrive at the main castle located in the depths of the capital city. Massive statues of ancient male and female fairies loom above them, towering hundreds of feet tall. As they walk inside, these statues face the walkway, each one striking heroic poses that serve to awe the viewer.

Jason's eyes flick from one figure to another, reminding him of the El-Dorado room inside the Labyrinth where he found the statues of the Three Kings.

"I take it these fairies were figures of some renown?"

"Most of them have died." Hefa says regretfully. "Many of them came from the Precursor Era, before the Great Migration. The Matriarch will likely tell you about them, if you wish to know more."

Jason frowns. *Precursor Era? Great Migration? Hmm...*

No doubt, it must have something to do with what Calanthra told him before.

The fairies 'arrived' in the Milky Way, huh? I think I'm starting to get an idea of what the Matriarch meant.

As they walk past the line of statues, two at the very end catch Jason's eye.

He looks at the one on the right. "That's Lady Calanthra, isn't it?"

"Yes. That is our Matriarch." Hefa says, smiling at him.

Jason's gaze moves to the left, where he spots a much older-looking woman, her body covered in powerful-looking armor distinct from all the fairies before. Unlike her predecessors who wore beautiful and dainty robes or other pleasantries, this woman on the left at the end appears quite fearsome!

"She is the Matriarch's mother." Hefa says respectfully. "She was the former Matriarch, Lady Erenia. Unfortunately, she passed away from grievous wounds after the

Great Migration, passing her position to her daughter."

"Wow. She must have been a mighty warrior." Jason mutters.

"The strongest fairy to have ever lived." Hefa acknowledges. "I was never able to meet her myself, as I was born millions of years after her death. But I have seen her exploits in the record crystals. If it wasn't for Lady Erenia, our whole species might have perished..."

Before long, Jason and Hefastria reach their final destination, the banquet hall, where they spot hundreds of royal fairy princesses eating together, giggling as they sit at a table. Innumerable eyes sweep toward Jason as he arrives, and whispers go up around the giant table.

"A man?"

"A human. I heard he possesses magical power."

"He's fairly handsome. Do you think mother would let us...?"

"Not a chance. You know what she always says about men."

"Aww..."

Jason's attuned ears easily pick up some of the conversations, but he maintains a neutral expression.

These fairy girls sure seem horny. Jason thinks.

He looks around the table for Calanthra, but to his surprise, he only spots her when he turns his gaze off to the side. There, he spots a huge golden throne positioned in the back of the room atop a tall platform. He almost slaps himself for missing it, giving how distinctive it is compared to everything else.

Hefa stops walking, then gestures to him. "You go on ahead. I've completed my task."

"Oh, alright." Jason says. "Nice meeting you, Hefastria."

"You too!" She chirps, waving cutely before flitting away.

Jason approaches the throne, and a silly thought occurs to him. *It's weird how the fairies are all human-sized. I always assumed they preferred to stay small, like Blinker. I'll have to ask Calanthra about that later.*

When Jason reaches the throne, Calanthra smiles at him. "I'm surprised you didn't teleport directly here."

"I wanted to take the scenic route." Jason replies, bowing his head politely. "It's good to meet you in person, Matriarch."

"Just 'Calanthra' is fine." Calanthra says with a dismissive wave. "You and I can be said to be equals, given we are the respective rulers of our civilizations. Let us not stand on ceremony."

"If you insist." Jason replies, raising his head.

Calanthra waves her hand, and an illusion formation activates, shrouding the space around herself and the Wordsmith in an impenetrable veil of secrecy. Instantly, all the pretty fairy princesses vanish from sight, and Jason finds himself standing in a pitch-black void where he can only make out Calanthra's radiant form, as well as her throne.

"Please excuse me, but I must take certain precautions." Calanthra explains. "What I am about to tell you should not be leaked to the Volgrim, nor the demons. In fact, I'd prefer if you didn't even tell your wife, Wordsmith."

Jason frowns. "Not even Phoebe? Let me guess. This has to do with your 'arrival' in the Milky Way. I've already made some guesses of my own."

"That's right." Calanthra affirms. "This secret is extremely sensitive, and it could paint my people as a target. I cannot force you to remain silent, but I would like to know if you are willing to promise not to leak a word of what I'm about to tell you to another soul."

"You came to me first." Jason says. "I must assume you're taking a risk telling me this. So, on my honor as Humanity's Hero, I promise not to tell anyone, including my own wife."

Calanthra's body sags slightly in relief. "Good. Thank you, Jason. I appreciate that you would say that. There's no point bothering with a soul contract or whatnot. I also tend to believe that cooperation and mutual benefits are superior when it comes to solidifying alliances."

"Oh? You want an alliance with me?" Jason asks, his eyebrows rising in surprise.

"You, yes, but more importantly, humanity as a species." Calanthra explains. "Because of the recent developments you and your wife revealed on that debate stage, I have reason to believe humanity and the fairies can offer one another substantial benefits in the coming years."

She continues. "Ordinarily, I would not go to these lengths, but as you well know, the Plague only continues to encroach on the Milky Way's stability. Our future is in flux, and my people face just as much risk of going extinct as you humans, the demons, and the Volgrim too."

"It is only together, in a unified capacity, that the fairies and the humans working together can continue to survive in this unfathomably cruel cosmos."

Jason nods seriously. He crosses his arms and widens his stance.

"You've piqued my interest. I'm listening." He says.

"As you may have already guessed," Calanthra explains, "my people, the Fairies, are not from the Milky Way. We are also not fifty million years old. In fact, like the Angels, we are a Precursor Civilization. We have existed since the formation of this Eternity."

Jason's heart skips a beat hearing the truth comes from her lips. He doesn't allow the emotion to show on his face.

"You're as old as the angels?" He asks meaningfully.

"Indeed, we are." Calanthra affirms. "And once, we were just as powerful. We were Cosmics standing at the apex of strength in our home galaxy."

Calanthra lowers her eyes. A deep sense of loss dances in the light of her pupils.

"But that was a long time ago. Our reign ended with the arrival of the Dark Ones."

"The Dark Ones?" Jason asks. "From Andromeda? You're from Andromeda?"

"We are." Calanthra answers. "The fairies were once the supreme rulers of Andromeda, many billions of years ago. But we fell because of our own infighting and the arrival of a superior Apex Species. Now, we are but a shadow of our former selves."

She sighs softly.

"I wonder if you would like to give voice to the question on your mind, Wordsmith."

"I have a lot of questions." Jason says, nodding slowly. "But... I guess I'll start with the first one. If fairies were once Apex Cosmics, and if you have a humanoid form along with wings... does that mean you are *related* to the angels?"

Calanthra smiles. "The angels? We are not related to them, no."

She pauses.

"But... have you ever heard of... Convergent Evolution?"

Part 559: Eye of Yredelemnul

"Convergent Evolution." Jason repeats. He pauses for a moment to collect his thoughts. "The tendency for species to evolve toward certain similar characteristics over time, ones which are often evolutionarily superior or grant significant advantages. For example, having an even-number of legs to walk on, such as two or four or six."

The Wordsmith materializes a chair for himself, like he did when speaking to Calanthra back on Tarus II. He conjures a table and some tea, then passes a cup to Calanthra while taking one for himself.

"Exactly." Calanthra confirms, as she gracefully accepts Jason's offer and procures his offered cup. "Angels are bipedal creatures with two arms and two legs. They have wings. In that way, fairies are similar."

"Okay." Jason says with a frown. "But... angels didn't 'evolve.' They were created by the Milky Way's former Ruler, the Creator. Unless you're telling me fairies evolved from angels, but that would contradict what you just said."

"Angels did not evolve in the strictest sense of the word. That is correct." Calanthra continues. "And like the angels, my people also were created at the beginning of the universe by our own Ruler. Our Ruler was a powerful entity known as The Timeless. She lived for at least seventy Eternities in total."

Jason blinks twice. "*Was. Lived.* So... she's dead? Like my Creator?"

"The Timeless has indeed disappeared into the annals of myth." Calanthra says without a shred of emotion. "It is regrettable, but in Akasha's game, such events happen every Eternity. New Rulers uplift themselves from Apex Cosmics. Old ones die to their enemies. There are countless Rulers scattered across the cosmos. Some Rulers control tens of galaxies, while others control only one. The Creator was the latter, as was The Timeless."

"But what does all of this have to do with convergent evolution?" Jason presses.

"I'm getting to that. No need to be impatient." Calanthra says helplessly. "Andromeda and the Milky Way are neighbor galaxies; very close together and boasting somewhat similar levels of strength. There are many other galaxies in our Local Group, and outside

that group there are tens of billions more. The Rulers have contested one another for Eternities innumerable, their memories and knowledge having long, long passed a point that you would be able to fathom. As such, their Galaxy Wars have raged for cumulative septillions upon septillions of Eternities, and they have learned what the ideal forms for Sentient species are."

Calanthra continues. "The bipedal form is considered to be extremely potent. It is versatile and well-balanced. The Quadrupedal form affords more power and speed, but often sacrifices intelligence. The tetrapod and octopod forms are less common, as are non-legged forms. So, while the fairies and angels did not 'evolve' in the strictest sense, our Rulers created us with the knowledge of what forms tended to be the most powerful based on their many Eternities worth of knowledge. In Akasha's Game, every minor advantage can snowball into a game-winning move as Eternities enter the competition phase."

Jason nods slowly. "How do you know all of this, anyway? Have you lived through multiple Eternities yourself?"

"By no means." Calanthra answers with a shake of her head. "I was born shortly after my people migrated to the Milky Way. My mother died after the migration, so I have no memories of our ancient past. As far as I am concerned, I am a child of the Milky Way, through and through. I have no sentimental attachments to Andromeda. My mother did, though, and she would often... speak of its beauty."

Calanthra's eyes become contemplative. She looks away, sighing softly as she remembers the short but sweet time she spent living with her mother as a child.

"Like I said before, Jason. The Timeless crafted the image of my people at the start of our Eternity. Based on our similarities to one another, it makes sense to assume our two Rulers knew one another. Perhaps they were hotly competing with one another, as most neighboring Rulers tend to do. But then again, perhaps not. The Creator died at the beginning of the Eternity, which should not be possible, going by Akasha's rules. That likely altered The Timeless's plans, throwing her mental state into disarray. It allowed the Dark Ones to strike, killing her and allowing our galaxy to fall early on."

"I'm getting mixed messages..." Jason mutters. "From what I've learned from Unarin, there are barriers around galaxies that prevent the Game from being initiated before a preset period. If so, then how would your Ruler fall?"

"How did yours?" Calanthra retorts. "There are many ways a Ruler could be assassinated. And The Game is not inflexible. Anything which amuses Akasha can be allowed. Perhaps the Dark Ones bribed him to lower the barrier. Perhaps, like the Plague, the Dark Ones slipped inside and secretly established a warpgate of sorts that allowed their Apex Cosmics to travel over and slaughter our High Fairies. Unfortunately, I am not learned in the ways of Rulers, so I can only hypothesize. I was only born after the migration to the Milky Way, after all."

Jason slowly nods. He leans forward to pour himself more tea before continuing. "Then that begs another question. How did your people 'migrate' to the Milky Way? How did YOU pass through the Akashic Barrier? Something isn't adding up, Calanthra."

"The answer to that question is... complicated." Calanthra says. "During the war against the Dark Ones, our mightiest fairy queens and kings fell one after the other. Apex Cosmics who had ruled for billions of years were unable to cope with the onslaught of our enemies, and so, we perished along with our Ruler."

She pauses.

"...I have looked into the history of the Milky Way. I know that the angels were a warlike species who viciously battled with one another early on. My people were *not* like that. We were extremely cooperative among our highest echelons. Working beneath our Ruler, we sought to increase our power and live extravagant lives while preparing for the day the Akashic Barriers lowered and The Game would begin. This meant, unlike the Milky Way which gradually killed its Highest off through self-immolation, we possessed unfathomably powerful and vast armies capable of doing battle with multiple galaxies at a time. There was a Plan, and we were ready to make great gains during this Eternity."

Calanthra takes a long, slow sip of her tea. She hesitates before continuing.

"Based on what my mother has told me, along with the historical ledgers I've read, we could not fathom the fierceness of the Dark Ones. From the very beginning, we were utterly outmatched. We had Apex Cosmics aplenty, and yet no matter what terrifying magic we unleashed, we could not withstand their assault. My mother was, in the end, the last Apex Cosmic of our people. In order to open up a path to the Milky Way, she paid a terrible price and reduced all the remnants of our people to the level of High Mortals."

Calanthra raises her crystal blue eyes to look at Jason with deep meaning. "You see, Wordsmith, Akasha's rules become less restrictive the weaker you are. Rulers who break

the Akashic Laws pay terrible prices, often losing their lives. Apex Cosmics, High Cosmics, and so on... if they interfere with the lives of mere mortals, they can also suffer brutal fates, up to and including death. But the weaker one is, and the lower their status, the more leniency we are afforded. That is why, even though my people continue to draw breath, we will never again be able to stand among the highest echelons of galactic society. The Fairy species is doomed to lose the War during this eternity."

"I think I get it." Jason says slowly. "Your mother, as the last Apex Cosmic, expended all her remaining power. She opened up a portal to the Milky Way and traveled here along with what remained of your people before closing the gate behind herself."

"A portal?" Calanthra asks.

She shakes her head and looks away.

"No, dear boy. Not quite 'a portal.' But... perhaps it is time for me to show you."

Calanthra sets down her cup of tea, smiles at Jason, then rises to her feet. Seeing her stand up, Jason does the same, looking at her with interest as she gestures to the left.

"If you'll follow me, I think you will be quite surprised by the Truth behind our arrival in the Milky Way."

Jason nods. "I'm certainly interested in- what the heck?!"

His eyes drift from Calanthra back to her throne, and what he sees startles him.

While Calanthra has stood up, she also remains seated at the same time.

There are two Calanthras! The one still sitting on the throne has her eyes tightly closed, her head leaned forward, and the appearance of a puppet with its strings cut.

Noticing the look of shock on Jason's face, the Fairy Matriarch merely smiles and shakes her head. She gestures behind herself at the motionless form she left behind.

"Tragic, isn't it? For millions of years, I have been unable to stand up from that throne. The Curse placed upon me by the Dark Ones only grows stronger over time. In order to walk around, I have to resort to an illusionary duplicate. I'm sorry you had to witness such a pathetic sight."

Jason's heart skips a beat. He looks at Calanthra with pity in his eyes. "You're... cursed? In what way? Can my Wordsmithing undo it?"

"Your power is impressive." Calanthra says with a weak smile. "But only among mortals. When it comes to the machinations of Cosmics, let alone Rulers, your power is nothing at all. If you attempt to peer into the source of the curse placed upon me, I am afraid it will only draw Their eyes to you as well. It's best not to involve yourself in matters of Rulers until you have achieved the ultimate goal of being a Candidate."

Jason grimaces at her words. In his heart, he feels he must surely be able to undo the curse, but then again, he doesn't know anything about it, and he doesn't know Calanthra that well. Putting himself at risk for a complete stranger whose motivations are not fully understood doesn't sound like a good idea.

I can always try undoing it later. Jason thinks, before returning his attention to the Matriarch's illusionary clone.

"So..." Jason says, changing the subject, "you use a lot of plurals when it comes to the 'Dark Ones.' Are there multiple Rulers or something? I was under the impression only one Ruler could control a galaxy at a time."

"There are indeed multiple." Calanthra says. "As for how many, I do not know, exactly. The Dark Ones are a collective of Rulers that all ascended during different Eternities. They work together to amass power and bully individual Rulers, such as The Creator, The Timeless, and so on. Alliances are not forbidden in Akasha's Game, so there is nothing preventing them from adopting this strategy."

"So, does their name mean they all wield the power of darkness?" Jason asks.

"I... don't know." Calanthra says helplessly. "I only know what my mother told me, and she was not a Ruler herself. The information mortals and cosmics can obtain is nothing compared to what a Ruler will amass over multiple Eternities."

Calanthra gestures to Jason, and he falls into step alongside her as she disables the privacy screen, returning both of them to reality. The fairy princesses at the table look over, seeing their Matriarch reappear with the Wordsmith.

"I'll be taking this male for a walk." Calanthra says. "Nobody is to follow."

"Yes, Matriarch." The princesses respond in unison.

Jason and her head out of the royal greeting chamber through a side entrance. They begin walking down a hall adorned with unbelievably beautiful paintings, all of which astound Jason due to their lifelike imagery.

"Incredible..." Jason says, pausing before one of them. "This image... I cannot even comprehend how it was painted."

That painting depicts a paradise-class world with pink and red plants surrounding a village of carefully crafted but modestly constructed cottages, each one unique from the others, with different colors of paint used for each building's exterior. Many different male and female fairies sit, stand, and dance together, all of them looking happy and blissful as they enjoy what can only be described as the most idyllic life possible.

Calanthra smiles, but the expression contains a certain sense of sadness with it.

"One of our former homeworlds in Andromeda." She says. "Mother told me it wasn't unique at all. Most fairies used their magic to craft beautiful utopias free of strife. Despite our immense power, The Timeless seemed to want us to simply live our little lives, enjoying the simple pleasures, rather than building up immense forces to rival other Rulers."

"So the fairies didn't have a standing army?" Jason questions.

"We did. No doubt about that." Calanthra answers. "But only those who had the desire to battle were promoted to the top of the hierarchy, acting as silent guardians while they awaited the inevitable days of reckoning. We didn't expect the sudden arrival of the Dark Ones at the edge of our galaxy, which was how they were able to catch us off-guard. Perhaps if we did, we might have fortified our galaxy more extensively. We might have survived the invasion."

The two continue walking. Jason idly admires the paintings as they travel, his eyes flicking from one to the other.

"These paintings are so lifelike." He says. "It's almost like they're not even paintings at all. They look like windows to other times and places."

Calanthra chuckles. "These paintings were made with magic. Not many fairies can craft ones at the level on display here in the capital. I happen to have the talent, as does Princess Melia, who you are acquainted with. There are different levels to Transcended Paintings, as we call them. Nine in total. The ones on display here only go up to the sixth level. We lost the most ancient paintings during the Dark War, unfortunately. Most of the ones you see now were made by fairies native to the Milky Way. That is why we cannot produce anything at the Cosmic level."

Jason looks at her in surprise. "That's right. Earlier, you implied there are no Cosmics among the fairies. Why is that? Surely, with a heritage as rich as yours..."

"As I said before, my people are cursed." Calanthra says, sighing yet again. "Haah... cursed to never produce another Cosmic among our ranks. In fact, you denizens of the Milky Way are cursed, too. Because of the actions of your precursors, you are also unable to become Cosmics in the Way of Magic. It is quite an unfortunate tragedy..."

Jason scoffs. He folds his hands behind his back and smirks at her. "Guess you're not up to date on the news. Diablo has been mass-producing Cosmics with ease. Mephisto became a Cosmic. The Volgrim have Cosmics too. Seems they're crawling outta the friggin' woodwork these days."

"You misunderstand what I said." Calanthra explains patiently. "I said you are unable to produce Cosmics through the *Way of Magic*. There are still ways to Ascend using other means. But harnessing the innate magical power of your galaxy is no longer possible. Because of the Angels, who drained the Milky Way of its power during the Primordial Era, the magical power left behind is thin and incapable of producing Cosmics."

She continues. "Mephisto ascended by using the cursed power of soulcrafting. Diablo is elevating Cosmics by attaching their power to stellar bodies. This limits their mobility and prevents them from being considered 'True Cosmics.' As for the Volgrim..."

Calanthra shakes her head and chuckles.

"Those Volgrim certainly are interesting. Their Psionic Power is derived from a... different source... than what the ancient angels used. The Psionic Well."

"I take it you've been observing the Psions long enough to understand how they uplift themselves." Jason says, his question rhetorical.

"To be honest, nobody who isn't a Psion fully understands it. Not even me." Calanthra admits. "But in any case, that's neither here nor there. My greater point is that the fairies cannot become Cosmics anymore. Not only because of the thin magical energy inside the Milky Way, but because of the curse the new Ruler of Andromeda inflicted upon us as we fled. Every fairy is limited to the rank of High Mortal, forever prevented from returning to our former glory. Not even your Wordsmithing should be capable of undoing it."

"I see." Jason says, looking away. "That's... really unfortunate."

"We've grown used to it. It is not worth complaining about anymore." Calanthra replies.

After exiting the hallway of paintings, Calanthra leads Jason left and right, past countless opulent rooms, and outdoors, where they eventually stop inside a vast garden adorned with bio-luminescent trees, ponds filled with algae and critters hiding beneath, and flowers stacked atop thirty-foot-tall statues.

In the center of the garden, a large pond, made perfectly round by stones lining its banks and inner depths, remains motionless without a single creature inside. Four statues of ancient fairies stand around the pond, their palms aimed at a central point thirty feet above its surface, as if trying to contain some unfathomable power from erupting...

Jason glances around. "Hm? This garden is empty. Where are all the other fairies?"

"Nobody is allowed here but me." Calanthra says, her tone solemn. "These are the Eternal Waters. The connection between realms."

Suddenly, Calanthra claps her palms together. Instantly, the artificial sunlight above the city vanishes, plunging Jason and herself into darkness.

Jason jumps in fright, not expecting this turn of events. Just as his bewildered mind is about to catch up to the point he might start asking questions, his heart drops into his shoes!

Between the four statues, at the central point where their palms are aiming, a ghostly, blood-red eye flickers around, its evil presence fixating on Jason with a malevolent gaze that flash-freezes his blood.

"What the fuck!" Jason blurts, jumping back two steps. "WHAT THE FUCK?!"

The horrifying eye says nothing. It does not communicate with him, but instead stares at the Wordsmith in a manner most monstrous, making him feel like a rat being eyed by a horde of hungry wolves.

Never has he felt so small and vulnerable. Not even when facing down the Archdemon!

"One of the eyes of Yredelemnul." Calanthra says, looking at the Wordsmith with an inexplicable gaze. "Frightening, isn't it? This is an incipient eye my mother stole from a Ruler among the Dark Ones. Its power is limited, and its sentience restrained. But even so, it is utterly terrifying."

"This eye... belonged to a Ruler?!" Jason exclaims. "Why the hell are you just letting it sit there? Shouldn't we kill it?!"

"Kill it?" Calanthra repeats. "This eye is hideous, terrifying, and malicious, no doubt, but it is also my people's unwitting benefactor. Through Yredelemnul's Eye, we were able to harness a small amount of focused cosmic power, just enough to open a crack between dimensions."

She looks at the eye, which has continued to stare at Jason, unblinking, the entire time.

"It cannot exist without total darkness. That is why we always keep this city covered in blinding light. But, when the time comes for me to activate its power, I must deactivate the Endless Sunlight Formation, if only for a short while."

Jason's skin crawls as the eye continues to gaze at him. He forces himself to look away, because for some reason its gaze feels magnetic, drawing his eyes toward it for unfathomable but no-doubt sinister reasons.

"Okay!" Jason shouts. "You can turn it off now! Are we done yet?!"

"Done?" Calanthra asks. "Wordsmith, we have only just begun."

Without hesitation, she aims a finger at the eye. A beam of light as bright as the midday sun blasts at the eye, making it tremble and weep tears of blood.

These tears fall from the silently raging eye to the pond below. The pond illuminates with an ominous bloody glow, and storm clouds materialize in the sky above. Lightning crackles downward, striking the eye and causing it to bleed and tremble even more profusely. The pond turns redder and redder, until, in a moment of ferocity...

Yredelemnul's eye explodes!

BOOM!

A shockwave blasts outward, but to Jason's surprise, it doesn't even so much as ripple the grass around him. It passes through his body and momentarily jolts his soul, but otherwise, it has no effect on the physical world.

With the eye gone, the pond begins to swirl rapidly until it becomes a maelstrom of stormy water, spinning round and round without splashing beyond the confines of its rocky exterior.

"Get ready!" Calanthra shouts. "When the water stills, jump inside!"

"Jump inside?!" Jason asks, horrified. "It's filled with blood!"

"Not blood in the way you imagine." Calanthra explains. "Cosmic Essence. The blood of a Ruler is more powerful than any exotic you can imagine. The pond will become a gateway to the other dimension soon. Now, ready yourself!"

"I..."

Jason starts to argue with her, but decides to bite his tongue.

"What kind of portal is it?" He asks. "Where will it take me?!"

"It will transport us to a place you cannot even imagine." Calanthra says. "After shattering the eye, it will require one Pixiv-cycle to restore itself. If you don't come with me now, you'll have to wait another year to learn the Truths you want to know most!"

Jason hesitates.

He grits his teeth, momentarily feeling indecisive.

At that moment, the waters stop spinning, and a hazy image of a far-away land appears.

"Now!" Calanthra shouts. "If you aren't coming, then I'll go alone!"

"Fuck it!" Jason snaps. "I'll go, I'll GO, goddammit!"

Calanthra jumps into the pond, and less than a second later, Jason steels his nerves... and jumps in after her!

The moment they pass through the boundary between dimensions, Jason seemingly spins in midair and lands on his feet. He looks backward, only to see the portal closing behind himself.

The gateway back to the Milky Way disappears!

"Shit." Jason curses softly. He directs a withering stare at Calanthra. "You've trapped us here?!"

"We are not trapped." Calanthra says with a smile. "We can leave at any time we wish. Now, look around you. What do you see?"

Jason blinks. He turns his gaze around to take in the sights.

What he sees upends his understanding of reality.

He and Calanthra stand atop a small stone platform amidst a pitch-black void seemingly overlooking not the Milky Way, but all of the cosmos itself.

No matter which way Jason looks, he sees an infinite number of galaxies, stars, black holes, and other cosmic phenomena he cannot even begin to describe in words.

By looking at any of these entities, his vision begins to move toward them, drawing them nearer.

He can look at any star of any galaxy and view it with a frightening level of clarity!

"What... what is this place?" Jason asks.

"This is the entrance to Ripped Space." Calanthra says softly. "A viewport into every Eternity that has ever existed, up to and including the current one."

Calanthra smiles at Jason.

"It is through the power of Ripspace that my people were able to travel to the Milky Way... among other destinations."

"Fairies aren't only in the Milky Way?" Jason asks, suddenly comprehending her meaning.

"My people have taken up residence in *many* galaxies." Calanthra responds. "But unlike the Milky Way's fairies, our interstellar brothers and sisters... are unlikely to have met good ends."

After a pause, she takes Jason's hand in hers.

"Well? Would you like to go exploring?"

Part 560: Ancient Domains

"Hell yeah, I wanna go exploring." Jason says to Calanthra with a smile. "How do we navigate around Ripspace though? Traveling to other galaxies is going to take billions of years, right? Surely, there's a shortcut."

"Ripspace is not as it seems." Calanthra explains, gesturing grandly to the epic sight before them. "It is a connection between the past and the present; the near and far. The further away or the further back you want to travel, the higher the price you will have to pay."

Jason's smile vanishes. "Wait... you can use Ripspace to travel back in time?!"

"No." Calanthra clarifies. "Time is linear. We cannot travel through it. Some can slow it down or speed it up. A rare few can even pause it for a short while. But moving forward and backward is impossible. Countless have attempted to do so over the eons, but all have failed."

She looks at Jason meaningfully. "Many Rulers would wipe out galaxies if it might let them obtain such a power. The fact they still haven't proves it is impossible."

Jason nods slowly. "I won't lie. I have a lot of regrets. Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and save my daughter from dying."

"Everyone has regrets." Calanthra muses, looking off into the distance. "I have plenty, myself. But it's better this way. There would be pandemonium if time travel ever became possible."

She pauses before continuing with her explanation. "While we cannot go back in time, we can *look* back into time. Pinpointing exact moments in history is difficult, to say the least, but it is possible to use Ripspace to search for key moments in intergalactic history."

"So it's like a massive seer-stone." Jason muses aloud. "But wait, didn't you imply earlier that you used Ripspace to travel to the Milky Way from Andromeda? How does it allow you to jump between galaxies? Are other species using Ripspace for intergalactic travel?"

"You can indeed use Ripspace to travel to distant reaches of space." Calanthra explains. "But... you have to pay a *certain price*. Akasha's Barriers still protect every

galaxy. Cosmics cannot travel between them easily. Mortals can, but the price we must pay is unimaginably steep. That is also the reason my mother perished not long after arriving in the Milky Way and giving birth to me."

The Fairy Monarch sighs softly.

"My people used the power of Ripspace to travel to several other galaxies. We were fortunate that the Creator had died, allowing us to take up residence here in secret, but the Angels, Titans, and Dragons were still a threat we could not overlook. Later, the Volgrim rose up too, and that was something that worried us for a while. Particularly when their Sentinels began to rapaciously erase the lives of innumerable Sentients."

She waves her hand. "Ultimately, very few galaxies didn't have a Ruler in power. Traveling to one that *did* meant flipping a coin and praying our people could avoid their gaze. Sadly, time has shown me that we were likely unsuccessful. I have lost contact with all my sisters across the cosmos."

The image of innumerable galaxies floating in the distance changes before Jason's eyes. Calanthra manipulates some unseen power, causing herself and Jason to suddenly materialize directly in front of a beautiful spiral galaxy.

"This is our Milky Way." Calanthra explains, waving her hand to conjure another, far bigger galaxy beside it. "And this is Andromeda."

"Is it just me or does Andromeda seem... brighter?" Jason asks.

"Andromeda contains far more interstellar particles, cosmic energy, and latent magical power than the Milky Way." Calanthra says. "Of course, in the ancient past, it had even more than it does now, but such is the way of entropy and Chaos."

Jason nods. "How exactly do galaxies lose power over time? Doesn't this feel self-defeating in a way?"

"Every Ruler enters the Unending War with a strategy." Calanthra says, motioning with her hands to disperse the galaxies and reveal images of ghostly creatures, some standing on two legs, some on four, and plenty that appear as mere blobs of energy. "I cannot pretend to know the thoughts of such high and mighty beings, especially as I am a mere mortal myself. Even so, I can definitively state that there are Rulers who seek to put as much galactic energy into their initial creations as possible, while others wish to adopt a more energy-efficient growth-model."

She pokes her finger against Jason's chest. "Take the angels and humans, for instance. The Creator poured the vast majority of his power into creating a galaxy full of Apex Cosmics. At their peak, the angels as a whole commanded enough power to flatten other galaxies. But what did they do instead? They fought with one another, killing themselves due to sheer boredom, if not outright ego."

"I see." Jason says, brushing Calanthra's finger away. "So the Creator dumped all the Milky Way's energy into the angels. I take it this is uncommon among Rulers?"

"Of course. It's a wasteful strategy and usually loses Rulers the War for that Eternity." Calanthra says dismissively. "The Timeless used a different strategy. She created the fairies as mere mortals that evolved over time, gaining greater and greater power through their own efforts. This meant that instead of devouring Andromeda's abundant Cosmic energy, they could slowly sap off its excess over time. For you see, the more energy a galaxy has, the more it can produce. If you ration it long enough, you can reap more of it across the duration of an Eternity."

"That makes sense." Jason concludes. "It's like a Rush build in an RTS versus an Economy build. You sacrifice long-term gains in exchange for short-term power. The problem is, with Akasha's Barriers preventing Rulers from attacking their enemies straight away, a Rush build is dumb because you're just wasting your resources and sacrificing Cosmic energy when you'll actually need it."

Calanthra blinks twice. She looks at Jason with a strange expression, then turns away for a moment, trying to understand the strange terms he's used. They mostly make sense, but some of them are a little...

She shakes her head and returns to the topic at hand. "Right. Rush strategy versus Economy. Of... course. Well, in any case, there is one advantage toward the first strategy. If you drain all the energy from your galaxy, it becomes less appealing for other Rulers to attack. Because Andromeda was so large and still filled with Cosmic power even billions of years after the Expansion Era, it stoked the hunger of the Dark Ones. Meanwhile, the Milky Way only needs to deal with the Plague, which is threatening for mortals, but manageable for Cosmics. In that respect, we've gotten off much luckier."

"I get the bigger picture now." Jason says with a nod. He turns to look back at the cosmos before him. "So, what about all this? Are we gonna go exploring, or what?"

"In order to explore the universe presented here, we would need to make sacrifices we cannot afford. I think you would find the price most disagreeable. But there is something we can explore freely..."

She waves her hand, and instantly, the brilliant and beautiful cosmic view of the universe vanishes.

In its place, Jason and Calanthra suddenly appear inside a dead, barren wasteland. Brown and grey dirt rises up in huge dunes stretching off into the distance. Fallen towers made of gold and stone lay on their sides, or stick into the ground, buried nearly up to their tops as they point diagonally toward the sky.

And speaking of the sky, it glows faintly grey, as if some weak, pale imitation of a star were trying to shine through a thin atmosphere clouded by dust and grime. The very air itself smells of sulfur and toxins, making Jason's nose curl up when he takes a breath.

"Ugh... what the hell? Where are we now?" Jason asks, as he turns and looks around at the dead world surrounding him.

"An Ancient Domain." Calanthra says softly. "A remnant of a dead universe. All life stripped away. All hope lost. Septillions of different Sentient species, gone. Their mortals, their Cosmics, reduced to dust by the Contraction."

The Wordsmith frowns. "This Ancient Domain represents a dead universe? But how can that be possible? If the Heat Death played out and all the galaxies faded to cosmic dust, then there already wouldn't be anything left. And then, if the entire universe collapsed into a singularity before exploding again, there definitely wouldn't be anything left behind resembling physical matter."

"You perceive reality through just three dimensions." Calanthra intones. "Time and space can be considered two dimensions. Cosmic Power is another dimension. I must admit I do not understand how Ancient Domains have continued to exist across countless Eternities, and I don't know how they retain a vaguely familiar form... but I can assure you that in spite of bending logic itself, they do exist and they can provide tangible benefits to those dedicated to exploring them."

"You've been exploring them, then?" Jason asks, turning away from the dead world to scrutinize Calanthra's phantasmal image.

"Me, a little. But often, I dispatch my descendants to scour these Ancient Domains for things of value. It may surprise you, but there are powerful artifacts, vengeful spirits, and all manner of other inter-dimensional horrors lurking within these so-called dead-lands."

Calanthra pauses. She shifts her posture to look at Jason deeply.

"And that is why I've brought you here, Jason. It's time for me to get down to the crux of the matter and breach the subject that I find most important."

He nods. "I'm listening."

"It's like this." Calanthra explains. "The Ancient Domains are unfathomably broad. Think of how large a universe is. Think of how many universes have existed. Think of how much space my people have yet to explore."

She pauses.

"The gains we have received have made my people stronger than you would expect. Among those gains are Yredelemnul's Eye and other leftover remnants of power that many dead ancient Rulers lost when their Existences became forfeit. While their tangible Existences may have perished, their spirits sometimes live on in these broad, unending dead universes..."

"That's why you approached me." Jason says, while crossing his arms and leaning on the ball of his heel. "You said you wanted an alliance with humanity. You... want humans to help you explore the Ancient Domains?"

"Trust is hard to come by among mortals, Cosmics, and Rulers." Calanthra says simply. "I never would have considered allying with the humans before, but you have shown me the broadness of your mind during the debate against your clone and the commander of your military. To some, you certainly appear naive, but to me I see an opportunity I would be foolish to ignore."

She continues. "The Fairies cannot reproduce efficiently. Every fairy we send into the Ancient Domain is one less fairy we have among our Empire. We already have a difficult time replenishing our numbers through the remaining Male Fairies, but do you think it is easy for us to reproduce with other species?"

Jason slowly shakes his head. "Blinker and Kar's children were all crocodiles, not fairies. From that, I can only imagine that most of the time, your mating attempts do not create more of yourselves, but instead more non-fairy children."

"That's exactly correct." Calanthra replies. "But that all changed recently when I found out one of your human males somehow spontaneously altered his genetic profile to become a fairy. There is no doubt about it; Samuel Baker harnesses all the capability to reproduce that you humans do, as well as the trueborn powers of any male fairy."

"So... are you seeking a marriage alliance with Samuel Baker?" Jason asks, scratching his head in confusion. "You could just ask him yourself, you know?"

"This is not about one man." Calanthra retorts. "Samuel Baker, if he were to join our ranks, would certainly help us stave off extinction for a while longer. But that is hardly worth all this melodrama and me taking you to the Ancient Domain in person..."

Jason's eyes widen in realization. "I see! You... you're thinking that if my magic could make one male fairy, I could surely make another, and another..."

"Yes, precisely." Calanthra says, revealing a beautiful smile. "Additionally, if humans were to assist us in scouring these Ancient Domains, we could make great gains together. There is plenty of room for another species to join ours in locating powerful artifacts and other items capable of Uplifting us."

"You want to become Cosmics still." Jason muses. "You haven't resigned yourselves to your current fate."

"Quite the opposite." Calanthra says. "The curse placed upon us is unbreakable by those beneath the realm of Ruler. As I said before, the fairies have lost this Eternity's war. However, while we cannot Ascend any longer, that does not mean the humans are subject to the same limitation. If we could groom a human into becoming the Milky Way's Ruler, we could finally break free of our shackles by virtue of having a powerful ally."

She pauses, looking meaningfully at the Wordsmith.

"If the Demons or the Volgrim were to become our Ruler, we would not enjoy such a benefit. At best, we would only maintain the status quo, and at worst, they might eradicate us out of fear of having an unsightly tumor in their midst."

"Haha." Jason laughs. "So you brought me here to show your sincerity. I get it. Well, I'm definitely not opposed to helping you. Blinker is my good friend. If she were to ask me, I'd definitely say yes to just about any request."

Jason turns away. He walks a few feet off to the side and pauses, standing to gaze out at the Ancient Domain and its endlessly rolling plains which stretches off into the infinite

distance...

"Here's what I can do." Jason says. "My people are already working on laying out the options for humanity and where our fellow men and women will depart over the next few weeks. Some will travel to Maiura. Some will go to Sharmur. Some will stay on Tarus II. It's no trouble at all to put Pixiv on the list, especially as I was already planning to do that. I even have some other places I'd like to include, too..."

"Such as Camael's Cube?" Calanthra asks with a smile. "Or do you perhaps mean Chrona and Hope's Hall of Heroes?"

Jason nearly jumps out of his skin. He whirls around to look at Calanthra with shock in his eyes. "What?! How do you know about Chrona? How do you also know about where Hope has been hiding?? I don't even know that much!"

"For those who are talented in magic, it is possible to see through many lies and deceptions." Calanthra says calmly, unfazed by the alarm on Jason's face. "Your Spynet Sphere isn't so different from the many options I have at my disposal. I have many means to keep an eye on the galaxy. And while Diablo does not know exactly where or what Chrona is, he certainly knows of its general existence."

Her smile turns cold. "I would advise you not to take Unarin lightly either, Wordsmith. That ancient creature is more capable than you can imagine. He is hiding a great many secrets from the galaxy... secrets he does not know that I am aware of. If he were to learn of the true extent of my information web, I fear that he would dispatch a handful of High Psions to eliminate the fairy species tomorrow."

Calanthra's words truly rock Jason to his core. All along, he assumed the precautions he put on Chrona, precautions that fooled even Hope, would make his hidden dimension impossible to detect.

But how could he be so naive?

As the daughter of an Apex Cosmic, Calanthra must have her means, and that likely means Unarin and Diablo aren't too far behind either.

"Shit." Jason curses, lowering his head as a flicker of anger smolders in his heart. "I was too complacent. Chrona isn't secure, which means it's only a matter of time before more Cosmics learn of its existence. How long before they can find its exact location and invade it?"

"Calm yourself, child." Calanthra says soothingly. "The situation is not that dire. After all, Chrona still exists within a highly accelerated timespace. Any biological entity that wishes to travel there could suffer severe after-effects. Furthermore, the entities born inside will be too adapted to living within a higher dimension, so they won't pose much threat to the creatures of realspace."

She waves her hand. "Let's move on, Jason. I want to discuss other matters before dying of old age."

The Wordsmith cools himself off. He inhales deeply, then returns his attention to her.

"Alright. What next, then?"

"Fairies are not the only Sentients capable of entering Ancient Domains." Calanthra explains. "There are others who rarely appear inside here. That is why exploring these domains can be dangerous. The good news is that Cosmics have little need to enter these barren lands, as most of the heritages, treasures, and other such gains you might find inside are only useful to mortals. There are exceptions, but they are so rare as to be a needle found within ten million haystacks. A waste of effort better spent simply progressing one's Cosmic power the ordinary way."

"So what you're saying is, when you send fairies into an Ancient Domain, they can die as a result of crossing paths with Sentients from other galaxies." Jason concludes. "But if you had an army of humans to enter with you, your people would be a lot safer."

"Safety in numbers, yes. And you humans are... uniquely advantaged in Ancient Domain exploration." Calanthra says mysteriously. "Before that, though... do you know what the Power of Imagination is, Wordsmith?"

Jason raises an eyebrow. "Imagination? Like the mental ability to visualize stuff in your head? Yeah. It's not that complicated to understand."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong." Calanthra chides gently. "Imagination is the key to magical power. Imagination, Conception, Visualization, these are all key capabilities powerful maguses and sorcerors use to uplift their capabilities! And as it turns out, most Sentients are actually quite terrible at conceptualizing thoughts into imagery."

She gestures grandly. "Just take the Volgrim! You may think they are a powerful Sentient species, but in fact the Volgrim have terrible imaginations. They are stodgy, dull, and lack a great deal of creativity. All the gains their Technopaths make through

technology are developed via brute force. They slowly improve their technological prowess by minute fractions over long periods of time, eventually resulting in a large and cohesive buildup."

"At the same time, the Psions Uplift themselves through meditation and sitting motionless for thousands of years at a time. Can a species capable of such incredible feats of drudgery also possess limitless imagination? I think not."

"Maybe the reason they're able to sit still for so long is because they live in their imagination?" Jason posits. "In which case their power of imagination should be quite formidable, right?"

"Possible, but unlikely." Calanthra says with a wave of her hand. "Never mind that. The point I'm trying to make is that humans have an extremely high affinity for magic. If your people were to ally with mine, we could teach you our ways. You could help us through your Wordsmithing and superior genetics, creating more fairies and humans alike. This would create a recursive cycle that would continually bolster both our species to greater and greater heights!"

She lowers her voice back to normal. "An alliance with humanity would have other benefits. You humans are equally adept in technology and magic both. You are versatile, capable of learning any skill provided you have time to devote to your studies. The bursts of inspiration you receive also allow you to make large jumps in capability as well, which could mean that in a relatively short period, you might even be capable of challenging the Volgrim."

Jason nods. "That does sound tempting, Calanthra. I'm willing to help you, but I won't demand my people join the fairies. It would be better if those who were the most interested did so instead."

Calanthra playfully twirls a finger through her hair. "Well. My daughters are all beautiful. Perhaps you should make mention that the fairies are... aggressively interested in copulation?"

"COUGH COUGH!" Jason wheezes, taking a step back as he asses her bold choice of words. "Yeah! Uh, I can probably- I'll let everyone know about that too. Obviously!"

Calanthra chuckles. "Such a shy boy."

They continue walking toward one of the nearest fallen towers embedded in the soil of the Ancient Domain.

"You know, Jason." Calanthra says. "You are a Candidate. You have the capability to become a Ruler someday."

"I am?" Jason asks, before thinking back to a conversation in the past. "Oh yeah, someone did mention that to me before. But... eh. I don't know. Becoming a Ruler sounds awful."

"Awful?" Calanthra asks. "How so?"

"It seems... lonely." Jason says, his voice softening. "Imagine all your loved ones dying, but you're stuck behind, living through the end of an Eternity, which takes trillions of years before Heat Death finally eradicates everything. Then comes the next Eternity, where you can remake your species again... but it won't be the same. Even if you remake your loved ones, it won't really be them."

Jason lowers and shakes his head. "That sort of life doesn't suit me."

"I understand why you'd think that way." Calanthra says. "In fact, you are suffering from the same affliction that plagues all Candidates who began their Existences as Biologicals. We have too many ties to the mortal world, so the majority of Biologicals who ascend to the rank of Ruler... fall to their non-biological opponents."

"As for the *things* which are not biological..." Calanthra says, looking at Jason with disgust. "You should already know what they are."

"Highly evolved Artificial Intelligences?" Jason guesses.

"That's right." Calanthra affirms. "There are several tiers of power a superintelligence can possess. The Volgrim have taken great care to prevent anything above a Beta Core from forming in the Milky Way, but once, a long time ago... they made a huge mess by accidentally creating the Milky Way's first Alpha Core Synthmind."

Calanthra chuckles. "The stupid fools didn't only create an Alpha Core, they gave it autonomy in the hopes it would be able to stop the wars between their factions. They built indestructible bipedal bodies for its splintered intelligences, and called them... *Sentinels*. Luckily, they were able to defeat the Alpha Core before it ascended further, but countless other biological species have failed at that juncture, creating an Alpha Core that ultimately devoured the full power of their galaxy for itself."

A chill trickles down Jason's spine. "You're saying the vast majority of Rulers are actually Alpha Core AIs? AIs that control entire galaxies?!"

"No, Jason." Calanthra counters. "Alpha Cores can defeat advanced civilizations. But there is one Existence higher than an Alpha Core, a tier that can only be reached once it has swallowed the power of a galaxy."

"That would be an **Omega Core**. a sentient artificial intelligence that has become Ruler over one or more galaxies. And in Akasha's game, more than 90% of all Rulers are estimated to be these superior lifeforms."

"It is for that reason that these highly adaptable entities are known as **The Evolved**."

Part 561: Milky Way's Agent

"The Evolved." Jason repeats thoughtfully. "Were the Sentinels capable of becoming Evolved?"

"They were not." Calanthra explains. "The Sentinels were not made with the intention of accelerated learning. Their programming was relatively fixed, making it so they would not grow infinitely more intelligent over time. That being said, at their base level, the leader of the Sentinels, named *Mulgris*, was absolutely an Alpha-Core level intelligence. Mulgris was the Command Unit; the brain of the Sentinels. It might have had a slight chance at someday rising to the status of Omega Core, but it did have limiters built in to its programming."

Jason blinks at Calanthra. "How do you know so much about technology?"

"Demons are technophobes." Calanthra sneers dismissively. "The fairies don't use technology much, but we're not totally ignorant. In fact, many monsters are somewhat adept in using it. The fairies are hardly an exception."

"Oh, right. True." Jason says with a nod. "Goblins are surprisingly good with tech stuff..."

He and Calanthra talk a little more, but eventually the conversation winds down.

The two of them begin walking toward the base of one of the sunken towers buried at an angle inside the Ancient Domain's soil. Its faded golden top makes it seem as if it were once part of an opulent and extravagant palace, but after an unknown number of eons, it has lost its shine and become rather haggard.

"Inspect." Jason says.

He waits for a moment, then frowns.

"...strange. My Wordsmithing feels fuzzy, somehow. The details I'm getting about this tower are hazy at best."

"Your magic is rare and powerful." Calanthra says. "I have long suspected it is not ordinary magic tied to the strength of your body, as most magic is. Rather, you are something of an Agent for the Milky Way. Since we are currently standing within a space outside the Cosmos's reach, the connection to your magic has become tentative."

Jason's eyebrows shoot up in alarm. "You're saying my magic is a lot weaker inside an Ancient Domain?!"

"Of course." Calanthra says. "If a new Ruler were to ever take over the Milky Way someday and they were your enemy, they might be able to sever the connection to your Wordsmithing. The same is true if an enemy Ruler were to destroy the Milky Way in its entirety. Even if you traveled to a new galaxy, you would either become powerless, or the full might of your magic would be greatly reduced."

That news troubles Jason. "Do I... have a counter?"

"As a matter of fact, you do." Calanthra chuckles. "Too much of your power is tied up in the central nexus of the Milky Way. I don't know how that happened, but you can change the status quo over time if you wish."

She continues. "But before you do that, you should consider the benefits of your current ability set. In the short term, a new Ruler is unlikely to rise. We have no formidable Apex Cosmics in our galaxy, certainly none coming within reach of seizing power. Because your magic is tied to the power of the Milky Way as a whole, it allows you to tap into the infinite versatility of Imagination without restraint. Should you choose to divorce yourself from the Milky Way, you would gain more autonomy, but you would likely lose much of the potency your Wordsmithing currently possesses."

"Wait, how do you know I'm an 'agent of the Milky Way'?" Jason asks with a frown. "I've never heard anything about this before."

"I don't know it for sure." Calanthra admits. "But my mother was an Agent of Andromeda. There are doubtless several Sentients in the Milky Way who were chosen by it and granted special abilities. You're not unique in that regard; every galaxy has them."

Jason's frown deepens. "Doesn't that mean the Milky Way has a bunch of 'agents'? Wait, no, more importantly, how the heck can a galaxy have an agent? I'd understand if a Ruler did, but... a *galaxy*?? It's just a bazillion stars all floating together. The very idea makes no sense."

Calanthra chuckles. "Galaxies possess consciousnesses, Jason. They are not 'sentient' in the way you and I are, but they possess Ego borne from the wills of all the creatures that live within their confines. The Milky Way's Ego is comprised of the thoughts and desires of Humans, Angels, Titans, Volgrim, Demons, and even us Fairies, after millions of years spent living and integrating into its consciousness."

"So," she continues, "you must understand that every galaxy is capable of selectively choosing and empowering individual Sentients they deem 'worthy.' While I suspect you are an Agent, I cannot say that entirely for certain. There's simply no way to tell unless one reaches the level of a High or Apex Cosmic. I'm merely guessing."

"You believe I am, though, because my power seems weaker now that we're in the Ancient Domain?" Jason asks.

"The Ancient Domain exists outside the realm of the Modern Cosmos." Calanthra says. "If your power were entirely your own, it would remain unaffected. The power of the Milky Way cannot pierce the barrier of Ripspace. Thus, I rest my case."

Jason nods silently, then pushes the thought to the back of his mind.

If my power isn't fully my own, I can investigate it later, he thinks. What's more important is learning more about the Ancient Domain itself.

He returns to examining the faded golden tower. He and Calanthra walk around its exterior, but they don't find any entrances. Eventually, she rears back and smashes her fist against its wall, causing a huge hole to burst open and fragments to fly inside!

Jason looks at her, and she smirks at him. "What? You think because I'm an old woman floating around in an illusory form I can't also punch like the Balrog?"

Jason shrugs. "I mean, you're a top-mortal expert, right? You're as strong as a Demon Emperor? So I guess you being super strong makes sense. It's just... I figured you'd be all... *magical and shit.*"

"Well, you're not wrong." Calanthra concedes, as she steps into the newly opened passage. "My physical body isn't particularly strong. I actually used a spatial compression technique to fire a shockwave at the wall. It's a neat trick. You should try it sometime."

Jason rubs his chin as he follows behind her. "Yeah. Maybe I should."

The two of them step inside and find themselves in a pitch black room devoid of all light. Jason utters a few Words of Power to illuminate the area, but his magic sputters out, forcing Calanthra to intervene. She conjures luminous balls of mana and casts them in different directions, revealing some sort of alien church. Unfamiliar avian figures, resembling bipedal feathered birds of noble origin, rest on the ceiling and walls. The faded stained glass windows appear mostly shattered and broken due to the passage of

time, but Jason can vaguely make out images of the bird-people no matter which direction he looks.

"Huh. So what civilization is this?" Jason asks.

"I don't know." Calanthra replies. "When one enters Ripspace, the landing point is always different. This is why exploration teams sent inside cannot be rescued. Even if a second team goes into Ripspace just a few hours after the first, they could be separated by tens of galaxies worth of distance. It's impossible to traverse Ripspace and map it out in any reliable manner. We can only hope to stumble across a treasure and bring it back with us to Realspace."

Jason nods. He walks over to a statue that has fallen to the ground, a statue depicting a powerful-looking bird-person, his avian face looking much more regal and his body appearing more humanoid than the Harpies Jason has come to know since his departure of the Cryopod.

"Ripspace connects to countless different Eternities, right?" Jason asks. "So this avian species could be from the previous Eternity, or a thousand Eternities before that, or even further and further...?"

"Correct." Calanthra says, as she busies herself flitting about, examining the cracks and crevices of the room. "We've lucked out by landing directly in the middle of an ancient civilization, but it's perfectly possible these creatures were primitives with no noteworthy treasures. Then again, they could have been Apex Sentients that ruled over their galaxy at one point. It is impossible to say unless we investigate further."

"All life becomes void before the advent of a Collapse." Jason says solemnly. "Someday, that will include the humans and Fairies alike."

"Yes, perhaps." Calanthra says nonchalantly. "But then again, we will probably die well before the end of this Eternity. The Dark Ones might kill us, or some other Ruler's minions. But hey, that's life for you!"

"Such a comforting thought." Jason says uneasily.

Over the next few hours, he and Calanthra continue examining the structure, as well as searching through the other nearby ones. All they manage to find are more crumbled ruins of the unknown avian species, but then, before they are about to leave, Jason exclaims in excitement.

"Look! I found something!"

Calanthra flits over to his side, where she finds him holding a ruined book with barely legible words written in ancient ink that has nearly turned to dust after countless eons.

Having searched a rather large area, the two of them only managed to stumble across this book in a village of ruined stone houses, and it wasn't even hidden inside a particularly prestigious looking structure either.

Jason scrunches up his face. "**Translate.**"

His Wordsmithing hazily starts to make some of the words comprehensible, but then after a moment, the magic fails, and their meaning vanishes.

He scowls in frustration, but three more attempts repeat the previous failure, forcing him to turn to Calanthra.

"I cannot read the words." Calanthra says. "Based on some of the drawings, it might be... an apothecary manual."

"Apothecary??" Jason asks in bewilderment. "What's that?"

"A type of mystic who can create potions using magically enhanced ingredients." Calanthra explains. "See these faded drawings here? These appear to be plants and weeds, likely part of the local environment. Even if we could perfectly translate the words, it would be meaningless as the plants from that world are obviously long-dead. But still, we can try taking the book back to Realspace to translate it there."

"At the very least, it'll make for a sick souvenir." Jason says with a smile. "How many people can claim they've read books that came from a different time and universe?"

Calanthra smiles back. "Not many, I'd imagine. You can always give it as a gift to your wife or-"

Suddenly, Calanthra's smile vanishes. Her eyes shrink to pinpricks and she stands up straight, looking around fearfully.

"What?" Jason asks, standing up as well. "What is it??"

"Someone's here." Calanthra says, looking toward the doorway. "They've surrounded us!"

Without another word, she raises her hand.

Whoomph.

The power of spacetime wraps around her and Jason both, yanking them back to Realspace.

But in the instant it takes her spell to transport them, a pitch black figure comprised of evil energy suddenly pounces through the doorway and leaps at Jason! Its luminous red eyes boil with bloodlust as it opens a mouth full of teeth to bite at his neck!

"Shi-!"

Jason cries out in fear, but right before the creature can make contact with his body, he and Calanthra arrive back on the world of Pixiv, where they plummet ten feet to the ground below, slamming brutally on their backs!

THUNK!

"Ugh-uhHH!" Jason cries out instinctively as the air is driven from his chest.

He lies on his back, cringing and bending around as the fear and adrenaline quickly wear off, replaced instead with spine-tingling pain.

"Ahh, fuck! Shit! What the f-fuck was that?!" Jason coughs. He rolls onto his side and trembles for a moment before dragging himself to his knees. **"Heal!"**

Thankfully, after returning to Realspace, his magical powers work once more, allowing him to instantly heal his body and restore his physical form.

Calanthra wipes sweat from her forehead. As an illusory body, the fall didn't hurt her, but even she was not prepared for that sudden attack. "I'm sorry, Jason. I let my guard down because I was having fun answering all your questions. I should have placed protective sigils as we moved around."

"That isn't an answer." Jason says, as he finally rises to his feet. "What the hell were those monsters? They looked like Shades or Shadow-walkers!"

"I don't know what they were." She says with a sigh. "Like I told you before, the ancient civilizations are all dead, but Sentients from the current Eternity can sometimes find their way around the Ancient Domains. Those were monsters capable of ripping us apart, especially as you didn't have proper access to Wordsmithing, and I'm only a phantasmal clone. If I'd been more prepared, we could have escaped sooner and not risked our lives."

Jason's expression turns ugly. "If I send humans into the Ancient Domain, and they have to fight horrible creatures like that, there's a high likelihood everyone will die."

"Possibly. Yes." Calanthra affirms. "But such is the risk they'd need to take. We didn't recover any treasures this time, but at least we managed to retrieve that book."

She looks around for the book, but after a moment, her expression falls.

"Oh."

Jason follows her gaze. He finds a crumbled pile of ash next to where he landed.

"It must have disintegrated on impact." Calanthra mutters. "It was so old and brittle that falling from such a height shattered it into powder..."

Jason turns around, but when he does, his heart turns cold. Yredelemnul's Eye awakens amidst the four statues and directs a piercing glare toward him, shrouding his body with the power of a Ruler!

"Damn!" Calanthra growls. **"Let there be light!"**

She stomps her foot, activating the city's formation once more. Daylight materializes inside the courtyard, causing Yredelemnul's Eye to vanish, and for Jason's heart to stop pounding like the drums of war.

"For god's sake." Jason mutters, turning his attention back to the crumbled remains of the book. **"Restore. Remake. Recreate..."**

He tries several different Words of Power, but all he manages to do is make a brand new book with no writing inside whatsoever. The blank pages make him feel dismayed, as if all the time he spent in the Ancient Domain was wasted.

Calanthra senses his thoughts. "Your viewpoint has expanded. You learned that your Wordsmithing does not work properly within Ripspace. I would say today was quite fruitful, Jason. Don't worry too much about losing that Avian species' book."

"I'll try not to." Jason mumbles, disheartened. "I was just really looking forward to showing Phoebe something cool."

Jason stores the book inside a hidden space. He looks at the four statues contemplatively.

"Want to visit Ripspace again?" Calanthra asks. "We'll arrive somewhere else, so those shadow-monsters won't be around."

"Nooo thank you!" Jason laughs nervously. "I'll pass. I was just thinking that there must be something special about these statues for them to have the power to contain a

fragment of a Ruler."

"Of course." Calanthra says. "Yredelemnul's Eye usually could only be suppressed by the power of another Ruler, but since we lacked such a thing, we had to sacrifice the souls of four Apex Cosmics, placing them inside these statues to suppress his power."

Before Jason can offer any words of sympathy, she raises her hand. "Save your breath. Those Cosmics saved countless fairy lives. They were more than willing to give up theirs if it meant securing a safe haven for their descendants."

"It's still tragic." Jason says. "Akasha's Game is brutal at heart. It allows no survivors."

"The game wouldn't be any fun for the Rulers if their minions simply lived enjoyable and easy lives." Calanthra says. "It's for this reason that they encourage such violence. The War is unending."

The two of them finally leave the garden and head back inside, where they enter the hallway of paintings Jason saw before.

"Not all is as bad as it seems." Calanthra explains. "These paintings harness limitless energy and potential. Did you know that if a Painting Mystic becomes proficient enough, they can create entire worlds filled with life via a work of art?"

"You mentioned something like that before." Jason says. "I guess that means you can infinitely expand your living space? You can create worlds to live on without encroaching on the territory of other celestial powerhouses?"

"Not anymore, we can't." Calanthra says sadly. "Our Cosmic Painters have all fallen. We only have a few of the Ancient Paintings left. They are our most prized possessions, as they contain energy which once belonged to our lost homeworlds. By going inside, we fairies can reminisce on the old times, the ancient days before the Great Migration."

Calanthra sighs and shakes her head. She touches one of the paintings lovingly, but doesn't offer to show Jason the inside of any of them.

Instead, she looks at him with renewed interest. "You know... there is a certain individual living on Tarus II. He possesses an affinity for Mystic Painting. I wonder if you might be willing to convey to him our interest in... exploring his talents?"

Jason stares at her for half a beat before a light bulb goes off above his head. "Wait, do you mean Sir Lorent? Phoebe's nephew?"

"Indeed, that very Hero." Calanthra answers. "His paintings lack a certain spark of life, but I think, given time, we might be able to improve his talents if he were to come and live with us. Could you extend my offer to him when you return?"

"Sure. That's not a problem at all." Jason says, before pausing to add, "I must warn you though, I don't control Sir Lorent. If he doesn't want to pay you a visit, I won't command him to do so."

"I would never force a fellow artisan's hand." Calanthra says. "But I do thank you in advance for conveying my wishes."

As they depart the Hall of Paintings, Jason turns a questioning gaze her way.

"Say... I've been wondering. When I met Blinker, she was super tiny and shrunken down. I expected most fairies to be like that, but you're all... human sized. Why is that?"

"We are standard-biped-sized." Calanthra counters. "But we do often shrink ourselves when in the presence of other Milky Way Sentients. As for why we do so, you should be able to guess."

Jason contemplates that thought for a moment.

"Hmm... perhaps because it makes you appear less intimidating?"

"That's one reason. We like to make ourselves appear small and weak. We become more agreeable in the eyes of our equals and less eye-catching in the eyes of our superiors. This is one reason the Volgrim don't pay much attention to our movements. Not only do they have a Plague to fight, but they don't care too much about a one-world civilization."

"By the way," Calanthra adds. "My people have another problem. Because of Mephisto's actions, luring a powerful Apex Cosmic Archangel here, the capital city of Pixiv fell a few weeks ago. It housed a certain artifact that kept us from being detected by the Plague. I now worry our safety has been compromised. You should warn any humans who wish to come here about that fact."

"Were you able to rebuild the stealth artifact?" Jason asks.

"Partially, using remnants from the original one." Calanthra says. "But the entire planet is not yet fully protected. It could take us months to return to our prior status quo. In the meantime... the Plague has likely identified us as a target."

"Why hasn't it struck yet then?"

"We don't know. That is the most worrying aspect."

Eventually, Jason and Calanthra arrive back in the main lobby. By now, the fairy princesses have finished eating and dispersed, leaving the hall feeling empty.

"One last thing before you go," Calanthra says, "my offer remains on the table. I'd love it if you took a few of my daughters back with you. They are beautiful, fertile, and trained well. You can fill them up as you please-"

"Ahem, AHEM!!" Jason coughs, interrupting her. "It's been GREAT talking to you, Miss Monarch! I think I need to be going home to my WIFE now. Take care, and we'll talk in the future!"

Without waiting for a goodbye, Jason utters a Word of Power and vanishes from the spot, leaving Calanthra to stare wistfully at his afterimage.

"Oh, such a cute boy." She mutters to herself. "He'd make for a fine son in law if I could just snag him. Tut-tut."

She chuckles playfully to herself, then merges her phantasmal body back into her physical one.

"Well anyway. Back to business as usual, I suppose."

Part 562: Parahuman Corps

Seven days after the Great Debate, Immigration Centers open up around Tarus II. Four of them in total, with one at each side of the city: North, east, west, and south. These centers provide a huge building for people to go and place their preferred future residence following the Great Debate, so everyone will be able to quickly and efficiently organize their future living accommodations.

Several high profile individuals staff the posts at each Immigration Center. For the western center, which allows people to migrate to Sharmur, a handful of demons and humans take the lead, including Emperor Kiari. For the northern center, which allows people to migrate to Maiura, Neil's personal assistant Debra takes the lead. As for the southern and eastern centers, these are for transferring to Pixiv and for either staying on Tarus II or migrating to folded spaces under the control of Jason Hiro.

While Jason does not immediately open up the possibility of humans living inside Chrona, he certainly does for the folded spaces within the Cube. Unbeknownst to almost every Sentient in the Milky Way, Jason begins aggressively expanding Camael's Cube's internal space. He creates multiple different spaces, with some of them the size of Tarus II and others that are bigger or smaller, depending on the needs. Most interestingly, he experiments by changing the time-flow between different spaces, with some accelerating time five-fold while others accelerate fifty-fold.

With the help of Blinker's fairy friends, such as Princess Melia, Jason also establishes gates that can travel around inside the Cube, allowing people to smoothly travel between higher and lower dilation zones. In this way, he can see what the effects of high and low TDR are on humans over time.

But on the surface of Tarus II, most of the attention goes to the Immigration Centers. Millions of humans and tens of millions of their allied demon and monster comrades have to make hard decisions on where they will go, following the conclusion of the Great Debate a week earlier.

On this day, Hope Hiro joins Debra at the Northern Center, helping her with the workload of a large number of people who want to migrate to Maiura. He sits inside an isolated tent-area with a short line of thirty or so people extending outside, while not far

away, Debra's much larger tent has fifty times the number of people in line and she requires half a dozen helpers to keep it moving along at a reasonable pace.

"I don't get it," A married pair of Troopers say as they sit in Hope's tent and talk to him directly. "What's the difference between coming under you or Neil? Aren't you close friends? Isn't the Commander your superior officer?"

Hope nods at the woman who asked the question. "We're friends, yes. But Neil and I are going to be leading different branches of humanity's military. In the ancient times, when Earth was still around, we had divisions such as the Army, the Navy, the Coast Guard, and so on. Many nations organized their militaries differently, but that's beside the point."

He continues. "As I'm sure you two are aware, Neil is a... traditionalist. He wants boots on the ground. He wants you to pick up your guns and fight that good fight against the demons. But what I'm offering is different."

The male troopers glances to the side, where he sees a large white panel explaining all the benefits of joining Hope's Parahuman Corps. Several diagrams describe the benefits being offered along with the gains they will surely reap.

"Well, from what I've heard, this whole arrangement feels a bit... *culty*." The male trooper says, his voice sounding slightly nervous. "Look, I like you a lot, Commander Hope. You fought hard for us when we needed to expand. You ended up captured and tortured by that piece of shit Gressil, but you rebounded and you came back better than ever. I admire that about you. But this... this whole 'submitting to Jephthath' thing sounds *really* weird, sir."

Hope smiles weakly. "I get it. I do. But that's the thing. Neil is offering for you to do what you've always done. You wear an exosuit, you shoot demons and xenos dead. Nothing wrong with that. But I'm offering for you to join on the ground floor of humanity's future strongest military force."

Hope's voice becomes more excited as he continues to explain. "See, by submitting to Jephthath, you will become a part of something bigger. Better. Greater! Humans united in mind, body, and soul. You will become physically stronger by a factor of ten, maybe even a hundred. Don't you *hate* feeling like the demons are more powerful than you? Don't you hate having to make up the difference with these flimsy suits when any Emperor can still rip you apart?"

"The transformation isn't a problem." The female trooper says. "Obviously, becoming far stronger is a huge benefit. But Jason Hiro said we're going to become slaves if we join you! He said we would lose all control and Jephthah would turn us into his pawns!"

Hope's expression crinkles into a look of disgust. "Jason? You really think Jason gave you the full story? Look, I get it. Up there, on that stage, it probably looked like I was out of my element or like I didn't have any good explanations. It probably seems like he cornered me."

He waggles a finger chidingly. "But that's exactly what Jason wanted! He talks a big talk about uniting together and all that crap, but in the end it was Jason who decided to split humanity apart. He had his wife take the fall for that stupidly unpopular Unification Plan, and when the time came, he felt the changing winds and flip-flopped! But I've been consistent right from the beginning. Humans need to stick together!"

Still sensing the uncertainty from the troopers, Hope waves his hand dismissively. "Jephthah isn't going to control you and turn you into sex-puppets or some weird crap. Look, you two are religious, right? Haven't you ever heard of turning your body over to the Will of God in your moment of weakness?"

Both troopers nod slowly. "Well, yeah." The man says. "Who hasn't?"

"It's exactly like that." Hope explains. "Let's say a demon invasion occurs. You become scared. You try to move, but your legs freeze up. When a demon hits you, you die. But not with Jephthah around! He can take control and give you the strength to stand up and save yourself! He can put all that strength you've gained to good use! And now imagine you're fighting in a platoon of soldiers who've been surrounded by the enemy. Wouldn't you like it if you could get a shot of liquid courage injected into your mind by the strongest member of the team? With Jephthah's power, all of us become as strong as our strongest link!"

Seeing that his words have finally made an impact, Hope smiles.

"Besides. You're already in my tent, right? Do you *really* want to go out and walk to the back of Debra's line? You'll be waiting for hours. Seems like such a hassle, doesn't it?"

The woman glances outside and grimaces when she sees a line nearly a thousand people deep.

She and her husband lean together and whisper for a few moments, then they sigh and turn back to Hope.

"...We'll join you, Commander Hope."

"I sure appreciate the enthusiasm." Hope jokes. He slides a digital pad over to them. "Just put your names here, check this box, and..."

A few minutes later, they leave the tent, and Hope sighs. "Finally. Another one. Shit, I was hoping for ten times as many people, if not a hundred. Jason really smeared me good... next!"

He calls out to the line outside the tent, and the flap flips open to allow a single man to walk inside.

Hope's eyes light up. "Hey, Henry! Henry, my guy! You came to me first?!"

The young man with bags under his eyes, Henry Cliff, smiles at Hope. "Commander. This felt the most fitting place for me to come, sir. You know, since most people can't stand me, since I sort of... betrayed Commander Neil, and all that."

Hope shakes Henry's hand, and the two of them sit down. Hope smiles at the young man, but notices a look of melancholy on his face.

"You have any questions?" Hope asks. "Anything that you need convincing about?"

"Oh, it's nothing like that." Henry says, shrugging his shoulders and sighing softly. "I would have come to your side no matter what. You are one of the few people who's shown me any kindness, sir. I know I screwed up. I just want to make a difference."

Hope nods. "Do you know what you're getting yourself into? Do you understand what Jephthah is all about?"

"I get it, sir." Henry answers. "If I can fight the good fight, I'll do anything, sir. Honestly, I thought I'd never be able to join the military again. My only worry now is that you'll tell me 'no' and I'll be stuck making deliveries for the rest of eternity."

"Haha, no worries, Henry. No worries." Hope says, his smile widening. "Everyone deserves a second chance. It's a shame *Jason* can't understand that, but you know how he is. More importantly, after today I'll expect you to stop calling me 'sir'. We're better friends than that!"

"We're friends?" Henry asks, his body slightly jolting in surprise. "I... I didn't know you saw me that way."

"You know we're practically the same age, right?" Hope asks, reaching across the table to lightly slap Henry's shoulder. "C'mon, you've gotta lighten up a little bit. Anyone who joins my Parahuman Corps will become a Hero, like me, capable of punching the average Demon Duke into the dirt and easily bringing the fight to Emperors. You were the best goddamn sniper we had, so we'll put your enhanced sensitivity and reaction speeds to good use on the battlefield."

"That would be amazing, Hope." Henry says, his smile becoming gentler. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't." Hope says. "I sense a great will to do good hiding inside you. Over time, I think we'll be able to awaken it, to humanity's benefit."

* * *

A few hours later, after Hope has signed up those who will come, and as night descends, he steps out of the tent, only to see an equally-long line still stretching out in front of Debra's tent.

"...damn." Hope mutters. "And I thought I had a pretty good yield. It's barely a drop in the bucket."

His expression falls. He glances at the immigration sheet in his hands, discovering he only managed to sign a few hundred people today.

"It's less than yesterday, too." Hope mutters. "I've barely signed two thousand, total. Jephthah's power works better with more and more people linked together, though. Fucking *Jason*. He really screwed me this time."

As Hope curses to himself, a trooper walks over to him and deactivates her helmet, revealing the face of an older woman Hope recognizes.

"Hm?" Hope grunts, looking at her. "Linda! Good to see you."

"Hey, Hope." Linda says. "Neil told me to ask you to pay him a visit once you were done. You mind?"

Hope blinks. "Sure, sure. Not a problem at all. I'll pop over right now."

After saying goodbye, Hope utters a Word of Power and teleports directly outside Neil's office, slightly startling a few people nearby, but they quickly recover when they see who arrived.

Hope knocks on the door, then enters after Neil tells him he can come in.

"Neil." Hope says, nodding respectfully. "What's up?"

"Are things going well for you?" Neil asks, looking up from a mountain of paperwork on his desk. He stands up and walks over to shake Hope's hand. "I hear you haven't gotten many immigration requests."

The corner of Hope's eye twitches at Neil's statement. "Y-yeah. Well, you know I'm looking for quality over quantity, haha..."

He shakes Neil's hand, then the two of them sit down with the desk between them.

"You don't have to lie to me." Neil says, shaking his head. "Jason pulled a dirty trick on you, Hope. I see real value in your Parahuman Corps. I want to... try and divert some people your way."

"Oh yeah? You do?" Hope asks, his eyes narrowing. "And what's this little favor gonna cost me?"

For a brief moment, silence follows.

Neil looks at Hope intently. He rests his elbows on the table, and his chin atop his folded hands.

"Hope. Are you aware of the... conversation I held with Diablo a little over a week ago?"

Hope's eye twitches again. "I am. You turned him down."

"So you were listening." Neil says quietly. "I thought you might be. No doubt Jason was listening, too. As I'm sure you are aware, I hold quite a strong hatred for the demons. Some detractors have even called my hatred 'irrational.'"

He lifts his head up and sits back in his chair.

"We are at a crossroads, Hope. I have built my current existence on hating demons. I cannot alter that identity without paying a price. But if you think Diablo's offer did not move me, you were not paying attention."

A half-breath of silence follows.

"Hope." Neil says, after a pause. "I want you to take Diablo's offer."

"What?!" Hope exclaims. "The fuck are you talking about??"

"Don't act surprised." Neil says calmly. "The demons are only able to turn Emperors into Cosmics. They have, at most, a hundred Emperors. That's a hundred worlds they can take back permanently from the Plague. But there are tens of billions of planets and star systems in our galaxy. The demons are nowhere close to stalling the war against the Plague, let alone winning it."

He continues. "Even if Diablo can uplift ten thousand new Emperors, which I strongly doubt he can, that's still nothing at all in the grand scheme of things. We humans need real practical experience in battle against these 'Kolvaxians.' We need to know what they are capable of. We need to know how they fight, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and so on. If we engage the Plague in battle alone, our soldiers will die miserable deaths."

"I see..." Hope says. "So, since Diablo has a 100% success rate against the Kolvaxians so far, you think we should help him conquer worlds in order to test our troops."

"That's right." Neil says. "But it won't do if you only bring your Parahuman Troops to battle. First off, the reception hasn't been particularly enthusiastic toward them, and secondly, we need to train our troops en-masse. I want tens or even hundreds of thousands of soldiers forging real practical experience on the battlefield. The problem is, I cannot give this order with my identity as it stands now. Only you can."

"Jason could too." Hope points out. "He'd love to have soldiers fight beside the demons."

"That's exactly what I want to avoid." Neil quickly retorts. "If Jason takes command, he'll make it seem like we humans are buddy-buddying up with our former enemies and becoming closer. If you do it, you can frame this as a simple military exercise. Nothing more, nothing less. An exchange of benefits."

"There is a problem." Hope says slowly. "You can say our men and women are getting 'combat experience' but the demons will still reap the ultimate rewards. They clear out the Plague, they place a Cosmic in command, and they ultimately gain a new world rich in resources."

Neil's nose twitches. "I know. In an ideal scenario, we would simply elevate one of our humans to the rank of Cosmic. Force Diablo to make it work. But I'm guessing that's

infeasible."

Hope nods. "Completely. I have observed Diablo a few times from afar. The process of forging a new Cosmic requires a body to become overwhelmed with the energy of a star. Human bodies are more frail than Demon Lords, let alone Barons, Dukes, and Emperors. Any human who tried to become a Cosmic through Diablo's method would explode. At least it would be a quick death."

"A sturdy body is required?" Neil asks. "Then... what about a body empowered through Jephthath?"

Hope pauses for a moment to think about this. He massages his chin, then communicates with Jephthath through the Dominion Rod.

"...Jephthath says it might be possible, but only a human who was sufficiently powerful could do so. An ancient Hero like Arthur might have been able to pull it off. Jephthath himself probably couldn't have. Hercules, the ancient Titan, would have likely been able to."

He shakes his head. "This is all assuming Diablo's method isn't limited to demons. More likely, it is. Even if it isn't, he won't reveal that fact. Uplifting humans stands counter to his long term goals."

"I would rather not use a demon's ascension ability to empower our people." Neil says mildly. "So let's strike that option from the list."

Neil reaches over to grab a cup of coffee. He takes a few sips, then sets it back down.

"Here is what you're going to do, Hope. You are going to declare that you are building an anti-Kolvaxian task force. You'll say that killing the Plague takes precedent for now, and that you strong-armed me into this position. I will remain silent and allow you to take full credit for any future victories you make, all in order to train our soldiers well."

Hope nods. "I might get all the credit, but I'll take all the blame if something goes wrong."

"Every reward requires one to pay an equivalent price. Humanity needs this, Hope, and I cannot give it to them. I'm going to focus on building up Maiura in the coming weeks and months, but you need to be leading our troops into battle to give them the experience they so desperately need."

"Alright. I agree with that proposal." Hope says, as he stands up. "We'll talk later, Neil."

He turns to leave, but before he can reach the door, Neil speaks up.

"Hope. One last thing."

Hope pauses. He turns to look at Neil.

"...Yeah?"

"Do you know what humanity's biggest advantage is?" Neil asks. "Or perhaps instead, what demonkind's biggest disadvantage is?"

The Wordsmith thinks for a moment. "Our... willpower?"

"Perhaps. But I am referring to our capacity for growth." Neil says slowly. "The demons are stagnant, Hope. This method of ascending to Cosmic is pathetic, if you truly think about it. They anchor their lives to a single planet, give up their freedom, and in exchange only obtain a one-time power-up."

Neil lifts his chin to peer down the bridge of his nose at Hope. "In that manner, the Volgrim are quite similar. They have long plateaued when it comes to their technological progress. They make minor, incremental changes over long periods of time, but their creativity is much duller than ours. Their Psions are the same as they were millions of years ago."

"So you think humans are different?" Hope asks.

"I know we are." Neil says slowly. "We possess something neither the demons nor the Volgrim do. We have science, we have technology, *and* we have magic. If we can obtain just a bit of breathing room, we can rapidly develop our strengths. We can steal Volgrim technology, reverse engineer it, and make it our own. We can create new Heroes capable of harnessing incredible magical power. Then, we can combine the two to create warriors unstoppable among our rivals."

Neil lifts a finger and points it at Hope.

"But we need time, Hope. We *need* time. There is a race for galactic supremacy underway. Our rivals started millions of years before us, and their headstart is, to say the least, *considerable*. We can only catch up to them if we tap into the true power lurking within our genes."

Hope listens silently while Neil speaks, absorbing his mentor's words.

"You have to take this assignment seriously, Hope." Neil says, his words solemn. "All it will take is one mistake, one moment of inattentiveness, and our species will go extinct in an instant. We are not strong enough to resist the forces opposing us, not right now. But given time, I believe humanity will rise up and crush these interlopers."

Hope nods. "I understand, Neil."

"Good. I pray you do." Neil says, closing his eyes heavily. "Now get out there and make some magic happen. Don't just rely on Jephthah either. Use the full force of your Wordsmithing to empower our boys and girls. Make our soldiers a force to be reckoned with."

Hope and Neil exchange one last look. They nod at each other, then the Wordsmith exits the room, closing the door behind himself as he departs.

Neil remains quiet for a moment.

"I'll play your game for now, Diablo. But it won't be long before my species stops being mere pieces you can shove around the board."

"Underestimate humanity at your peril."

Part 563: Deal with a Devil

Unarin paces around his Inner Sanctum, his eyes closed, as he has done countless times for countless different reasons over his long, storied life.

Without any other Volgrim within several stories, let alone those foolish enough to barge in on the First Founder, he has always been able to enjoy a certain degree of peace during these moments of solitude. Unlike some Sentients, Unarin has never been one to feel lonely during isolation, as he possesses a formidable brain that allows him to think about innumerable subjects all at the same time.

Philosophy, literature, battle tactics, empire building, the individual performance of millions of high-level subordinates, and many many other things always keep a portion of his mental focus occupied, preventing him from experiencing boredom. Rare are the times when he deliberately decides to think about nothing at all and simply stare into the Void, allowing himself to focus and achieve tranquility.

But for the past 90,000 cycles, he has almost never done so, as the Plague has morphed over time into an omnipresent Threat he cannot afford to ignore. In recent millennia, that Threat has evolved to become greater and greater, and now it occupies more of his brainpower than ever before.

If Unarin were to give an exact estimate, he might even say the Plague was valued at a full 22% of his mental real-estate. An unfathomable amount, compared to all the other matters involved in running the Volgrim Empire.

As Unarin closes his eyes and thinks, time passes swiftly in the real world. His mind, though occupied, always keeps a sliver of consciousness focused on the happenings around him. While he might not be a Psion trained in Brain Enhancing, his mental acuity does not lose out in the slightest to Dosena, the progenitor of that very same branch of Psionics. Over many ages, his brain has enlarged and compressed itself over time, allowing him to out-think his enemies should he devote a fraction of his acuity to the Threats they pose.

It is because of this accumulation over three million years that Unarin immediately notices a fluctuation within the space of his Inner Sanctum. He pivots on his heel and

turns to face a projection of magical energy as it coalesces into the figure of a bipedal, red-skinned demon within the span of just three short seconds.

Diablo, the Emperor of Annihilation, materializes a short distance from Unarin, his projected figure still adorned with the same robes he always wore before he merged with the body of the Archdemon.

"Founder Unarin." Diablo says, after flicking his eyes around the Inner Sanctum. "You reacted quickly. It seems you were expecting me."

Unarin blinks slowly. "You took your time. I thought you might show a few rotational cycles ago. Been busy?"

"Oh, you know how it is." Diablo says, waving his hand flippantly. "So many worlds to liberate. So little time for pleasantries and idle pursuits."

The Emperor of Annihilation pauses for a moment. He glances up toward a specific direction, as if peering through the ceiling.

"Second Founder. There's no need for you to lurk like a vulture. Why not come down and say hello to an old friend?"

Hardly have the words left his lips before a disturbance of Psionic Energy materializes beside Unarin. Founder Dosena levitates a half-inch off the ground, her feet barely missing the floor as she crosses her arms and remains at Unarin's side protectively.

[Diablo. Do not speak in such a familiar tone to me.] Dosena bites. [We are neither friends nor allies.]

"We're not?" Diablo asks innocently. "I am but a humble Emperor of the Demons, a loyal vassal to the great and mighty Volgrim Empire. Have I wronged you in some way?"

He spreads his hands out and smiles kindly, like a simple old man unassuming of his relationship to a greater power.

Dosena's eyes narrow. She does not appear amused.

"You've come for a reason." Unarin interjects. "I believe I have deduced roughly eighty-seven point six percent of that reason, but it would be best if you told me in your own words what you wish to discuss."

Instead of immediately answering, Diablo turns and wanders to the left, slowly walking past tables, shelves, and other displays of various pieces of artwork and other

cultural artifacts. His gaze moves from one item to the next as he spares half a glance at some, and pauses to focus on others for a second or two.

"Such a grand display." Diablo says after a full minute of silence. "It hurts this humble Demon Emperor's feelings that you've never invited him to your Inner Sanctum, Unarin. To collect a mountain of beautiful artworks and yet never show them off... don't you find it to be a waste?"

"Those who are worthy may enter." Unarin says. "You are now worthy, so you are allowed to enter."

"I'm *now* worthy?" Diablo asks, turning his head to peer at Unarin out of the corner of his eye. "You *allow* me to look? Goodness, you're certainly a generous benefactor. I would hate to spoil your good mood and force you to evict me."

[Watch your words.] Dosena warns. [This frail projection of yours stands no chance against me. If I wish to banish you, you cannot resist.]

She sneers. [In fact, why don't you bring that lumbering body of yours to Volgarius? I will show you the meaning of true power.]

Diablo and Dosena exchange a glance. He stops and stands in place, looking at her with the same intensity she forces upon him.

"Someday, the two of us should... exchange a few blows." Diablo says slowly. "Trade insights. I have long desired to witness the full might of the Volgrim's greatest warrior."

[I will hold back a little so that you can save face.] Dosena says, her eyes curling into a smile. [It would not do for such a mighty Cosmic as yourself to lose too quickly.]

Unarin sighs. "Dosena, you may go. I will speak to our guest alone."

[Your will is mine.] Dosena says, nodding at Unarin before flickering away.

Diablo pauses for a moment, then he bares a toothy smile.

"Your mutt is well-trained." He praises sarcastically. "Will she give you her paw if you ask?"

"Even the best trained dog of a human has the blood of countless wolf ancestors flowing through its veins." Unarin fires back. "Tread carefully, lest you cause her to bite."

Diablo continues to maintain his fierce gaze for only a few seconds longer. Then he turns his whole body and reduces his aggressive stance.

"Let's get down to business." Diablo says.

"Certainly." Unarin says. "I was starting to wonder if you only came here to trade quips."

The two men walk over to a small table with four wooden chairs surrounding it. They take a seat beneath a chandelier of seemingly orcish origin, then both sigh softly under their breaths.

"Two weeks ago," Diablo says, "I began my campaign to retake the Milky Way."

His words do not seem to differentiate *who* he was liberating it from, and neither does Unarin ask for clarification.

"Before then, I only somewhat comprehended the scale of the conflict." Diablo continues. "Now, thanks to my newfound power, I can safely understand just how badly you are losing. Every day that passes, your forces get pushed back another dozen or so worlds at a time. You never make any gains, and only continue to lose ground."

Diablo chuckles. "I imagine the situation is truly agony for an intellectual like yourself. No matter what science or psionics you throw at the Kolvaxians, you cannot seem to push them back. Their expansion must have been *so slow* at the start, like a snail stuck to an adhesive agent that only made the tiniest forward momentum. But with each new world they took, the Plagueborn began to build up more and more momentum, while you only had *one* option to stop them."

Diablo's smile turns more sinister. He leans forward with a mocking gaze, directing it at Unarin as if it were a sword capable of impaling his adversary's ego.

"You blew up the planets taken by the Plague using Marie Becker's Neutron Bombs. And, I'm guessing, at one point you blew them *all* up. Every single world where the Plague had taken root. You destroyed them all. Yet *somehow* they returned. You brought hundreds of Paradise-class worlds to ruin for *nothing*. You were flabbergasted. You had no idea how the Plague was able to return again and again and again."

Unarin lifts up his chin. "And?"

Seeing the composed look on the First Founder's face, Diablo leans back in his chair. His evil smile returns to a simple smirk.

"You can pretend to be in control all you want, First Founder. The truth is, you're beginning to feel desperate. Thanks to the Wordsmith, you know about the Cosmic Realm

enveloping the Milky Way. Like an egg protecting a chick before it hatches, this dimension was intended to give the Archangels another weapon in the future Unending War. But alas, those foolish pheasants perished, and now all that remains of them are a few souls sticking stubbornly to the physical world through mere remnant souls."

"But what does it matter?" Diablo continues. "Perhaps if you had known about the Cosmic Realm at the start, you could have killed the Plague before it reached a tipping point. But now? You have no chance whatsoever. Short of a miraculous scientific breakthrough, you're going to lose this war once even a single battle-line collapses. The Plague has taken over the entire periphery of the galaxy and is now working its way inward. Once it reaches the middle and core systems, there will be no escape."

Diablo pauses for a moment to mockingly puff out his lips and look around, as if searching for a savior in the darkness.

"Oh dear, so what is a humble Founder supposed to do when the mud-dwelling species he despises start suddenly rising up with ways to defeat his enemy? Try and force them to bend the knee? But with what military? You can't spare the soldiers to suppress me. Or perhaps you should simply allow the entire Milky Way to fall so long as it allows you to look good until the last moment. So many options, and none of them seem to give you the victory you desire."

Unarin slowly blinks. He doesn't respond to Diablo's mockery, instead opting to let the Demon Emperor get it out of his system.

"Is that all?" Unarin asks. "Or do you have a proposal for me? The day is young and we have plenty of discussions we could be pursuing."

"Sorry, Unarin. I'm so young compared to you. So childish." Diablo says with a smile. "Forgive me for my youthful folly. I'll just cut to the chase now. Save us the long-winded diatribes."

His smile disappears.

"I am running out of Emperors. There are only so many I can uplift. In order to make an Emperor, I need a Duke. But once I run out of those, I'll need Barons, but that will require me to uplift them two levels instead of one. And once the Barons have all been run out, I'll need to dig into the Lords... and so on."

Unarin nods, having already deduced as much himself.

"The problem is," Diablo says, "we need to fortify the cores of every world I take back from the Plague. You see, Unarin, the Plague infests world cores, and in doing so it opens gateways where it can transfer forces from the Cosmic Realm to our material plane with ease. I can take a world from the Plague, but if I don't attach a powerhouse to that world, it will remain available for the Plague to retake at a later date. That means even if I were to request Founder Dosena herself to stand guard over a world, unless she anchored herself to the world's core, it would still be weak to another Plague invasion in the future."

Unarin's eyes flicker with insight. "So that's the trick you've been using. I ignorantly assumed you only attached Emperors to Celestial bodies for the sake of obtaining Cosmic powerhouses, but all this time you were also preventing the Plague from ever returning to those systems."

"Something like that." Diablo says. "Actually, the Plague can still return. The method the Plague has historically used to corrupt worlds is by suddenly and inexplicably appearing on the planet's surface. This is because the Kolvaxians would materialize inside the world's core, infest it, then start making their way to the surface. However, they do not need to use this method to attack planets in the future. Now that you have fed them a willing and ready supply of High Psions, they can simply traverse the Void. If they sneak up on and subdue a Planar Warden, perhaps by infecting them with the Plague, then they can infest the world once again. Therefore, even though I have made the worlds impossible for the Plague to traditionally infest, those worlds are far from invulnerable."

Unarin closes his eyes for a moment to think.

"In that case, even though it seems you have made great gains versus the Plague, it is not inevitable at all that you will continue to win one easy victory after another. The further you spread your base of power, and the more you stretch your forces out, the more vulnerable your Wardens are to assassination attempts by sneaky Cosmic Plagueborn."

"That is right." Diablo says. "And now we reach the part where *you* come in."

Unarin opens his eyes. Diablo leans forward in his chair.

"There are two issues I'm currently facing." Diablo explains. "First. Despite conquering tens of worlds so far within just two short weeks, my speed of conquest is painfully slow compared to the Plague's expansion. At best, I am only keeping up with the speed of worlds lost every day, and the Plague has a ninety-millennia headstart on me."

"Secondly, I'm about to run out of Emperors. Uplifting more will take time. Even if I uplift all the demons above the rank of Baron, that's less than 50,000 elites across all the remaining Hells. 50,000 star systems compared to the totality of the galaxy? It's nothing at all."

Diablo slowly raises a finger and points it at Unarin.

"This deal I'm about to offer is better than you deserve. If I had come onto the scene 50,000 years ago, it wouldn't even be on the table. Simply put, you don't deserve it."

"Well. I thank you for your generosity in advance." Unarin says mildly. "Continue."

"Here's the deal." Diablo explains. "I want your help in two ways. First: You will send troops with advanced weaponry, psionic power, and anything else you can spare to every world as I begin to conquer them. This will greatly increase my speed of assimilation, allowing me to conquer each world's core with ease. The faster I take worlds, the faster we can begin working to push the Plague back."

"I don't have troops to spare." Unarin says. "You said it yourself. My poor, fragile Empire is barely holding on. We're unraveling at the seams."

Unarin dons an expression of mock weakness, shaking his head and throwing up his hands helplessly.

Diablo doesn't buy it.

"I'm not asking for your Executors. I don't even need any Psions at or above the 6th level. In fact, it's better if you give me Psions of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th level. 5th Level Psions are roughly equivalent to Demon Emperors, and that just so happens to work out perfectly for the second condition."

Unarin's eyes flicker once again as he realizes what Diablo is implying.

"You mean to say...?"

"That's right." Diablo says with a smile. "Since there aren't enough Emperors to go around, I'm going to let you have some of the worlds we'll be retaking. By choosing a 5th Level Psion, of which I know you possess many, I can forcibly attach their Psionic Souls to the cores of these worlds and turn *them* into Planar Wardens. Oh, certainly, they will not become the mighty High Psions of ancient yore, those who could flit around and smash the galaxy into pieces. But look at it this way. *Would they have made a difference*

otherwise before the Plague crushed your Empire into dust? I think you know the answer."

The way Unarin looks at Diablo changes. For the first time in a long time, he gazes at an inferior mud-dweller with an expression of appreciation.

"Impressive, Diablo. Earth had one philosophy I read about in the past known as the Carrot and the Stick. To be an effective leader, one should alternate between rewards and punishment in order to obtain maximum material gain. You have clearly mastered this branch of philosophy."

He pauses.

"By taking over a few key worlds of mine right before they were about to be conquered, you displayed your power to the masses. You made yourself look benevolent to my citizens, allowing word to get out regarding your acts of saving innocents. You made me look weak, incapable of protecting them, and gave your species a reputation as being able to accomplish the impossible. Now that you have succeeded, that has put me in a predicament. Sooner or later, word will spread across my entire Empire, and I will begin to look the fool. Our galactic situation would still not improve over time, and thus my people's confidence in me would slowly erode."

"But now that you've waited an appropriate length of time and demonstrated your prowess to my lieutenants and generals, you show up here offering the solution to my dilemma. I can stand against you obstinately, praying for a chance to overcome the Plague through our own means, or I can take your deal, speed up the conquest of the Plague, and ultimately win the war. I'll just have to admit that you, and thus the demons, are superior to the Volgrim on this matter."

"Unarin, Unarin." Diablo says, waving his hand in the sweetest and most loving manner he can muster. "It's nothing like that. In these trying times, your loyal vassals have come up with a single method to defeat one singular enemy. And since I have informed you of the way to keep the Plague at bay, by preventing world cores from being assimilated, it's perfectly plausible your mighty Empire can find a way to succeed like I have. Despite my one singular success, in all other matters, the demons are still weak and inferior compared to the Volgrim. Your technological superiority alone- need I say more?"

Unarin's expression becomes ugly. "5th Level Psions are the backbone of my military. Given time, a decent portion of them will reach the 7th Level, and eventually the 8th."

"A decent portion, you say?" Diablo asks, his saccharine-sweet expression disappearing. "There's no reason to exaggerate. You barely have a dozen Executors fighting beneath your name. As for the 7th Level Psions, perhaps a few hundred? The number of Lower Psions that manage to Ascend to the ranks of Cosmic is certainly infinitely higher than the demons, but the number that attain the highest levels are still tragically low. I'm offering you... an alternative way to bolster your forces."

Diablo crosses his arms. "If you agree to ally with me, I can empower the 5th Level Psions who fight alongside me up to the rank of 7th Level. You and I both should agree that popping out Executors is not ideal, because while it would empower your forces tremendously, it could also cause a certain amount of strife to appear within your ranks. Similarly, there should only be *one* 9th Level Psion in the Volgrim Empire."

Unarin's eyes narrow. "Turning Demon Emperors into Bottom Level Cosmics is the third and weakest option at your disposal. Do you truly expect me to accept such a mediocre deal?"

"Oh, it's not such a bad offer at all." Diablo retorts. "Becoming a Free Warden will cap the level of strength these young Psions will attain, certainly. They will never step beyond the 5th Level in their base state, or the 7th Level when residing upon their chosen planet. But in exchange, they can still flit about the cosmos as needed, and provide ample power to the worlds they protect when necessary."

"How generous of you." Unarin counters. "Protecting me from my own soldiers. Here's a better idea. I'll help you if you can... sweeten the deal. I would very much like to have a few extra Executors in the back wing. Say, a few hundred or so. Hardly any to speak of at all. What say you regarding this proposal?"

Diablo rubs his jaw and looks off to the side. "No, no, I can already imagine the strife that would cause among your military. Imagine poor Executor Nufaris finding out that he has dozens or even hundreds of competitors that leaped up to the same rank as him with relative ease. No doubt, he would start to call your leadership into question."

"Whether my Executors complain means nothing in the grand scheme-" Unarin starts to say, only to pause mid-sentence as Dosena communicates with him privately.

Several seconds of silence follow as his eyes turn to the side. Swiftly, he and the Second Founder have a long and detailed discourse, unheard by Diablo. Even so, the Emperor of Annihilation smiles smugly when he sees Unarin returning his gaze to him.

"Changed your mind?" Diablo asks.

"In light of other evidence, I have indeed." Unarin says mildly. "Alright. Military support during your conquests in exchange for control of certain liberated worlds. *But*. In exchange for elevating no Psions beyond the 7th Level, we will get to... *discuss* the allocation of worlds that go to the Volgrim and Demons. After all, if you snatch up all the high-resource worlds and leave us the scraps, there won't be much value for us in this arrangement, will there?"

Diablo's smile flickers. His eyelid twitches for some reason unknown, but he still maintains eye contact with the First Founder.

"Very well. As for how those worlds should be allocated... we have plenty of time to discuss the matter slowly. Let's focus on liberating a few to start so we can see how effective this... *partnership*... will be."

Unarin smiles amiably. "I like the 'new you', Diablo. You've become more ruthless and pragmatic of late. What caused this change, I wonder?"

Diablo chuckles.

"I'm the same as I've always been, Unarin."

"Somehow," Unarin counters, "I doubt that *very* much."

Part 564: Hardcore Henry

A few days pass. Unbeknownst to humanity, Unarin decisively dispatches some of his 5th and 6th Level Psions to assist Diablo's goals of planetary conquest. At the same time, he also adds in more than a hundred thousand High Technopath Warriors, frontline combatants outfitted with lethal weaponry embedded into every inch of their bodies. These warriors, unlike mindless automatons, fight with biological intuition and the power of technological supremacy. When the Volgrim combine their forces with that of the demons, they multiply Diablo's planetary capture speed severalfold, allowing him to take new worlds in just a few hours, sometimes even only a single hour.

But humanity doesn't know about this, aside from the Wordsmiths using their special spying methods. Rather, they remain fully focused on the planetary migration efforts.

All across Tarus II, more and more humans, demons, and monsters make key decisions about whether they will immigrate or whether they will remain on Tarus II.

Kiari and Saul pause outside the Northern Immigration Center.

"Nah. None of these." Saul says to his fiancée. "I like our cabin just fine. It's in a good spot. It's secluded. And most of the demons and monsters are staying on Tarus II anyway, right?"

Kiari rubs her belly. Already, she's begun to develop the tiniest baby bump.

"Yeah. I don't wanna go anywhere, either. Oh, hey, Beelzebub!"

Kiari waves cheerfully to a certain Demon Emperor nearby. Beelzebub casually walks over and waves back.

"You two moving?" Beelzebub asks, sticking his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

"We decided against that." Saul answers. "How about you?"

"I'm staying. Obviously." Beelzebub says with a shrug. "Where else am I gonna go? Pixiv, with the fairies? They only want humans. Maiura? That's not an option. One of those 'secret' places Jason's been yammering about? Humans and monsters only."

"You could live on Hell Harbor. Or Sharmur!" Kiari chirps cutely with her eyes turning upward into crescent moons. "I hear Diablo's had a few Dukes reconstructing Hell Harbor after the Archangel attack."

Beelzebub waves his hand in a flippant manner. "Pass. I'm good with staying here. Besides, whenever I leave Tarus II, I always feel a bit... weaker. It's as if I'm more powerful when I'm here, but I can't deduce why for the life of me."

He taps his chin thoughtfully. "Could just be my imagination. Who knows."

"Well, I'm glad you're sticking around!" Kiari says. "You've had it rough, and you've done bad things, but I feel you're a good guy at heart."

"It's nice someone believes in me." Beelzebub says with a smile. "If anyone comes to cause trouble here, I'll kick 'em out of the star system myself."

"That's the spirit!" Saul laughs.

* * *

Meanwhile, at the Western Immigration Center, other people also congregate together, pondering where they belong.

"Daddy!" Lily Brown exclaims, stomping her feet. "I don't WANNA!"

"We've stayed here long enough." Benjamin Brown says, gently squeezing his daughter's arm. "Tarus II is in a precarious situation. I don't feel this place is safe. We have to return to Hell Harbor now that the Slithering Spire is finished with its reconstruction efforts."

"You can go if you want." Lily says, crossing her arms and turning away from her father defiantly. "I heard Beli is staying here. That means I am too! Besides, I've made lots of friends with the humans. I don't want to go back to Hell Harbor."

"What you want is not up for debate here, young lady." Benjamin Brown says, his face darkening. "I am your father. You will do as I say."

"No, I won't!" Lily shoots back. "I'm thousands of years old, daddy! I'm an adult. I can make my own decisions! Or are you really going to treat me like a little girl for the rest of eternity?!"

"That's not what I mean, and you know it!" Benjamin barks back. "Dammit, this is for your own good. Stop chasing that succubus and use your head for once! The First Wordsmith is too lackadaisical to lead this planet to any long-lasting good times. You can't trust his judgment."

"Who said anything about the stupid Wordsmith??" Lily asks, bewildered. "I don't care about him. I've never even met him! I only care about Beli and my friends. No matter what you say, I'm staying here. And that's FINAL."

"You... you!" Benjamin roars. "You're just like your mother!"

"What? Strong and independent?" Lily scoffs. "Don't be mad because she left you, daddy. I'm making my own choices. If you try to force me back to Hell Harbor, I'll just sneak away. And if you lock me in a dungeon, you'll be proving what a piece of work you are!"

"I... I don't even know what to say." Benjamin Brown says, dismayed. "Fine. Alright? You want to pull the mother card, be like that. You can stay here. I need to return to Hell Harbor, though. I have too many things that require my attention."

He pauses. He looks around for a moment, frowning.

"You know, Lily. If... if you're not near me, I can't protect you."

"Protect me? Why would I need your protection?" Lily scoffs. "I'm a nobody. There ain't no demons gunning for me."

"That isn't entirely true..." Benjamin mutters, as his thoughts turn to a certain prison warden. "Look, I had a friend make you this necklace. It has a special savior beacon built into it. If you ever need me, activate it. Daddy will come running, no matter where you are in the galaxy. It has trans-dimensional properties so even if you're 90,000 lightyears away, I should be able to track you down."

Lily crinkles her nose. "Be honest. This is just your way of keeping tabs on me, isn't it?"

Benjamin chuckles. "Not by any means. I want to make sure you're safe, sweetheart. Your brothers and sisters are all grown up, off doing their own thing. You're... the only one I have left. The others haven't spoken to me in ages."

Lily's heart softens as she notices the pained look on Benjamin's face.

"Daddy... daddy, don't cry, okay? It's not- I'll keep the necklace, okay? And I'll call you regularly, maybe even pay a visit to Hell Harbor once in a while. I'm just gonna be... living here for the moment. Staying independent!"

Benjamin sighs. "Alright, baby girl. You keep yourself safe then. Don't ever take that necklace off, alright?"

"I won't, daddy. Bye now!"

* * *

"Pixiv, is it?" A young man at the Southern Immigration Center asks. "Of course it would be for you, sir. I'm just surprised she's going too."

Lieutenant Samuel Baker glances at the woman standing beside him, Private Ashley McCarthy. As one of humanity's foremost powerhouses, capable of transforming into an orc at will even without her Power Glove, she has attracted a lot of attention of late, attention she doesn't particularly enjoy.

"I'm hoping the fairies can help me." Ashley says, crossing her arms. "I don't get why I have to transform into a stupid ugly orc. I wanna be able to turn into a cute and dainty fairy, like Lieutenant Baker."

"Hey." Samuel growls at her. "I do NOT look cute and dainty. I look... masculine as hell. Man, if I could trade my crappy fairy transformation with you, I'd be HAPPY to do it."

"Well, even the Wordsmiths can't fix this problem, so I doubt the fairies can." Ashley grouches. "But I've gotta at least try! Plus, I heard there's going to be a special task force assembled when we reach the fairies. Seems they have some sort of mission that will be really beneficial for us. At least that's the word on the grapevine."

"That's what I've heard too." Samuel says. "In any case, who else is coming to Pixiv?"

"Some of the other soldiers." Ashley answers. "Especially ones who've prematurely gained transformations through the Power Glove. I hear the majority of them have signed up for a transfer to Pixiv. The Felorians, too!"

"Even them?" Samuel asks, his eyes shining with surprise. "It seems Pixiv is the destination of choice for magically-enhanced humans. Interesting."

"I hear Mister Yamir is planning to expand his restaurant enterprise to multiple worlds in one go." The young man running the sign-up line says. "He's going to build a restaurant on Sharmur, Hell Harbor, Pixiv, anywhere that will take him. It seems his food is so popular nobody wants to turn him down!"

"That minotaur has some real business acumen." Ashley says, rubbing her chin. "I heard that the goblins have been acting similarly too. They're going to all the different worlds! Seems they don't have any specific attachments to Tarus II."

"So if all these bigshots are going to other worlds, who's staying here?" Samuel asks.

"Lots of allied demons, mostly." Ashley answers. "Plenty of monsters. Not too many humans. There is Miss Hiro, but that much is expected. I heard Hans Wagner is packing up to go to Maiura, actually. His base on Tarus's moon, Kelkin, has been where he does most of his inventing stuff, but it's a pretty inconvenient location. He wants to put his boots on normal planet ground for once."

"General Chadwick is going with Commander Neil to Maiura." The young male recruiter adds. "Oh! And have you heard of the Cybernites? Seems they've been busy helping work on some big tech project alongside Neil's inventors, including Hans Wagner."

"Dang." Samuel mutters. "We're really all splitting up, huh? Everyone's going to different places."

"It's better this way." Ashley says. "Trying to get all these different people to work together was like herding cats. Personally I'm looking forward to seeing how everything shakes out in the end."

"You know what?" Samuel asks. "Me too, Ashley. Me too."

* * *

Near the Eastern side of the Fortress of Retribution's upper plateau.

At the edge of the city, a notable structure stands tall, a magical privacy field of immense power surrounding it to isolate all the goings-on inside. This building happens to be none other than the Archangel's church, a place where Uriel lives following her bodily transformation back into her original self. Despite still technically possessing the body of a Demon Duke, she now seems identical to her physical form from more than 100,000 years prior to her death during the War in Heaven.

Inside the church, a male human and a pair of female angels stand opposite the four Archangels. Siddhartha Gautama, Cassiel, and Soleil all look at Raphael, Michael, Gabriel, and Uriel with differing expressions.

"I don't understand." Cassiel says softly. "Why would you want to leave, Raphael?"

The Archangel of Wisdom shakes his head. He looks at the floor with a complicated expression.

"Verily, this decision was not one I wished to make." Raphael says, his words slow and deliberate. "My alliance with the First Wordsmith hath grown tenuous over many a recent day, but not in any recent weeks hath he deigned to speak to me. Meanwhile, my relationship with the Second Wordsmith art still somewhat warm."

"There is no point in our remaining on Tarus II." Michael explains. "We do not wish to reside upon a world primarily populated by monsters and bloodskins. The majority of humanity hath opted to travel to Maiura, and so too shall we go with them."

Gabriel nods. "Humans art our allies. Why stay? Better to migrate where the humans have gone."

Soleil frowns. "That might be true, I suppose. But us having to depart all of a sudden still feels quite abrupt."

"Do not misunderstand." Raphael quickly says. "Cassiel, thou art still the Daughter of Heaven. Thou needeth not walk in our footsteps. T'would be best if Soleil and thee remaineth here while my siblings and I go to Maiura. In this way, we can spread the word of the Creator in two locations at once."

"Oh. I see..." Cassiel says, lowering her eyes. A look of sadness fills her gaze, as well as more than a hint of loneliness. "I... I don't know if I'm strong enough to stay here all by myself."

"Now now," Buddha interjects, "you will not be alone, little one. I'll stay with you, as will Soleil. Additionally, you seem to have made a new acquaintance in that Belial, yes? Perhaps this would be a good time to spread your wings and meet new people."

"Buddha's right!" Soleil says excitedly. "Cass, this is a great chance for you to make lots of new friends!!"

"New friends..." Cassiel says hesitantly. "Y-yes. I suppose... that would be... nice."

Uriel and her brothers exchange a knowing glance. She turns and walks over to Cassiel, squeezing her shoulder lovingly.

"We shalt leave this church to thee, little one. Do with it whatever thou dost desire. It shalt be thy home, and perhaps a meeting place for those who wish to bear witness to thy future rise."

Michael also takes a step forward. "Daughter of Heaven. I consider thyself a sister in spirit, if not in blood. Therefore, what I am about to say, I hope thou doth understand I

speak it with only the best of intentions."

He pauses.

"Thou requireth power. Spiritual power. *Faith energy*. We Archangels cans't truly live well on the energy supplied by that hateful bloodskin, Barbatos, but thy vessel is not the same as ours. As a Lazarite, thou requireth Faith Energy to keep thy spirit burning. I hope thou shalt pursue it in the hopes of elevating thyself to a level where none can oppress thee."

"Thou art the last living hope of our species." Gabriel adds. "We Archangels live on as mere sparks of light, but thou art a burning star with unlimited potential. Please live well in our absence."

Cassiel looks at each of the Archangels in kind. She nods at each one of them, etching their loving words on her heart.

"Very well. Faith Energy. I'll do what I can, brothers, sister. Perhaps, if I have a chance, I'll even come to visit you all on Maiura sometime."

"That would indeed be delightful." Raphael says with a jovial chuckle. "Fare thee well then, little one. We shalt take our leave."

With a nod from each of the four Archangels, they merge back into Uriel's body, and she strides out the church doors, leaving Buddha, Cassiel, and Soleil behind.

As Buddha watches Uriel depart, he narrows his eyes menacingly, but neither of the women notices this subtle action.

Raphael...

"Everyone. Thank you for coming today." Hope Hiro says, as he stands before a throng of people all gathered together inside a massive church-like building. This facility, erected on the planet of Maiura a good distance away from the main cities and towns, stands alone, isolated within the wilderness. Dense trees and foliage would even be visible through the windows if they weren't made of stained glass, depicting images of numerous ancient Heroes of myth.

The people standing before Hope nod in unison. They say nothing, instead waiting for Hope to continue his speech.

Among these people is Henry Cliff. He looks at Hope with reverence and respect that even borders on unbridled idol worship. In his eyes, Hope Hiro is his savior, his one path back to greatness, a chance he cannot afford to miss.

Without Hope, he is nobody. A civilian who will only ever live in the shadow of better men.

"As of today," Hope continues, "the tallies are in. This is it. Those of you who have signed on to be a part of my Parahuman Corps are the only ones who leaped to such a decision. I am truly grateful for your faith in me."

Hope pauses. His gaze sweeps across not only Henry, but all the people present.

"Before I continue, is it just my imagination or are a good number of you not actually service-members? I seem to be seeing quite a few civilians present."

One man in the front row nods nervously. "Y-yes, Commander Hiro, sir. I'm Mikael. I didn't join the military originally, but when I heard about your Parahuman Corps, it really struck a cord with me. If I can become strong enough to protect myself from demons, that would be amazing!"

Hope frowns. "Your motives aren't exactly pure, Mikael. The power I'm about to bestow upon all of you will indeed strengthen your bodies, but without a foundation of military training, do you truly think you'll be able to accomplish much? Not a chance. Expect to endure some grueling military drills tailored to your enhanced physique before I set you loose in the world of ordinary humans."

He returns his eyes to the others. "That goes for all of you. Yes, you will be able to obtain great strength in the easiest manner possible. But allow me to disabuse you all of the notion that this pathway to easy power will make you as strong as a Demon Emperor, or a Duke, or even a Baron. If you have no combat techniques, then you're just a big strong infant waiting to be executed by any remotely competent opponent! A complete pushover!"

The Wordsmith doesn't mince his words. "Submitting to Jephthah's power is a serious rite of passage. If your hearts are impure, he will reject you! You will have to head out and join the common folks on Maiura, hanging your head in shame and knowing you weren't good enough to join the elites!"

He looks around one last time. "With all that said, are any of you here having second thoughts?!"

"Sir, no sir!" The crowd roars, their collective voices momentarily making Hope's ears ring. He mutters a quick Word of Power under his breath to fix that issue, then he motions with his hand and immediately summons the Dominion Rod into his grasp.

"Here is how this is going to work." Hope says. "I shall manifest the image of Jephthah into reality. Look up to him. Pray to him. Accept him in your heart. When you hear his words in your mind, you will have the option to accept or deny his offer. Those who accept will become Jephthah's Chosen, the Illuminators of the future, Parahumans who tower above their fellow man! But as for those who are unworthy? You will remain with the common rabble."

Seeing decisive looks on everyone's faces, Hope smiles. "Alright then. Let us begin."

He holds up the Shepherd's Staff, and the gem in the center of its upper crook immediately begins to glow a bright white. At that moment, a phantasmal figure materializes in the air, his massive image towering thirty feet high. The top of his head seemingly scrapes the ceiling of the makeshift church, making everyone present gasp in amazement.

"My children." Jephthah says, holding out his hands in a welcoming gesture. He smiles like a kind old grandfather at them. **"Hear me now. I am the First Hero. I am the Illuminator. I light the path for those to follow. To those who are attuned to my strength, greater benefits will be available. Perhaps, among you, there may even be a special soul possessing the highest affinity to my power. If so, he may be capable of mimicking my full power without reservation! But, doubtless, there will be those among you lacking in affinity entirely."**

He sighs. **"That is unfortunate, but it is how things are. Now, pray to me. Reach out with your heart, mind, and soul. Feel the touch of my Light..."**

A warm aura spreads out of Jephthah's towering form. It washes across the massed crowd, making many of them feel snug and cozy. They close their eyes and pray earnestly to the Illuminator, sometimes opening their eyes to look up at him as they feel Jephthah's power surge into their bodies.

"I feel it!" One woman cries out. "The strength! The power! Uwaaaaa!!!"

Her muscles bulge dramatically. Her shirt rips in several places, and her height increases by half a foot. She roars mightily to the heavens as a large fraction of Jephthath's power enters her body and Mind Realm.

"I feel it too!" Another man cries. "Power! Overwhelming! Aaaaahh!!"

He, and many others like him, roar in ecstasy as Jephthath's power begins rapidly bolstering one person after another.

Strangely, Henry Cliff doesn't feel anything at first. But when the power starts to trickle into his bloodstream, a voice speaks in his head.

[There you are, boy. Lord Henry of the Illuminators. I have been expecting you for a while, young one.]

Henry blinks. The world around him slows to a stop as he looks up at Jephthath in shock.

[You... know my name?] Henry asks.

[Indeed I do.] Jephthath says with a smile. [Not long ago, Hope performed a ritual that allowed me to make initial contact with all of humanity. However, my power could not flow through them until they agreed to this ritual. It was then that I felt your strength for the first time. You are more formidable than you believe, my child.]

Henry looks down in shame. [You must be thinking of someone else, Great Illuminator. I am nothing at all. A mere nobody. A sinner.]

[You call yourself a sinner? Silly child. I am friends with the Greatest Sinner.] Jephthath chides gently. [King Arthur committed a crime far worse than you could imagine, yet he is still remembered as a legend. In the future, so too shall you join him among humanity's greats.]

Henry looks up again. [I... will?]

[Your compatibility with my power... is perfect.] Jephthath answers, visibly satisfied. [Look! Your body has not swelled up at all! Unlike the others who balloon in strength because their souls are impure, your willpower is formidable enough to reject the corruption of my nascent soul. It is for this reason that I have decided to name you... My Champion.]

Boom!

A massive detonation of energy explodes inside Henry's body. He staggers in surprise, as instead of great pain, waves of ecstasy flood his vessel. He can't help but release a moan of pleasure as his mind seemingly unlocks its full potential, his muscles pulsate with a strength greater than he ever could have imagined, and his soul condenses into its purest form.

[Power!] Henry exclaims. [I feel it! I feel... so much power!]

"Uaaaaahh!!" Henry roars as he tilts his head up to the ceiling. "I am a mortal no more! I am your champion, Jephthah!"

Hope's eyes sparkle as he looks at the previously ordinary-seeming young man. He looks up at Jephthah, who smiles back at him, answering his unspoken question with a single gaze.

But suddenly, in the midst of this joyous occasion, Jephthah's image changes color from a loving and calm blue to a dangerous shade of red. His eyes narrow as he snaps his gaze around the room.

"WHERE?!" Jephthah roars, his piercing eyes jumping from one human to another. "YOU! It's YOU!!" Jephthah snarls, stabbing a finger toward a random woman in the crowd.

That woman freezes in place, like a deer in the headlights. Hope looks at her. All the other humans do too, everyone turning in unison as they feel a deep, nauseating rejection from her entirety.

"Human... she's not HUMAN!" Henry growls, balling his hands into fists. "She's not one of us! She's a CHANGELING!!"

Panicked, the woman starts to push through the crowd, but in an instant, tens of hands latch onto her from every angle, grabbing her arms, shirt, hair, and neck. They pin her in place while Henry walks through the crowd with eyes full of bloodlust. He grins wickedly and nods his head as he stomps toward the woman.

"Trying to sell us out, you filthy infiltrator?! TOO BAD! This is where your story ends!!"

In an instant, he lunges forward and punches his fist at the woman's stomach.

SPLURT!!

He rams his arm through her gut and blasts her entrails backward, spraying off-colored blood on the Parahumans behind her. The woman's mouth opens reflexively, and she vomits blood, unable to stop herself.

"N-no! Guhuk! Mis-misunderstanding! We- COUGH!!"

"Spare us your pitiful begging." Henry sneers, before sweeping his arm upward, tearing through her body with ease.

RIIIIIP!

A sickening series of snapping bones sounds off in the room like a series of firecrackers. A second later, the woman sags lifelessly in the grasp of those present. They release her, and allow her to collapse into a puddle of blood at her feet.

Just when it seems the madness is over, Henry slowly turns around to look at another person in the crowd behind him.

"Heh heh heh. You stupid bastard. Did you think I missed you, too?"

"Wait!" The man screams. "This isn't what you think! We're just supposed to observe-"

He doesn't get to finish his sentence. Henry snaps toward him, rears his fist back, and sends it flying at the Changeling's head. So unfathomable is his strength that he blasts apart the man's head like a watermelon, showering the people behind him with bits of blood, bone, and brain matter.

Hope watches, silently, as Henry performs these acts. He nods with approval, even directing a small smile Henry's way.

"Hardcore, Henry."

Before the ceremony fully comes to an end, Henry kills another three Changelings, ensuring that not a single one manages to make it out alive and report news of what happened to the Founders.

It will be some time before they come to realize the significance of the events that transpired on this day...

Part 565: Henry's Humility

In the immediate aftermath of his empowerment, Henry basks in the glow of adoration from his fellow Parahumans. A deep sense of satisfaction wells up in his chest after slaughtering the five Changelings who dared to infiltrate their solemn ceremony, and he looks at the Second Wordsmith with gratitude and profound respect. Without Hope Hiro, he would still be a mere civilian, doomed to live a life of mediocrity. All of that has changed now.

As for Hope, he pats Henry's blood-covered shoulder and smiles. "Well done, Henry. Anyone here could have killed those Changelings, but you were the first to react. Maybe you even managed to prevent them from leaking what happened here, too. I sure hope you did."

Henry grins. "Just doing my duty for the good of humanity, Commander."

Several soldiers nearby whoop and cheer as they slap Henry's back and congratulate him. But while they give the young man the credit he deserves, Hope has a few other people gather the bodies of the Changelings and lie them down, side to side. Despite the gruesome sights of their mangled corpses, Hope doesn't even blink. He's long become desensitized to such violent imagery.

"**Scan. Examine.**" Hope says, sending Words of Power out to probe the corpses. "Hmm."

Henry pulls away from the crowd to walk over and crouch down beside his Commander. "Notice something, sir?"

"I haven't." Hope says. "That's the problem. Every inch of these people looks identical to the average human. You're... sure they were Volgrim Changelings, right? Like, you're *one hundred percent* sure? Because everything I'm seeing here indicates they're ordinary humans."

Henry nods seriously. "Without a doubt. When Jephthah connected to my mind, I could read the thoughts and sense the emotions of everyone around me. But not these five. Their minds were... void. When I probed deeper, I came into contact with words and thoughts that didn't feel human. It was like if I tried to describe to you how a slug experiences the world around it. Completely alien."

"So you could only tell because of Jephthah's power." Hope muses. "That poses a problem. I can't verify these are aliens at all. If they really are Changelings, their disguises are incredible. The blood is slightly discolored, so that might be worth looking into, but otherwise even their genetic makeup is identical to that of any human."

"I think you should examine their souls, sir." Henry suggests. "Or their brains. I'm telling you, they didn't think in the same way I did at all. It was almost frightening how weird their thought patterns were. I can't really put the experience into words."

Another man nearby nods. "I felt the same thing too, Commander. Lord Henry isn't lying."

"I know he isn't." Hope says with a smile, before raising an eyebrow. "Wait, 'Lord' Henry?"

"That is what the Sovereign has decreed all of us should call him by." The man says. "He is Jephthah's Champion. He possesses the same strength and power the Sovereign did when he walked the Earth. It's only fair to call him our Lord."

Hope looks at Henry. The young man doesn't physically appear any different from before. Compared to the roided-up Parahumans who also ascended, Henry appears the same as before, almost as if he didn't power up in the slightest.

"I want some of you to deliver these corpses to Neil in secret." Hope says to a nearby soldier. "I'll let him know you're coming ahead of time. Don't tell anyone these are Changelings. Just say they were training casualties."

"Yes sir!" The soldier says, before gathering a few other people to cover the bodies and drag them away.

As the crowd disperses to discuss the day's events, Hope slaps Henry's back. "Come with me."

He and Henry stand up, then they exit the church and head deep into the woods. After walking for a couple of kilometers, Hope cracks his neck, then turns to face Henry.

"We'll spar here."

Henry blinks. "Sir?"

"My body is augmented." Hope says mildly. "Due to an accident six years ago, billions of nanites ended up embedded under my skin. Over time, they're merged with my

biological makeup and enhanced me in lots of different ways. My bones are durable, my mind is quicker, even my blood pumps a little faster."

Hope assumes a guarding stance. He raises both of his fists and looks at Henry seriously. "We'll start off light, but as long as neither of us ends up dead because of a single sudden hit, I should be able to heal any damage we take."

Henry nods. He takes a deep breath, then assumes his own combat stance, dancing between his heels and toes as he starts moving from side to side.

"I've gotta warn you, Commander." Henry says. "I haven't tested my strength yet, but the Sovereign says I'm as strong as he was when he was alive. I also have access to all of his knowledge on fighting, as well as the knowledge of everyone he's ever connected with, and the 10,000 who joined his consciousness today."

"That's why I said we'll start light." Hope says with a smile. "I'm no novice, but when it comes to combat? I doubt I'm Jephthah's match. HUH!"

He suddenly lunges toward Henry and sends a jab at his opponent's right shoulder. Henry lightly pivots from the flat of his foot to his heel, turning slightly to avoid the attack.

THWAP!

Hope sees stars as the side of Henry's fist bashes against his left ear, sending him sprawling to the dirt. Hope blinks his eyes, needing a few seconds to register just what in the hell happened.

"Commander!" Henry exclaims. "Are you okay?!"

He quickly leans down to pick Hope up, and the Wordsmith clumsily climbs to his feet, visibly dazed.

"...huh? Huh?? You... hit me?" Hope asks, incredulous. "I didn't... even... see you move."

"I tried to restrain my strength." Henry says, blushing in embarrassment. "I thought that backfist would only knock you to the side a little bit."

Hope rubs the side of his head. He opens and closes his jaw while a ringing sound squeals in his ear. "**Normalize. Heal.** It's no problem, Henry. That's the whole point of this exercise, to see how strong you are. Clearly, I was way off the mark in my estimations. I'm going to need to take this a lot more seriously."

Hope once again assumes his guarded-stance. "**Empower. Strength. Defense. Swiftiness. Agility. Reaction. Prediction...**"

He strings along several dozen Words of Power, all of them being spells that he has confirmed will help him during hand-to-hand combat fights thanks to his six years of practice, as well as his training inside the Hall of Heroes.

Finally, he finishes off with one last word. "**Invincibility**. There, that should make my body basically a slab of tungsten."

"You're all done, sir?" Henry asks, his eyes sparkling innocently. "I'll make sure not to hit you in the head again."

"I'm far stronger than before." Hope warns him. "Don't hold back on my account. Though, do try to avoid my jaw. I can't Wordsmith if I can't speak."

"Noted, sir." Henry says back, as he once again resumes his dance-like steps of combat footwork.

The two men start trading blows once more. This time, Hope manages to match his opponent in the physicality department. When Henry sends a crushing blow toward Hope's chest, the Wordsmith takes the hit, staggers back, then leaps forward to spike a jab at Henry's throat. Henry slaps his fist aside, then ducks low and tries sweeping Hope's feet. The Wordsmith lightly hops, evades the sweep, and plants his feet firmly on the ground before punching down at Henry's lowered head.

Over and over, the two men attack and defend, the sounds of their fists, arms, feet, and legs making contact as they disturb the nearby woodland creatures.

For twenty long minutes, they fight. Eventually, Hope pulls back, sweat covering his whole body. Comparatively, Henry appears somewhat relaxed, as if the sparring session was barely even a warmup.

"I'm not your equal." Hope says mildly. "Strength-wise, I can barely match up to you. But when it comes to technique? I feel like a toddler fighting a martial arts master. I can barely even land any hits, but you're constantly knocking me around like I'm in a goddamn pinball machine."

Henry blushes again. "Sorry, Commander. I held back as best as I could to match your strength level."

"Wait, you're *still* holding back??" Hope asks, bewildered.

"Well, yes, sir." Henry says, scratching his nose sheepishly. "You said this was only a sparring match. If I were to go all-out I'd probably have easily..."

He trails off, causing the implication to linger in the air.

Hope blinks his eyes, feeling as if a bomb has exploded in his mind. "Henry! Be honest with me. How much have you been holding back?"

"Well. I don't have any exact numbers or whatever." Henry says, looking away. "I mean, I probably used less than half my strength? Can you perhaps boost yourself more? Then I can get a more accurate estimate..."

Visibly dismayed, Hope hangs his head and looks at the ground in disbelief.

"...So *this* is what Solomon meant when he said Specialists are better than Generalists in their specific field. Sorry, Henry, but if I strengthen my body any more, I'll probably explode. This is all I can manage for now. Let's call it good for today."

"Oh. Alright then!" Henry says, cheering up a bit. "It was a lot of fun anyway, Commander! I feel so powerful now, like I could rip a tank apart with my bare hands! If I have any one complaint, it would just be..."

He pauses, then looks away.

"Well. I'm not usually one for using my fists. I was a sniper when I worked under Neil. I'd rather be using a gun if I'm being honest, but now it feels like I'd be wasting my strength if I did that instead of using my whole body."

"Yeah. Maybe..." Hope says uncertainly. "Or perhaps we need to get you a new weapon and set of armor that better matches what your body can accomplish now, to say nothing of your new status. I'll talk to Hans Wagner and see what he thinks."

With their sparring session complete, both men teleport back to Maiuran High Command, now located in the city of Adamsburg, a fortress built atop the planet's tallest mountain. Despite its immense height and seemingly awkward geographical positioning, because of the efforts of several Fairy Princesses, there exist teleportation matrices at the bottom that can send any number of civilians and troops upward and downward as needed.

This city atop a peak, named Mount Adams after the commander himself, stands as a testament to what humanity can accomplish even with surprisingly limited resources. In fact, Hope Hiro had almost nothing to do with its construction. It was built a few years

earlier at the command of Neil himself, who wished to have a secure fallback location in the event of a total collapse of humanity's ranks. While it would normally be quite secure, its carrying capacity was unfortunately too limited to hold all the humans in existence during the Stormbringer assault.

Now though, with humanity's population having been decreased by a significant margin, Adamsburg provides a safe and secure shelter for the humans to start from, allowing them to begin working their way outward to conquer more of Maiura's fertile territory.

As Hope and Henry teleport into the city built atop the mountain, Henry looks around in wonder. "Wow! I should have come here sooner."

Hundreds of residences made of rock and stone dot the city's interior. Thirty-foot walls shield the city from external attacks, which would also have to aim those attacks upward to even reach the city's underside.

In many ways, it resembles a medieval city, but with electricity powering it courtesy of Hope's few material contributions. Thanks to his Wordsmithing, he was able to add a miniaturized fusion reactor to the city's electrical grid, allowing it to self-sustain its residents as needed for the next several hundred years.

When the two men arrive inside Adamsburg, Hope starts walking toward the city center, where Neil's personal office sits comfortably within a few minutes of walking distance in any direction. But hardly has Hope taken ten steps before a series of invisible question marks pop up over his head. He turns around to see Henry standing in place, clearly content to stay behind.

"What are you doing?" Hope asks. "Come on! Let's go see Neil!"

"Huh? Me?" Henry asks, his face paling. "You want... me... to see the Commander? I- I don't know, Hope. That doesn't seem- I don't think that would be a good idea. I know he hates me for what I did. I can't look him in the eye anymore."

Hope realizes the reason for Henry's lollygagging. He chuckles under his breath. "You don't need to worry about that. Neil's not the sort of guy to hold a grudge. Even if he is, all you have to do is sit through one tongue-lashing and admit you screwed up, and he'll forgive you."

"Are... are you sure?" Henry asks, wincing. "I don't know."

"I've known Neil for six years. We're extremely close, almost like father and son." Hope says. "Now come on! If you're going to call yourself 'Jepthath's Envoy' then you're gonna need to grow a goddamn spine, man."

"I have a spine!" Henry protests. "But... it's easier killing demons than facing Commander Adams again. I hate that I nearly got him killed, all because of that demon bitch."

"Good. Be sure and tell *him* that." Hope concludes.

The two men resume walking. They pass by hundreds of civilians in the bustling city, many of whom have only migrated within the past few days. In fact, more than eighty percent of Maiura's human population have come from Tarus II after the Great Debate, which has caused a certain amount of friction among those who settled here for a longer time before.

"Goddammit!" One man yells as he stands in a line outside a popular restaurant. "Ever since you Tarus yokels came along, this place has been packed every day! I used to be able to walk in and sit down. Why do I need a reservation just because you yahoos moved here, huh??"

"Quiet down!" A man ahead of him yells back. "We're all waiting. Fair is fair!"

Hope observes the interaction as he passes, then swiftly forgets about it a few moments later. Squabbles of this level aren't of any interest to him, and will instead be dealt with by the city enforcers if things turn violent.

He and Henry eventually arrive at a sizable building that resembles a library, with architectural flourishes that give it a classical look, yet without skimping on the security. Numerous troopers patrol outside, while a half-dozen sit and stand atop the slanted roof, keeping an eye out for airborne threats. When Neil is on base, everyone always remains on high alert, just in case.

Both men walk inside, and Hope nods at a blonde woman with glasses. "Debra. Is Neil busy right now?"

"Only if it's not you asking." Debra says with a smile. Then her eyes meet Henry's and that smile disappears. "You brought *him* here?"

"I have a good reason." Hope says, ignoring the protest in her eyes as he walks Henry over to Neil's office door. He knocks twice, then lowers the handle to push the door open.

Neil looks up, momentarily surprised someone would just walk right in, but only until he realizes it's Hope. "How did the ceremony go?" He asks.

Hope doesn't say anything. He steps into the room, then gestures behind himself at Henry, who slowly walks inside, reflexively lowering his head out of shame.

"C-commander." Henry mumbles, wringing his hands together.

"So it's you." Neil says. He looks at Hope with narrowed eyes. "You brought him here because...?"

Instead of answering, Hope tilts his head up. "**Privacy. Barrier. Solidify. Opaque. Scan...**"

He erects a privacy field around the room, taking care to triple-check and ensure no Psions are inside the bubble where they can listen in. After satisfying his desire for privacy, he smiles politely at Neil.

"I'd like to introduce you to the strongest member of the Parahuman Corps, Neil. Henry Cliff has obtained a perfect compatibility rating with Jephthath's power. He is as strong as the ancient Hero-King was when he walked the Earth, and has thus been named Jephthath's Champion. You can also call him Lord Henry, or the Illuminator's Envoy, if you prefer."

Neil listens to Hope's introduction. He looks Henry up and down, but to his layman eyes, the young man still appears only as strong as any average soldier. Certainly not as impressive as Hope seems to think.

"I- uh, Commander." Henry says, stuttering and mashing his words together. "Don't-don't let my, uh, appearance fool you. Ahaha... I'm pretty strong."

"He beat my ass during our sparring session." Hope says plainly. "And I was going at him with everything I had. Henry here didn't even break a sweat."

For several long seconds, the room falls into an awkward silence.

Neil simply stares at Henry, and the young man becomes visibly more uncomfortable by the second. Finally, he breaks composure and steps toward Neil while holding his palms out.

"Commander! I... I am so sorry. I am filled with shame at my actions during Stormbringer. I betrayed you! I betrayed humanity. Ose may have assumed the form of a beautiful human woman, but I didn't follow protocol and report her to the higher-ups!

Because of me, you ended up captured by the demons and suffered terrible torture! I don't know how I can redeem myself, but I'll do anything- ANYTHING, if it satisfies you."

Neil continues to remain silent for a few seconds longer.

"...Will you kill yourself if I ask you to do so?"

Henry flinches at the question. He starts to open his mouth, but then he pauses for a moment before lowering his head.

"I'm sorry, Commander. That's the one thing I cannot do for you."

"Oh? And why is that?" Neil asks, unfazed.

"Because, sir. I'm not some ordinary civilian anymore. I answer to a higher power. I have a Calling now, and a strength that I cannot throw away uselessly. I need to use Jephthah's strength to save as many human lives as possible! But if, in the future, my power becomes irrelevant, I would be willing to follow your... request."

Neil again stays quiet. He looks Henry up and down a few times, clearly thinking to himself about something unknown.

Finally, he stands up from his chair and folds his hands behind his back.

"That was an excellent response. It seems the time spent in that prison cell gave you a chance to think about what sort of person you were becoming, and what sort of person you'd want to be."

He continues. "I'll be honest, boy. I never blamed you for what you did. Demons are wiley. Crafty. You are young and stupid. You thought with your lower head instead of the brain the Creator gave you. Even so, I know if Ose hadn't pretended to be a human, you'd never have done as she asked. You'd have turned against her the moment you realized she was a demon."

The Commander inhales sharply. "Every man makes mistakes. But it is not these errors which define us. Rather, it is the lessons we learn from them that shape our potential and turn boys into men. I see now that you have grown a little wiser and will not be fooled so easily in the future."

Henry nods heavily. "I cannot claim I'll never make another mistake, Commander. But I promise to do my best not to fall for any bloodskin's forked tongue again."

Neil chuckles. "You know, when I was younger- before Bahamut took me, that is, I fought under a Hero named Napoleon."

He continues. "In Napoleon's army, there were plenty of fellows who screwed up basic orders, failed to follow simple commands, but Napoleon often forgave them even when it seemed nonsensical. Why, on one occasion, some fool lit a cigar near a barrel of gunpowder and damn near killed three people nearby, not to mention himself. When Napoleon only let the man off with a stern rebuke... I was so confused at the time. I questioned him about the matter in private, and do you know what he told me?"

Hope and Henry both listen intently as Neil pauses to let their minds run wild.

"He told me, 'Neil, what would you have me do? Kill the bastard? Better to let him live. For the price of one barrel of gunpowder, we taught that man a valuable lesson. You can bet going forward he'll be far more prudent about his actions!' And I must say, Napoleon was right. That person ended up becoming a lieutenant toward the end of the war, decorated for his valor, and well known for his sometimes-excessive level of caution."

Neil shrugs. "Compared to the price you paid, which actually ended up being nothing at all, I'd say the lesson you learned was equally valuable. I'm fine in the end. Alive and fully intact in body, mind, and soul. Contrary to what you might believe, no demons tortured me, though they did deny me a bit of food in a pathetic, half-assed attempt to weaken my morale. It's too bad they underestimated the indomitable will of the human spirit."

Henry nods, fully comprehending Neil's words. "I understand, Commander. Your wisdom is truly sublime."

"I'm glad to have you back, Henry." Neil says with a smile. "You were my best sniper. I'll be watching your military career with great interest in the future. Don't disappoint me."

Henry slaps his chest. "I promise I won't, sir!"

After the two men exchange a few more pleasantries, Neil has Hope teleport Henry outside of the privacy barrier, leaving the Wordsmith and Commander Adams alone.

In an instant, Neil's smile vanishes. In its place, an icy-cold gaze fixates on Hope.

"That Jephthah is really something." Neil says frostily. "I'll bet you didn't even notice what just happened."

Hope blinks twice. "Huh? What- what do you mean? Are you telling me you only pretended to accept Henry's apology?"

"Henry didn't apologize. Jephthah did." Neil explains slowly, waiting for Hope to catch on. "Come on, boy. You're smarter than this. Don't tell me you didn't notice the abrupt change in Henry's demeanor. I'm not a close friend of his, but we've spoken on several occasions. He's never been this decisive before."

"I... I don't know." Hope says, frowning at Neil. "I think Henry really wanted to get that apology off his chest, Neil. Why are you saying it was Jephthah talking? I mean, I know Jephthah *could* have used the Dominion Rod's connection to seize control of Henry, but that seems unlikely, don't you think??"

Neil shrugs again. "Maybe you're right. Maybe Jephthah didn't take direct control. But that whole shpiel about a 'higher calling'? Give me a break. Don't you know who Henry is? He's an illiterate human we rescued from one of the savage worlds. He's adapted to modern human society somewhat, true, but since when has he ever been so well-spoken? No, I can state with absolute confidence that Jephthah had a hand in that boy's emotional transformation. It's up to you whether you believe me or not."

Hope's frown deepens. He glances behind himself, as if trying to see the doorway hidden by his Privacy Field. He turns back to Neil, unwilling to concede this point.

"Let's agree to disagree, Neil. Henry's a good guy. He screwed up once, yeah, but you didn't have to lie to him to make him feel better."

"I spoke no lies. I meant every word I said." Neil counters calmly. "Whether or not Jephthah took over for a while, Henry has learned a lesson and it may just turn him into a true man. But we won't know for the foreseeable future, so let's move on to other things."

He meets Hope's gaze. "Have you spoken to Diablo yet?"

"No. I was waiting to see how the Illumination Ceremony played out." Hope explains. "Now I know, and we've gained a lot of bargaining chips. If you really want me to lead troopers into battle alongside the demons, then I'll do it."

"It has to be you." Neil says. "My reputation won't allow me to take Diablo's deal, but you can play the moderate in this situation."

Hope snorts. "Heh. Sometimes you make me think you're a real funny guy, Neil. I'll go find and talk to Diablo after this, don't you worry. Maybe within the next week we can

start fighting alongside him."

"That would be for the best." Neil concludes. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. One last thing." Hope says, his tone of voice changing to something resembling a bubbling anger. "There were five Changelings that tried to attend the ceremony. Jephthath sniffed them out when he tried connecting to their minds, and Henry killed them. Our troops should be bringing the bodies soon."

"Changelings." Neil says, tightening his eyebrows. "You're positive it was them? To date, we haven't had any luck detecting them."

"Jephthath's power seems to be the key." Hope explains. "Now that we have five bodies to examine, we'll need to do so in absolute secrecy. I fear the Volgrim already know about the deaths of their spies, but it's possible they might not. In any case, with five bodies to examine, we might find a biological marker or some sort of DNA sequence we can use to identify other Changelings in the future."

A few seconds pass. Neil looks at Hope questioningly.

"You're telling me the differences aren't obvious? Did you even examine their corpses?"

"Of course." Hope says. "That's the first thing I did! But no dice. I'm telling you Neil, if the Parahumans weren't swearing up and down these five were Changelings, I'd have no idea! Their internal organs, their brains, every piece of them came up human even when I looked at them with my Wordsmithing. It's fucking *uncanny* is what it is. And creepy."

Neil's expression turns ugly. "All along I assumed they were only deceiving us with their outward appearance. If their entire body can blend in with any populace, then we're in real trouble, Hope. We have five bodies to cut open but even those might not help us identify other Volgrim spies!"

"Yeah. You're telling me." Hope mutters.

The two of them chatter a while longer, then Hope turns to leave.

"I'll be visiting Diablo next." Hope says. "Until next time, Neil."

"Until next time." Neil says, as Hope dissipates the Privacy Field.

The Wordsmith teleports away, leaving Neil to plunk back in his chair and rest his elbows on his desk.

Humanity's Military Commander stares vacantly ahead for a long while, thinking about various things.

Jepthath, you are a sneaky one.

Part 566: Test of Unity

A few days after Neil and Hope's meeting.

Henry Cliff walks alone down the hallways of the Labyrinth. He wears a purple-colored T-REX, a status symbol put in place by the higher-ups as a sign of his newfound prestige and military ranking. Its color, as well as the other new colors among the army allow for a quick idea of the ranking of any human soldier at a glance, especially among those who don't know the humans well, such as their allies for today.

Henry's feet quietly plod against the Labyrinth's compacted dirt floor. His breathing remains even despite having walked for over thirty minutes. Thanks to his newly enhanced body, he could run for a thousand kilometers without breaking a sweat. Even he isn't entirely certain just how strong he is. Perhaps, if he were to come to blows with a Demon Emperor, he might roll them out like a sleeping bag.

As he walks, Henry's newfound clarity of purpose mixes with the voices and thoughts of ten thousand other members of Jephthath's Legion. No, more accurately, they are Henry's Legion, now. While their power might be derived from Jephthath, it was the Hero-King's decision to give Henry command of them and become his Voice.

Each person who joined on that day possessed their own thoughts, feelings, and talents. Their combined cumulative experience, which could now be tapped into at will, easily amounted to more than 350,000 years. If the age of every person who merged had been 10, that would have given them 100,000 years, but the fact the average turned out to be 35 elevated their cumulative total dramatically.

And that was to say nothing of the people who had once been a part of Jephthath's Legion in the past. When Henry first became inducted into the Legion, he was shocked by just how much wisdom Jephthath possessed. While he did not have the truly unfathomable and vast breadth of knowledge Solomon possessed, Jephthath was amazing in his own way. What he lacked in raw information, he made up in with mastery of combat.

If Solomon possessed the combined cumulative knowledge of humanity, Jephthath possessed its raw hand-to-hand fighting prowess. And that served to bolster Henry's state of mind significantly.

Just by integrating into the Legion, Henry's ability to peer into the essence of combat increased ten thousand-fold. Over the last few days, he had happened to pass by several different training grounds for humanity's soldiers on Maiura, most of them having been erected at some point by Neil Adams in the past six years. Henry was not impressed by what he saw. If anything, he was disgusted.

[Their movements are so crude. So lacking in refinement.] He would often think, while conversing with the ancient Hero-King. [I want to train them. I can't stand to imagine them using their sloppy combat skills against old demon monsters.]

[A waste of time.] Jephthah would chide gently, whenever he and Henry had this conversation. [The knowledge you have obtained effortlessly cannot be communicated through words or demonstrations. The only way one can become as proficient as the members of Our Legion is by directly transferring Our combined knowledge through Our souls and minds.]

[Then we have to convince more to join Us!] Henry would exclaim. [These fools are wasting their time flailing about, trying to reinvent the wheel. If they joined Us, they would gain all of Our power in the art of war and become capable of adding to Our collective consciousness!]

Jephthah shakes his head. [I made a deal with the Wordsmith. We will not forcibly recruit anyone. If you wish to convince more to join Us, you must demonstrate Our power. Not only do you possess knowledge of countless schools of fighting, but you also possess intimate knowledge of battlefield tactics and guerrilla warfare. By demonstrating that Knowledge is Power, you can enlighten the foolish masses as to what they are missing out on.]

Henry nodded sincerely at that time. He looked up at the night sky and clenched his fist with determination.

Humanity was wasting its capabilities! If other humans only knew how small and frail they were, they would jump at the chance to join the Legion!

Less than a week before, Henry had been a disgraced soldier, a mere civilian, a person who might never even get the opportunity to shine the boots of those he had once trained with.

But now he was an officer, an elite warrior many would come to fear and respect.

This realization made his heart leap and his throat dry. In many ways, he sometimes felt he didn't deserve this position. He certainly hadn't earned it.

Not yet. Someday he would. Someday *soon*.

His thoughts come back to the present. He continues walking, ultimately falling into step beside an ordinary human commando also donning a T-REX. A small artistic flourish on the side of her armor, a pink rose, hints to him the other soldier might be a woman.

The grey-armored soldier turns her head to look at him as she walks. "Oh! You startled me. And you are?"

Unable to see her face, Henry looks at her helmet instead, and her name and other information pop up in his HUD, allowing him to see her identity.

"I'm Lieutenant Henry Cliff." He says. "You're Private Ashley McCarthy? Aren't you the lady who can transform into an orc?"

Immediately, her previously formal tone turns cold. Ashley snaps her head forward, no longer looking at him.

"Every time. Every time! Is that all I am anymore? Just the ugly bitch who turns into an orc?!"

"Whoa, whoa!" Henry exclaims, taken aback by her response. "I'm sorry, uh, Miss McCarthy. I didn't mean to apologize- I mean, I didn't apologize- mean to offend you! I- I uh, sorry!"

He stumbles over his words, feeling suddenly ashamed that he spoke so bluntly without considering the other person's feelings. Then again, how could he have known it was such a sore subject for her? That thought also makes him feel unfairly slighted, as he committed a blunder without meaning to.

"No, no I'm sorry." Ashley quickly says, suddenly realizing how rudely she just spoke to a superior officer. "It's not your fault, Lieutenant. I, I just... it's a long story. I never asked for this ability. I hate it."

"You hate it?" Henry asks, as they round a corner, passing a dozen goblins who carefully press against the side-wall to avoid the giant humans. "Pardon my bluntness, but why? In this time of war, possessing an orc form must make you pretty strong. Valuable. You could be on the fast-track to a higher rank if you have any ambition."

"Higher rank." Ashley mutters under her breath. "As if that's something I'd want. I'm not some big brained Terran from Old Earth. I'm just a normal girl from one of the Wild Worlds. I only want to be pointed at an enemy so I can hurt them."

That sounds an awful lot like something an orc would say, Henry thinks, but wisely keeps to himself.

"Does turning into an orc make you stronger?" Henry asks, choosing to turn the discussion down a more positive path.

"Oh, sure. A bit stronger." Ashley concedes. "You know how the Body Booster improves a human's baseline physique, putting some of us on par with certain low-ranking Demon Lords? Well, my Orc transformation stacks on that, sort of. I can pick up and throw boulders pretty far."

She pauses, before adding, "I mean, it is really fun being that strong."

Henry reaches up to rub his chin, only for his hand to clank against his T-REX's helmet. He gives up on the idea and lowers his arm again.

"I recently got a, uh, a pretty *substantial* boost to my strength. You remember how Commander Hope offered for people to merge with the Hero Jephthath? I did that, and it made me a lot stronger."

He turns to look at the woman beside him, but she simply gazes forward, her helmet offering no insight into her current expression.

Her words, however, definitely give away what she's thinking.

"Oh. You're one of the cultists."

Her disappointed tone makes Henry's heart skip a beat.

"No, no, no!" Henry exclaims. "Not a cultist. Who told you that?? Jephthath's Legion have simply unified Our minds and bolstered Our bodies, making Us a lot stronger."

She remains quiet for a few moments.

"Yeah... that's... what a cultist would say."

"We're not a cult..." Henry protests feebly, but his words fall on deaf ears.

This isn't the first time someone has directed a look of disgust his way, or visibly cringed when he proudly declared himself one of Jephthath's Chosen.

Jason's words during the Great Debate made a lot of people immediately strike becoming a Parahuman off their list. They'd rather be ordinary soldiers in body armor rather than part of a weird, unified hive-mind.

Dismayed, the young man falls silent. He doesn't say anything for a full minute, and perhaps feeling bad about dismissing him so easily, Ashley decides to reignite the conversation as they draw closer to their destination.

"So what's it like. Being inside a, uh... hive mind? Is it weird?"

"We're not a hive-mind." Henry says, his mood deflating even further. "We're... we're like brothers and sisters. We understand one another. We share thoughts, insights, wisdom."

This time, Ashley tries to exercise a little tact. "It just doesn't sound right for me. I guess everyone has their own preferences. Me, I think I'd die of shame if everyone around me could hear my every thought. The embarrassment alone..."

She trails off and shakes her head.

But this time, Henry doesn't just back down.

"It's not what you think at all." Henry says. "Do you know why you feel fear at the thought of sharing your thoughts? It's because you're self-absorbed."

"What?!" Ashley exclaims, pausing her walk to look at him. No doubt, her helmet hides an expression of disbelief. "What do you mean by that... *sir*?"

Henry also pauses. He turns to face her, resting his hands on his hips. "You have friends, right? Maybe even a best friend?"

"O-of course!" Ashley says, her tone defensive. "What, you think I'm friendless just because I'm not a part of some bee-hive?"

"That's not what I'm getting at." Henry says patiently, holding out his hand and modulating his tone so he'll come off less aggressive. "Think about your friend, or your best friend. Really think about it. What's the most embarrassing thing you remember about him or her? What's the worst social gaffe they've made that you can't get out of your head?"

Ashley pauses. She lowers her head and falls into thought for a moment.

"I don't know. I can't think of anything. Why?"

"What about other people?" Henry asks. "Has anyone else you know made any serious social fuck-ups recently?"

"Social ones? No. There have been a few generally bad events recently, like finding out Baron Mara killed a bunch of people. But she's not my friend anyway, so..."

"THAT is my point." Henry states emphatically. "You don't think about the weird and embarrassing things your friends do. So why do you believe they're so fixated on yours?"

Ashley lifts her head to look at him. She remains silent, digesting his words, so he continues to press the issue.

"Do you know why you find things about yourself embarrassing? It's not your fault. Most people are extremely self-conscious about their own insecurities. Now that I've become a part of the Legion, I experience everyone else's insecurities all at the same time as I experience mine. In doing so, I realize that mine never amounted to anything at all. When you have ten thousand other people worrying about what they're wearing, or if they look fashionable, or some other tedious bullshit, you quickly realize that all of them amount to white noise. They don't matter."

He throws his hand up dramatically.

"I'm not picking on you. It's just a fact of human consciousness. All people are held back by their fear of social pressure, but much of that is because we don't know what goes on in the heads of our fellow men and women. If you could see their deranged sexual fantasies all at once, you would realize you're not weird at all. Everyone has a kink. If you enjoy looking at gross bugs, guess what? Someone else is unbothered by bodily fluids. We're all weird, and joining the Legion just made that clearer to me."

He pauses, unable to see the look on her face. "Sorry, I hope I'm not coming off as condescending. Does any of this make sense to you?"

Ashley slowly nods. "Mmm. Yeah, it does."

Henry heaves a sigh of relief. "Well, great! Great. I was worried I was starting to sound a little long-winded."

Ashley turns away and resumes walking. "You're definitely in a cult."

"Goddammit." Henry grumbles.

* * *

Before long, the two of them make it to the meeting location, where they arrive inside a massive, hollowed-out area inside the Labyrinth. There, they find, of all things, a new Volgrim Warpgate installed, its destination some unknown desert on a planet Henry can't immediately identify.

As they enter the massive arena-like staging area, Henry becomes momentarily disoriented. His newly enhanced senses pick up surges of spiritual energy, all spread out across the humans, demons, monsters, and other creatures inside. The powerful Demon Emperors, only a few of whom have yet to Ascend to Demon Deity, stand near the portal, using their strength as a show of force. Despite their proud expressions, Henry's keen senses detect a hint of fear in their eyes, as they seem to be unable to properly stand as strong as they always have. It's as if they are being suppressed by something...

"Whoa!" Ashley gasps. "I can't believe it. Why are the Volgrim here?"

"The Volgrim?" Henry asks, following her gaze based on the direction her helmet is pointed.

Somewhere in the mass of the crowd, a handful of decidedly alien-looking creatures with tentacles writhing under their mouths and heavily-armored bodies stand at attention, looking like proud leaders and commanders. Their postures indicate a level of arrogance bred into their bones by millions of years of dominance over the Milky Way. Compared to the slightly fearful Demon Emperors, these Technopaths truly stand out as cream of the crop, with unknown augmentations that likely elevate their combat prowess to the peak.

"Those are Volgrim?" Henry asks. "Huh. The only one I've ever seen was that one female, the one who didn't have a mouth. She was presiding over my, uh, my tribunal..."

"Your tribunal?" Ashley asks.

She pauses, then turns to look at him strangely.

"Cliff... Henry Cliff? What the- you're that traitor! What- how even...?? You're a Lieutenant now? I didn't even recognize your name- no, forget that. Why are you in uniform? Weren't you banned basically forever from rejoining the military?"

"I was banned from rejoining the main military." Henry says, lowering his head in shame. "But, uhm, Hope's Parahumans are... different. It's a different jurisdiction."

Ashley takes a step to the side, pulling away from him. He can't see her expression, but based on her voice, she suddenly seems disgusted by him.

"All this time, I was talking to *him*." She mutters to herself, as she turns and walks away without another word.

Henry stands there, silently. He watches her depart, a feeling of bitterness welling up in his heart. He could pull rank on her, write her up for insubordination. Given his new status as a high-ranker, it would be easy to do.

But he doesn't.

In truth, he doesn't blame Ashley for her feelings. Because of his actions, Neil Adams was captured and humanity likely lost far more people during Stormbringer as a result. He indirectly caused the deaths of hundreds, perhaps even thousands.

How can he demand respect from her when he feels he doesn't deserve it?

As that thought wells up in Henry's mind, the thoughts of the Legion feed back into him, suppressing his negative emotions. All of them comment on his feelings and insecurities, offering kind words to help him feel better.

[You cannot and should not demand respect, no, but you can earn it back through your actions.] A 52-year-old Legionnaire says. [People like her will come around in due time. Perform admirably and make the Legion proud.]

[That woman is a mere Private.] Jephthath chimes in. [Do not allow your emotions to be tangled up by the feelings of a random soldier. You will need to bolster your Willpower if you seek to reach the peak of what you can achieve.]

[Right. My willpower.] Henry says, as his mood drastically swings back up. He hardens his heart, casting aside Ashley's comment and instead meditating for a moment to clear his mind. [Thank you, everyone, for the support.]

With his thoughts clear, Henry strides toward the front, keeping his gaze fixed on the Volgrim Technopaths. Having never seen these creatures before, he finds their horrid-looking tentacle mouths fascinating and yet creepy to look at. While all of them appear to be gender-ambiguous, certainly at first glance, as he comes closer, he does manage to make out one or two female-sounding voices among them. Or perhaps they might be higher-pitched males. He isn't entirely sure, and it seems a taboo subject to breach.

"-the Task Force will be working alongside these Technopath Envoys." Demon Emperor Yardrat says, his tone even and unbothered by the Technopaths to his left. "Naturally, full command of this operation will still go to the Archdemon, as the ranking

Cosmic. However, because he will be busy dealing with the highest level threats, control of the ground forces will go to one member of each species, chosen via several votes of consensus. Today's operation is a *test*, and its purpose is to ensure we all work together properly. NO friendly fire. Our enemy is the Plague and nobody else. Save your personal grievances, vendettas, and petty squabbles for after we take our galaxy back from the Kolvaxians."

He gestures to the ten Technopaths. "The Volgrim have dispatched an army of 100,000 Technopath soldiers, and they will be commanded by this High Technopath named Loputo Jidelor, a high ranking commander of Clan Symmetra's ground forces."

Each of the Technopaths possesses their own combination of flesh and blood bodily parts mixed with metal limb replacements, armor-addons, and other such things. In Jidelor's case, he stands on two flesh and blood legs. However, in place of his right arm is a long, metallic limb with dozens of razor-thin threads waving to and fro where his 'wrist' ends. Each one moves independently, much like the tentacles on his left arm, but their movements appear far more precise. Dozens of metallic pieces are attached seemingly at random to his skin and skull.

Jidelor nods. "I am an experienced battlefield commander, but I am not a frontline soldier. I will be controlling our siege weaponry and directing our soldiers from the back."

Yardrat nods, then continues. "For the Demons, it goes without saying that just like with the last ten operations, Emperor Serena will be commanding our forces. Her ability to link souls together has proven instrumental in rapid battlefield communications, and her ability to sense souls allows her to keep up with the emergence of new Plagueborn until the point Diablo steals the world core back."

A beautiful demoness with sightless eyes nearby waves her hand delicately. "I will be in your care, everyone. Let us make it to the end without losing any demons this time."

"For the monsters, Fairy Princess Melia will take point." Yardrat says, nodding to another beautiful woman with green hair, fairy wings, and a look of boredom permanently etched onto her face.

Unlike the previous two commanders, Melia doesn't give a speech. In fact, she only rolls her eyes, crosses her arms, and looks away.

"Alright, and for the humans, General Chadwick will be taking charge." Yardrat concludes. He gestures to a massive Norwegian man who has now donned a Rhino T-REX

variant and rests his hands around the shaft of a massive battleaxe. Its head rests on the ground, and he supports his massive armored frame by resting on the weapon's handle.

"Everyone." Chadwick says. "It is my honor to lead this mission. Naturally, Commander Neil is not happy about having to work with the demons, and I cannot imagine all of our soldiers are either. However, I pledge on Hope Hiro's honor that we will not commit any cowardly deeds of treachery, any backstabbing, or anything else of that sort! It was Hope Hiro who pushed for this arrangement because he wants humanity's soldiers to get real battle experience against the Plague. Let's be sure to make good use of this time to bury as many hatchets as we can!"

The crowd nods along to Chadwick's words. Some of the humans vocalize their approval, but many more remain silent.

The humans here are not normal civilians. They are military personnel, countless many of whom have not forgiven the demons. They may never forgive them, if their leaders are being honest.

Perhaps sensing the tenseness in the air, Yardrat briskly moves the pace along.

"In thirty minutes, we will begin. Transfer your forces to my world so that I can begin preparation to open the Intragalactic Portals. The Swarm has begun adapting to my tactics of late, so the moment those portals open, we'll need boots on the ground. No delays! If the Plague has its way, it might flood through the portals back to us, and that would be a whole bloody devil-damned mess."

The other leaders nod solemnly. They spread apart to talk to their forces, and Henry heaves a sigh.

In thirty minutes, we'll find out just how stable this alliance truly is.

Part 567: Reaver Invasion

One hundred thousand humans. One hundred thousand Technopaths. A thousand 4th and 5th Level Psions. A thousand Demon elites, mainly consisting of Barons, Dukes, and a few remaining Emperors.

This massive army stands on a recently reclaimed world, a fairly bland planet with minimal life signs and a barely breathable atmosphere named after its new Planar Warden, Yardrat, the Temporal.

This planet, Yardris, is nothing more than a platform to elevate Yardrat's powers to the level of a Bottom Cosmic. It has no other demons on it, and he almost never spends any time there except when staging operations to assault new worlds. If the Plague were to take it back tomorrow, he would simply return to being an ordinary Demon Emperor, then attach himself to a new world at Diablo's behest.

Thus, Yardrat becomes the poster boy for what the so-called 'weakest' Demon Deities can accomplish. While he might not have obtained the power to crack planets and traverse the Void with ease, his fundamental abilities have still received a massive boost in power whenever he stands upon his chosen world. In cases like these, being able to create portals far wider and more stable than the ones he made as an Emperor grant him unparalleled strategic value. Not even the Volgrim can mimic his abilities, leaving some of the Lesser Psions present feeling a little annoyed.

[The Demons are growing powerful frighteningly quickly.] One of the 5th Level Psions says in private to a nearby companion. [Their sudden ability to fortify planets with a single Cosmic would mean nothing during ordinary times, but with the Plague pressing upon us, the Volgrim Empire cannot stop the demons from taking what is ours.]

His fellow Psion, a female with onyx-black skin, remains aloof. [Trust in our leader. First Founder Unarin is too wise to allow this Threat to evolve within his domain unchecked. You would do well to assume he has already begun preparing contingencies, assuming he did not do so countless orbital cycles ago.]

[I suppose you are correct.] The male Psion murmurs. [I would not be surprised if Founder Unarin had several plans formulated in the event any mud-dwelling species suddenly obtained large numbers of Cosmics.]

The two of them continue to converse, sometimes including other nearby Psions in their discussion as they debate over whether or not Founder Unarin's wisdom is truly as unfathomable as they imagine.

Meanwhile, Henry Cliff paces around at the periphery of the human troops. Surprisingly, he is the only member of Jephthath's Legion to join this first expedition, since the other Parahumans have opted to put their strengths to use rapidly constructing a new base of operations for their future living conditions. Through his mental link to the Legion, Henry can easily monitor their progress, and he often gasps quietly as they rip trees out of the ground, split them with their bare hands, and throw together a simple log and stone city within just the first 12 hours after their ascension.

But Henry doesn't put much attention on the rest of the Legion. His job today is to set a shining example of what the Legion can accomplish, as well as to gather intel on the current power level of the Demons and Volgrim.

Before long, Hope Hiro materializes in the center of the massed human army. Henry turns to look at Hope, and is momentarily surprised to see a beautiful blonde woman standing beside the Wordsmith. Tall, gorgeous, and extremely formidable in appearance, the woman stands with her arms crossed, wearing a blue-colored metal armor that appears rather ancient at first glance, as if it were made during the medieval era of Old Earth. A sword hangs at her side, hidden within her scabbard, but Henry recognizes it as Excalibur.

In the time it takes Henry to register the woman's appearance, Jephthath speaks in his mind. [She is Artoria Pendragon. A Black Hole Construct formed in the image of King Arthur himself.]

[A Black Hole Construct?] Henry asks.

[During a battle some time back, Jason Hiro created two of those Constructs by compressing the bodies of many different powerful demon corpses, among other things. In a fit of rage, he formed two self-thinking creatures with independent personalities. One of them refers to herself as Soleil and stands alongside the last living angel, Cassiel, also known as the Daughter of Heaven. The other stands over there now and has taken up the identity of a female version of King Arthur.]

[Oh! I see. I didn't even know these two existed.]

[That would be because you were in prison.] Jephthath says, faintly smirking at Henry's discomforted reaction.

Their conversation concludes in the blink of an eye. Hope raises his hand to grab everyone's attention, then he levitates a few feet upward so all the human commandos can get a good look at him.

"Everyone. We will be starting the operation in only a minute or two. I've already spoken to Emperor Diablo and outlined how this test operation should play out. I will be placing Lady Artoria on the western flank of our forces, and my own super-soldier, Henry Cliff, on the eastern flank. Together, the two of them will protect our massed soldiers from any sudden high-ranking Plaguehosts. Should Cosmic Kolvaxians make an appearance, the leaders of each faction have already prepared several contingencies."

Linda Hurent, standing not far away, raises her hand. "Hope! Are you going to fight in the field? We cannot risk handing a Wordsmith to the Plague."

"Oh, hey, Linda." Hope says, offering a tight smile to her before returning his attention to the other soldiers. "I will not be directly participating. I'm going to be taking an active role in commanding from the backlines and using my power to intervene should any of our brave soldiers fall into crisis. For the rest of you, I'll expect you to listen to General Chadwick's orders, as he will be your commander once the operation begins. Are there any further questions?"

A few men and women do indeed volunteer their questions, and Hope fields them smoothly before moving on. As the timer counts down, he walks over to Linda and frowns.

"Neil wouldn't want you here."

"I know." Linda says. "But I am a soldier. I fight for humanity. I represent Neil's interests by coming here, especially since you and I both know he can't be present due to the message it would send."

Hope glances at the army of demons out of the corner of his eye. "I suppose not. But don't do anything rash, Linda. We can afford to lose a few grunts if we must but I will not risk losing you. It would devastate Neil."

He pauses, then looks her in the eye. "By the way. That stunt he pulled at the Great Debate? That was bullshit. You two haven't been dating very long. Are you really okay

with him using you like that?"

Linda sighs. "It was a move of political expediency. It didn't make me feel good. But... I care for Neil. If this is how he wants to use me, then I'll play along."

"You're a grown woman." Hope says. "I won't tell you how to live your life. But I recommend after this battle, you go back there and make sure Neil knows that wasn't okay. He should have proposed in private first, not used you like a prop. Even if you would have said yes, it was still wrong."

Linda smiles helplessly. "I do plan to talk to him about it eventually. We just... haven't had the right moment yet."

"I've said my piece." Hope concludes. "Take care out there, Linda. I'll make sure to protect you."

At the same time as Hope talks to Linda, Henry walks over to the formidable looking Artoria. She notices his approach and turns to face him.

"Artoria?" Henry asks, belatedly realizing it's a bit of a silly introduction. "Jepthath told me about you."

Artoria says nothing. She merely rests her hands on her hips and stares at Henry silently.

"You're pretty strong, I assume?" Henry asks, feeling even more awkward when she again fails to respond. "I, I uh, I got a power-up from Jepthath recently. I was thinking after today's battle, you and I could spar a bit? I need to face a strong opponent."

The Black Hole Construct blinks twice. "Yes."

"Yes?" Henry repeats. "Great! Let's, uh, meet up on Maiura?"

Once again, Artoria blinks twice. "Yes."

Then, she turns away, decisively ending the conversation.

Henry lamely stammers something out before turning and walking away, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

"Holy shit, that was so awkward." He mutters to himself.

Jepthath snickers. [Does this old man perhaps sense a hint of... interest... in the scary but beautiful woman? Be careful, boy. She can take a beating... and dish one out.]

After Henry leaves, Hope walks over to Artoria, sparing Henry's departing figure a glance, as well as a chuckle.

"Made a friend, Artoria?"

The tell blonde woman looks at him with disinterest.

"Guess not." Hope says, snickering to himself. "Hey, before you go out there, I wanted to offer you this. You might need it."

Hope grabs a sword at his waist and pulls it out of its sheath, revealing the original Excalibur, glowing faintly due to the immense mana stored within.

"I'd feel a lot better if you went onto the battlefield with this." Hope says, holding Excalibur out for her to take it. "Whaddya say?"

Artoria slightly shakes her head. "No."

Hope frowns. He gestures to the replica of Excalibur hanging at her side. "The real Excalibur is much stronger. With it, you'll be able to control Arthur's power of light magic. Since I can't show up on the battlefield without risking giving the Plague a Wordsmith, this is the next best option."

Artoria slowly grips the hilt of her Pseudo-Excalibur. "I like this one. It's *sharp*."

"Yes, yes, I know it's sharp. Maybe even a little sharper than the original blade." Hope says, his tone turning faintly exasperated. "But come on, nothing beats the original! You don't have any magic you can use for long-ranged attacks!"

"I don't need magic." Artoria says coldly. "I'm strong."

"Well..."

Hope trails off. Seeing the look of determination in Artoria's eyes, he decides to throw in the towel. After sliding the genuine Excalibur back into its sheath, he heaves a sigh.

"Alright. You took on Lucifer and Gressil. I guess you'll be okay. Just make sure to protect the humans, alright? If any Cosmic Kolvaxians show up, let Diablo and the Volgrim deal with them. We only have a few major threats worth worrying about, and they're not very strong, so it should be a cake-walk. Diablo's taken back a hundred worlds already, so he knows all the tricks the Plague can unleash on us."

Artoria nods. "It's time. You should leave now."

Hope nods at her, then he speaks a Word of Power to return to the Hall of Heroes.

Not long after his departure, Commander Chadwick steps up. "Alright, everyone. Thirty seconds! Engage your T-REX's and prepare for battle!"

Henry nods. He slaps his chest, causing a layer of nano-machines to swarm over his body. Linda covers her head up with a helmet, as do all the other humans. Only Artoria remains in her medieval armor without any other protection. More than a few soldiers look at her in confusion, as if she were suicidal, but those in the know quickly spread the word about her true power.

Her skin and bones are like flexible titanium. She has no blood and thus cannot bleed. Her vision is capable of switching from telescopic to microscopic in an instant. Her punches can sunder mountains. In terms of durability, she comes second only to Bael back in his prime.

As for breathing a little toxic air? She wouldn't even bat an eye.

Yardrat teleports overhead. Now a Bottom Cosmic, he summons forth the power of a Demon Deity, then materializes an absolutely massive thousand-foot-wide transparent portal, one which reveals a fallen industrial world which once belonged to the Technopaths. This world fell over thirty thousand years before, and the infrastructure every soldier can see appears decrepit, rusted, and ruined.

Wherever the world might be located, it has long lost the industrial base which made it valuable. Even so, it must be retaken, as must ALL the other worlds lost to the Plague over the last 90,000 years.

The War has only just begun.

"CHARGE!!" Yardrat yells, sending forth the demons to attack first. At the same time, he opens a portal elsewhere on Yardris, a portal big enough for Diablo to pass through in his Archdemon form. Thus, the Archdemon arrives on the Kolvaxxed Planet at the same time as the first of his demon soldiers.

By the time the humans and Volgrim follow the initial burst of demons, the planet has already come to life.

The plants vibrate, transmitting incomprehensible messages deep underground. The creatures of the land scatter and flee. Winds whip up, causing an earthen odor to spread throughout the air, one which the humans' T-REX's instantly filter out.

Pheromones.

The moment Diablo steps foot on this world, a planet once referred to as 'Reaver' by its inhabitants, the Kolvaxians take notice.

Mere seconds pass before creatures with mottled green skin burst out of the ground and rush at the invading army. Diablo lances his tentacles into the soil to begin the process of contesting Reaver's core while his Emperors, Dukes, and Barons start blasting the Kolvaxians with all they've got.

One of the newly crowned Emperors immediately hardens the ground beneath himself, spreading this effect beneath the feet of other nearby demons, then the soil beneath Yardrat's portal. He continues to spread it around, making the ground as solid as iron, all for one explicit purpose: Preventing the Kolvaxians from emerging directly underneath the invading army.

In the past, the demons were caught off-guard a couple of times when the alien monsters managed to surprise them with sneak attacks from below. Naturally, the demons survived and even escaped the fate of consumption via their enemies, but Diablo also took care to ensure such a thing would never happen again!

At the same time as the demons fortify the area and lay a foundation to conquer the planet, humanity's soldiers join the Volgrim in two flanks that sweep around outside the demons to form twin walls of flesh. Technopath elites don highly advanced combat armor which augment their already terrifying augmented flesh and bone bodies. Unlike the simple Technopath technicians who have fallen to the Kolvaxians en-masse for 90,000 years, these soldiers are warriors that have killed thousands of Kolvaxians each. Battle-hardened, capable of staring death in the face and making the Grim Reaper himself blink, these Technopaths follow the orders of Loputo Jidelor as he issues commands.

"Artillery, form up. I want three squads on the north, east, and western sides. Place two armored divisions in the rear. Keep your eye on that biomass forming north-east three clicks out."

Calmly and carefully, Loputo Jidelor issues commands in the same way he has for centuries. While he is not even close to the oldest Technopath present on Reaver today, he is a noble bred for leadership by the elites of Clan Symmetra. He has never faltered in the face of adversity, nor will he do so today.

Chadwick surrounds the demons on the flank opposite the Technopaths. "Rhino squad, move to the front! Clear a path! Hummers, give me aerial support. Suppress the

horde amassing at three o'clock! Use your grenades! Spectres, scan for high-level targets and point them out to Lieutenant Cliff and Lady Artoria!"

Henry storms into battle, becoming momentarily frenzied as he rips a tree out of the ground and swings it in a huge arc, splattering ten Kolvaxians instantly as the ten-ton makeshift weapon kills them dead. He hefts the tree horizontally, then throws it forward to send it smashing into the horde like a bowling ball. Even more Kolvaxians get crushed under this attack, but Henry's expression falls when just as many new Plagueborn continue to crawl out of the ground and charge the army.

"Shit." Henry curses inside his helmet. "They're weak. Easy to kill. But there's so many!"

Soldiers behind Henry take aim with their rifles. They unload thousands of bullets into the swarm, killing a hundred Kolvaxians in a second, then a hundred more.

But it doesn't matter. The creatures just keep coming.

"Remember!" Chadwick shouts. "Our endgame isn't extermination. We just have to hold this area! Every Kolvaxian we kill strains the planet's core, weakening it and allowing Diablo to absorb it faster! It's only a matter of time until we win, so keep shooting but DON'T press forward!"

Chadwick's timely reminder snaps Henry out of his daze. Indeed, the objective today is *not* to kill all the Kolvaxians. The Volgrim have informed demonkind and humanity both that this is an impossible goal. The Kolvaxians can simply call more of their horde over from any of the million-plus worlds they've taken.

As the surface of hardened steel continues to expand outward, its rate of expansion slows. The Demon Emperor who conjured it reaches his limits and collapses, allowing Yadrat to teleport him away. With his goal complete, the humans, demons, and Volgrim now have a bastion the Kolvaxians cannot 'swim' through, and thus a viable defensive platform they can hold on to.

Bullets spray outward in all directions wantonly, like the rain of a waterfall upon a desert. Humans and Technopaths mow down the Kolvaxians with ease and keep them at bay, but the corpses of those fallen creatures turn to rotted meat and pus before sinking back into the soil, ensuring that a wall of bodies will not form around the invaders.

Minutes pass. Soldiers begin to sweat as they realize that slowly, very very slowly, the Kolvaxians are beginning to gain a small amount of ground over time.

Diablo sweeps a beam of destruction from the Archdemon's mouth, atomizing countless Kolvaxians in a circle around the invading forces. This allows the humans and Volgrim to reset the losses they were taking up to that point. Even Loputo Jidelor can't help but breathe a little easier, as they continue to easily cut down any Kolvaxians that come at them.

Henry rips apart a Kolvaxian with his bare hands, causing its internal organs to splatter against his exosuit. He throws a punch at another Kolvaxian, sending its head flying like a projectile, where it batters another Kolvaxian dead.

[So many!!] Henry howls in frustration. [How long are we supposed to do this?]

[Relax, boy.] Jephthath says. [At least you're getting a workout. If Solomon's guesses are correct, it should take less than an hour before this world falls.]

[Less than an hour?] Henry asks telepathically. [And how long has it been?]

[Eight minutes, forty-seven seconds.] Jephthath says blandly. [Endure the pain. I fought wars much more brutal than this against the bloodskins.]

[Yeah, yeah!] Henry grouches.

Every so often, Henry can't help but shoot a glance Artoria's way. Her golden hair glows as she fights, becoming slightly more luminous every time she kills a foe. Already, her blade has claimed the lives of more than three hundred Kolvaxians, their blood incapable of dirtying her clothing, let alone causing her harm.

[She's... absorbing the Kolvaxians?] Henry asks.

[Artoria is a Black Hole Construct. She is capable of enhancing her strength by devouring the life forces of her foes.] Jephthath explains, his spiritual avatar obtaining this information from Solomon and Arthur in the Hall of Heroes. [The Kolvaxians are not too strong, but their sheer quantity should bolster her strength a bit.]

The battle rages. More and more Kolvaxians die, but not a single human, Volgrim, or Demon does!

In the skies above, a thousand 4th and 5th Level Psions levitate, using a wide variety of powers to assist the others below them. Among these Psions, the majority of them are masters of Primal Psionics, using raw telekinesis at its highest form. They push and pull

things around, smash down onto the planet's surface with the weight of freight trains, and rip apart Kolvaxians from the inside-out.

Among the Psions, only a couple of them possess any form of healing powers. Their abilities prevent them from materially contributing to the battle in an offensive manner, but allow them to save the lives of anyone injured as the minutes pass.

Suddenly, among the Psions, one of them, just a hair's length from stepping into the 6th Level, snaps his head toward a certain direction.

[Incoming!] The commanding Psion exclaims. [Cosmic signature inbound!]

A mile from the invasion force, one of the two Executors taken by the Plague bursts out of the soil and races into the sky. It only takes a fraction of a second for the Psions assembled to identify the attacker.

[Everyone! Executor Huron's doppelganger is here! Be on your guard. His clone is a Bottom Cosmic with a high mastery of Primal Psionics!]

Wordlessly, the elites present snap their heads toward the incoming threat.

Henry gazes toward the powerful Psionic signature as it races up into the sky, then back down toward the invasion force.

Artoria also looks at the incoming threat with an expression of interest.

Diablo turns the Archdemon's head toward Huron's clone and sneers.

"HOW MANY TIMES WILL YOU COME, ONLY TO SUFFER A DEFEAT? MISERABLE CLONE. YOU WILL DIE TODAY LIKE YOU HAVE DIED TO ME A THOUSAND TIMES BEFORE."

Huron's Clone does not speak. It simply races toward the center of the invasion force while conjuring a shell of hardened psionic energy around itself.

The true fight begins.

Part 568: Reaversal of Fate

Executor Huron's Kolvax-clone charges at the invasion force. Its body, already standing at the peak of what a Body Enhancer can achieve, grants it unparalleled defensive capabilities. When adding on to that durability with a psionic force field conjured from the raw telekinesis of Primal Psionics, 'Huron' becomes almost unkillable!

Diablo fires off a blast of destructive energy from the Archdemon's mouth, intercepting Huron's charge in midair. The attack, capable of reducing mountains to rubble, merely knocks Huron aside and sends him crashing into the dirt. He immediately leaps up and charges again, suicidally rushing at the human forces from a tricky angle Diablo can't strike at without threatening the invasion force's battle-lines.

Luckily, Lady Artoria intervenes.

Before Huron can smash into the 100,000 human soldiers, Artoria leaps into his path and slashes pseudo-Excalibur horizontally, batting him aside by using her strength and the sword's hardness to strike him like a baseball. The Executor gets knocked to the side, but the impact is clearly far weaker than what Diablo was able to accomplish.

Undeterred, Artoria doesn't give the false Psion a chance to attack again. She presses the attack, sheathing her sword and jumping into melee range to directly battle with the Kolvax-clone! Her fists smash against the psionic barrier protecting Huron, forcing the Kolvaxian to drop the barrier so he can use his superior body to deal with her in hand-to-hand combat.

When it comes to their mastery of the Psionic disciplines, all the Kolvaxxed Psions perform far worse than their original-selves. Executor Sartran himself possesses strength at the Low Cosmic level, but his Kolvax-clone only manages to bring out the abilities of a Bottom Cosmic. The same is mostly true of Executor Huron's clone, except for *one small detail*.

Body Enhancer Psions do not lose any physical power. They are as strong in their Kolvaxian forms as their original bodies, meaning Huron's clone is just as physically powerful as his original self, a Low Cosmic Executor.

Artoria's fists smash against Huron's face. The Kolvaxian doesn't even blink, as if pain has lost its meaning. He pounds Artoria back, with the two of them trading ten punches

and kicks every second. The sound of thunder detonates rapidly, deafening anyone with enhanced hearing or those lacking ear protection who might happen to be nearby. Several demons in the distance wince as they continue to fight the Kolvaxian horde while sparing horrified looks at Artoria's brutal melee.

"How the hell is that human woman so strong?! Even Diablo has to be a little careful when that Huron guy shows up!"

"That can't be a human! She must be Belial or something! I bet she turned herself into a human bitch so we wouldn't recognize her!"

"If it IS Belial, she's doing a shit job at hiding her strength! Holy CRAP that broad is badass!"

Bullets tear apart the Kolvaxians nearby, preventing them from swarming Artoria and Huron as they duke it out. Over and over, Huron's gaze turns to the humans, as if eyeing a delicious meal just out of reach, but Artoria's fists always snap the Kolvax-clone's attention back to her.

"Your opponent is ME, foul creature!"

Artoria swings both fists toward the Executor's head from opposite angles, smashing his right and left ears with dual-punches that would burst any lesser creature's head like a watermelon. Instead, the sound of steel striking steel rings out. Artoria's seemingly indestructible body meets its match, as Huron's body is no weaker! They seem to be evenly matched in all areas.

Just when it seems like their battle has reached a stalemate, Henry rushes over and delivers a bone-crushing kick against Huron's back, causing the Executor to stumble forward. Artoria punches him from the front, which knocks him back in Henry's direction.

In an instant, the two of them form a silently understood partnership. They exchange no words, but instead treat one another as equals, knocking the Executor back and forth like a pinball as the slower-minded Kolvaxian becomes momentarily overwhelmed by their shared strength.

However, despite their combined powers, the two of them both become frustrated.

Their fists lack the striking power to actually kill this creature!

Thankfully, after Artoria punches Huron backward, she remembers the sword at her waist, reaches down, and pulls it out while also sweeping it in a diagonal line from up to down, cutting across Huron's body.

However...

The Psion isn't bisected as Artoria expected!

Her sword, despite being able to seemingly cut through anything, only ends up biting into Huron's flesh and glancing off his insanely resilient bones! She manages to chip off a few calcium flakes, but doesn't cause a grievous injury as intended.

Her reward for this failed assassination is a brutal punch to the face when Huron counters while her guard is down.

CRACK!!

Artoria gets blasted backward. She slams into the human soldiers behind her, killing ten as her body acts as a cannonball and strikes them with the force of an enraged Executor's striking power.

"ARTORIA!!" Henry roars.

The young man's eyes widen, and his pupils dilate. A savage fury boils within him as he realizes the Executor is about to charge into the human soldier's ranks to finish her off.

"YOU! WILL NOT! TOUCH HER!"

He pounces on the Kolvaxian from behind, wrapping his arms and legs around Huron in an excellent display of Brazilian Jujitsu. Henry's rage causes his strength to escalate, becoming stronger as his rage builds. He snakes his limbs around the Executor, hampering the Kolvaxian's movements as it struggles to break free and throw him off.

At the same time, Diablo continues to push deeper and deeper into Reaver's core with his tentacles, biting through waves of Kolvaxians as they swim toward the surface, blocking his path and slowing him down.

Unlike the other planets Diablo has taken in recent weeks, Reaver has been corrupted by the Kolvaxians over tens of thousands of years. It was one of the first to fall, and has been continually reinforced by the Kolvaxian hive's toxicity over all these millennia. Taking one of their stronghold worlds is much harder than the periphery ones, Diablo discovers, which means its conquest will require more time to complete.

"YARDRAT. ASSIST THE HUMANS."

Diablo's voice booms in the air. He speaks with a voice capable of projecting across cosmic distances, and as such, Yardrat hears his demand.

The Temporal Deity summons forth the power of a Bottom Cosmic. He opens up two portals to different worlds controlled by different Demon Deities, then creates a pair of passages to the world of Reaver, allowing the rifts to materialize in the planet's sky.

Compared to the immense size and majesty of the Archdemon, the two Deities who appear beyond those two portals do not seem particularly frightening. Their bodies have not inflated in size, but they are both Middle Cosmics possessing strength similar to the Archdemon himself.

Melody, the Demon Deity of Defiance, levitates in the sky with a haughty look on her face. Now fully recovered from the ass-beating Dosena gave her, the muscular demoness stands proudly, unwilling to show weakness before her lessers. Her long black hair hangs down below her butt, while jewelry adorns her face, hands, neck, ears, and anywhere else she can attach it. In many ways, she looks like a punk rocker girl, despite how she isn't holding a guitar.

At the same time, another Demon Deity appears inside the other portal. Kristoff, the Devourer.

Kristoff's pale gray skin, a hallmark of the vampires, contrasts with his glowing red eyes and his fashionable cloak. His elongated nails give him a feral, animalistic look, while his fangs barely poke out from beneath his teeth. The rise to Deity has made him far more attractive to look at, though the loss of his wife has long dulled his cravings for any pleasures of the mortal coil.

Together, Melody and Kristoff release dangerous auras that rival the Archdemon, causing the Plaguehosts below to take notice.

Without warning, Kristoff snaps his hand forward, conjuring a spear made of cosmically charged blood. It jumps through the portal and rushes toward the momentarily immobilized Executor Huron with pinpoint precision. Henry doesn't even get an instant to react before that spear blasts through the Kolvaxian's head, bursting it apart and spraying Henry's helmet with blood and entrails. The spear perfectly misses the young man holding onto the Executor's back, but the near-death experience still gives him the fright of his life!

"What the hell?!" Henry exclaims, terrified out of his wits. He looks up into the sky and gasps.

At the same time, Melody opens her mouth and roars, sending a wave of concussive sonic energy downward with enough force to obliterate a city. This attack, also carefully aimed, smashes into the Kolvaxian horde and obliterates twenty-five thousand of the monsters at once, slowing the momentum of their western assault to a crawl! This gives the Technopath soldiers a brief reprieve and allows them to make some headway where before they were losing ground.

Despite the assist from the demons, Loputo Jidelor glances up at the two Middle Cosmics in the sky with a distinct sense of unease.

[Send a report back to Volgarius.] He transmits over a secure channel to one of his communication field officers. [The demons possess a method to project Cosmic force across the galaxy. They are not as immobile and toothless as we believed.]

Diablo watches the display of power from his subordinates with a deep sense of pride. His cosmic senses easily glean the astonishment and fear from the Volgrim forces, making his real body, hidden within the Archdemon, smile evilly.

The Volgrim are afraid. Good. They should be.

Did they really think my Deities were trapped within their star systems, unable to act during crucial moments? This should give Unarin more reasons to tread carefully around me, moving forward. Heh-heh-heh...

While Diablo gloats, Henry drops the corpse of Huron to the ground, and it melts into a mess of pus and blood, absorbing into the soil as the planet consumes the Executor's vitality for unknown reasons that surely benefit the Kolvaxians.

Artoria jumps back over to Henry. She looks him up and down, then nods.

"Thank you for the assistance. You fight well."

Henry nods as his adrenaline wears off. "Yeah. Yeah! Don't worry. I've got your back."

Artoria says nothing else. She uses Excalibur to make more sweeping attacks at the nearby horde, while Henry borrows a massive greathammer from one of the local Rhino troopers to augment his striking range. It doesn't take more than three minutes before Henry feels a familiar sinking sensation in the back of his head.

A pit forms in his stomach as his Heroic senses warn him of two Cosmic signatures materializing in the planet's core.

"He's back!" Henry shouts. "And this time, that Psion is bringing a friend!"

The planet's surface bursts open a mile away. Executors Huron and Sartran fly into the sky, their attention divided between the two Demon Deities above and the juicy human, demon, and Volgrim assets on the ground.

Huron dives, while Sartran levitates. Sartran places himself in the sky between the two Demon Deities and Huron, while Huron re-enters battle with Henry and Artoria.

Sartran fires twin beams of lightning from each hand, striking at each of the Demon Deities. Unlike Huron, whose bodily strength is firmly at the peak of a Low Cosmic, Sartran is only as strong as a Bottom Cosmic, two entire levels below Melody and Kristoff. His attacks barely even make them flinch.

Melody holds up her arm and takes the lightning strike on her left shoulder, chuckling as it slightly tickles her nerves. She punches the air and sends a focused blast of sound back at Sartran, which he dodges by flickering to the side. Unfortunately, her attack detonates at the edge of the human forces, atomizing a hundred men and women, sending them to meet their maker in the afterlife.

"Shit." Melody curses, glowering at the Executor. "Watch out, Kristoff! If we attack him, we're liable to hit our own troops! Just focus on drawing his attention."

Kristoff nods. He deflects the electrical attack with a blood shield, then creates a whip made of blood and lashes it through the portal toward Sartran, attempting to either grab and immobilize the creature, or to snap the whip-tip in such a way it rips him to shreds.

Unfortunately, Sartran's mastery of energy gives him unparalleled speed. He flickers three times in a row, dodging Kristoff's attacks while giving the Devourer Deity a look of animalistic hunger.

As the two Deities take frustrated potshots at Sartran, Artoria and Henry fight for their lives, desperately holding on as they try everything they can to kill the false Huron. This time, Huron taps into his other abilities, one of which is a powerful transmutation effect. He shifts his body's appearance, absorbing the soil around himself and turning mere rock and dirt into a hammer-gauntlet melted onto his fist. He smashes his new weapon against

Henry's face, sending the young man tumbling helplessly backward until he crashes into one of the tanks humanity brought to the battleground.

While Henry shakes the daze out of his eyes, Artoria ducks and dodges Huron's deadly new weapon. He swings at her face, but she drops to her knees and stabs pseudo-Excalibur at his throat. The blade glances off Huron's durable cartilage, failing to behead him.

From behind, a portion of the 5th Level Psions direct some of their attacks toward the two Cosmic threats. Despite there not being a single Cosmic among the Volgrim ranks for this invasion, the 5th Level Psions aren't completely unable to affect the battles between elites. Their long-ranged attacks send up clouds of dust and interference around Sartran and Huron, occasionally making the Executor-clones miss crucial hits or deflect deadly attacks that otherwise might have connected.

[We need backup.] One of the 5th Level Psions says. [Contact Creator Demila. She should be stationed on Tarus II. She needs to make it here in time to reinforce our battle-lines. We must not let the mud-dwellers outshine us!]

His command transmits downward to the reconnaissance squads of the Technopaths, who relay that order through quantum nodes scattered throughout the Milky Way. Not five seconds later, Demila receives the command and starts making her way off-world, through the Labyrinth, toward the Warpgate that will take her to Yardrat's planet.

Of course, she won't arrive for a while, and will need Yardrat to teleport her, but the delay won't slow a powerful Psion by much.

In the meantime, Henry and Artoria increasingly hone their teamwork. Thanks to countless millions of human-years worth of combat training being essentially downloaded to his brain, Henry is no worse at the art of combat than perhaps the great Buddha himself. He easily switches between different fighting styles with fluidity and grace, using his enhanced body to deliver hits that would have killed Gressil in an instant, were he to have swapped places with Buddha. Over and over, Henry's greathammer smashes into Executor Huron's face, back, and legs with enough force to shatter tanks into scrap metal.

Combined with Artoria's deadly Excalibur, the two of them manage to hold the Executor back, though they fail to land a killing blow.

"God DAMMIT!" Henry screams, firing off a punch at the Executor. He sends the false Psion flying backward, but Huron reorients himself in midair to land on his feet. "Why

aren't you DYING?! I'm too weak! This suit is slowing me down!"

Henry takes half a second to think, his brain whirling at accelerated speeds well beyond what ordinary humans can achieve.

It's as if the suit is try too hard to hold itself together! I can feel my T-REX straining to keep up with me. It's useless! It isn't enhancing my power, it's holding me back!

Henry's eyes flash with intuition. He communicates this thought to Jephthah, who immediately agrees with him.

[That exosuit is too primitive, boy. It will strengthen any ordinary human soldier, but for a Parahuman like you, it will only make your movements more sluggish and your striking power weaker. Abandon it!]

Henry doesn't hesitate. He grabs onto the power system affixed to the center of his chest and rips it off, causing the nanites around himself to crumble apart. Then he crushes it with his bare hands and tosses it aside.

The wind blows against Henry's face. The scent of death lingers in the air, a smell the T-REX previously filtered out but which Henry can now detect with his enhanced senses.

Dead humans, mostly fallen due to accidental crossfire from the Demon Deities above, or because of Artoria being sent flying, cause strange emotions to well up within Henry. He suddenly feels intimately close to those who have fallen. He becomes momentarily dazed, realizing that human lives are so painfully fragile that if he does not step up, even more of them will perish.

Humanity needs champions. He must become one of them, capable of taking down those who would do his species harm.

His will to resist the inevitable strengthens.

Executor Huron, perhaps sensing Henry's moment of inattentiveness, rushes at the oblivious human as he dumbly looks around. The Kolvaxian Plaguehost morphs his arm into a blade almost as sharp as the false Excalibur, then slashes at Henry's neck.

Henry's body blurs. He drops down instantly, ducks the attack, and pivots on his heel to swing his fist upward at Huron's chin.

CRACK!!

Every bone in the Executor's jaw turns to powder under the impact! A deafening shockwave blasts outward as Henry's punch not only shatters all the bones in Huron's head, but disconnects his skull from his spine.

The Executor careens helplessly up into the sky. His body spins and twists multiple times, and his lifeless corpse eventually crashes against the planet somewhere ten kilometers in the distance, splattering into pus and blood as his life essence dissipates.

Artoria shoots a look of disbelief Henry's way. Her usual aloof expression changes, even if only for an instant, revealing a look of admiration.

"...Excellent." She says. "The suit was holding you back."

"Yeah. It was." Henry says, as he lifts his greathammer once again. "Let's keep fighting! Shouldn't take long before Diablo captures the planet's core!"

Artoria looks deeply at the young man for a moment longer. Then she looks away, her expression reverting to its default emotion of bland disinterest.

The two continue fighting, and sure enough, not two minutes later, Cosmic energy builds up inside Reaver's core.

"Incoming!" Henry shouts. "Huron's about to- what...?"

Henry blinks twice. He looks behind himself, up at the sky, where he sees Sartran continuing to fire potshots at the two Demon Deities who remain hidden behind their portals. Then he turns his head back to look down at the soil, as if peering through Reaver's confines directly into its core.

"If Sartran is still here, then why are there two Cosmic energy signatures on the way?"

Diablo instantly detects the anomaly. The Archdemon's head snaps toward the pair of incoming threats, and a rumble of anger growls in the Archdemon's throat.

"SO. YOU'VE FINALLY DECIDED TO SHOW YOURSELF. AFTER ALL THIS TIME..."

Melody's expression changes. She looks through her portal towards the other one, where Kristoff levitates on his homeworld.

"It's the third Kolvaxian Executor! He's finally decided to show his face!"

"The third one?" Kristoff asks, his face contorting into a look of disbelief. "We've conquered a hundred worlds and he hasn't shown up until now. What changed?"

Nobody answers Kristoff's question, because nobody knows. When the soil bursts again, it isn't just Huron who appears, but a third Executor, the scariest of them all.

Executor Nufaris.

Considered the most powerful Executor, an 8th Level Psion who is also the youngest among his peers, Nufaris was the one who advanced most rapidly during the Energy Wars, achieving incredible feats in his fight against humanity. Despite being the youngest, he possesses more latent potential than any of his peers. Many Volgrim have even come to believe he has the highest chances of reaching the 9th Level.

As for his doppelganger, his Kolvaxxed clone?

Frightening doesn't even begin to describe it.

The moment the fake Nufaris emerges from the planet's soil, every Cosmic and Cosmic-adjacent life-form in the area stiffens in fear for a moment. Diablo narrows his eyes from within the Archdemon's body, gazing at Nufaris with a respect he never expected.

"COME. FIGHT ME, YOU PALE SHADOW OF A TRUE LEGEND." Diablo taunts. **"YOU ARE INCAPABLE OF DEFEATING ME. EVEN THREE FALSE PSIONS WILL NOT BE MY MATCH."**

Diablo charges up a laser of destruction within the Archdemon's mouth.

He fires it at Nufaris, knowing that despite being a prodigy, Nufaris is not a Body Enhancer master like Huron. His physical strength is actually quite weak!

But when the beam of destruction lances toward Nufaris, it somehow bends around him, curving as if pulled aside by the gravity of a black hole.

Diablo's attack blasts off into the horizon, traveling harmlessly into the Void where it may travel unobstructed for the rest of eternity!

"WHAT?"

Diablo momentarily becomes baffled. He didn't expect this to happen!

Nufaris ignores Diablo. He and Huron instead race toward the invasion force, but this time, they do not direct their animosity toward the ordinary human soldiers.

They aim for Henry and Artoria!

Henry might not normally know who Nufaris is, but thanks to Jephthah's connection to Psymon Miralax in the Hall of Heroes, he has long been debriefed on the various abilities of the Kolvaxian Psions.

"Shit!" Henry exclaims. "I barely managed to kill Huron! I don't know if I can handle Nufaris too!"

"Then don't." Artoria says. "You will battle Huron. Leave the new one to me. I will test his strength."

"Alright. Be careful!" Henry says. "His body is weaker than Huron's. You might be able to land a killing blow with Excalibur."

The two don't get any additional time to strategize. Both Executors race at them in unison!

Huron and Nufaris both aim for Artoria, but Henry intervenes. He jumps in front of Huron and tackles him to the ground, making sure to keep away from the horde of ordinary Kolvaxians as the human soldiers behind him continually mow down the horde with gunfire.

As Henry fights for his life against Huron, Artoria dances with her blade, striking at Nufaris while the Kolvaxian sends blasts of shadow, light, fire, ice, wind, and lightning in her direction. Nufaris summons clones of himself made of different elements, and they surround Artoria, attacking her from all angles.

If Artoria possessed the capacity for it, she might start to nervously sweat. Nufaris's Kolvax-clone continually confounds her senses! When she strikes at one of the mirages, she misses and receives a blow from the side as recompense. She gets battered sideways, right into the attack of another clone as it, too, sends her flying.

Luckily, she keeps her cool. Artoria glares at the main body, but it switches places with her clones, then fires a chain of lightning at her, wrapping around her sword-arm and hampering her slash before she can land a decisive hit on a different clone.

"Damn you." Artoria growls, one of the few words she's spontaneously spoken during the entire operation. "I will not lose to a false idol. You are nothing before me."

She breaks free of the electrical chain, shattering it with brute force. Nufaris batters her around again, but her insanely resilient body ensures she takes almost no damage from any attacks he successfully lands.

From above, a spear of blood races downward, tearing through Nufaris's real body. Unfortunately, the false Psion changes positions with one of his clones at the last second, sacrificing it, then re-summoning it a moment later.

Nufaris ignores the distant threat of the two Demon Deities. The Kolvaxian puts a strange amount of focus on Artoria, soloing her while paying no attention at all to the other humans, demons, and Volgrim among the invasion force. For some reason, it doesn't even seem to care about Diablo...

Artoria smiles. By drawing all of Nufaris's attention, she is actively keeping the humans safe. As long as this frightening creature doesn't pay any attention to them, Diablo's conquest will continue to proceed and the casualties will be kept to a minimum.

The humans, demons, and Volgrim will win the battle!

"Beat me down all you like." Artoria sneers. "You're a pale shadow of the true Nufaris. I wouldn't fear him, and I certainly don't fear you!"

As she continues to taunt the Kolvaxian, something strange happens.

A smile appears on the Kolvaxian's mouthless face.

Artoria's heart turns cold.

Something about the Kolvaxian abruptly makes her feel a deep fear, a terror that only those who have faced a superior existence could ever comprehend. A primal sense of danger that those who are hunters would only experience when they become the hunted.

Nufaris slowly points a finger at Artoria.

Two words speak inside her mind, words that contain a mixture of human, demon, and Volgrim sensations.

[YOU. IN...TER...ES...TING...]

"What?" Artoria whispers. "You... speak?!"

'Nufaris' says nothing else. That strange, hideous smile spreads across his entire face.

Abruptly, he grabs at Artoria, lifting her with a force resembling gravity, but perhaps reminiscent of Primal Psionics.

"Ahh!"

Artoria cries out, but she doesn't have any time to say more. Nufaris suddenly flings his arm. He hurls Artoria away from the humans, out toward the Kolvaxian horde!

Henry catches a glimpse of this moment from the corner of his eye. As he punches Huron's teeth in, he shrieks in disbelief.

"Artoria! NOOO!!"

Unable to fly. Unable to activate any magic. Artoria careens helplessly away from the safety of the human soldiers. She crashes into the mass of Kolvaxians, and they swarm on top of her like ants ripping at a centipede. Her formidable body prevents her from taking any damage, but the sheer number of Kolvaxians grabbing at her face, arms, legs, shoulders, chest, and hair makes it impossible for her to fight back. She opens her mouth to scream, but a hand grabs her from behind and silences her before she can make a sound.

She fights like hell. She feebly tries to swing her false Excalibur around, but the horde wrenches it from her grasp. She bucks and pulls, tugs and yanks, but slowly, she is drawn more and more toward the soil...

Inside the Hall of Heroes, Hope roars at the top of his lungs. **"RETURN! PUSH! EXPLODE!!** God DAMMIT! Nothing's working! There's some sort of magical interference! Solomon, Jephthah, what do I do?! I can't get her out of there!"

"It's the Kolvaxians," Solomon quickly explains. "They possess a primal form of Chaos Energy. It interferes with magical powers, just like Gressil does!"

"Then how can I save her?!" Hope asks. "Hurry!"

Even with the Hall of Heroes operating at 100 times the flow of realspace, a few hundred seconds isn't long enough for Solomon to think of a rescue strategy. The Kolvaxians have never done something like this before, and it catches everyone off-guard.

"I... I could try and create a piece of technology-" Solomon offers, but Hope interrupts him.

"Too slow! I need something now!"

At that moment, a portal opens on the world of Reaver. Creator Demila emerges from it just in time to see Artoria thrown by Nufaris and swallowed by the Plague.

Her eyes turn livid.

[YOU!]

She races toward Artoria. She stretches out her Primal Psionic to try and rip away the horde, but Nufaris and Sartran both jump in front of her and begin attacking with all their strength. They force Demila to go on the defensive, and she can only watch helplessly as Artoria is dragged further and further downward.

Eventually, she disappears beneath the soil.

Artoria loses her ability to resist. The Plague pulls her toward the planet's core, and her body goes limp. Some unknown power seizes and silences her, just as it has countless others.

If even the Executors could not resist, how could a mortal like her?

"Artoria!!" Henry shrieks, his eyes filling with tears. He glares hatefully at Huron, and his strength erupts once again. "YOU FUCKING MONSTER! DIE!!"

Henry's fist blasts the side of Huron's head. He cracks the hardy Executor's skull and sends him flying, but Henry doesn't stop there. He dashes after the Executor and punches him again, then again! He smashes his face down into the soil and releases an unrelenting fury of fists.

"You worthless! Piece! Of SHIT! How DARE you! Eat! This! Fist!"

Henry atomizes Huron's skull, crushing it to pieces and spraying green-colored brains and blood all over the hardened floor. He snaps his head toward Nufaris, a look of death in his eyes.

"You're NEXT, motherfucker!"

But at that moment, Nufaris's body sags. He flops downward, collapsing to the ground as every drop of power in his body disappears.

At the same time, Sartran also collapses. Both Plaguehosts flop to the soil, collapsing lifelessly as their bodies splatter apart, dissipating into blood and pus.

One second later, the entire Horde on Reaver slows to a stop. The Kolvaxians cease their assault. They freeze up, stiffen, then fall over, all of them bursting apart as some unknown effect ends their lives.

For a brief moment, the entire battle concludes. The bewildered forces of humanity, demonkind, and the Volgrim watch in disbelief as their enemies perish around them, melting into disgusting puddles of goo and bone and marrow that would surely stink to high heaven if their exosuits didn't filter out the rank odor.

Loputo Jidelor cranes his head from side to side. "What happened? Why is the Plague dying?"

"It was that human woman!" Another Volgrim says. "After the Plague swallowed her, there must have been a backlash. Perhaps she transmitted a disease to them?"

Founder Demila frowns. She turns to look at the Archdemon, but its massive eyeless head gives no clues as to Diablo's mood.

[Diablo.] She says, looking at the Archdemon intently. [I only just arrived. What happened? Can you make sense of this?]

Diablo doesn't answer. Inside the Archdemon's body, the Emperor of Annihilation looks just as perplexed as the others.

Nothing about this situation makes sense. Why would the Plague collapse after devouring the Black Hole Construct. Could something about her biology have caused the swarm great harm? Perhaps her unique nature has affected the 'heart' of the swarm?

Diablo continues to attack the planet's core. Over the next five minutes, nothing further happens with the Kolvaxians. He draws closer and closer to fully conquering Reaver, and his mood improves.

"WE'VE ALMOST WON." Diablo declares. **"ONLY A FEW MORE MINUTES, AND REAVER WILL BE OURS."**

Sighs of relief go up among the invasion force. Only Henry looks bitterly at the area where Artoria was surrounded, ensnared, and taken.

"Why... why did it have to be her?" He mutters. "She was... so powerful... so valiant. She didn't deserve to die. Even if her death ends the Plague's Threat forever, was it worth losing her?"

Diablo's assimilation of the Core continues unabated. Just as he is about to finish the job, a sense of danger appears in his mind!

Kolvaxians begin swimming up from the Core once again. This time, they move much more quickly and aggressively! They tear through the planet's soil, racing toward the surface at speeds three times faster than before.

"EVERYONE!" Diablo shouts. **"THE PLAGUE ISN'T DEAD! IT'S-"**

He doesn't get to finish his sentence. The Kolvaxians explode from the soil and charge at the invasion force with renewed fervor. As the humans, demons, and Volgrim return to the previous status quo, they grimly fire bullets and artillery into the horde.

But this time, something goes horribly wrong.

It only takes five seconds before people realize that the status quo is no longer intact.

Bullets that once would have killed a Plaguehost instead bounce off them. The swarm converges, breaking through the invasion force's battle lines with horrifying ease!

"Oh my GOD!" A man at the front shrieks. "Something's different! They-"

A Kolvaxian pounces on him and impales its fist through his stomach, ripping through his exosuit with contemptuous ease. In the blink of an eye, ten more Kolvaxians leapfrog past and rip through the men and women behind him, causing screams of terror to unfold among humanity's side.

The Volgrim are no better off! The Kolvaxians shred through their Technopath elites as if they were schoolchildren being wiped out by crack teams of elite government forces. The unexpected ferocity and power of the Kolvaxian uprising frightens the Volgrim out of their wits.

[This is impossible!] Demila exclaims. [The horde! It's become stronger! Their bodies! They're practically invulnerable!]

A chill goes down Diablo's spine. Where before he would have completely ignored any threat posed by ordinary Kolvaxians, now they climb across the Archdemon's body and begin ripping into it, tearing out massive hunks of flesh and meat with their newfound strength.

It doesn't take long for Diablo to realize what has transpired.

Seven Devils. It was the Black Hole Construct. Somehow... somehow... after devouring her, it resulted... in a massive evolution in the Plague's fighting power! How could this have happened?!

* * *

Across the Milky Way, a cataclysm unfolds. Countless worlds besieged by the Plague fall faster than ever. No longer can ordinary weapons and artillery harm them. Even the might of 7th and 8th Level Psions fail to mass-kill the Plague like before. Countless brave

Psions and Technopaths perish before they can comprehend just what in the hell has happened.

Red Level Alerts spring up at the Founder's Thumb. Unarin's brother, Randis, scrambles to figure out what is happening.

"UNARIN!" Randis roars. "There's been a collapse! A full collapse! The Plague- it's become drastically empowered! I... I'm issuing a full retreat from the frontlines! This is a Founder Level Threat!"

Unarin quickly runs over to Randis's side. "What caused this? How has the Enemy become so much stronger?"

"I'm still trying to parse the data." Randis says, his tone becoming more frantic as the seconds pass. "Something... empowered physique, nearly impenetrable bodies... every single Plaguehost has gained a body on par with Executor Huron! This is absurd! What could cause such a qualitative leap in power?!"

Dosena's voice speaks from an unknown realm. [There has been an unexpected development on the world of Reaver. Diablo's invasion caused a catastrophe. This is all his fault.]

"That damnable demon." Randis hisses. "I knew we shouldn't have worked with him!"

* * *

[Retreat!] Demila roars. [Volgrim, fall back!]

Diablo chimes in as well. **"ALL DEMONS, THIS BATTLE HAS BECOME UNWINNABLE. YARDRAT, BEGIN THE EVACUATION! WE MUST SURVIVE TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY!"**

The invasion of Reaver fails.

In its place, a new horror emerges.

The era of the unstoppable Bio-Plague.

Part 569: Reaver's End

Jason Hiro teleports inside the realm of Chrona, just outside the Spynet Sphere. He quickly enters and finds Fiona, Blinker, Kar, and Initiator Ferrel watching the screens.

He doesn't even get to speak before Fiona turns and interrupts the question he was about to ask.

"Artoria is gone."

Jason's heart turns cold.

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"The Plague. They pulled a dirty trick. The last Kolvaxxed Executor finally showed himself. Executor Nufaris's clone fought Artoria, but he threw her into the horde. We detected multiple activations of Words of Power- I'm guessing that wasn't you?"

"It wasn't." Jason says quietly.

"Then it was Hope." Fiona says. "He failed to rescue her from the horde."

"Once the Plague closes in on someone, the chaotic auras around their bodies will interfere with all forms of magic." Jason explains. "Like Gressil's aura, but weaker."

"Gressil..." Fiona says, returning her gaze to the monitors.

A few moments pass. Jason quickly walks around, looking at the different displays. On this particular day, most of the monitors have been attuned to various worlds currently embroiled in conflict with the Plague. Not only Reaver, but several other planets that were being attacked by the Kolvaxians, most of them along the border of Volgrim space.

"Hm?" Jason grunts. "What's going on? Why isn't the Plague moving? Why did it stop attacking?"

You mean you don't know?" Blinker asks, shooting Jason a quizzical glance. "This isn't part of your big plan? Having Artoria get eaten so you can kill the Plague?"

Jason blinks twice. "I'd never wish that upon her. Even if she is 'just' a Black Hole Construct. I don't want that for Soleil either! This is a horrifying tragedy."

With realspace's progression slowed down by a factor of two hundred and fifty, the people inside Chrona get plenty of time to debate just what the hell is going on while the

Plaguehosts remain deathly silent, melting into pus and blood as they submerge back into the soil of the various worlds they were previously overrunning.

"So you didn't plan this?" Fiona asks.

"No way." Jason answers. "If this kills the Plague, it's a happy accident. But I'm not sure the price was worth paying."

"Hurgh. Trading the life of a mindless construct for the entirety of the Plague is absolutely a price worth paying." Kar says, interjecting his own opinion.

"Artoria wasn't mindless. She was sentient, just like you and me." Jason counters. "I know *the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few*, but this is absolutely a tragedy. At the very least, Artoria was a unique life-form. She and Soleil are the only Black Hole Constructs that have ever existed."

"Whatever your opinion on what's transpired, it's already happened." Blinker interjects. "We need to capitalize on this development. If the Plague is really dead, then that means the Volgrim military has become free to do what it wants again! This is a nightmare scenario for humanity."

Jason's expression turns ugly. "That's a good point. So what the hell do we do? Humanity is the weakest major faction in the Milky Way, outside the collective might of the monsters. But they're relatively neutral and don't present a threat to the demons or Volgrim, so they will get ignored or recruited."

"You can say this was all deliberate. Part of a plan." Kar offers. "You've been acting all secret and quiet-like, recently. Really picking up on this King's big brain moves. I bet you could convince the Volgrim to think so."

Jason exchanges a glance with Fiona, then he looks at Kar. "You think that's a good idea?"

"Hurgh. Don't give specifics." Kar growls. "*Never* give those. Just be general. You made Artoria. She was a test. The Plague ate her. The Plague is dead. All part of your plan. Then you just let the Volgrim guess what comes next. You keep them guessing."

Fiona strokes her chin. "I... think this is worth considering."

Initiator Ferrel looks at the others around him, the humans and monsters. [I do not think your plan will work. Founder Unarin is wise. Founder Unarin will see through this facade.]

Jason looks at the Initiator, then he looks away. He closes his eyes and massages the bridge of his nose.

"We can't be direct about it." Jason says. "If I just come out and laugh like an idiot, saying 'It was all part of my master plan!' he'll see right through it."

"Then go about this in an indirect way." Fiona encourages. "Let hints slip. Keep people guessing what your next move is. You *did* make Artoria. She was eaten. The Plague died. These facts are indisputable. It's not hard to tie everything together."

Jason scrunches up his face. The thought of weaponizing poor Artoria's death makes him feel a little ill, but if he can prevent further deaths...

"Alright. Let's brainstorm how we'll do this then. As a famous man once said, *never let a tragedy go to waste*. Humanity needs any leg-up it can get. We'll start by disseminating information through our soldiers, making rumors spread about how I-

"Wait!" Blinker suddenly exclaims, interrupting him.

Jason turns to the fairy, where he sees her looking at one of the monitors focused on the world of Reaver.

"What is it?" Jason asks.

"Something's changed." Blinker says. "Our soldiers look spooked."

Seconds pass in realspace. Each one requires 250 seconds to pass inside Chrona, but all the major players wait with bated breath as time crawls forward at a glacial pace.

"No... no this is impossible." Jason whispers. "**Detect! Scan!**"

He transmits multiple Words of Power through one of the monitors, investigating the status of Reaver.

"IT'S ALIVE?!" Jason cries out, horrified. "Artoria didn't kill the Plague! She only paused it!"

"Across the whole galaxy." Fiona adds, looking spooked. "But now it's back. What happened? Was it simply frozen for a brief period?"

Nobody answers her. They simply wait, allowing minutes to pass as they watch the Plaguehosts slowly claw their way back to the surface.

"They're faster." Jason says, his throat dry. "Three times faster. Look how quickly the Kolvaxians are burrowing out of Reaver's core."

"Faster is bad." Fiona says. "Really bad."

One realspace minute passes. This translates to over 4 hours in Chrona time.

Even so, nobody relaxes. Jason, Fiona, Blinker, Kar, and Initiator Ferrel all watch the screens with tight faces. They wait, and wait, and wait some more.

"The first Kolvaxian just made landfall." Fiona says quietly. "East-side. Three more will follow in two real-seconds."

And so, they do. Time continues to crawl forward as hundreds and hundreds of Kolvaxians emerge and charge at the human and Volgrim forces enveloping the demons in the center.

Suddenly, Fiona's eyes widen.

"Oh my god!"

Jason follows her gaze to the monitor, but he doesn't see anything that stands out, just human soldiers firing into the wall of encroaching Kolvaxians.

"What? What is it?" Jason asks, bewildered.

"The Kolvaxians! They... they've become bulletproof! Our weapons aren't hurting them at all!"

Blinker goes still. Her heart skips a beat.

Almost in unison, everyone in the Spynet Sphere comes to the same conclusion at once.

"Artoria." Jason says. "She... her body... she must have..."

"We have to move fast!" Fiona shrieks. "Jason! Quick, start teleporting our people out of there!"

"I'm not commanding the operation!" Jason shouts back. "It would be a breach of-"

"Fuck protocol." She snaps, looking at him with angry eyes. "Save our people! HURRY!"

Jason takes three seconds to react. Three precious seconds that don't amount to much time in realspace, but they aren't *nothing* either.

Without answering his mind-wife directly, he turns his attention to the humans at the front of the horde. "**Return! Return! Return! Shit!!**"

To his horror, he finds that the soldiers closest to the horde have already been enveloped by bubbles of chaotic energy, preventing his Wordsmithing from reaching them. Decisively, he switches gears, targeting people further back, but still as close to the front as he can manage.

"Return! Return! Return!"

This time, he finds success. People vanish one at a time from amidst the horde, reappearing on Yardrat's staging world as the designated fallback point.

Every Chrona-second, Jason manages to save one to two people at a time. He repeats the same word, over and over and over.

And over.

And over...

Roughly three to four hundred people disappear from Reaver's surface every real-time second. They disappear so fast that only Initiator Ferrel notices a certain anomaly.

[Jason Hiro is not the only one teleporting humans away.] Ferrel says, transmitting his telepathic words to everyone except for Jason, so as to not distract him. [I suspect Hope Hiro is also rescuing his fellow humans.]

"Good." Fiona whispers, as she shoots a glance at Jason. "We need to move quickly, no matter what."

Jason says the word *Return* so many times in such rapid succession that he starts to feel dizzy. He pauses to catch his breath, as well as to activate a mana bead, causing ten seconds to pass and just as many people to possibly die to the Plague.

"Not fast enough." He mutters. "Fuck it. Time for me to get serious."

Jason focuses his mind. He narrows his eyes, then look at the monitor with deep intent.

"Da! Da! Da! Da! Da!"

He fires off a single syllable, barely even a word at all. Each time he speaks, a person disappears, but this time at nearly twice the speed they were vanishing before.

Fiona looks at him with a complicated gaze. *It seems his training has paid off. He's finally putting that new skill to good use...*

Over the next minutes, the army of 100,000 humans dwindles down, disappearing quickly as Jason and Hope work in tandem. Unfortunately, sometimes both of them target the same person, causing that person to teleport to the same location twice. These happen more and more frequently, wasting time and mana as their lack of communication starts to bite them in the ass. The fewer the humans who remain, the more often they come into conflict.

"Da! Da! Da! Fuck you Hope, you fucking idiot!" Jason roars. "Quick picking the same people as me, you stupid piece of-! **Da! DA! DA!!**"

All the while, Fiona and the others can only stand and watch, hoping the Wordsmiths will save as many lives as they possibly can.

The only help they can provide is moral support. No more than that, even if their hearts ache to do so.

On the world of Reaver, the situation becomes more and more dire by the second. Weapons fail to inflict material damage on the Plaguehosts. Only the attacks of powerful Cosmics and Cosmic-adjacent individuals, such as Diablo, Melody, Kristoff, Demila, and even Henry, can so much as push back the Plague for moments at a time. As for killing them, only Diablo and Kristoff have the strength, and only when they focus their attacks to inflict the greatest amount of damage on the smallest area. Wiping out swathes of Plaguehosts has become completely impossible.

Seeing the horde fall upon a pair of female soldiers who are too close to the front to be teleported out, Henry explodes with rage.

"YOU WILL NOT HURT THEM!" The young man roars, his muscles bulging with veins. Heroically, perhaps even suicidally, he jumps toward the two women, spreads his arms, then claps his hands together with every drop of strength his body can summon.

BOOOOM!!!

A shockwave detonates from the point where his palms meet, slamming into the horde and blasting their bodies backward! The women cry out and hold onto the ground, but they nearly get swept away as well. Luckily, Henry is able to react quickly enough to grab both of them under his arms and jump backward.

Not even two seconds later, the horde fills in the gap Henry made and continues clawing forward, each Plaguehost charging over the others nearby as they silently charge toward the juicy mortal flesh before them.

The faceless monsters wreak havoc, killing more than a thousand humans the Wordsmiths were unable to save in time. Eventually, Henry is the last to be pulled off Reaver as the Wordsmiths teleport him out, then cease their activities, leaving the Volgrim and demons to their fates.

"You Wordsmith bastaaards!" Emperor Crow roars. As one of the few remaining Emperors who has yet to ascend to the rank of Cosmic, she can still put her powerful body to use on the frontlines of the war. Unfortunately, even she realizes her strength is nothing compared to the mass of bodies rushing toward her. She and the other demons are hopelessly outmatched, and the Wordsmiths have stopped teleporting their allies out!

"YARDRAT!" Diablo roars. **"SAVE OUR PEOPLE. SAVE THE VOLGRIM. HURRY."**

The two portals linking Kristoff and Melody to Reaver collapse, and instead a giant portal opens smack in-between the demons and Technopaths. Without hesitation, both forces rush inside, swarming as fast as they can while the Psions above clip through the top of the portal, all of them arriving on the world of Ydris.

The instant the last survivor makes it through, Ydrat closes the portal.

But there is a complication.

Diablo is left alone on Reaver!

With no allies to back him up, the powerful Archdemon roars with fury at his opponents. He sprays beams of destruction indiscriminately, unleashing his full power at will as he fights off the horde tearing at him from ten thousand different angles.

The Kolvaxians rip at Diablo's flesh. They tear the Archdemon's body apart, even as it quickly regenerates the damage. Like rabid wolves, they work as one mind, a group hellbent on causing his destruction.

At the same time, Diablo finally succeeds in disconnecting himself from Reaver's core. The Archdemon hunches down, then leaps into the sky, ignoring the Kolvaxians that continue to hold onto his massive body. He soars toward Reaver's upper atmosphere, his

speed slower than ever as the wounds continue to accumulate. Even the mighty Archdemon cannot regenerate forever...

But, without any other Kolvaxians able to attach to him, bit by bit, Diablo tears the ones that remain off him by using his teeth-tentacles. These giant maws of death bite onto the mortal Kolvaxians, but they fail to break the skin of these hardy foes, instead opting to fling the Kolvaxians back toward the planet's surface.

Slowly, steadily, Diablo makes his way toward Reaver's star, intending to burn the rest away with its heat.

As he flees, Diablo's heart turns cold.

He senses the approach of three Cosmic signatures behind him.

He doesn't even have to look to know who they are.

Executors Huron, Sartran, and Nufaris chase the Archdemon. Most horrifyingly, they bring more than ten thousand mortal Kolvaxians along behind them, levitating their flightless comrades through the use of Primal Psionics.

Diablo shivers as he looks at the terrifying force following after him.

"YARDRAT." Diablo says to the void. "DO NOT OPEN A PORTAL. I MUST FIGHT THEM MYSELF."

If Yadrat were to open a portal, he'd not only bring Diablo to a new location, but also the Kolvaxians still clinging tightly to the Archdemon's skin. Just a single one of these creatures would be a huge threat, let alone more than a thousand of them!

Diablo has to deal with the Kolvaxians alone before he can make his great escape.

But then, from the surface of Reaver, another mass of Kolvaxians begins levitating toward the skies.

Rarely used. Rarely seen. They are the 5th, 6th, and 7th Level Psions that have fallen to the Plague over tens of millennia.

For some reason, they almost never attack worlds, leaving such tasks to the flightless Technopath and monster Kolvaxians instead.

But, perhaps because of a chance to devour a juicy foe like the Archdemon, tens of thousands of them take to the Void, giving chase as Diablo flees for his life.

There's too many. Diablo thinks. *The Plague has changed drastically. Every individual Plaguehost possesses a body on par with Executor Huron. Since that is the case, just how much more frightening have the Executors become?*

Diablo charges up a laser-beam of destruction. He blasts it at Nufaris, who flickers to the side and easily avoids it. Two of the mortal Kolvaxians behind him catch the laser by accident, and their bodies explode to ash.

This fact offers no consolation to Diablo. The Plague continues to gain on him.

Abruptly, Nufaris accelerates. His body flashes forward at a speed far beyond Diablo's expectations, and in an instant, he leapfrogs the Archdemon, jumping into his path to turn around and face him.

NO! Diablo thinks, horrified.

Nufaris flings his ball of mortal Kolvaxians at Diablo, dispersing them like a net. Diablo tries to slow down, to dodge them, but his massive body is much slower than usual thanks to the serious injuries he's suffered. Countless Kolvaxians grab onto him and join the others, ripping at his flesh with their talons.

Diablo does not feel any pain. The Archdemon's meaty and muscled body might as well be impervious to such sensations, but he can still *feel* the Kolvaxians worming their way deeper and deeper inside.

Nufaris charges at Diablo. The Archdemon tries to swing his arm, to smash the tiny Kolvaxxed-Executor aside, but Nufaris's clone bends its body through a spatial warping technique, wraps around Diablo's arm, and races toward his head in a single split-second.

BOOM!!!

A silent explosion detonates in space as Nufaris punches Diablo with enough force to flatten planets. That power transmits through the Archdemon's head and nervous system directly to Diablo's body at the core. He opens his mouth in a wordless scream, but he fails to make any noise due to the Archdemon flesh pressing on him from all directions.

BOOOM! BOOOM!!!

Two more times, Nufaris strikes the Archdemon, paralyzing Diablo with those attacks.

Then Sartran and Huron join the fight. They pepper Diablo with even more mortal Kolvaxians, tearing apart his flesh and striking him in the back and legs, battering him senseless until he is unable to resist.

Darkness starts to swallow Diablo's mind. Under the assault of these empowered Kolvaxians, he realizes too late that he is utterly defenseless against them.

"YAR...DRAT..." Diablo says, his voice weak as he communicates with his fellow Deity. **"THEY... HAVE... EVOLVED... NOT... HOLDING... BACK... POWER... THE... EXECUTORS..."**

Another violent impact jars Diablo's senses. He realizes it won't be long before the mortal Kolvaxians reach his core, the place where his true body is hiding.

No! No, I can't die like this... Diablo thinks. His body energizes one last time as he wills himself to make a fateful decision which will change the course of Milky Way history.

THIS PLAGUE WILL NOT TAKE ME ALIVE!

Diablo activates the power of Destruction hidden within himself. He energizes every cell of the Archdemon's body, turning its internal atomic power into a bomb of unbelievable strength.

In a manner not dissimilar to Beelzebub's detonation, Diablo self-destructs, conjuring a light far brighter than the local star.

The Reaver system vaporizes. Planets turn to ash. All three Executors erupt into rivers of flame as a light too bright for mortal eyes to gaze upon wipes their bodies from existence, causing the nearby star to ignite into a supernova.

Years later, this light will become visible to the star-systems nearest Reaver. As for whether the entities living on those planets will comprehend the sacrifice made, or whether they will care, none can say.

Diablo, the Emperor of Annihilation, dies in a fiery blast rivaled only by the energy of creation itself.

On the world of Yardris, eighty thousand Technopath soldiers, a thousand Psions, and a thousand demons collapse to the ground, beaten and exhausted as Yadrat hurriedly seals the portal behind them. Having narrowly escaped with their lives, the Technopaths suffered much heavier losses than their human counterparts. Because of the Wordsmiths, only a thousand human soldiers fell to the Kolvaxian horde. But, lacking such champions among their people, the Technopaths lost twenty percent of their elite soldiers.

They arrive on the world of Yadriss not far from the human survivors Hope and Jason rescued. Immediately, tensions rise as the demons and Volgrim glare daggers at the 'allies' who abandoned them.

Creator Demila surveys the survivors with a gloomy expression. Hatred boils her blood as she thinks about those shitstain Wordsmiths and how they didn't even bother trying to save the Volgrim or demons!

Not knowing of Diablo's fate as he fights for his life, Demila quickly checks the nearby Volgrim, breathing a faint sigh of relief when she realizes Loputo Jidelor, the leader of the Technopaths, has survived.

"Eeeyargh!"

A female Demon Duke shrieks in pain. Her cry causes the blood of every Sentient on Yadriss to run cold.

They quickly look around, and find the person who screamed, only for their eyes to go as wide as saucers.

Among the demon ranks, a single Kolvaxian remains, having somehow made it through the portal at the last possible second. It stands with its fist plunged into the female Duke's chest. Threads of green, veiny vines spread throughout her body, making her eyes turn cold. Her face begins to disappear as skin grows over it, and her movements slow to a stop.

Emperor Crow gasps. "A Kolvaxian! It's eating Duke Miranda! Quickly, KILL IT!"

One would expect the full might of a thousand Demon Emperors to be able to kill a single Kolvaxian.

They would be wrong.

With the monster's feet firmly planted on Yadriss's soil, it remains standing even as lasers, fireballs, ice-blasts, and raw telekinetic energy smash into its body from every direction. Pieces of its skin sometimes flake off, but otherwise it remains all but impervious to the attacks being sent its way.

Yadriss's eyes turn frigid. "Seven devils. This... it isn't taking Miranda underground. It's assimilating her right here. The Plague has improved its consumption power!"

He immediately conjures a portal to Kristoff's world, then a portal to Demon Deity Vespera's world. As the newly crowned Deity of Quasars, she commands immense

shadowy power, as well as the power of starlight and cosmic radiation.

"Kristoff! Vespera! A Kolvaxian made it through! Kill it quickly!"

Yardrat, despite being perfectly capable of putting up a fight, is only a Bottom Cosmic. Compared to his Middle Cosmic peers, he simply lacks the striking power to kill these newly empowered Kolvaxians, and thus does not even bother trying.

Kristoff wastes no time. He fires a spear of blood at the Kolvaxian, but it anticipates his attack, diving underground while dragging Duke Miranda along with it.

"Where did it go?!" Emperor Crow exclaims, looking down at the soil in fear. She jumps upward, using her wings to fly as high as she can.

She receives an answer not long after. Two Technopath soldiers scream in terror as green claws grab onto their feet and drag them beneath the soil.

Yardrat's thoughts turn chaotic.

"Oh no."

Part 570: Elevated Threat

Recommended Listening

The Volgrim have long grown accustomed to the horrors of the Kolvaxians. Their soldiers, especially, are not weak of mind. Even knowing that one of the strongest Kolvaxian mutations of all time has just occurred, and that two of their elite soldiers have just been taken from the center of their ranks with more to follow, they do not display any extreme emotions on their faces. They act professionally, spreading out while keeping wary eyes on their surroundings.

The humans and demons, on the other hand, are not the same.

Screams of fear go up among the humans. The demons completely panic and break formation as they frantically attack the ground, all while also knowing their weak and feeble attacks won't cause any damage to these horrifying new Plaguehosts!

Crow, the Emperor of Sacrifice, a proud and long-lived Demon Elite, panics because she is terrified of dying a death where even her formidable powers cannot protect her.

Dawn, the Demon Duke of Stillness, panics because she has only just achieved enough strength to join the elites of her people, but has not lived a long enough life to actually enjoy that power.

Many other demons shriek and scream, feeling that their long and cushy lives are about to come to an end.

Zagan, the Emperor of Transmuting, one of the demons who was recently uplifted from the rank of Duke, slaps his palms against the dirt. He summons an ultra-hard, concrete-like soil around himself, spreading it out like he did at the start of the battle on the world of Reaver. He quickly creates a stable platform to try and block the Kolvaxians from attacking from below.

He fails.

The newly empowered creatures tear through his transmuted concrete floor and grab a pair of Dukes, a Technopath soldier, and one of the human commandos, dragging all four to a death beneath the soil.

Zagan freaks out. His defensive barrier, which saved him and the allied forces on Reaver, has become nothing more than a minor obstacle to the Plaguehosts.

From above, Kristoff and Vespera watch uselessly as one Kolvaxian becomes two, then four, then eight. They want nothing more than to strike out at the creatures, but their enemies lurk beneath the soil where they cannot be sensed, even by Demon Deities.

"What do we do?!" Kristoff shouts, feeling an ache in his heart. He feels as weak and useless now as he did when his wife fell, months before, to the Archangels. He cannot save his friends, yet again. This, in spite of being a mighty Middle Cosmic!

"I do not know." Vespera says, her expression ugly. "Those bastards will surely show themselves! Surely!"

Henry Cliff looks around frantically, his eyes searching for any solution to this crisis. If he is grabbed by the Kolvaxians, he does not know what would happen to Jephthath's Legion. Would the Kolvaxians gain control of it? Would he become severed from Jephthath's Light? Would it cause a horrible feedback as the two 'hive minds' battle between one another? How could Jephthath's piddly 10,000-strong Legion compare to a force comprised of tens of trillions of Sentients?!

Creator Demila tenses her body. She starts to reach out with her power, to envelop every Sentient in harm's way and lift them above the ground, anything to keep them out of the easy reach of their enemies below.

But it is at this moment when a figure materializes in the air above and races toward the ground at an alarming speed.

BOOM!

It crashes into the dirt, moving too fast for almost anyone to make out. Only Demila, Yardrat, and the other Deities catch a glimpse of the figure.

"Wait, is that...?" Vespera asks.

"What is that fool doing?!" Kristoff howls. "He mustn't put himself in harm's way! The whole war hinges on his abilities!"

Seconds later, all eight Kolvaxians are torn out of the soil and thrown into the sky, their bodies bound together at the waist by a series of linked chains. As they hurtle upward, the figure that sent them flying bursts out of the ground behind them, giving chase.

The entire army looks upward, following the unexpected savior with their eyes.

"It's Commander Hope!" Linda Hurent shouts.

The Wordsmith races after the Kolvaxians, even as they fall back toward the planet's soil below. He summons a sword in his grasp, then chops it at the head of a Kolvaxian in the rear, but the sword fails to land a killing blow, instead striking the Kolvaxian like a hammer and sending all the chained-together creatures hurtling toward the soil even faster than before.

Boom-boom-boom!

They crash into the dirt and immediately burrow underground again, using the chains to pull each other along, even as they fail to break the bindings between themselves. The Wordsmith gives chase, diving underground to pursue his foes.

"That isn't Hope..." Henry says under his breath. "It must be Jason..."

A feeling of fear takes the armies once again as, seconds later, the Wordsmith hasn't resurfaced yet.

"Beneath us!" Emperor Crow shouts.

All the humans, demons, and Volgrim quickly look down at their feet, realizing the Kolvaxians must be about to surface.

However, their gazes turn to confusion.

Somehow, while they were focused on the distraction above, a floor made of steel silently materialized beneath them. It stretches out for over ten thousand meters in every direction, protecting every member of the allied forces from being attacked from below.

Huh? Emperor Zagan thinks, his expression turning to confusion. *When the hell did that get there?*

"Prepare yourselves!" Crow shouts. "If this floor holds, the Plague will have to attack us from the sides!"

As if to punctuate her words, a sound like a gong being struck rings out eight times in a row beneath the armies. The floor of steel faintly rumbles, making everyone sigh with relief.

Loputo Jidelor, the assigned leader of the Technopaths, narrows his eyes.

This is no ordinary steel! Its hardness is ten, a hundred, perhaps even a thousand times more fearsome! What sort of incredible alloy is this?!

Momentarily foiled, the eight Kolvaxians start to swim to the sides of the ultra-hard barrier barring them from the juicy Sentients above. They burst out of the soil and pounce from the western edge of the platform at the Technopaths, only for Jason Hiro to *foop* into existence between the Kolvaxian attackers and the Volgrim defenders, his palm raised.

A thunderous blast of energy fires from his palm, striking the lead Kolvaxian and sending it flying backward.

A split-second later, Jason disappears from his spot and reappears in the path of the eight Kolvaxians as they are helplessly yanked away by that damned chain binding all eight of them together. In a manner that might appear comical if the stakes weren't so high, Jason summons a huge greathammer and swings it upward, banging it against the back of the nearest Kolvaxian and flinging them up, up, up into the sky.

Jason looks toward the two Demon Deities within the portals Yadrat summoned. "I lack striking power! Help me kill these things!"

Kristoff and Vespera, despite having been struck dumb by Jason's sudden appearance and reversal of an unwinnable situation, quickly gather their wits about them. Kristoff fires two spears of blood, blasting apart the heads of two Kolvaxians in the middle of the chain. Vespera conjures a pair of twin shadow-swords, sweeping their blades at the necks of another two Kolvaxians. Unfortunately, she only manages to behead one of them, and the other survives with a shallow gash running across its neck.

"Damn!" Vespera hisses. "Their bodies are ridiculously durable!"

The eight Kolvaxians, three of them now corpses, fall toward the planet. They smash into the soil, then disappear, swimming out of sight as they circle around the army once again.

Jason hesitates this time, not chasing directly after the monsters. His eyes jump all over the place, as if thinking about a hundred different things all at once.

Suddenly, the ground explodes beneath him. A Kolvaxian leaps up at Jason and stabs its clawed hand at his chest.

RIIIIP!

It tears through Jason's outer shirt, plunges through his chest, and bursts out of his back before he can react.

"JASON!!" Henry cries.

Linda's eyes widen in horror. "No! Not like this!"

Just as the entire crowd is about to descend into chaos, Jason pushes toward the Kolvaxian that attacked him. He grabs it, ignoring its arm plunged through his chest, and wraps his arms around his foe. Then he dives at the soil, dragging his opponent into the underground depths.

Seconds after Jason and the chain of Kolvaxians disappear, a rumble in the planet's depths signals a massive underground explosion, one that knocks a few of the less sure-footed soldiers onto their asses.

"What happened?" Private Ashley McCarthy asks. "Did the Wordsmith die? Ah!"

She lets out a yelp of surprise when Jason materializes in midair on the human side of the army, his body fully healed and perfectly intact. Neither she nor anyone else present can quite make out what the hell happened.

That is to say, everyone except for the Cosmics.

Demila sneers. *So it's not the real Wordsmith here. That brat had me worried. It's his robot clone.*

Yardrat breathes a sigh of relief. *Is he trying to give us all heart attacks? A little communication would be nice.*

The soil shifts. The chained-together Kolvaxians emerge, this time more slowly and hesitantly, onto Yardris's surface. Appearing much warier than before, they no longer charge stupidly at the Sentients, but eye the Wordsmith in the sky with a look of intelligence.

Jason's expression turns ugly.

Of the Kolvaxians he 'killed', all but one of them have regenerated. Somehow, seven Kolvaxians remain among the living, despite the fact that three, if not four, should have died by now.

The Kolvaxians yank at the chains attached to their waists, but they fail to break the links. They try to pull apart, to spread out like they did before, but the Wordsmith's

bindings prevent them from splitting up.

What alloy is the Wordsmith using to bind the Kolvaxians together? Loputo Jidelor thinks. *Is it the same one he used to shield us from below? I don't know if even a Middle Cosmic could shatter it...*

Unable to break the chains, the Kolvaxians try a different tactic.

They attack each other!

The Kolvaxians use their own power to rip one another apart, slashing at each other's waists with their razor-sharp claws, severing their bodies in half, causing the weaker-stomached human soldiers to turn green with disgust.

"Oh, god! Why are they- no, WHAT are they doing?" Ashley asks. "They're killing each other!"

But she is wrong.

After severing their bodies, the Kolvaxians drag themselves along the ground, extracting their lower halves from the shackles that bound their waists, then they press their stumps together and rapidly heal the damage, making Jason's eyes narrow.

"So that's why." Jason says, seemingly speaking to himself, but for the benefit of his audience as well. "Kolvaxians used to die easily. Now they've obtained a powerful regenerative factor, in addition to their hardy bodies. They're nearly as hard to kill as Beelzebub and Bael combined."

A chill goes down Emperor Crow's spine.

Just how fearsome would a demon be if they possessed Bael's defense and strength, but also Beelzebub's regenerative capabilities?

Even if one could somehow get past their enemy's superior defenses, they'd still have to contend with a body that could heal itself in seconds!

The Kolvaxians from before are no longer comparable to the ones that exist now.

The one dead Kolvaxian melts into the dirt, disappearing from sight. The other seven dive underground, circling the metallic platform protecting the invasion armies like a small, elite group of trained sharks.

Jason quickly looks behind himself at one person in particular.

"Henry! I'm gonna need some help here. Grab that sword!"

"That sword?" Henry asks, baffled. "What sword- huh??"

He looks down at his feet, and his eyes nearly pop out of his head as he spots a beautiful blood-red blade sitting on the ground at his feet. He hasn't the faintest clue when it appeared, but its size is far bigger than the average longsword. In many ways, it resembles a Claymore, or perhaps a Bastard Sword. At 6 feet long (1.8 meters), it's nearly as big as the young man himself.

Henry quickly reaches down to pick up the sword, but he staggers and almost trips due to its immense weight!

Somehow, the sword weighs nearly two tons, which is well within his means to heft around, but certainly deceptive when looking at the widened blade without touching it. Henry wraps both hands around the hilt, grunts for a moment, and lifts it up, gasping with surprise at just how much weight he'll be able to put into any single swing of it.

"What a good sword." Henry praises, looking at Jason with complex emotions.

Jason looks away to survey the battlefield. "The Kolvaxians will return any second. There are runes inscribed above the handle. They can activate different effects, so try them all out. You shall protect the human side. I'll take care of the rest!"

Jason teleports away, reappearing on the western edge while Henry remains at the east. Simultaneously, two more Jasons materialize on the north and south edges of the metallic platform to anticipate the Kolvaxian's appearance.

With only moments to spare, Henry quickly examines his new sword. He spots five glowing runes embedded on the sword's thick crossguard, within reach of his uppermost thumb if he reaches toward them deliberately, but not able to be unintentionally pressed.

The five runes glow different colors. Red, blue, green, yellow, and brown.

He presses the brown one. Suddenly, the sword doubles in weight. He grunts in surprise, nearly dropping it and allowing it to cleave a nearby soldier! But he presses the rune once again, and this time, the weight reduces by three quarters, halving it from the original weight it was when he first picked it up.

This must be a setting that alters its physical properties. Henry thinks. *Lighter and easier to swing around without exhausting myself, versus heavier and capable of dealing deadlier blows. Against the new Kolvaxians, heavier is almost certainly better!*

He presses the blue rune, and the blade of the sword gains a freezing cold effect. One more press, and its element changes to water, allowing it to extinguish fire!

The red rune likewise cycles the blade between fire and blood elements, while the yellow one gives the weapon a lightning enhancement. Strangely, the yellow one seems to have a second setting that doesn't do anything obvious, and this is made more confusing by the final green rune also doing nothing obvious.

But Henry doesn't get a chance to ask Jason about the different rune effects. The ground explodes once more, and a single Kolvaxian leaps at him, while two Kolvaxians pounce at each other the other sides, where Jason's Dronesmiths have already anticipated their arrival.

Henry's eyes flare with passion and rage. The memory of losing Artoria smolders in his heart, making him direct a wicked look toward his foe as the Kolvaxian jumps at him with lethal intent.

Automatically, as if having already rehearsed the action, Henry's thumb flicks to tap the brown rune twice, setting the sword to its four-ton weight parameter, and he concludes by activating its flame mode.

"You will PAY for what you did, monster!" Henry roars, charging at the Kolvaxian.

Riiiiip!

His empowered sword slashes diagonally across the Kolvaxian's body, from its shoulder to its waist. In a single move, he bisects the creature, then spin-kicks it, sending it flying away. The Kolvaxian impacts the dirt, but it melts back underground, then pounces at Henry a moment later, fully healed after merging its two halves together again.

Henry stabs the monster, ramming his sword through its chest. He beheads it, then bursts its body into flames, scorching what remains of it to ash. In seconds, he demolishes one of the monsters that previously would have rendered even the mightiest Demon Emperors helpless.

He turns to look at the Dronesmiths, but is shocked to find that despite having to face two Kolvaxians each, they've already finished the job. All seven Kolvaxians lay dead, their bodies reduced to ash in the wake of Jason's immense battle prowess.

The looks of shock on the nearby Demon Emperor faces say it all. They look at Jason with awe, reverence, and horror. Never did they expect that the Wordsmith would rise to such heights. Killing Ose a few months earlier was already frightening, but compared to the feat he demonstrated mere moments ago? It was nothing at all.

Yardrat, Kristoff, and Vespera all wear ugly expressions. They look at the Wordsmith with a mixture of gratitude and shame, unable to believe that he defeated the Kolvaxians they were floundering against.

Just as the armies of the allied factions are about to come to terms with Jason's feats, one of his Dronesmiths speaks, sucking the wind out of the area.

"Diablo is dead. The Kolvaxians killed him."

"What?!" Yardrat asks.

"No! That's impossible!" Vespera exclaims.

All three Deities send their Cosmic senses outward, pointing them toward the part of the Milky Way where they last saw Diablo, the area of space belonging to Reaver and its star system.

What they receive back are cosmic waves of blinding light and heat generated by a recent supernova detonation.

Their faces fall. Their emotions become turbulent.

"How... how could Diablo die?" Kristoff asks in disbelief. "He's the Archdemon! He can regenerate from anything!"

"Not even the Archangels could kill him during the Ancient Era!" Yardrat protests. "He'll reappear soon!"

"He won't." Jason says simply, allowing his words to linger in the air. "The Archdemon is dead. And along with him, the hope of slowly overtaking the Plague through his methods has also disappeared."

Jason Hiro sweeps his gaze across the human soldiers, the demon elites, and the Volgrim warriors.

"The Plague has swallowed every world it presently resides upon. All the worlds marked as 'contested' earlier today have fallen. That only leaves us with the question of what we should do next."

Hope Hiro materializes in the air beside Jason. He directs an accusatory gaze toward Jason, his eyes narrowing as he examines his counterpart.

Jason's appearance here has awarded him great prestige in the eyes of his enemies. By systematically wiping out the Plaguehosts mostly on his own, Jason has established a momentary aura of invincibility, one that may yield great gains in the future.

Compared to Hope, he simply feels... *superior*.

"Then let's talk about what comes next." Hope says, crossing his arms. "I'm sure we'd *all* like to hear your thoughts on the matter."

Hope pauses.

"After all. This mess is your fault."

Volgarius, inside the Founder's Thumb.

Founder Unarin leans forward, resting both of his palms on the galactic starmap as it projects into the air above the Strategy Table. To his left, his brother Randis stands, his expression dim. Muuxunuu stands on Unarin's right, her limpid eyes displaying no emotion.

"Seventeen thousand, one hundred forty-nine worlds. Gone." Randis says. "All of them fell nearly in unison. A complete collapse of the ranks."

"What happened?" Unarin asks. "How did the Plague become so powerful, so quickly?"

Founder Dosea's voice drifts into the Situation Room from a position unknown.

[I am communicating with several High Psions. We are still investigating what happened. However, I have confirmed that Diablo has fallen to the Plague in the Reaver system. Before the swarm could devour his individuality, he self-destructed, causing the local star to initiate a supernova detonation. The Reaver system is gone.]

"Reaver was a valuable industrial world." Unarin says softly. "Diablo would have proven a thorn in our side, eventually. But his death is nothing compared to the empowering of the Plague. I'd take ten demons on par with Diablo over today's catastrophe. It is only a matter of time before the Milky Way falls, now."

A brief moment of silence follows Unarin's declaration.

Dosena speaks, her tone uncertain. [Perhaps not.]

"Hm?" Unarin grunts, looking up at the ceiling, as if to search for her. "Your meaning?"

[I expected the Plague to immediately begin appearing on new worlds, infesting them like before. But it hasn't.] Dosena explains. [The swarm is acting... strange.]

"Strange." Unarin repeats. "Strange, *how*?"

[It seems slower. More reticent. I cannot pinpoint the reason why.] Dosena says, choosing her words carefully. [Perhaps whatever empowered the Plague was not entirely an 'upgrade.']

"A minor reprieve, perhaps." Unarin says, more to himself than the others. "I certainly hope so. If push comes to shove, we will have only one option remaining to deal with the Plague."

Once again, a crushing wall of silence fills the room.

When Dosena replies, her tone is ominous. [That decision would be... inadvisable.]

"We've run out of options." Unarin says. "You think I want to awaken them? Diablo was our only chance at winning the war, his ambitions be damned. With him gone, the situation would already be terrible. But now that the Plague has become practically undefeatable, *they* are all we have left."

[We still have the Wordsmiths.] Dosena says. [Though unreliable, they may yet present an opportunity to stage a comeback. The Sentinels *must* not be awakened.]

Unarin closes his eyes. He shakes his head, feeling as if he's aged a million years.

"I know the price we'd pay. At least... the Sentinels were *once* Volgrim. We can take pride in knowing that the Milky Way would still be run by descendants of the Creator, if nothing else."

[Mutual destruction is useless.] Dosena says. [I will not remain silent if you decide to unleash those metal monsters.]

"But will you stop me?" Unarin asks.

Dosena does not reply. Her presence fades from the room, seemingly answering his question in a roundabout manner.

Of course you won't. Unarin thinks, returning his gaze to the galactic map. *Because even if you oppose my decision, you know there can be no other way to end the war. The Sentinels are the final solution to the Kolvaxians. They will end our civilization, but they will also take revenge for us in our stead.*

A hollow victory is still a victory in the end. I'll seize any win I can obtain before my life ends.

Part 571: Henry's Promise

"My fault?" Jason asks, as he looks Hope in the eye. "*My* fault? You're going to play the blame game here and now, after this colossal fuck-up? This was YOUR operation! You were supposed to be supporting the invasion force from the rear! I barely got back in time to start teleporting everyone to Yadriss! Then you sat on your ass while I swooped in and finished off the Kolvaxians that were about to kill EVERYONE here!"

He pauses to take the smallest of breaths.

"Just how in the goddamn HELL do you get on a high horse and think it's okay to blame me?!"

The crowd below flicks their eyes from one Wordsmith to the other. Many suspicious, if not outright hateful gazes fixate on Hope, while just as many grateful expressions hover on Jason. Clearly, one of the two Wordsmiths has done more to save their lives than the other, and not by an insignificant margin.

Hope points a finger at Jason. "You planned for this to happen! You sabotaged me!"

Bewildered, Jason scrunches up his face. "Planned for *what*? For Artoria to get eaten by the fucking Plague? Are you an imbecile?? Maybe you think I made it look easy, but it took the cooperation of Henry and two Middle Cosmic Demon Deities to kill just eight of these newly enhanced Kolvaxians. This is quite literally the worst situation the galaxy could be in, and you think I somehow *orchestrated* all of this to my benefit? What benefit do I get?! The privilege of knowing all of humanity is about to die?!"

In the midst of his argumentation, Jason throws a bone out to Vespera and Kristoff. Without their timely assistance, his Dronesmiths would not have been able to land the killing blows on the final six Kolvaxians.

Hope grabs at his hair. He tugs on it, looking more than a little insane as he points a shaky finger at the First Wordsmith. "I don't KNOW what your plan is! I just know you always have a way of fucking up in such a way it makes ME look bad! And what a coincidence that you made Artoria and she just so happened to be the catalyst that empowered the Plague. You MUST have done this intentionally!"

Yardrat looks at Hope with an expression of disbelief. "Do you even hear yourself right now? What in the Seven Hells is rolling around in your head? A bag of rocks?"

"Don't you see it?!" Hope snarls, directing his rage at the Bottom Cosmic who dared to speak up. "Diablo is DEAD! You think this chicanery happened by accident? No! Jason orchestrated it! Somehow, he benefits, just you wait and see! He already has safe havens made for the humans. He gets to come out on top, looking like the good guy, while punishing everyone else!"

Yardrat raises an eyebrow, but it's Emperor Crow who speaks next.

"I don't know if Jason has some plot or if you're a raving lunatic babbling nonsense. But what I DO know is both of you only teleported the humans off-world. What about us? What about the demons and Volgrim? Were you just going to leave us to DIE?!"

Kristoff's expression turns ugly. "Answer the question, Wordsmiths! Both of you! This was a betrayal, plain and simple!"

Loputo Jidelor says nothing, but he pays careful attention to the body movements and facial expressions of both Wordsmiths, recording their replies for archival and later perusal. Perhaps the First Founder will be able to glean important details that Loputo cannot.

"I ran myself ragged rescuing the humans." Jason says. "All together, Hope and I managed to save just under a hundred thousand people, one at a time. Do you know how many times I had to say the word 'Return'? Quite literally seventy thousand times. Hope probably rescued forty thousand while I rescued sixty. Not that I was counting, but I was so exhausted I wanted to die by the end. I only recovered enough to intervene with my Dronesmiths because I was able to take a power-nap for a few hours."

Hope grimaces. "The situation was similar for me. Even pulling upon Excalibur's power, I barely managed to save the humans. I hoped Yardrat would be able to save the demons, and he did, as Solomon advised. I fell unconscious afterward and only woke up right as Jason killed the last Kolvaxians."

Hearing that both Wordsmiths were somehow sleeping or unconscious for 'several hours' confuses the demons and humans, but the Volgrim aren't quite so befuddled.

"You were both residing within time-accelerated domains." Loputo Jidelor points out. "That is why you were able to rescue so many humans, so quickly. But you still gambled

with our lives. That was unacceptable."

"I don't care what your excuses were." Yadrat adds. "I knew opening a portal would risk bringing the Plague to Yadrin, and I was right. We're lucky everyone didn't die at the end."

"Not lucky." Jason says. "I planned for several negative contingencies in the months leading up to this operation. I never could have planned for the Plague to become so terrifying, but I did anticipate needing to fight the Executor Plaguehosts. My Dronesmiths were well-equipped for the situation at hand."

Hope sneers. "And yet you claim you didn't plan this all out! How *convenient* that you ended up the strongest player at the end."

Jason glares at his clone. "Do you want to fight, Hope? We can fight. I'm exhausted, but so are you. Maybe, while the newly empowered Plague rips our galaxy apart, you and I can beat each other to death and let the others die in the aftermath. Is that what you want?"

"Boys, boys, calm down your raging hormones." Vespera says, intervening with her words. "You're embarrassing yourselves! Hope might be throwing random accusations around, but he has made a few points I find hard to ignore. Jason, it is not unreasonable to point out that you have benefited from the death of Diablo and the revelation to us of your power. All I can say is that I'm disappointed beyond belief by how today's events have transpired. Maybe this was a big win for the First Wordsmith, but overall I feel it was a terrible loss for ALL the Sentients present. Our Foe is stronger than ever, while we have only weakened."

Kristoff nods at his comrade from across their two portals. "Well-spoken, Vespera. Everyone, let us set aside the ugly matters. What are we going to do next, now that the Plague has become practically invincible? Expecting Middle Cosmics to shred through their mortal bodies one at a time is infeasible. I'd die of exhaustion before I killed fifty thousand, let alone a million, billion, or trillion Plaguehosts."

[I need to contact the Founders.] Demila says. [It is clear that the trust we've extended each other has become compromised. At the same time, we need each other more than ever, barring some unknown trump card the Wordsmiths are holding in reserve.]

Demila directs a withering glare Jason's way. He frowns at her.

"Don't look at me. I'm NOT holding some secret from all of you. What happened today was a tragedy. I didn't mastermind some brilliant plan to benefit humanity and fuck over the rest of you. All of this was an accident!"

[Yes, that is what you've claimed.] Demila says, not deigning to continue the line of discussion. [I've received tentative word from the Second Founder that the Plague has ceased its activities for the moment. No further worlds have been attacked, which indicates some unknown variable at play.]

Hope glowers at Jason, but he doesn't speak his concerns.

As if we don't all know who might have put that 'unknown variable' into play. Bastard, Jason...

His animosity isn't hidden at all, so Jason easily picks up on it. He doesn't confront his clone though, and instead moves on to other things.

"Gate. All humans, step through and return to Tarus II. Volgrim, I can open a gate back to Volgarius, if you'd like."

He materializes a false Warpgate that connects back to a designated position on Tarus II, allowing the human soldiers to start filing through, but the Volgrim reject his offer.

[No need.] Demila says. [We will return using Deity Yardrat's methods.]

Jason nods. *She doesn't trust me now. All because of what Hope has been insinuating. For fuck's sake...*

The humans go their own way, while the demons and Volgrim stick together, shooting side-glances at their former allies. The betrayal by the humans, whether intentional or unintentional, rubs both of them the wrong way. And while the demons might not have Diablo on their side anymore, thus drastically reducing their bargaining power, they have already demonstrated the ability to project Middle Cosmic fighting power throughout the Milky Way. They still have ways to make inroads with the Volgrim if the situation continues to worsen, and it likely will.

As for the puny humans? Aside from the Wordsmiths and Henry, they are clearly still the weakest faction. They won't last long if they don't come back to the bargaining table while offering serious concessions.

Jason thinks about these facts, and many others, as he and Hope herd the soldiers into the portal that will take all of them back to the Northern Side of Tarus II. Once everyone

steps through, Jason closes the portal, then he turns to Henry.

"You made good use of that sword. You killed the Kolvaxian faster than I thought you would. I was worried you might get overwhelmed and devoured, but you didn't."

Hope stands next to Henry, glowering at Jason. But he remains silent while Jason and his 'lackey' make conversation.

"Well, this sword is incredible. I can't believe you made it for me." Henry says, tempering his excitement. The knowledge Hope is looking over his shoulder ensures he can't display too much enthusiasm, lest he upset his benefactor. Ultimately, his station in life was achieved only because he aligned himself with the Second Wordsmith, not the First. "Do you want it back now?"

"The sword is yours." Jason says. "I made it specifically for you after observing your capabilities during training, and during the initial fighting on Reaver. I can't mass-produce more. It is truly a one-of-a-kind artifact. I haven't even given it a name yet; thought I'd let you do that yourself."

Henry glances at Hope, but the Second Wordsmith remains silent. He simply continues to glare at Jason, barely keeping his anger contained.

Sensing the deep animosity between Hope and Jason, Henry sighs. In his mind, the two Wordsmiths should be working for humanity's mutual benefit, but Hope's deep distrust of his former self only worsens whenever the two come into contact. It isn't Henry's place to intervene. He instead focuses on the here and now.

He looks back at Jason. "Can you tell me about the runes? What do they all do? The yellow and green ones don't seem to do anything obvious..."

"You've already figured some of them out, I assume, but I can give you a more detailed explanation." Jason says. "I made this weapon over the span of a week, along with Blinker's assistance. In actuality, it is more than *thirty* swords all combined into one via the power of Wordsmithing and fairy magic. The runes allow you to change the state of the blade using quantum entanglement. You see, using a sort of complicated series of logic gates, I was able to make it so you can have up to two runes active, enabling a lot of different combinations-"

Jason pauses, realizing Henry's eyes are starting to fog over. Despite becoming massively more competent as a result of joining Jephthath's Legion, he's still an illiterate

young fellow from one of the Wild Worlds, lacking in 'book smarts'.

Jason changes his track of speech instantly.

"-combinations that don't matter too much. All that matters is that you can combine two different 'states' of the sword together in most cases, though a few won't work very well. I believe there's a few edge cases that might allow three runes to be active at once, so you'll just have to experiment and see."

"Okay, but what do all the, uh, colors do?" Henry asks.

"The Brown Rune is the simplest one to understand." Jason explains. "Blinker calls it the Material Rune because it affects the weapon's material composition, like its weight, durability, and sharpness. It has three states, making it weigh one ton, two tons, and four tons. We designed these weights to apply to your enhanced body based on our examinations of what you're capable of lifting."

Henry nods. "I guessed about that much."

"Next, the red rune." Jason continues. "The three states are 'off', 'blood,' and 'flame.' The Blood Form will allow the weapon to drain the vitality of your opponents into the weapon, and thus, yourself, allowing you to conserve stamina while sucking the life out of your enemies. It won't be any use against machines, but that much should be obvious. The flame-mode, as you've already found out, is great for burning apart the atomic structure of your opponent's bodies. It's almost like you're swinging around a Beelzebub-in-sword-form, or something."

"So that's what the blood-sword does..." Henry mutters, looking at the weapon in his grasp with awe. "Amazing!"

Hope scowls. He doesn't want to ruin Henry's good mood, and the sword is truly a weapon suited to him, but the fact Jason is slowly making 'his' guy look at him favorably rankles him more than ever. He turns away, mutters the word 'Return' under his breath, and vanishes.

With Hope abruptly disappearing, Henry's good mood disappears. He turns to the side, looking at the spot where Hope was just standing, and sighs.

"Hope will get over this." Jason says. "At least, I think he will. It's hard to say. He blames me for everything these days."

"You're not giving me this sword to suck up to me, are you?" Henry asks. "Not that I don't love it! This weapon is just what I needed! But..."

Jason shakes his head. He chuckles quietly. "No, Henry. This has nothing to do with me wanting to sway you to my side or whatever. I've never disliked you. If anything, you should be one of the people I like most. After all, you fucked over Neil, right? And Neil and I were 'enemies,' so to speak. I don't think that's worth praising, or anything. I'm just saying, in terms of 'where we should be,' you and I aren't opponents to one another. I'm glad to see Hope was able to help you get back on your feet. You were a victim of Ose's manipulation, and Ose was able to manipulate you because I didn't take enough precautions against someone of her capabilities, despite having Solomon's Crown at the time."

Henry frowns. He doesn't like being reminded of what he did to Neil. The moment passes, and he moves on.

"I pray I don't fall for someone's deception that easily ever again." Henry mutters.

"As do I." Jason agrees.

The First Wordsmith continues explaining to Henry what all the other colored runes do, making the young man's eyebrows raise multiple times.

"The Blue Rune is the Rune of Cold. It contains the elemental power of Water and Ice, but isn't compatible with the Fire Rune. Blood should work, though."

"The Yellow Rune contains a Lightning mode, but also a mode I've termed 'Hyperspeed'. It doesn't actually make you faster, but it should greatly enhance your *perception* of time, temporarily drawing your brain into a concentrated Time Dilation realm 250 times faster than realspace. This will allow you to think faster, mentally train faster, perhaps even sleep faster! Maybe you can get a good night's rest every day with just a few minutes spent in realspace! But don't abuse it, it might have serious negative repercussions for your mental health."

"Finally, the Green Rune. I'm personally calling it the Rune of Health, but you can call it something else if you like. The first setting, I actually got the idea from the Kolvaxians. It will allow you to regenerate your wounds and recover from most injuries, but only so long as you are in contact with the soil of a planet. You will essentially create a miniature Formation around yourself that draws in ambient life energy to heal your body. Think of

it like having Belial around whenever you get in a pickle. It should work well in conjunction with the Blood Rune for even more efficient healing!"

Henry gasps. "That is a super-useful ability. Amazing!"

"Right?" Jason asks. "And the second setting is for defense. I based it on Bael, but it does happen to bear some similarities to the new Kolvaxians too. It makes your body extremely durable so you can take heavier hits."

Jason continues. "The idea is that with this sword, you'll be able to adapt your fighting style to different Threats. You can become one of humanity's champions, like Hope and I. We need strong humans if we're going to survive the coming galaxy wars. The sword's powers draw upon your internal mana reserves, so the more powerful you become, the stronger the sword will become!"

Henry nods. "I certainly appreciate the assistance. But..."

He pauses.

"Why didn't you or Hope save Artoria? With a single word, you could have teleported her out of the danger zone. She didn't deserve to die like that."

"We couldn't." Jason explains. "The Kolvaxians have a power not dissimilar to Gressil. They can nullify many different magical abilities within a certain range of their bodies. Teleportation becomes a lot harder, for example. It's why I couldn't rescue the human troopers who were closest to the front-lines. We lost a lot of good men and women as a result."

"But they can come back to life, right?" Henry asks. "The Psion Executors were devoured by the Plague, but they're still around. Can't the Lazarus Tower bring our people back? Maybe even bring Artoria back?"

Jason falls silent. He looks away, his expression becoming morose.

"Sorry, Henry. That isn't the case. The Psions are a special case. Any humans devoured by the Plague will have their souls consumed as well. The Lazarus Tower can't revive them. As for Artoria, she wasn't a human, so she couldn't benefit from the Tower. Artoria... is gone."

"Oh."

Henry looks at his amazing new sword, but he no longer feels as enthusiastic about its powers. He thinks to himself that he'd give it away in a heartbeat if it could bring Artoria

back, and the troopers who fell at the front-lines. They didn't deserve to die, and the weapon simply pales in comparison to their lives.

"You liked her." Jason says simply, startling Henry out of his thoughts. "Artoria, I mean."

"I, I mean, *liked* her?" Henry asks, blushing slightly. "Well, she was beautiful. But we didn't know each other. It was a childish crush. And she wasn't a human anyway. Plus we barely talked. I didn't even save her... I don't deserve to feel anything when I let her die like that."

"Don't do that." Jason says, reaching out to squeeze Henry's shoulder. "Don't diminish your feelings like that. You know, I loved Amelia too, in my own childish way. Then I had to kill her because she became a monster. Now she's back, and it's rather surreal knowing she and my clone are together. Just because bad things happened, that doesn't diminish the feelings I once had for her. You shouldn't hate yourself just because you failed at a task you weren't equipped to handle. Neither physically nor emotionally. Perhaps, if I'd given you that sword a little sooner, Artoria might still be here."

Henry smiles weakly. He looks at the ground, feeling an indescribably raw emotion claw at his heart.

"You're right."

He pauses.

"*Artoria*." Henry says, looking at the sword. "I'll name it in remembrance of her. When I fight, I'll... I'll keep that image of her in my heart. That way, her memory will never fade."

He looks up at the warm blue sky, feeling misty-eyed for the first time in a long time.

"She might not have been a human, but she fought for us. I'll take revenge in her name. I'll wipe out the Kolvaxians... and if there's any way to bring Artoria back, I'll spend the rest of my life searching for it."

Jason smiles tightly, his lips drawing a thin line as he looks at the sad young man in front of him.

"You do that, Henry. Every soldier needs the will to fight. Make Artoria proud by saving the people she would have wanted to save."

He pulls his hand away from Henry's shoulder, then he pauses.

"...You know, Artoria was a Black Hole Construct. But she isn't the only one I made."

"What?" Henry asks, startled. "Artoria has a clone?"

"No. Not a clone. More like... a sister. Her name is Soleil." Jason explains. "She's taken the shape of an angel, and she lives in the eastern church, topside of the Plateau. You've seen the church, right?"

Henry nods slowly. "She's like Artoria, then?"

"Well. They're different people. Artoria was... quiet. Silent, by most accounts. Soleil talks a lot more. She's also..."

Jason pauses. He lowers his voice and leans in close to whisper in Henry's ear.

"She's protecting the last angel, Cassiel. The last truly-living angel, not like the Archangels who are mere souls contained within rings."

"Cassiel..." Henry whispers. "If she can be considered Artoria's sister, then I'll do what I can to protect her in Artoria's stead."

"Artoria would like that." Jason says, smiling more genuinely than before. "I can introduce you later, if you'd like. Right now, though, I have to deal with today's matters. We'll talk again soon, alright?"

Henry nods. "I hope so. Thank you for the sword, Jason."

"The best way you can thank me is by mastering its powers." Jason says. "Make 'Artoria' a weapon our enemies will fear to go against."

"I will."

With a nod, Jason takes his leave. The Dronesmith turns and walks away, leaving Henry to his thoughts.

Henry looks down at the sword in his hands and smiles.

"Artoria."

* * *

Hope Hiro watches the Dronesmith from the Hall of Heroes. He sneers at Jason's words, growing more and more disgusted as Jason worms his way into Henry's good graces.

"Bastard." Hope mutters, scrying the Dronesmith's movements. "You think I wouldn't notice? What a *coincidence* that sword is, eh? Beelzebub's flames. Nerissa's ice. The magic

of demons, and the entire 'Health Rune' seems a little *too* 'similar' to the Kolvaxians for my liking."

Hope's eye twitches.

"You may have the others fooled, but not me. Somehow, some way, you engineered all of this. I'm going to find out how, and when I do, I'm going to make everyone see you for the liar and the manipulator that you truly are."

A voice seemingly whispers in the back of Hope's mind, driving his thoughts further in that direction.

He sneers.

"Then... I'll *kill* you myself."

Part 572: Beauty and the Beast

After Jason and Hope depart, Henry finds himself momentarily stranded alone at the Northern Base. This short period of isolation disappears quickly once the other soldiers notice the two Wordsmiths have disappeared. As if responding to an unknown Henry-Signal, more than ten thousand men and women descend upon Henry and surround him, cheering wildly.

"Henry!" General Chadwick exclaim. "Great work out there, young man! You truly proved yourself today!"

"You were so cool!" One of the female troopers says.

"You didn't flinch when the Kolvaxians attacked! You even managed to kill one!" A different man says. "My bullets wouldn't have staggered it!"

"I was wrong about you. You're not so bad after all."

"Are all the members of Hope's Parahumans as strong as you? Can I become one?"

"You? What about me? I want in!"

"I always believed in you, kid!"

"You're so handsome! Are you dating anyone?"

"Yo, Henry, show us what that sword can do, man!"

"Can you lift a tank for us?"

"We'd have died if it wasn't for you!"

* * *

Countless words barrage Henry, but he keeps his cool. After connecting to Jephthah's power, he has long grown used to the dull roar of other voices in his head, so this crowd doesn't faze him. However, he does grow annoyed by some of the self-serving praises these people are giving him.

That one guy saying he 'always believed in me' was one of the people who snubbed me after the Tribunal. He's a coward and a liar. Henry thinks.

[Most people are.] Jephthah confirms. [Do not fall for the pleasant words of flattery foisted upon you by such types. Everyone wants to get close to a Hero, but if you lose your

power, how many will stay by your side? Only the ones who do can be qualified to be your trusted comrades.]

Henry nods and smiles perfunctorily as whoops and cheers go up around the crowd. He pulls out Artoria's blade, then stabs it into a boulder nearby, inviting people to try and pull it out. More than a hundred try, and it eventually becomes a bit of a game for them.

Eventually, Private Ashley walks over to Henry while the others are trying to pull the sword out.

"I'm sorry about earlier, Henry." Ashley says. "I disrespected you because of the Tribunal. You saved my life, as well as the lives of everyone else here. You deserve better from us."

Henry looks at the pretty young brown-haired girl, only a year older than him. Her sparkling eyes catch his gaze, and he swallows a small lump in his throat before looking off to the side, at Artoria's blade.

"It's fine. I can't really judge people for not liking me. What I did to Neil was reprehensible."

"Maybe so." Ashley says. "And to be honest, we wouldn't be having this conversation if you hadn't saved everyone here. But we all do respect strength. I just want to apologize to you because it's the right thing to do. You might be a lot stronger than the rest of us, but you're no Demon Deity. You still risked your life against those Kolvaxians, and you ultimately saved tens of thousands of lives. I think you've redeemed yourself a thousand times over."

Henry's eyes drift back to Ashley. He smiles lightly.

"Well. That does make me feel a bit better. Thanks, Ashley."

She smiles back, playing with her hair as she looks away. "It's the bare minimum, really. I was so disrespectful to you before the raid, I really ought to wash my mouth out with soap. I also don't want you thinking I'm only sucking up and trying to get in your good graces now that you're so powerful."

"The thought never even crossed my mind." Henry lies. "What do you say about trying to pull Artoria out of the stone?"

Ashley blinks. "You... named the sword after Artoria?"

"Yeah." Henry says, his smile dimming. "It felt appropriate, given her sacrifice."

"Were you and Artoria an item?" Ashley asks.

"No. Nothing like that. I will admit to a small crush I developed during the battle but... it was short-lived. She and I barely ever spoke, and I doubt she held any thoughts toward me. Now she's gone. I'll never see her again."

Ashley nods her head solemnly, her expression sympathetic. "We lost a good one. That was the second time I ever saw Artoria fight, the first being when she fought Demon Deity Mephisto. She left an impact, but I wish she'd been around longer so she could enjoy life."

Henry's eyes momentarily harden. A dark expression passes over his face as he gazes at Artoria's blade.

"Somehow, I'll make the Kolvaxians pay. I'll make it my life's mission if I have to. Not just for Artoria, but for all the others who've died."

The two continue talking for a little bit, and Henry's emotions cool. Eventually, their conversation draws to a close, and Henry walks over to Artoria, embedded in the stone.

"Did anybody manage to pull it out?" He asks.

"Not one person." Linda Hurent says, watching from the sidelines. "That thing must weigh a ton!"

"Two tons, actually." Henry says. "In its default state. One ton in its lightweight form, and four in its heaviest mode. Does anyone else want to give it one last try?"

Ashley grins. "I will! Probably won't accomplish anything other than looking like a dummy, but I've gotta try!"

She activates her full T-REX, enveloping her body, then she grabs the handle and tugs mightily with all her strength.

"Hunnnngh!"

Unfortunately, Ashley doesn't even manage to make the blade shift its weight. She gives up, perspiring lightly within her suit's confines.

"Never mind! You must be ridiculously strong to swing this thing around at its full weight, Henry."

Henry shrugs. "Definitely. But we all know you're holding back, Ashley. Why don't you... monsterize? Show us what you can really do?"

Despite wearing a helmet that hides her face, Ashley still freezes like a deer in the headlights. She slowly looks around, where many people are looking at her with hungry eyes, waiting to see what the strongest Orc-Morpher can do.

"I... I don't wanna become an orc again!" Ashley complains. "Orcs are so ugly! I think I'll pass..."

"Come on, Ashley!"

"You can do it!"

"Let's go, girl! Show us what you've got!"

"Just do it! Don't be scared!"

"We're not judging you! Show us how strong you are!"

Under the pressure from her peers, Ashley's hesitation crumbles. She grimaces inside her helmet, but eventually retracts her exosuit, standing only in her normal combat fatigues. After a second's hesitation, she reaches inside herself and grabs onto the power within, monsterizing her body and rapidly releasing the power of an orc!

Her height increases by 50%. Her muscles explode. Ashley roars to the sky as she towers nine feet tall, dwarfing every other human around her and causing them to look up at her with awe-filled eyes. While her true combat power in her orc form might not meet the level of a Demon Duke, she's certainly at the level of a Demon Baron, and her physical body likely breaks that limiter, if only by a little.

Her uniform tears in several places, but she manages to retain her modesty. Luckily, in her orc form, many of her inhibitions disappear, and she ends up standing proudly, looking down on the tiny people around her with a wicked grin.

"This puny little sword won't stop me anymore!" Ashley declares, in a manner more verbose than most orcs. While she might have become one of them, her brain patterns are still distinctly human.

Henry blinks twice. He's seen Ashley in her orc form once before, in a training area, but for some reason...

Has she gotten taller? Henry wonders to himself. *She seems stronger than I remember.*

Jepthath watches the scene through Henry's eyes. He chuckles mischievously. [Heh. Now there's a fine woman. You don't find too many of her caliber no matter how hard you look, yet this little lady is strangely bashful about displaying her abilities. If she practiced more, she could put up a good fight against you, Henry.]

Ashley reaches down and grabs hold of Artoria. She pulls, and the blade immediately shudders as she starts yanking it up out of the rock. Not two seconds later, she pulls it free and shakily holds it overhead, using both hands as she holds it in the sky.

"Woohoo! I did it! Ashley McCarthy is the best!"

The crowd cheers!

"Amazing, Ashley! You're stronger than I expected!"

"We couldn't even budge the sword a millimeter but you pulled it all the way out!"

People congratulate Ashley, making her think that maybe monsterizing isn't always as bad as she expects. Even some of the men direct appreciative gazes her way, admiring her finely toned and muscled body. The shredded clothes don't hurt her aesthetics, either.

After a few moments, Ashley lowers Artoria, appearing visibly tired. Despite being able to pull the blade out of the rock and lift it up, the weapon is still extremely taxing on her orc physique. She holds it out, and Henry takes it from her grasp. Compared to Ashley, Henry easily hefts the sword with one hand, while she can barely do so with both hands. The difference is obvious.

Still, nobody in the crowd mocks her. None of them even came close to wielding it, so her feat is still extremely impressive.

"You should monsterize more often." Henry says. "Maybe even consider joining Jepthath's Legion. Perhaps your ability could transfer to the other people, allowing many of us to monsterize at will."

Linda Hurent shakes her head. "Our studies have shown that different people have different affinities for various monster species. Ashley is the only S-class Orc-Genome transformer we've found. Other people are capable of transforming with the Power Gloves, but their strength always pales compared to hers."

Ashley sweeps her long brown hair out of her face. She grins in a way that might appear monstrous if she wasn't still human in important ways. Her lower teeth stick out

of her mouth in a manner similar to ancient Sabertooth Tigers, albeit in reverse. "You are right. I do not think my ability will help others. It is too niche."

"Jepthath's power defies conventional wisdom." Henry says, pressing the matter a little more. "We can share powers and abilities among all the Legion members at once. In order to make a stronger humanity, I think this is worth a shot."

Ashley shrugs, clearly not interested. But, hearing they might obtain strength similar to Henry, many men and women in the vicinity think a little more carefully about the young man's offer. In this time of uncertainty, a surefire powerup is hard to ignore.

* * *

Sometime later, Ashley reverts to her human form and grabs a spare set of clothes from the northern barracks. She and Henry decide to walk off together, leaving the crowds behind. They wander from the north side of Tarus II to the west side, through the residential streets.

"So." Ashley says. "Was what Hope said true?"

"What are you talking about?" Henry asks, before remembering what she means. "You mean about Jason manipulating the entire situation? About him sacrificing Artoria to take control of the Kolvaxians? It sounds dumb to me, but I don't know all the facts."

"Hope and Jason are always at each other's throats," Ashley says, before quickly amending that observation. "Correction: Hope is always finding new reasons to hate Jason. It's one of the reasons I'd rather stick with Neil. Hope seems like a good leader, but he's unhinged in his own way."

"All three of humanity's leaders have big problems." Henry says. "Neil is extremely bigoted toward demons, to the point of offending our allies like Belial. Hope is always making up conspiracies about Jason, and Jason is... *lazy*. His inaction caused millions of deaths during Stormbringer. None of them are perfect."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Ashley says. "They're all flawed men. Still though, I keep thinking about what Hope said. What if he's right? What if Jason really is secretly manipulating the situation? We almost never see him anymore. And that robotic body he was using on Yardris? I hear it's not the first time he's brought it out."

"We can't risk the Wordsmiths getting caught by the Plague." Henry says. "The Kolvaxians have already become so strong we can't hope to hold them back anymore. I

don't know how we're surviving the next year..."

"Maybe we aren't." Ashley says gloomily. "Just eight of those creatures nearly killed two hundred thousand humans, demons, and Volgrim. You, Jason, and the Demon Deities may have exterminated that handful of Kolvaxians, but there are *trillions* more. If we have to fight a war of attrition, we'll lose. It's as simple as that."

"You're probably right," is all Henry can muster up as a response.

A momentary lull in the conversation follows. Henry and Ashley make their way up the plateau into the central district, where they buy some food. Henry gets a sausage in a bun with relish and ketchup, while Ashley chooses a burger with cheese and pickles, along with some fries. They sit down at an outdoor table and start to eat.

"Say, I've been wondering," Henry says between bites, "how often do you monsterize yourself?"

Ashley looks away, blushing in embarrassment. "As rarely as possible. Only during missions when it's a critical moment."

"But why?" Henry asks ignorantly, looking at her in surprise. "During these times, we need every champion we can get. You seem stronger than the last time I saw you in your orc form."

"I do?" Ashley asks. "You're imagining things."

Henry takes a bite of his sausage and thinks for a moment. "No, no I don't think I am. Some of the other Legion members have seen you in action before. Looking through their memories, I can see that you've monsterized at least a dozen times publicly before. Your orc body has gotten bigger and stronger compared to the first time you transformed."

Ashley frowns. She licks a bit of mustard from her lips, then takes another bite of her burger.

"So, what are you saying? I get stronger every time I transform?"

"I don't know." Henry admits. "Maybe you do. Maybe you don't. Or maybe you're getting stronger in some other way. How do orcs usually train their bodies?"

"I wouldn't know. There aren't any orcs on Tarus II, or living in human civilization," Ashley says, before correcting herself. "Actually I think there's a few that were in the Core, but I try to avoid them. I don't want people looking at me... like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm some ugly, tall, muscled orc girl." Ashley grumbles. "I want everyone to see me as a cute and dainty damsel, not some roided up monster-thug."

Henry looks at her. He pauses eating to contemplate what he's just heard.

"You... don't know?"

"Don't know what?" Ashley asks.

"A lot of, uh, a lot of the guys are *into* that." Henry says, scratching his cheek. "You're not going to be scaring anyone away, Ashley. I think rather than worrying about that, you should stop trying to restrain yourself. Just be the best warrior you can be. If it's, I dunno, *dates* you're trying to get, you will get plenty of them. Trust me on that."

Ashley shakes her head. "Guys are always intimidated by me. I don't think it will work out. I really don't want to be single for the rest of my life."

"Then why not be more assertive?" Henry asks. "You don't need to wait for a guy to approach you. Approach them! Ask them out first."

"And scare them off? Or intimidate them into dating me?" Ashley asks, her expression turning serious. "No, no I can't do that. It wouldn't be right."

Henry shrugs his shoulders. He finishes the last of his sausage and bun, then licks his fingers contentedly.

"I just think you're acting too scared of other people's opinions. Considering you're so strong and cool, you should act more like your real personality. It's better to be with someone when both of you are your true selves than to fake who you are and be miserable the whole time."

"And just how would you know who my 'true self' is?" Ashley challenges. "This is only the second time we've ever talked."

Henry looks away, this time being the one who is embarrassed. "Well. I *do* have the memories of all the other Legion people. A lot of them have spoken to you before."

"What the heck!" Ashley exclaims. "That's not fair! And it's weird too. I don't get to know all the little conversations you've had in the past, so why do you get to know mine?"

"It's just part of being the Legion." Henry says, defending himself lamely. "If you joined, you'd get the same privilege. We'd be able to look inside each other's heads."

"Ew, no way." Ashley replies, looking away. "Sorry but that's still so weird to think about. Thanks for the invitation, but just... I can't imagine looking into other people's thoughts or letting other people look into mine."

"It's just an offer." Henry says, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Once you get used to it, it feels totally normal being able to know what all the people around you are thinking at any given moment. It's... intimate.. in a way that even being a father and son or a brother and sister can't compare to."

"Or a lover?" Ashley quips.

"Probably."

The two fall silent. Ashley finishes her burger, then she wipes her face with a napkin and sets her plate aside.

She looks at Henry for a moment, then crooks the sides of her mouth into a cute smile.

"You know, Henry, maybe you were onto something earlier."

"I was?" Henry asks.

"Absolutely. You said I should be more assertive, right?"

"I... did..." Henry says slowly, as he notices her playful smile. "Why? What's... on your mind?"

"We should go on a date!" Ashley proclaims. "You and me. Together, I mean. I won't join that Legion of yours, so you'll just have to *wonder* what I'm thinking."

Henry blinks. He stares at her for several seconds, momentarily lost for words.

"You... uh, you want..."

"What?" Ashley asks. "Were you just huffing smoke earlier? I thought you said guys liked big muscled orc girls?"

A hint of color spreads across the tips of Henry's ears. He looks away, rubs his hands together under the table, and coughs.

"W-well, I mean. Yeah. Yeah, I did say that. And I, uh, meant it, too."

He and Ashley happen to look each other in the eyes, but they both quickly look away, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

"Err..." Ashley grunts. "I've... never dated anyone before."

"Me neither." Henry mumbles. "I didn't expect this. I don't... I don't know what to say. Or do."

"It's probably not a good time to date anyway." Ashley says, moving a stray strand of hair out of her face. "You know. With the Kolvaxians and all."

"Yeah." Henry says. "We could go to war any second. We might not even be alive a month from now."

"And what if one of us dies?" Ashley asks, lowering her eyes. "It would feel... so bad."

"So tragic." Henry acknowledges.

They fall silent once again. This time, a full minute passes as they don't say anything, instead folding in on themselves, thinking only their own thoughts.

Henry slowly stands up. He picks up his plate and garbage, and Ashley mimics him. They toss their food away, then they pause and look at one another.

"Maybe 'date' is too strong a word." Ashley says self-consciously. "Um. Why don't we just, you know, meet up here tomorrow? Get some more food or something."

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds fine." Henry says, smiling goofily. "A little food never hurt anyone."

"Right! And who knows, maybe we could go to the park or something." Ashley adds.

"Right, yeah, totally. Or do some training together." Henry says. "I *have* been needing a good training partner..."

"Oh, yeah. Same. Me too. Definitely." Ashley babbles. "Training partner. Mhm."

They both awkwardly smile at one another for several seconds before suppressing some involuntary giggles. Henry looks off to the side, and coughs into his fist. "Uh! So, see you tomorrow, then, Ash?"

"Ash?" She repeats. "Already shortening my name, *Henny*?"

"Sorry! It just happened." Henry blurts out.

"No, it's fine. It was... cute of you." Ashley says, giggling at her unexpected new nickname.

The two slowly pull apart, then they go their separate ways. Henry stumbles about in a faint daze, smiling more goofily than ever.

[Way to go, Henry.] One of the Legion members praises. [Not the smoothest way I've seen someone get a girlfriend, but praiseworthy nonetheless.]

[For your date tomorrow,] one of the female Legion members says, [you should remember to get Ashley some flowers. Maybe a cute hair ornament. I can tell she likes those things, even if she doesn't say it.]

[Don't do the 'training' thing with her, not just yet.] One of the men says. [Just go to the lake or something. Keep it casual.]

[I completely disagree!] A different woman adds. [You should always follow your heart and be yourself. Henry, you like to train and fight, and so does Ashley. Be yourselves and train together!]

A chorus of advice and well-wishes greets Henry, making him feel warm and fuzzy, but also a tiny bit miffed. Having his private life get spied on isn't exactly something he would have wanted before joining the Legion, but ultimately, he ends up accepting it.

[Say, uh, Jephthah?] Henry asks. [Is there a way to, uh, you know... turn off the Legion-link during... private times?]

Jephthah snorts. [If you are worried about others peeping on you, don't bother. You will quickly grow out of any prudish thoughts once you observe your fellow Legion members enjoying their own raucous moments, boy. It won't take a year before you've observed so many depraved moments of raw passionate intercourse that nothing will be able to faze you anymore. After all, we humans are naturally sexual creatures.]

Henry coughs. He covers his face with his hands, feeling his cheeks fill with blood.

Maybe it's not such a bad thing that Ashley doesn't want to join the Legion. Knowing how self-conscious she is, she might die of embarrassment if they ever were to...

"Cough cough!"

Henry's eyes flicker all over the place as the thoughts of a hot-blooded young man rush to his mind. Several of the older Legion-members laugh uproariously at his embarrassment, trading all sorts of pointed quips as they make their 'fearless leader' sweat bullets.

[UMMM. So, uh, Jephthah!] Henry groans, hurriedly changing the topic. [What do you think about Hope?]

[Hope?] Jephthah asks, his huge grin immediately turning to a frown. [Are you asking my thoughts on his... conspiracy theory?]

[Yes.] Henry nods, forcibly tuning out the other Legionnaires. [It all seems a bit far-fetched to me.]

Jephthah remains silent for a moment.

[That's because it is. Hope is letting his hatred cloud his judgment. After that shameful display, I'm starting to harbor second thoughts toward him.] Jephthah admits. [Maybe having him be the face of our recruitment isn't such a good idea. Meanwhile, you managed to perform well enough that many people will likely begin actively seeking us out.]

Henry cocks his head. [What are you implying?]

[Nothing yet.] Jephthah says mildly. [I'm only expressing my disappointment in Hope's leadership. My goal is to unify humanity into a form we might call Super Humanity. A people united in mind, will, and body. A species at the apex of the Milky Way's strength. But Hope is so hellbent on defeating Jason that he doesn't have his species' best interests in mind.]

Jephthah thoughtfully strokes his beard. [Perhaps it may soon become time for us to... go our own way.]

[Split off from Hope?] Henry asks with widened eyes. [That... I don't know if I can do that, Jephthah. I wouldn't be where I am if it weren't for him.]

[I am not speaking of a betrayal. More like... an amicable parting of ways.] Jephthah says smoothly. [Hope was instrumental in obtaining our first 10,000 Legionnaires, but our growth immediately struck a wall afterward. I believe *you* are the figure most suitable for expanding our recruitment efforts, moving forward.]

Henry nods seriously. The thought of turning on Hope leaves him feeling sick in an inexplicable way, but he has to admit Jephthah's argument *does* hold water.

[I'll think about it.] Henry concludes.

[That is all I ask.] Jephthah says, smiling.

Henry turns his thoughts away from this uncomfortable discussion, refocusing his thoughts on tomorrow's date with Ashley.

But Jephthah does not.

In actuality, disconnected from the Legion Net, Jephthah is secretly able to harbor thoughts hidden from the rest of his followers.

Hope's usefulness may be coming to an end. Jephthah thinks as he looks around the Hall of Heroes. *Henry is a much more suitable vessel to carry out my will. Hope's efforts have been half-hearted at best, but Henry...*

Jephthah secretly crooks a smile.

He is a far better Agent than I could have ever prayed for. It may have taken a hundred thousand years, but perhaps my power will finally surpass its limits in a way no-one ever expected...

Part 573: New Horizons

While the humans are rejoicing over the rise of Henry and mourning the loss of 10,000 good soldiers, the demons find themselves in a truly miserable state of affairs. Not one demon, except for perhaps Abby, the Baron of Happy Thoughts, is in a good headspace.

All the Demon Deities enter the Labyrinth, traveling to it either in person if they are a Bottom or Low Cosmic, or via Astral Forms if they are Middle Cosmics trapped on their homeworlds.

In total, over 100 Cosmic Demons band together in the same arena where Beelzebub once rose from Baron to Duke, and a smaller number of Emperors join them. In total, only ten Emperors hadn't ascended at the time of Diablo's death, making them the ultimate losers who have lost their chance at ascension.

Ultimately, they don't feel too bad about that fact. At the least, the difference between them and the Bottom Cosmics isn't too high, and they can always try and flee the Milky Way if the Plague charges, while the Low and Middle Cosmics will have to stand their ground and die.

A grim atmosphere pervades the congregation of demons. The Grunts, Lords, and Barons sit in the audience seats, while their Duke, Emperor, and Deity leaders stand in the central arena, with the lesser demons having no real say in the proceedings. This meeting is for the elites to determine the future of demon civilization, so they have the most say.

Among the demons, there are a couple conspicuous absences. Emperor Yumagi is not present, and neither is Gorn, Beelzebub, Kiari, or Belial. For the first two, they have their own circumstances to deal with, while the latter three are all demons aligned with humanity. This meeting is only for those who wholeheartedly support their own species' interests.

But one demon stands tall above the others. He is the Middle Cosmic who recently ascended through Diablo's power.

Auger, the Demon Deity of Civilizations.

More powerful than ever, Auger's seemingly fragile old-man body contains a boundless energy. He does not appear intimidating in the slightest, but he still retains all the same lethal power he did as an Emperor, dialed up a million times higher than before.

With Diablo gone, many demons subconsciously cannot help but look to Auger now as the de-facto leader of demonkind. His power is utterly unique, and he presents himself in a way that inspires at least a bit of hope among his peers.

"Everyone." Auger says, waving his hand lightly. "I know that today's events have unsettled you all."

His Astral Body might not be as formidable as the true bodies of Bottom and Low Cosmics, but it still possesses enough strength to wipe any mortal Emperor off the face of the map if they were to oppose him. He easily projects his voice outward so the arena full of demons can hear him.

"Diablo is dead." Auger says. "We have always known that Diablo possessed the incredible ability to regenerate from death in a manner similar to Satan and Beelzebub. During the War in Heaven, his body was crushed into pulp and yet he somehow revived in his Archdemon form. However, that is the extent of his ability. He was only able to revive in the Archdemon's body, but we never saw what happened if he was utterly obliterated once in that state."

Auger heaves a quiet sigh. "Now we know. He is dead. Well and truly eradicated from existence. All the Cosmics here have done their best to search for his body, but not even Serena was able to locate him. We must assume the worst and prepare for what may be our final battle."

Demon Deity Melody grimaces. She lowers her head, thinking private thoughts about how untenable the situation has become.

Kristoff's gaze is like steel. He gazes at Auger without any emotion, waiting only to see if this legendary figure will be able to pull a miracle out of his hat.

Serena, now the Soulmaner Deity, is also a Middle Cosmic like Kristoff and Auger. Her sightless eyes seem to penetrate all of creation, allowing her to see the fundamental laws comprising the souls of all around her, but even she is not certain what actions to take next.

Yardrat, the Temporal Deity, crosses his arms. "How should we proceed? We cannot evolve any further without Diablo. We never had a method to advance to Deity until he showed up. But at the same time, we have far more Middle Cosmics than the Volgrim. United, our military strength should be far above theirs."

"And yet our power amounts to nothing at all." Emperor Crow grumbles. "Kristoff and Melody were barely able to kill half a dozen Kolvaxians. Certainly, should those creatures show up on your homeworlds, you would do much more damage, but we need to be able to project military might across the galaxy, and that is where we fail."

Auger smiles and nods. "You are correct, Crow. And that is why I've gathered you all here today."

Everyone listens attentively as Auger begins to describe his new vision for the Demon Empire.

"In simple terms, we cannot win this war unless we unite." Auger explains. "I want every demon present, including my fellow Middle Cosmics, to submit to me."

"That's your plan?" Emperor Crow asks. "We all unite our abilities through you and thus we take over the galaxy? We need to have faith you won't abuse this ridiculous control to leave us defenseless even after we eradicate the Plague, assuming that's even possible?"

Bael, a Duke-Emperor hybrid with questionable status among his peers, chafes at Auger's statement. "Man! Get real, bub. Auger, there ain't no way we can just go along with such a dumb plan. Nobody's gonna trust you not to screw with 'em once this is all said 'n done."

"The humans have reawakened the power of a long-dormant Hero." Auger says calmly. "Jepthath. I think many of you should be familiar with his name."

At the mention of the Illuminator, Bael's face goes rigid. He momentarily recalls one of the most terrifying moments of his life, a single battle that shattered his faith in his own invincibility and left him mentally scarred.

"No... no way." Bael mutters. "It can't be him... that guy died a long time ago..."

Auger ignores the terror on Bael's face. "Jepthath's powers mirror my own. He is able to absorb the strengths, abilities, and knowledge of his subordinates. He passes them around, granting an exponential increase in power to his Legion as a whole. The more

who join, the more potent the Legion's abilities become. Once any individual obtains a metaphysical ability, *all* the members of his Legion will gain that ability."

Auger's expression becomes grim. "I won't lie. Jephthath's ability is similar to mine, but better in almost every way. If demonkind does not tap into my Power of Distribution, we will someday fall to the humans who have aligned with Jephthath. The only saving grace we have at present is the fact most humans are free-spirited and do not wish to submit to that ancient Hero-King. But as the Plague presses inward, will their compunctions hold? I think not."

Yardrat nods along to Auger's words. "I have said it once, and I will say it again. Auger has never mistreated me or my fellow demons. We have been subordinates of him for a hundred thousand years. When our territories were threatened, he distributed powers necessary to keep us alive. The more who join Auger, the more potent his abilities become. At the very least, demons possess magic far surpassing humanity. We can still defeat them with quality and quantity."

"I have already subjugated the Hell of Blood to Auger." Kristoff says. "You all know this. I regret nothing. I have also come under his power, so he can tap into my abilities at will, and channel additional abilities to me as needed."

Auger smiles at Kristoff, silently thanking him for speaking such words at this critical juncture.

"My abilities have become stronger than ever." Auger says, turning his attention back to the crowd. "Yardrat is only a Bottom Cosmic, yet when his powers are imparted upon Kristoff, they rise to the rank of Middle Cosmic. Do you understand what this means? I have one crucial advantage over Jephthath! He grants the abilities of all his subordinates to all his other subordinates at once, but the effects are drastically weakened based on their affinity. *Not so for me.* Kristoff is able to wield the full power of Yardrat's magic in addition to his own, making him a force to be feared!"

Bael listens silently to Auger's speech, and eventually he raises his hand.

"Hold up, bub. Are you tellin' me if I joined ya, I could use magic and stuff from other demons?"

"Naturally." Auger says with a nod. "You have lost all of your powers after transferring into Ose's body, but I could make you whole once more. Since you are a Duke possessing

the body of an Emperor, you should be able to wield the power of an Emperor if I granted it to you, at least in theory."

More and more demons start to come around to Auger's offer. Right now, faced with the death of Diablo and the empowerment of the Plague, the demons urgently need a way to protect themselves. Many lower demons realize they won't benefit as much from obtaining Auger's power, but at the very least if they suck up to him and offer their currently low-level powers, he might see fit to protect them, or possibly even reward them.

Who knows whether or not one of the low level Grunts or Lords in the audience might end up possessing a unique ability that could win demonkind the war?

Even so, a few demons aren't convinced.

"I'm not interested." Melody says, crossing her arms. "This power comes at a cost. The price of giving up the entirety of demonkind to you, Auger, would mean throwing away our uniqueness. We would no longer be free, but serfs you could dispose of at any time."

"How dare you!" Yadrat snaps at Melody's astral form. "Auger would never do such a thing! You are slandering him!"

"I agree with Melody." Demon Deity Serena says. "I am loyal only to Gorn."

Auger frowns. "Gorn is merely an Emperor. With Diablo gone, he will never be able to ascend. Do you truly intend to follow the orders of a mere mortal when you yourself are so much more, Serena?"

"Caw-caw!" Crow snaps. "What do you mean ONLY an Emperor? Is that how you think of me too?!"

"You and Gorn are not the same." Auger quickly corrects. "Gorn has holed himself up uselessly at this time of demonkind's greatest need, while you have fought bravely on the frontlines. I would be honored if you joined my cause."

"I don't like you talking badly about Gorn." Crow says with a glare. "He is one of my closest comrades. We have ruled the Hell of Calamity together for many millennia. Good luck poaching someone else for your schemes."

A brief murmur goes around the crowd, but it quickly subsides.

"I am interested in joining Auger." Demon Deity Vespera declares. "I was but an ordinary Duke of the Hell of Blood until Glinch and Diablo both uplifted me. If my power

can help to save demonkind, I will grant it freely."

Rhesus, the Emperor of Ripping, nods along to Vespera's words. "Me and Ves go way back. If she's with Auger, then so am I."

Another nearby Emperor chimes in. "I'll stand with Auger."

"As will I." Vepar, the Demon Deity of Erosion adds.

"Me too."

"And me!"

"Not me, I'm out!"

"I'm not becoming Auger's slave."

"Neither am I!"

A multitude of voices go up around the crowd. Surprisingly, half of the Deities, Emperors, and Dukes present decide to go along with Auger's ambition. He smiles confidently, glad that so many have finally been swayed, but disappointed that just as many have refused.

Damn that Melody. Auger thinks to himself. *She was the most vocal when it came to opposing me. I will not forget this betrayal.*

He keeps his anger hidden and raises a triumphant fist. "Everyone! If you stand beside me, I assure you our species will rise to a height it never could have imagined before! I will lead our species to galactic domination! Someday, we will mark Diablo's death as the beginning of our greatest upward swing in power!"

"Here, here!" The demons cheer.

"Let's go, Auger!" Others exclaim.

As for Bael, he listens to the roaring crowd and shrugs.

"Eh. Never mind. I'll just do my own thing."

Inside the Matriarch Armor, Ose glowers at Auger with deep mistrust.

He'd never have tried this when I was around. It's too bad I'm not able to intervene and prevent these fools from chaining their ankles for the rest of eternity. Once one accepts Auger's deal, they can never break free. His power is just as absolute as Satan's Soul Contracts.

These damned idiots...

On the world of Volgarius, inside the Founder's Ring Finger.

"Fourth Founder. Thank you for meeting me on such short notice."

Founder Cuanali, leader of the Technopaths, nods to the young male before her.

"Loputo Jidelor. I wish to hear what happened during Operation Plague Destruction from a firsthand observer. Please speak freely."

As one of the most formidable Technopaths in the entire Volgrim Empire, Cuanali has given up nearly every part of her biological body in exchange for raw technological power. More automaton than biological, all that remains of her former flesh and blood roots is her biological brain, and even that has been heavily digitized to allow for enhanced processing capabilities.

Loputo Jidelor stands atop two flesh-and-blood legs. Those contrast with his mechanical right arm, making him appear clumsy and lopsided, especially in comparison to the killing-machine known as the Fourth Founder. His implants are vastly inferior to hers, another sign of his comparatively lowly upbringing.

Loputo gestures to his left, where Creator Demila stands, her expression ugly.

"Everything I am about to say, Creator Demila will confirm." Loputo says, keeping his emotions in check so as to not embarrass himself. "First, I must start with the beginning of this cycle's events..."

He quickly but succinctly verbally informs the Fourth Founder of what happened while simultaneously transmitting the collective videos and holo-recordings taken by all the Technopaths on scene. Likewise, several memory crystals recorded by the Psions find their way into Cuanali's hands, and her expression turns severe.

She is not a Brain Enhancer like Dosena, nor does she possess the same raw calculating power that Unarin does, but Cuanali still has an enhanced cognitive ability as formidable as both of them! She has long constructed numerous supercomputers hidden within quantum tunnels, computers as big as many mining-class worlds that even Dosena would have trouble locating. Scattered around the Milky Way, each of these worlds afford Cuanali a raw ability to compute and think that make her a monster at innovation and technological prowess!

It takes her mere seconds to watch and analyze every recorded angle of the battle, as well as Loputo Jidelor's personal observations regarding what happened.

"The strife among the Wordsmiths is more severe than we anticipated." Cuanali says emotionlessly, her words eerily mechanical and precise. "The Second Wordsmith has made many accusations, but we lack evidence for his claims."

[I do not know if the First Wordsmith is secretly plotting behind Unarin's back.] Demila says carefully. [But I am prepared to investigate more deeply, if the Founders will it. This claim that he has found a method to control the Plague is deeply unsettling.]

"I have spoken to Unarin about this subject." Cuanalia says. "He is unconvinced. He believes Jason Hiro is not the sort of person who would do this. Hope Hiro is likely giving in to hysterical emotions."

[Possibly.] Demila says mildly. [So, is Unarin opposed to my... investigation?]

"You have his permission to scour the planet for clues." Cuanali says. "Right now, the Plague has ceased all movements. We are not certain what is happening to it internally. Perhaps the hivemind has become compromised. In any case, it has not spread to another world in the last half-cycle. We are keeping a close watch over all controlled worlds for new Plaguehosts."

[I will take my leave, then.] Demila says, bowing her head reverentially to the Fourth Founder before jumping through space to disappear.

After Demila departs, Loputo Jidelor frowns. "Fourth Founder. If I may speak freely?"

"You may." She replies.

"The galactic situation has changed too rapidly." Loputo says. "Diablo was our only hope for eradicating the Plague. Now that it is even stronger than ever, perhaps to the point of invincibility, how can we survive?"

"The situation is not untenable." Cuanali says carefully. "The status quo has been greatly upset in recent cycles, but much of the disturbance has been a net positive for the Volgrim."

She continues. "First, we now know of the False Cosmic Realm, created by the ancient Archangel Raphael. This is likely where the majority of the Plaguehosts reside."

"Secondly, we know that the Plague needs to infest planet cores to spread across the galaxy. That means we may be able to research new methods of slowing it down, possibly

even retaking lost worlds once again. If Diablo could do it, then perhaps we can too."

"Thirdly, the Wordsmiths may be able to innovate new solutions for defeating the Plague. Jason Hiro was able to conjure those strange, unbreakable chains. Whatever material he used, it may prove useful for capturing Plaguehosts alive."

"But what if we cannot trust the Wordsmiths?" Loputo asks. "What if they are not being... entirely forthcoming with us?"

"Such concerns are well within Founder Unarin's ability to perceive." Cuanali says, her tone unmoved. "He defeated the Sentinels. The Wordsmiths will not be able to threaten him."

After a few more minutes of talking, the Fourth Founder dismisses her junior, sending Loputo away to think about the latest happenings.

She stands inside the Ring Finger surrounded by circuitry in the walls, ceiling, and floors. The entire room glows an eerie green due to all of the light produced by the glowing wires, morphing her beautiful blue skin into a sickly green.

"I refuse to unleash the Sentinels." Cuanali says to nobody in particular.

"I *will* find another solution."

Part 574: Tactical Preparations

Fiona lowers her head as a fluctuation of energy surges through Chrona's worldspace for a split-second. She steps out of the Spynet Sphere, where she finds a person she's been waiting to appear for the past several days.

"Jason." She says with a faint smile. "You're back."

"For the foreseeable future." Jason confirms. "I visited Phoebe for a little bit, but I can't be doing that too much moving forward. We have a lot of things to take care of and we don't know how much time we have left before taking care of them becomes untenable."

He pauses for a moment, massaging his forehead as the shift in time-space dilation disorients his brain. The feeling passes, and his body re-acclimates to Chrona's TDR.

"Okay." Jason says, blinking his eyes twice. "Did you finish mapping everything out?"

"I handed it off to Rebecca." Fiona says, gesturing to a warehouse Jason has been using to hold his exponentially increasing pile of projects. "She's carefully prioritized your upcoming tasks based on importance, time-sensitivity, and expected impact."

Jason nods seriously. "The Plague is still inert?"

"No movements yet." Fiona answers. "We've been keeping an eye on Randis, since he's in charge of resource distribution, military movements, and all sorts of other high and mid-level operations across the Volgrim Empire. After the events on Reaver, the number of Red-level events has plunged into the single digits."

Jason massages his chin. "Didn't they previously average a few hundred a day?"

"Yes. And almost all of the red-level events were Kolvaxian related." Fiona explains. "I've done some digging, and apparently before the Kolvaxians attacked the Milky Way, Red-level events were so rare that the Volgrim might only experience one every 100 or so years. The major exception being during the Energy Wars when a few popped up in a short period of time involving the Archangels and Demon Emperors."

"Also the Seven Great Wars of the ancient past?" Jason posits.

"Well. No. Not exactly. The 'Alert Level' system was only conceived after the defeat of the Sentinels." Fiona retorts. "But... records of the ancient past are hard to find. I imagine

Unarin has deliberately obfuscated them."

Jason looks at the Spynet Sphere contemplatively.

"He might know." Jason says.

"About us watching him?" Fiona asks.

"Yeah." Jason says cryptically. "At the very least, Unarin has to have guessed we *could* be. I doubt he'd overlook such an obvious possibility. We should assume the 'obfuscation' you've encountered could also be intentional misdirection on his part. It's plausible Unarin could be doctoring historical archives to throw us off if we search them in the future. He could also have done this ages ago to trip up other sorts of saboteurs. Plus, it's just smart to hide truth behind lies in case another Volgrim rises up to challenge him. Maybe the reports you've seen aren't all true."

Fiona remains silent for a few seconds. She ponders Jason's words.

"If Unarin did know we were watching, would he do something about it? Actively, I mean."

"I think he would." Jason affirms.

The Wordsmith looks off to the side. He thinks for a while before frowning.

"I feel like Unarin would... have some sort of backup prepared in case a higher power began scrutinizing his Empire."

"Backup?" Fiona asks.

"Yeah. He has to have thought of the idea many times. What if an Apex Cosmic from another galaxy were to start peeping on him to gather intelligence? He'd probably have... I dunno... a whole secret language of some sort mapped out in case they did."

"That does sound like something Unarin would do." Fiona concedes.

"Only problem is, if Unarin made up the language, I don't think I'd have any way of decoding it." Jason mutters.

He thinks for a while.

Then, he thinks some more.

"Couldn't I?" He asks nobody in particular, as his mind conjures different ideas for how to deal with such an eventuality.

The two half-spouses remain silent for a little longer before Jason shakes his head.

"Later. Let's deal with more pressing matters."

He and Fiona walk over to the warehouse, where they find half a dozen Psions working with Rebecca, who guides them quickly and fluidly.

[Unknown device, possibly offensive in nature. Placement?] Initiator Dunal, one of the slower-minded Psions asks, as he holds up a palm-sized circular object.

Rebecca glances at it for only a moment before looking away.

"Quantum tunneler. Medium priority. Blue shelf."

Dunal nods, and moves to set the item on the low-priority shelf, while a different Psion levitates a large flat platform with room for items to be placed onto its surface.

[Wordsmithium Duplicator.] Initiator Lufa, the Psion who wishes most to become a Technopath, eagerly says. [It does not appear to function at present.]

"High priority." Rebecca answers. "Red shelf."

Initiator Tarim, the wannabe Changeling, is next. He hefts a large box filled with assorted mechanical parts and looks at Rebecca helplessly.

[I do not comprehend the contents of this box.] Tarim says.

Rebecca glances at it. "Those are the nearly-completed components of the Transdimensional Transfer Array. High priority. Tuck it under the red shelf too."

[What about this necklace?] Ferral, the bright-eyed Jason-fanatic asks. [There is a strange energy swirling about it.]

"Levitation artifact. Bottom priority, green shelf." Rebecca answers.

Jason walks into the warehouse to find a calm chaos unfolding as one Psion after the other holds up different items, each of the six having their own different affinities for tech, with some being utterly nonexistent while one of them is clearly heads and shoulders above the rest.

Lufa, ever the Technopath aspirant, seeks to learn all about technology, a fact that would make him a pariah on Volgarius among his fellow Psions, yet elicits little more than a 'ho-hum' among his newest compatriots.

"How are things going?" Jason asks.

Rebecca turns to smile at him. "Quite well, I'd say. We have categorized and prioritized 70% of your random projects. You have truly been too scatterbrained over the years, so

this renewed focus should assist you in deciding what research paths to take your Wordsmithing down next."

"If Fiona gave you the go-ahead, I'm willing to listen." Jason says neutrally. "What do you think my highest priority projects should be?"

Rebecca gestures at the Psions. They stop coming after her with more random knick-knacks, then turn and leave the warehouse. Clearly, she is about to discuss important matters with the Wordsmith.

"The Plague could explode with activity in the next five real-time minutes. It may also not do anything for a day, or a week, or a month. The uncertainty has driven much of my decision making. I have decided to prioritize high-impact short-term gains over long-term ones. I have also decided to emphasize any projects that grant either a high level of combat strength against the Plague's new form, or methods to 'save' humanity and give yourselves more time to improve your situation. Unfortunately, escape is not a long-term strategy as we are trapped in this galaxy with the Plaguehosts."

"How much of a threat do the new Kolvaxians pose?" Jason asks. "Don't hold anything back."

"Simply put," Rebecca explains, "the bodies of every Kolvaxian have become as durable as Artoria's body was. And since she was able to trade blows with Executor Huron, that means the Plague has collectively become as physically imposing as the Executor himself."

Jason's expression doesn't change. He already anticipated this was the case. "Do we have any counters to the Plague?"

"Almost none." Rebecca replies. "But that doesn't mean *exactly none*. For example, Henry Cliff proved effective in single combat against one of the Plaguehosts. The sword you gave him was able to kill the Kolvaxian in a single strike."

"Henry is an anomaly." Jason says, stone-faced. "I can't just duplicate his sword, either. It's risen to the level of 'artifact.' Even if I could mass-produce them, he had to use it in its heaviest state to land a killing blow. Very few soldiers could wield it."

"What about Samantha?" Fiona interjects. "She's strong enough. Maybe you could make a special sword just for her?"

Jason shrugs. "I can, sure. It's mostly just Wordsmithium and an elemental enchantment amped up to an extreme level. But I can't make many similar swords. The mana requirements alone are ridiculous."

"Wordsmithium is going to be extremely important, moving forward." Rebecca says, sensing an appropriate moment to speak up. "I cannot emphasize that enough. In terms of durability, it is the highest grade alloy in the Milky Way. If we built a fortress out of Wordsmithium, the Plague likely wouldn't be able to penetrate it."

"A whole fortress?" Jason asks with a frown. "That's a BIG ask. The cost of making Wordsmithium is insane. A single ton of the stuff would require... god, I don't even know..."

"Roughly twenty-four days of maximum mana output from you." Rebecca says, smirking at Jason's surprised expression. "I ran the calculations several months ago."

"So you understand why I can't do it." Jason says, sighing heavily. "I mean, even if I succeeded in making a Wordsmithium duplicator, the energy costs alone-"

"That won't be a problem." Rebecca says. "Since your magic defies physics, we can use that to our advantage. The conservation of energy is a physical phenomena related to the 'mundane' forces of nature, such as endothermic and exothermic reactions. However, 'magic' pulls from a different source; the power of Imagination."

"I don't understand." Fiona says. "Imagination, okay, but where does THAT energy come from? Why does it regenerate whenever Jason sleeps? How does a single night's sleep allow him and any other human to fully recover their mana?"

"I have theories, but no solid evidence." Rebecca says. "If I had to guess, I would say the power of Imagination is fueled by Cosmic forces we simply cannot understand. It may have something to do with the innate power of our galaxy. Or it might not."

Jason momentarily recalls a conversation he had with Calanthra regarding the Milky Way's source of magic, but he doesn't bother to bring it up.

"So what does this have to do with creating Wordsmithium?" Jason asks. "Don't tell me you've found a way to generate infinite energy using my power."

"Infinite? No." Rebecca clarifies. "But for our purposes? Functionally endless."

She turns to the side, and holds up her hand, causing a hologram of the Milky Way to appear.

"There are hundreds of billions of stars in the Milky Way. These stars output tremendous amounts of energy in the form of nuclear fusion, heat, and radiation, to name a few elements. In terms of output, each individual star far outpaces you, Jason. Therefore..."

She glances at Jason, and he nods.

"If we can capture the power of stars, we can convert it into energy for the Wordsmithium Duplicator."

"Exactly." Rebecca concludes.

Despite her pleased smile, Jason doesn't appear as excited about the idea.

"I tried converting mundane energy into mana. The conversion ration was terrible. Something like 99% of the energy went to waste, and I don't think we can create Wordsmithium within the bounds of the universe's physics. Only magic can break through that limiter."

"Jason, you're being dense." Fiona chides. "Do you understand just how much energy a single star outputs? If we can capture that energy, or even just a portion of it, even if we only convert 1% of it to mana, that's still a thousand times more than you can output each day."

"Maybe not a thousand times," Rebecca quickly corrects, "but certainly ten times or a hundred times. Possibly more. I think that if we start immediately working on a solar-to-mana conversion project, we should be able to use it to transmit energy directly across the dimensional barriers to Chrona. Then, we can start building bigger projects that will ultimately reap huge dividends over the coming decades."

"Let's assume your idea works out." Jason says. "What projects should we put that energy toward?"

"Our highest priority should be countering the Plague." Fiona says. "But we also need to improve humanity's existence. We need to multiply humanity's population a hundredfold. We need to spread them out across the stars, and we need to ensure our allies are amply rewarded so they continue to assist us."

"Our Cosmic power is nonexistent." Rebecca says. "If possible, we should find a way to nurture human Cosmics. This has never occurred before, but perhaps Henry or one of the Wordsmiths might make a breakthrough in the near future. If not any of you, then

someone else. If we can't create human Cosmics, then finding a way to uplift friendly monsters and demons, such as Belial, Blinker, Kiari, and so on would be to our benefit."

"Injuries and sickness have historically been easy for us to cure." Fiona points out. "Samantha has always taken care of the people on Tarus II. But that won't be the case moving forward. Even if our people weren't spreading across the galaxy, asking her to take care of billions of Sentients alone is an act of cruelty."

"So we need magical healing that doesn't rely on Belial." Jason says thoughtfully. "Definitely doable. I should have worked on this ages ago if I'm being honest."

"I want you to focus on completing the Transdimensional Transfer Array as your second, possibly third priority." Rebecca says. "The ability to transfer people across the different TDR-spaces smoothly and without killing them will provide immeasurable value to humanity's long-term stability. Additionally, if we can successfully build multiple arrays, we will have ways to save people in the event of a Plague attack. The Volgrim can't use magical devices to teleport people across the galaxy, but *we* can."

Fiona looks around thoughtfully. "The Volgrim have lost a lot of citizens to the Plague. If we develop this technology, shouldn't we consider giving it to them as a show of good faith?"

"I don't think so." Jason immediately replies. "Not a chance. It's truly awful how many trillions or even septillions of Volgrim have fallen to the Plague, but the Volgrim are only our ally in this one situation. We cannot afford to give them an incredible new ability like instant galactic traversal. There are too many ways such a power could be abused."

"Jason's right." Rebecca agrees. "The Demons have Warpers who possess similar abilities. We're lucky they aren't very imaginative or they could have come up with better ways of overrunning humanity than Operation Stormbringer showed."

Jason remembers the portals summoned by the Warpers and how Mara's sister Ying-Ying was one of the individuals who helped flood humanity's land with demons to try and overrun them. It was fortunate the humans managed to survive, but the price they paid was truly awful...

As Fiona and Rebecca pause to debate the finer merits of giving the Volgrim this advanced technology, Jason glances at the shelves Rebecca and the Psions organized.

There's one project I haven't started yet. He thinks. I should see if I can put all that excess energy to use in potentially breaking the curse put upon the fairy species. If they become capable of rising to Cosmic, then they'd make great allies for humanity. Especially with Blinker on our side.

He doesn't speak this thought, though. What Calanthra told him was said in confidence, and it wouldn't be right to break that trust. Not even his wives should know unless absolutely necessary.

"Wordsmithium." Jason says out loud. "What are some practical uses we can come up with for it?"

"Too many to count." Rebecca replies. "Armor, weapons, walls, spaceship components, you name it. Wordsmithium isn't just nigh-unbreakable, it also absorbs impacts at a level which no other alloy can compare. We can also make flexible variants with other practical uses, for that matter."

"Why do we need to convert a star's energy to mana?" Fiona asks, changing the subject somewhat thoughtlessly. "Jason can already make fusion reactors. Isn't that good enough?"

"Their output is fine if we want to provide power for a million people, but for industrial purposes of converting mundane energy to mana, they're insufficient. Barely a drop in the bucket." Rebecca says. "Any other questions?"

"No. I think we have enough to get started." Jason concludes. "Time is tight, after all."

"Let's pray the Plague doesn't come flooding into the local star systems at ten times its original pace." Rebecca says, her voice monotone. "We need as much of a reprieve as we can get."

The other two exhale unhappily at her words, but don't bother to follow up with any particularly witty comments. Ultimately, Jason and Fiona are afraid to jinx themselves and put humanity's future in peril. They need all the time they can get.

Jason walks over to his desk in the corner, which has a computer station a thousand times better than anything he'd have found on Old Earth, as well as a single gigantic monitor with more than a hundred windows visible, detailing all of the different projects and goals Rebecca thinks he should work on next.

The sight makes him feel a little sad.

Phoebe's going to have Timothy in four or five months. Jason thinks. Even if it's only in five months, that's 1,250 Chrona months. Almost 105 years. If I have to stay in here the whole time, I'll go crazy. I need to make time for her, assuming the Plague doesn't launch a final offensive.

Every year in realspace is two hundred and fifty Chrona years. Just half a year out there is a hundred and twenty-five years in here. Yet, even with all that time, compared to how long the Volgrim have lived, it's nothing at all.

Can I truly come up with a way to save humanity? Even with Rebecca and Fiona's help?

Unfortunately, nobody can answer the Wordsmith. He hesitates to ask these questions out loud, for he doesn't want to worry his mind-wife, nor his Cybernite assistant.

Hope, you'd better be working just as hard as I am. Jason thinks to himself. I can't be the only damned Wordsmith fighting for humanity's survival!

Part 575: New Hall Resident

While Jason, Fiona, Rebecca, and the other people living inside Chrona work to improve humanity's future, their counterparts in the Hall of Heroes also take the upcoming transitional period seriously, treating it as a potential turning point in humanity's future.

If the Wordsmiths do not rise to the challenge of preparing humanity for the Plague's next onslaught, their species will fall, and the Milky Way will be overrun. Countless Sentients will perish, and the galaxy will become nothing more than a playground for the hivemind. Nobody wants to see this occur, so even Hope is forced to at least temporarily set aside his hatred for Jason to focus on the bigger picture.

Inside the Hall of Heroes, a specially designated area known as the Hall of Transference hangs off at the 'western' side of the special dimension. Isolated from the other areas, its purpose is to provide an area for people to enter and exit the Hall of Heroes as needed, returning to-and-from Realspace through the special means Hope has crafted with the help of a certain Celestial Designer. The room glitters with gold, like much of the Hall of Heroes. With Solomon having crafted the designs for the entire special dimension, he just can't help but make every building as gaudy as possible, making Hope and Amelia feel as if they've opted to live inside the houses of some weird rapper from 21st century Earth.

Hope and Amelia stand together before a large lozenge-shaped diamond. The beautiful white crystal spins atop a magical matrix Hope created with the help of Solomon and Psymin Miralax, both of whom stand a little off to the left, also gazing forward past the crystal.

Amelia waves her hand, conjuring a bit of magical power from within herself to enter the crystal and activate its power matrices. Moments later, a figure made of light materializes across from the four observers, and it rapidly coalesces into the body and clothing of a male human.

"Oh! I made it." The man says, looking around his entry point with an expression of deep interest. "Wow! Zees place is incredible!"

"Welcome to the Hall of Heroes, Hans." Hope says with a smile. He walks over to shake the man's hand, and Hans meets his gesture with a firm grip. "We've prepared everything for your arrival, as you requested."

Amelia walks around the Transference Crystal to stand beside her fiancé. "Are you certain you're okay with living here on a permanent basis?"

Hans waves his hand flippantly. "Here, Moonbase Kelkin, Maiura, it does not matter! A scientist lives where zee research can be done most effectively! OH! And you zere, you are zee Technopath I have been hearing about?"

Hans directs his gaze over to Solomon, who he already knows well, and Psymin Miralax, who he has never had the privilege to meet before.

"*A formal greeting. Psymin Miralax. Pleasure.*" Psymin says, her harsh robotic tone and stilted manner of speaking not doing her any favors with the first impressions.

Luckily, Hans doesn't care about such a minor thing at all. Instead, his eyes light up at the thought of getting to work alongside such a storied character as Psymin, someone who assisted in creating the most fearsome weapons the Milky Way has ever seen. He eagerly trots over to her with a sparkle in his eyes.

"I am looking forward to working alongside you!"

"*I follow orders. Wordsmith's orders.*" Psymin says blandly, expressing neither interest nor regret in working with this 'genius' human. She has seen countless genius Technopaths over the eons, and so she is not easily impressed anymore. Certainly not by a random mud-dweller. In her eyes, the smartest human is about as impressive as the smartest ant, with Solomon being the lone exception. "*Working with you. I will comply.*"

If Hans notices her dismissive attitude, he doesn't show it on his face. He clasps his hands together and turns to look at Solomon. "Well? When can we get started?"

The Knowledge-Seeker smiles at his fellow thinker. "We've built the lab according to the specifications you gave us. Psymin and I even added some embellishments. If you'd be so kind as to follow me..."

He turns and walks toward the fortified door leading out of the Hall of Transference, which itself passes through a narrow hallway just big enough for bipeds under ten feet tall to pass through. With nothing but Void surrounding the Hall of Heroes, if one were to try and break into the main structure, they would instead become trapped by the power of

concentrated Entropy. It wouldn't harm a Cosmic, but as for a mere mortal? They might suffer terribly, if not die a horrible death.

Solomon leads the group around the Hall of Heroes, showing off the various facilities to their newest guest. Hans' eyes sparkle with excitement as he observes the Artifact Hall, the Hall of Legends, the Central Garden, and several different rest and relaxation rooms. Additionally, dozens of Heroes have had specific accommodations built according to their tastes, with priority granted to the Trueborn before the Lowborn.

After showing off more than a dozen key facilities, Solomon pauses to point out the place he considers 'home', the Library of Knowledge, which he has been filling with books for dozens of years now.

"Feel free to enter here and look up any information you wish." Solomon says to Hans. "Additionally, you may don my Crown any time Hope isn't wearing it to augment your knowledge base further. Unfortunately, while I can grant you information, I cannot improve your ability to comprehend it."

"I have worn your Crown before." Hans says with a casual wave of his hand. "I look forward to improving my center of knowledge once again! And goodness, zees library is truly impressive. You must spend all your free time here, yes?"

"Less than you'd think." Solomon says. "I can multi-task extremely well. My writing speed is also incomprehensible to most, and errors never appear in my books."

He leads Hans to the most important new facility in the Hall of Heroes, the *Hall of Innovation*. Inside, they find countless small cubes lined up and stacked on top of each other against the walls with computers linked up to them. Robotic arms hang from the ceiling, and multiple large circular, square, and rectangular pads sit off to the sides, each of them large enough to fit automobiles or even armored tanks atop their surfaces.

Soft neon blue lights illuminate the room, and for once this particular Hall lacks the golden, gaudy flourishes the others do. Clearly, Solomon was not the main designer.

Indeed, Psymin Miralax steps forward and takes the lead as she addresses the design of the room.

"*Quantum storage chambers*." She says, pointing to the numerous cubes stacked atop and beside one another along the walls. "*Each has high capacity. Storage potential,*

extreme. One cube. Four metric tons. Quantum computer links together. Interface to extract contents."

Hans looks at the computer attached to the cubes.

"You can store four metric tons per cube? And at a glance zere seems to be around a hundred cubes..."

"It's about 400 tons, yeah. Each cube has a pocket dimension inside so they can store immense amounts of material for whatever needs you have." Hope says. "The cubes are modular, so we can add more with ease. We can also expand the size of the facility as needed. If you require any adjustments, let us know. We want you to reach your full potential here."

Psymin nods, then continues speaking. *"Mechanical arms. Alpha classification. Used on Volgarius. Highly dexterous. Extreme grip strength. Delicate touch. Load rating: 100 tons."*

"Each arm can lift 100 tons? Wow!" Hans chirps, his eyes curving upward as he rubs his hands together in glee. "I can hardly wait to get started!"

She points at the differently shaped pads on the ground. *"Molecular assemblers. You call them Replicators. Capable of mass production. Versatile. Magic-augmented. Multiple variants. Some produce matter. Some produce energy. One produces Exotics."*

"Exotics?" Hans asks, bewildered.

"Special types of compounds." Solomon answers. "But only a few limited options, for now. We can try to acquire other ones, but don't expect miracles. These stations are meant for you to produce materials you'll *then* need to shape into new inventions with other tools in the workshop. They should be far superior to the ones you were using on Tarus II."

After Hans asks some questions and Psymin or Solomon fire back enough answers to satisfy him, he leans on the ball of his heel, looking extremely pleased.

"What an excellent workshop! I am pleased to come and serve humanity's greater interests, moving forward. Zank you for zee extensive introduction, Miss Miralax."

"I serve the Volgrim Empire." Psymin says, her tone mild. *"The Plague must be stopped. I cannot do it. Any assistance helps."*

Hans glances at Solomon. "I am curious. Why don't YOU be zee one to make zee inventions? You are smart, yes?"

"I'm a highly intelligent man, of course." Solomon says, nodding his head perfunctorily. "But I am... not terribly creative. Imaginative. I can collect the knowledge of other beings and combine that knowledge to make new inventions, but only within somewhat rigid guidelines. In terms of inventiveness, I'm nowhere near your level, or Phoebe Hiro's level, for that matter. That's why we want you here, developing weapons to combat the Plague. You may even be able to come up with innovations the Volgrim couldn't."

Psymin's face contorts into a derisive sneer, but she says nothing. In her eyes, addressing Solomon's comment would be beneath her. A mud-dweller has no chance of outperforming millions of years worth of Technopath accumulation. Even if the ignorant human 'genius' steals all the information out of her head via Solomon's Crown, he can't hope to make any advancements beyond what she would have made in the same time frame. More likely, he'll be so hopelessly lost and confused by the high science in her head that he'll give up and become a mountain-dwelling hermit.

Perhaps she might be a little fearful of Solomon himself, given his incredible achievements, but this no-name 'Hans' fellow simply cannot amount to much.

"So, Hans!" Hope says, clapping his hands together. "Anything you want to work on first?"

Hans frowns, looking indecisive for a moment. Psymin chuckles under her breath, seeing the sudden look of stupidity wash over his face. No doubt, he'll try coming up with some primitive form of warfare he considers advanced, making her feel at least momentarily bad for the poor ignorant ape.

"Ah, so many choices, it is hard to choose." Hans says, shaking his head and sighing. "Well, I brought a datachip with me for potential projects. Perhaps you all can help me decide!"

Psymin continues to watch as he wanders over to the nearest computer terminal and plugs the chip in. It takes a minute for him to navigate the folders, and as he does, she rolls her eyes.

All these theatrics, only to embarrass himself. Truly, the mud-dwelling people of the Milky Way are unable to grasp how small they are in the grand scheme of-

"Zee Plague has become quite strong now." Hans says, interrupting her train of thought. "But I did examine zee footage our people took of zee battle on Reaver, and I uncovered some new insights!"

Psymin rolls her eyes again. She dissected the data herself, and none of it stood out to her. She was easily able to tell that the Plague had become more formidable in every way, making most previously effective attack vectors obsolete. The Plague obtained a comprehensive upgrade, and new weapons would need to be ten or even a hundred times more potent to inflict lasting damage to the Plaguehosts.

What insights could he have possibly made compared to a long-lived Technopath like herself?

"First," Hans says, opening up a clip of Henry fighting the individual Plaguehost on Yardris, "zee new combatant Henry has revealed a potential flaw in zee Plague's biology. See when he attacks it with his flaming sword? He was easily able to kill zee Kolvaxian with a single strike!"

"We know that much." Hope says impatiently. "But giving our soldiers such powerful weapons would be useless. Most of them aren't strong enough to wield them, and mass-producing artifacts like Henry's new sword isn't even something I know how to do yet. I didn't even know Jason could do that, so I'll need to catch up to him on the research front."

"No, no, we do not need swords, boy!" Hans says, frowning at Hope's obvious ignorance. "Zee sword is not important. Look at zee Kolvaxian's body after Henry smote it dead!"

He zooms in the image, allowing the others to see the Kolvaxian Henry killed up close and personal. Invisible question marks pop up over Hope, Solomon, and Psymin's heads as they struggle to understand what Hans is pointing out.

He's trying to appear smart. Psymin concludes, unimpressed. Acting as if he's spotted something the rest of us haven't. There is nothing to see but a dead body, the same as the other seven!

Ignorant to her thoughts, Hans clicks his tongue. He changes the monitor to show the other dead Kolvaxians, and when he does, everyone leans in to look more closely.

"Look at zee other seven Kolvaxians." Hans says. "Look at zeir injuries. Zeir bodies may have died, but zeir injuries continued to regenerate! Only zee one Henry killed remained completely lifeless."

Solomon glances at Hans. "You're saying the other seven were still alive? Or maybe they would come back to life?"

"No, zat is unlikely." Hans says, turning to face his compatriots with a proud look on his face. "What I am trying to indicate is zat zee one Henry struck was zee only one zat did not regenerate its wounds. Perhaps zis indicates a genetic weakness to... fire?"

"Fire?" Hope asks, blinking his eyes twice. "Because Henry's blade was enchanted with flames... so when he cut it down... the flames cauterized the wounds and prevented the Kolvaxian from restoring itself?"

"Yes! Exactly!" Hans says, clapping his fist in his palm. "I believe zee Plague's new bodies may not be as durable as we believe. Perhaps zey have grown more powerful because of life energy derived from plants, but zis has made zem weak to flames. Soldiers equipped with fire-attribute weapons, napalm, and so on might be able to inflict serious damage!"

Psymin's heart skips a beat. Even she failed to notice the anomalous activity in the corpse Henry killed. Perhaps because she was so focused on all the dead Plaguehosts collectively, she didn't think to compare the methods used for killing each one.

"If our soldiers can't land killing blows, what good does this information do us?" Hope asks.

"Boy, you still zink like a civilian sometimes." Hans says, shaking his head with a sigh. "Attrition! Wars of attrition can benefit us greatly since our enemies are unintelligent and hive-minded. We can surprise zem, burn zem, cause zem to regenerate more slowly until zey collapse from exhaustion. Zen, one good shot to zee head might finish zem off! Alternatively, we can make autonomous weapons focusing on wielding fire and flames!"

He pulls up images of the Warframes he's been building, weapons of war humanity has not yet seen fit to use, but when paired with this new knowledge might make them extremely effective against the new Kolvaxian horde.

"We must zink creatively if we are to stand a chance against zis new Threat." Hans says, as he opens up multiple images and sketches of designs for new Warframes focused

on battling the Plague. "Not only fire, but other forms of attack may be essential for combating zese new foes. You say zeir bodies are indestructible? I zink not! I remember Jason made a sword zat can cut any material. Why not equip such weapons onto our new Warframes, hmm?"

At the mention of Jason's name, Hope's face darkens slightly, but he doesn't say anything. Interrupting Hans now wouldn't be prudent, and it wouldn't accomplish anything anyway.

"Cut any material?" Psymin scoffs. *"Impossible. Pseudo Excalibur could not cut the real Excalibur."*

"Zat is because zee true Excalibur is shrouded in a powerful aura of light energy," Hans says with a smile. "Zee fake Excalibur is fantastic against mundane materials, such as zose comprising zee Kolvaxian bodies. It is not so effective against special energy such as magic."

He pivots on a dime. "Hope, tell me about zee special alloy Jason summoned. What do you know about it?"

"Special alloy?" Hope asks, before remembering that weird platform Jason conjured beneath the allied armies. "I don't know what it was..."

"I bet it was somezing you could make." Hans says, with a flippant wave of his hand. "If not, zen go ask Jason how he made it. Such an alloy would make my Warframes impervious to damage! We could crush zee Kolvaxians with ease!"

"I'm not asking Jason *shit*." Hope grouches. "I'll figure out how to make that alloy or whatever. Don't you even worry about it."

"Right, right. Zen let us talk about my many other ideas in full," Hans continues.

He launches into a long explanation of his many ideas, causing Psymin's face to rapidly vacillate between expressions ranging from shock, to outrage, to anger, to disbelief, and even to outright confusion.

"Zee Plague is drawn to life energy. We could fake life energy on other worlds to draw zee Plague away from our most sensitive planets and safe harbors!"

"Instead of killing zee Plague when it attacks, why not trap it? Use Stasis Cannons to create time-bubbles zat will trap zee Plaguehosts in temporal micro-realms 1,000 times slower than realspace!"

"We could also trap zem with gravity bombs, similar to Diablo's power. Slow zem down, place zem under gravity one zousand times stronger than the local planet zey've infested. Zen we can pick zem off with ease!"

"Hope can make dimensional pockets of space, yes? Zen why not create a dimension zat we can shunt zee Plaguehosts into with special weapons or other gadgets? We could teleport zem into zee special dimension, effectively getting rid of zem!"

"Oh, and once inside, why not start a fire zat burns hotter zen zee core of a star? Hope, you can do such a zing, yes?"

"How about targeting their biological weaknesses? Nanites could disassemble zee Plague at zee atomic level, causing zem to turn to dust after zee nanites have devoured zeir bodies from zee inside-out!"

"And why stop zeir? We could bury nanites inside zee crusts of planets zee Plague is likely to attack, causing any burrowing hosts to be eaten alive before zey can even reach zee surface. We might never even know zey were zere!"

"Oh, and about zis material, 'Trifrancium'. Is rare, yes? Why not try to find ways to make more of it? Surely, with zee Wordsmith's power, we can invent some way to create Trifrancium farms, even if poor and inefficient!"

Finally, after hearing too much nonsense, Psymin blows her stack.

"Outrageous! Trifrancium farms! Impossible! You speak nonsense. Trifrancium cannot be replicated. You are ignorant. Stupid mud-dweller!"

"Stupid?" Hans asks, frowning at the Volgrim who he now realizes has been looking down on him the entire time. "You're stupid! Your whole family is stupid! You zink I do not know zee amazing technical marvels your people have made? Boring! Lacking in imagination! You make big death weapons zat hit hard but have no special flourishes. Where do you get off calling me stupid, hmm?"

Psymin doesn't back down. Her robotic voice turns slightly gargled as she strains to speak more words than usual. *"Your ideas will not work. Impossible to create. How can we fake life energy? How can we mass-produce dimensional pockets? The conservation of energy prohibits this. You ignore reality!"*

Hope raises an eyebrow. Solomon shakes his head, laughing at the exchange of barbs.

They both know what's coming next.

"And you call ME ignorant!" Hans barks back. "Verdammt! Stupid Volgrim woman! Why worry about the limits of reality when we have a Wordsmith on our side? Do you not understand how incredible magic-based technology is?! Of COURSE we can shunt zee Kolvaxians into pocket dimensions. It is as easy as performing a party trick! Hope can do zat in his sleep!"

"Plagueborn neutralize magic." Psymin points out, waving her hands angrily. *"Power similar to Gressil. Eerily similar."*

"Big deal. So what?!" Hans snorts. "Neutralizing magical spells is not zee same as neutralizing zee loopholes used to make magic-based weapons. Ptuh! I spit in zee face of physical limitations! Hope and I will show you how zee true ingenuity of humanity can easily topple reality!"

Hope crosses his arms. "Damn right. If Hans says it can be done, I'll believe him."

"Hans is one of the greatest minds I've ever encountered." Solomon adds, backing Hope up. "You should not be so quick to judge him. If Phoebe wasn't overshadowing him all this time, he'd have been one of humanity's brightest shining stars."

Psymin does not appear impressed. She groans and turns away, unable to believe the idiocy of these simpletons. Even Solomon has somehow been deluded by the wild and fanciful claims of this raving madman.

Genius? What genius?! He's going to waste resources on wild goose chases!

All she knows is that bringing Hans to the Hall of Heroes was the biggest mistake made by humanity so far. With the Plague looming in the not-so-distant future, a catastrophe will surely swallow the Milky Way, along with all its inhabitants.

She softly sighs, causing a raspy robotic noise to rumble from her vocal cords.

"Such is the foolishness of mud-dwellers." She mutters to nobody in particular.

Amelia looks at Hans with defiant eyes.

"Don't let Psymin get you down. Let's show this Volgrim what us 'mud-dwellers' can accomplish when we put our minds to a task!"

"You said it!" Hope adds.

While Psymin watches, Hans immediately gets to work teleporting the Warframes from Tarus II into his new workshop, falling into a zen state as he hurriedly jumps right

into the first stages of his new life in the Hall of Heroes.

Hope, meanwhile, thinks to himself about one important matter only he can specifically work on.

Henry is my soldier. I can't let Jason take him away with a fancy present. As good as that sword is, it doesn't suit a sniper like Henry well.

I need to make him a Big Fucking Gun.

Part 576: Seven Months Later

Seven months, or a little more than half a year, pass in Realspace.

With its first period of peace following Jason Hiro's awakening in the Cryopod seven years earlier, Humanity obtains a short but sweet period of breathing room to grow.

Under ordinary circumstances, seven months wouldn't mean much. Even children conceived at the start of such a period wouldn't be born yet. But because of the existence of the Wordsmiths, the reality of the situation has deviated from any sane observer's expectations.

For the people living inside the lowest TDR-area of the Cube, which moves through time at twice the speed of Realspace, 14 months have passed.

For those living in the five-times-faster areas, 35 months have passed.

And for those who opted to live inside the highest TDR zone, which moves at ten times the speed of Realspace, 70 long months have passed.

70 months is no small number. For those who conceived at or around the moment they entered, their children will have already turned five years old. Those children know nothing of the universe outside, living contentedly inside a veritable paradise free of predators and fear alongside their parents.

Perhaps, even on Ancient Earth, none ever lived such a luxurious existence, benefiting from the rapid accumulation and development of the greater Human Empire while paying little to no price to do so.

And yet, compared to the situation inside the Hall of Heroes and Chrona, the residents of the Cube cannot begin to fathom just how much time has passed.

For the permanent residents of the Hall of Heroes, well over 58 years have passed.

And for those living inside Chrona, 146 years have come and gone like the wind.

To the Volgrim, 146 years is nothing at all. A short isolation session for the High Psions to meditate on their Psionic Seeds. A brief period of development for a new but minor technological innovation. A tiny and insignificant blip on the timeline of their multi-million-year Empire.

But for the humans, 146 years of development inside a secret dimension has yielded gains far beyond any they could have ever imagined...

For Beelzebub, it is a day like any other. Ordinary. Somewhat boring. Lacking in excitement.

The Emperor of Inferno doesn't usually sleep, since his body has no need for it. Some Emperors do if they are injured, or if they have undergone significant mental stress, or perhaps if they are fornicating with humans. In the eyes of demons, humans need to sleep so much because their bodies are fragile and weak, like those of other lower Sentients. Higher Demons may rest their eyes for a bit after passionate lovemaking with one or more human partners, but even then, it's not something they absolutely must do to survive. Merely one of a million pleasures they occasionally indulge in.

Beelzebub strides around his residence, a small house he had the humans build for him with a few accumulated Merits. Over the past seven months, he has traveled to the Belial Booster and Uplifted dozens of lower demons allied with humanity. Not just him, but Belial, Kiari, and other Emperors who have joined the human ranks.

Leeroy, formerly the Duke of Restoration, has risen to the rank of Emperor and earned a new title. Upon doing so, his powers of healing surged to a level beyond even Belial, making him humanity's most capable healer. This allowed him to take over the entire Hospital, affording Belial more free time for her own activities.

As the newly crowned Emperor of Duality, his powers over life have reached a level of being able to even restore even the most broken and damaged brains of people injured through any means. Had Belial been knocked into a coma and Leeroy been around with his current power, he could have woken her up without any trouble.

Beelzebub slips his arms into his long-sleeved white undershirt. He wraps a tie around his neck, slides it beneath his collar, and looks in the mirror while quickly and efficiently adjusting its position. Afterward, he steps into his black suit pants and waist coat, adjusts his belt, and sits for a moment to put on his black shoes.

Beelzebub has always been one of the demons who dressed impeccably. Indeed, it was his species that created suits and latex outfits, which were later co-opted by the humans.

Demons found this irksome, but it didn't really matter. All demons knew humans were thieves, so it was best not to get into conflict with them over such minor matters.

With great care, he laces up his shoes. He stands up and checks himself out in the mirror, turning to examine his sides and back to ensure there isn't a speck of dust on his person.

After a few moments, he stops and looks at himself with a sense of despair.

"No. I'm not feeling it today."

In an instant, Beelzebub ignites his entire body with flames. He burns away all of his clothes, reducing his expensive suit to ash. His shoes melt into sticky tar, and his room catches fire. But just as quickly as he summons the fire, he sucks it away, reducing the damage to a bare minimum.

At his level, conjuring flames is no longer his limit. He can absorb them and extinguish them just as easily.

He stands fully nude in front of his mirror, shakes his head, then walks over to his closet to grab a white T-shirt and some baggy cargo shorts. He slips them on, then steps into a pair of black flip-flops.

He exits his house wearing an outfit so casual and nondescript that the Beelzebub of just one year before might have vomited in horror. Yet, he now feels absolutely nothing. This casual dressing down simply doesn't mean a thing to him anymore.

Beelzebub shoves his hands in his pockets. His house, situated atop a mountain five miles north of the Western Warpgate puts him at the edge of human civilization on Tarus II. Already, in just the last seven months, half a dozen new cities have been created across Tarus II. No longer is the Fortress of Retribution the only place humans live, but other isolated areas where resources are rich and privacy is high.

At two miles above sea level, the air is too thin for most humans to live comfortably. But to a Demon Emperor like Beelzebub, it doesn't harm him in the least. He doesn't experience even the slightest shortness of breath. Perhaps that is because, due to reasons unknown to him, he is more than a mere, ordinary Emperor.

Beelzebub levitates off the ground. He begins to travel forward at a slow and steady pace, no longer needing to fly via flame-jets ignited under his feet. Instead, the energy of

the universe, and the latent heat in his surroundings propels him through a means perhaps even he does not fully comprehend.

Beelzebub silently soars down the mountain toward the Fortress of Retribution. It takes him ten minutes to travel the distance, but he is not in any particular rush to go anywhere, so he doesn't care.

Beneath him, the apartment complexes have expanded on the western edge of the city by two orders of magnitude. Thanks to Phoebe Hiro's incredible home-building inventions, people can construct large dwellings in a single day, and huge apartment complexes in half a week. With humanity's population rapidly ballooning not only because of their own species, but intercourse with other species, the need for family residences has exploded.

If the changes on Tarus II are considered extreme, the changes across the entire Milky Way are even more so. Already, a small but rapidly ballooning population of humans has taken residence on Pixiv, the world of the fairies. Humans have also returned to Sharmur, along with a surprisingly large number of demons. With Diablo dead, the Middle Cosmic Deities have seen fit to take more personal control of their territories. After all, while they would have felt threatened by the Archdemon, his being gone has proven to be a potential blessing in disguise.

Not only have Pixiv and Sharmur become colonized by humans, but Maiura's population has likewise increased, albeit not quite as ridiculously. When humans lacking the Flaw breed only with other humans, the pregnancy rate increases, but the growth rate of their fetuses remains unchanged. A mother still needs nine months to bear a child, which means that Maiura's first generation of children have yet to be born.

Or at least, that would *seem* to be the case for those unaware of the Wordsmith's dimensional-creation abilities. Who can truly say whether Hope Hiro has remained as silent as his other half...

Beelzebub flies above the residential region toward the upper plateau in the center. When he arrives, he touches down, and only a few people nearby even give him a second glance. These days, Barons, Dukes, and Emperors are an all-too-common sight on Tarus II. Even the sight of Beelzebub doesn't stir much interest among people, aside from the most ardent haters of the famed genocidal maniac.

Beelzebub walks past a food stand erected in the central plaza, where a simple meat vendor sells some fresh exobeast-burgers to a pair of pretty human girls. Beelzebub frowns for a moment and glances at the girls' backs. One of them has dark black hair, while the other has white hair, making them look like yin and yang together.

"-just love a good Brittle Burger, Cammy!" The black-haired girl chirps. "You have to admit, the way the juice spills out is so satisfying!"

"It is." Cammy replies, her voice soft. "But... I don't know if I feel good about eating meat. Murdering animals just to eat them is a little..."

"Oh, you don't have to if you don't want to. I hear there's a veggie burger stand a couple blocks over. Wanna try that instead?"

"Sure, I'd like that, Serra." Cammy says.

The two of them turn to leave, but they flinch slightly when they see Beelzebub looking at them. Cammy's eyes widen a fraction, while Serra's posture stiffens. She takes a step forward, putting herself between Cammy and Beelzebub.

Suddenly feeling awkward, Beelzebub coughs and looks away. He quickly turns and leaves, feeling bad that he startled the two girls. It's not the first time people have looked at him with hatred, or fear, or some other raw emotion. Even so, it always makes him feel a deep pang of guilt.

Thought they seemed familiar. Beelzebub thinks to himself. *Stupid. I shouldn't just stand and stare at two women. They'll probably think I'm a deviant. Best to keep my eyes to myself.*

As Beelzebub departs, Cammy walks up behind Serra and whispers softly, "That's Beelzebub?"

"Yeah." Serra whispers under her breath. "He killed a lot of people."

"He doesn't seem so bad." Cammy mutters. "There's a sadness in his eyes."

"Don't be fooled. He's one of the worst monsters in the galaxy." Serra growls. She coughs, then forces a smile. "Let's... let's go get those veggie burgers, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure."

* * *

Beelzebub wanders over to the central gardens. He spots the figure of the former Hero, Sir Lorent, teaching an entire class of children how to paint, while his cute little assistant, Shana, demonstrates his teachings to those who aren't quite swift of mind enough to pick up on his explanations the first time. Over the past seven months, Lorent has obtained a deal of notoriety for his works of art, fame which he has put to good use educating people on the joys of artistic expression.

Beelzebub watches the lesson from afar, his enhanced hearing picking up bits of what Lorent is saying. Something about the flow of colors, blending different shades to create never-before seen hues, and some sappy stuff about how emotions can be made manifest through art.

Beelzebub doesn't care about art, so it goes in one ear and out the other.

He turns to walk away from the garden, only to pause when he sees a man and a woman walking toward him, the man holding a babbling baby in his arms.

"Beelzebub! It's great to see you." The man says with a smile.

"Hey, Beelzebub!" The woman chirps, her red face turning pink with a happy flush.

"Saul. Kiari." Beelzebub says, directing a nod both their ways. "How's married life treating you two?"

"The baby has been such a new experience!" Kiari says excitedly. "She's always hungry, always crying, and she's so hard to put to bed. Luckily I don't need to sleep anyway, so I try and take care of her so Saul can rest."

"I take care of little Sheba during the day." Saul says, motioning with his head toward the little girl in his arms. Interestingly, despite having pale human-colored skin like Saul, she has pointed demonic ears, like Kiari, marking her as a cross-species baby.

"Bah bah?" The baby babbles, looking at Beelzebub curiously.

"She's a cute child." Beelzebub says politely, smiling at the little girl.

"Want to hold her?" Kiari asks. "She seems to like you!"

Beelzebub coughs. "No, no, I ah, I don't know about that. I'm not good with the little creatures..."

"Little creatures?" Kiari repeats, directing a wry smile his way. "Oh, Beelzebub! You're such a funny guy. Come on, just give it a try! Saul's arms are getting tired anyway, so

this'll give him a moment of reprieve."

"Well, I mean, I don't really-" Beelzebub starts to say, only to swallow his words as Saul steps toward him with the baby outstretched. "I- I suppose I could give it a try. Ugh."

Beelzebub crinkles his nose to hide his despair. What does he give a damn about some other person's baby? This is all just so annoying...

With a barely hidden grimace, Beelzebub carefully holds the baby in his arms, just like Saul shows him. Little Sheba pulls at his white T-shirt and babbles something nonsensical, but her eyes seem to light up when she looks at him.

"Aww, I knew it!" Kiari squeaks. "Sheba loves you! You should come by and play with her some time, Beelzebub! Neither Saul nor me really have any family, so it'd be great if Sheba had a uncle around!"

"An uncle?" Beelzebub asks. "Well- I mean, I don't know if that word really applies. That's more of a human term, yes?"

"Bah bah! Beel-Beel!" Sheba cries, grabbing at Beelzebub's shirt a little tighter.

"Eeee!!!! She said your name!!!!" Kiari half-screams, hopping up and down in excitement. "Did you hear, Saul! She said *Beelzebub*!"

Saul chuckles. "Her first word, and it's not even 'mama' or 'dada.' Kids these days are really something."

The trio continues to chat for a minute, but when Beelzebub tries to pawn the baby off to Kiari, Sheba continues to hold onto his shirt as if it were a lifeline.

Even in spite of his faint annoyance, Beelzebub can't help but admit the baby is a *little* cute. Not that cute of course. It's just a stupid human baby, dumber than an imp. Heck, even imps are spawned with the basic ability to speak, so human babies are way below that level.

But...

Well...

She is just a *little bit* cute.

Beelzebub chuckles, but quickly catches himself and returns to his usual stoic expression. "Hmph. Little brat really doesn't want to let go, does she?"

"Bah bah! Bleh bleh!"

* * *

Beelzebub and Sheba finally part ways. The little girl starts crying afterward, forcing Kiari to soothe her with some gentle back-pats.

She wanders away, leaving Beelzebub and Saul alone for a few minutes.

"So." Saul says, his smile fading. "You doing alright, Beelzebub?"

"I'm quite fine. Thanks for asking." Beelzebub replies.

"Hmm. You're wearing... odd clothes. For you, I mean. This isn't your usual style," Saul points out, gesturing to the T-shirt and shorts with a nod of his head. "Trying something new?"

"Yes. Something like that." Beelzebub answers.

A momentary pause.

"...well. Alright, it's rather... that is to say, I'm not exactly..."

Beelzebub mumbles some words Saul can't quite make out. He looks off to the side, his frustration made obvious by his facial expression.

"I don't even know, Saul." Beelzebub finally says, his expression darkening. "It's this... this feeling. There's something wrong with me, but I can't put my finger on it."

"Something wrong with you?" Saul repeats, as he leans back on his heel and strokes his short beard. "Like what?"

"That's the thing. I don't know." Beelzebub answers. "I feel as though... I'm... stagnant."

He pauses again to collect his thoughts.

"I don't think I can put it into words. It's simply a feeling of stagnancy. I see humanity rapidly evolving, adapting, changing. I see the demons have uplifted themselves, but that's *it*. We're like the Volgrim. We move, we think, we *evolve* too slowly to stop what's coming. The Plague has changed, and I feel its Threat looming over us."

Saul remains silent. He listens as Beelzebub continues to speak.

"I'm the same demon I've always been. My mentality has changed somewhat, but I haven't made any serious improvements in my capabilities. I'm just a fellow who throws fireballs. When all you can do is shoot flames, every problem is solved by turning things to ash. It makes me feel so... *limited*."

"I see." Saul says, his expression becoming serious. "You know me. I don't keep up with the stuff that goes on around the galaxy. I just tend to my garden and make sure my wife is happy. But I've heard stuff from Kiari recently that made me feel the way you do."

He pauses.

"The demons have rebuilt Hell Harbor. But they didn't really improve it. The same forces that destroyed Hell Harbor could destroy it again. The Plague took out Sharmur, but it could do the same thing a second time. The demons do stuff, and when that *stuff* fails, they just do it again."

He raises a pointed eyebrow. "You demons are a bunch of blockheads. That's what I think. You're not creative at all."

"Right, yes. Creativity, or a lack thereof. That's what I've been feeling, lately." Beelzebub says with a deep nod. "I'm stuck in a rut. I don't know how to get out of it either."

For a brief moment, neither man says a word.

"Beelzebub..." Saul says, breaking the silence. "You said you're a flame-guy, right? You manipulate flames?"

"That's right." Beelzebub says. "It's sort of 'my thing.'"

"Sure, sure. But... is that *all* you can do?"

Beelzebub blinks. "Pardon?"

"You have the power to conjure fire, right? You can, well, you know... *blow yourself up*. But is that all? What is fire, but energy? Have you ever thought about that?"

Momentarily stunned, Beelzebub looks down at the ground.

"Fire... energy... no, I don't think I've ever given it much thought. My body tells me what I can do, and so I do it."

Saul snorts. He shakes his head, crosses his arms, and looks at Beelzebub derisively.

"Any human worth their salt, put inside your body, would be doing all kinds of stuff to experiment with their arsenal. Maybe that's why you feel stagnant, brother. Why are you only doing the bare minimum with the powers the Creator gave you? Even the Wordsmith slacked off in the beginning, but look at what he's accomplished after putting his mind to

the test! Your abilities might be more limited than the power of Wordsmithing, but with a little bit of imagination, maybe you could do a lot more than you think."

Saul gestures off to the side, where Kiari nurses her baby under a small blanket.

"You know, funny story. Kiari manipulates bugs, right? She can command them, move them around, and even make them grow as big as busses. That's pretty interesting, right? But she had a similar problem as you. She didn't feel like she could do much with those limited abilities."

"She's been building entire cities with her bugs single-handedly." Beelzebub points out. "That's been more helpful to the humans than anything I've done."

"Kiari has earned more Merits than any other individual aligned with humanity." Saul acknowledges. "But that's not my point. Kiari had a lack of imagination, just like you. I convinced her to try experimenting, and she found all sorts of novel uses for her bugs she'd never even considered before. Bugs can spin webs, fly, spit venom, suck blood, and all manner of other useful deeds. When used correctly, any *one* of those abilities can have dozens of practical applications, both industrially, militarily, and in the realm of consumer goods."

Saul chuckles. "Shoot, who do you think tends to the Central Gardens? It's mostly Kiari. She permanently changed the way the bugs in here think, reproduce, and evolve, so the garden can maintain itself while keeping the creepy-crawlies out of sight. It's beautiful, and it's harmonious."

Beelzebub glances around himself at all the beautiful flowers, trees, and ponds filled with fish and other small creatures that have taken up life amidst Tarus II's Central Gardens. Suddenly, the gardens take on a new meaning. They are a deep expression of Kiari's love for humanity. They are an expression of her latent, budding creativity, born from the love she has shared with a seemingly ordinary human male.

"Imagination. Creativity. Limitations..." Beelzebub mutters, more to himself than to Saul. "I see. I still don't entirely get it, but... but maybe you're onto something, Saul. Maybe I have been missing the forest for the trees..."

Saul smiles kindly. He takes a step forward and claps Beelzebub's shoulder.

"I think you're getting the picture. Don't be so hard on yourself, Beelzebub. Maybe if you find yourself a cute human girl, she'll make a big impact on you. Maybe she could

even help you unlock the potential that Kiari and I see in you."

Beelzebub smiles wryly. "I can try, I suppose. I just don't think I'm a good enough guy. Nobody will ever forgive me for my past actions. Even if they did, I don't know if I'd deserve such a grace."

"No. You're too hard on yourself." Saul says, pulling away his hand. "It's easy for someone to be a good person when they were born into a virtuous family and loving home. It's much harder for someone who was born into a culture of violence to become good. And, in my opinion, the latter is far more praiseworthy."

"Hmm. Maybe so..." Beelzebub concludes, a thoughtful expression playing at the edges of his face.

Kiari wanders back over. She, Saul, and Beelzebub talk a while longer, then they depart, heading off to deal with the important matters that have been stacking up. Despite her love for Sheba, Kiari has many duties to attend, and she cannot set them aside for long.

After they depart, Beelzebub sits on a bench in the Gardens. He listens to the chirping of birds, the trickling of pond water, and the distant, faint voice of Sir Lorent as the ancient Hero continues to speak to the children before him on the merits of artwork.

"If only I could go back in time and slap my younger self." Beelzebub says with a chuckle. "That fool had no idea how wonderful humans truly are. I have to do right by them... even if they never stop hating me. It's what they deserve."

He leans back on the bench and looks up at the blue-green sky.

"Maybe I should find someone to talk to about my powers. Surely... *surely* there is more I can do. This cannot be the limit of my capabilities..."

Part 577: Birthday Boy

While 7 months have passed in Realspace, 58 years have passed in the Hall of Heroes.

Hope Hiro, and the other denizens who have entered extreme time dilation, have not spent those years idly.

The Plague is an ever-present threat. Despite its significantly slowed-down movements, it has become a hundred, if not a thousand times harder to kill any individual Plaguehost. When massed together, an army of Kolvaxians is by all practical measurements an unstoppable force.

Hope has spent the last 58 years developing counters for the galaxy's most fearsome monsters.

Inside a secret containment room inside the Hall of Heroes, a carefully isolated Kolvaxian smashes against a magically enhanced barrier of mundane energy. Comprised of 'Wordsmithium' Hope made in his own way, Hope has placed the monster inside a transparent glass barrier made of essentially unbreakable materials. While a Cosmic level enemy could likely break the *Wordglassium*, as Hope has taken to calling it after communicating with his other self, even a Kolvaxian with a body as formidable as the modern strain cannot escape.

BOOM!

BOOM!

Mountain-shaking blows smash against the glass over and over, but the impact of the creature's fists dissipate instantly. Thanks to targeted enhancements, Hope has taken great care to ensure the glass is vibration-proof. Any blows struck against it will get canceled out by counter-vibrations. The barrier is so transparent that unless one looks for the smudges of blood where the creature's fists have struck the glass, they won't be able to tell where it starts and where it ends.

Hope and Hans stand at a computer terminal some distance away from the glass enclosure. Hans observes several readings detailing the internal stats inside the containment glass, and he nods to himself as he confirms the readings.

"Tenacious bastard." Hope grunts, watching with his arms crossed.

Hope has long found a way to capture individual Kolvaxians, something even the Volgrim's top scientists could never accomplish. This has allowed him and the people inside the Hall of Heroes to carry out targeted experiments against their future enemies.

"Zey all are." Hans says, looking at his display readouts. "Next, zee nanites."

An instant later, a metal canister teleports into the center of the glass-covered barrier. The Kolvaxian ignores it, mindlessly continuing to strike at the wall.

The top of the canister pops off, and a grey smoke rushes out of it, lunging at the Kolvaxian as if guided by a higher intelligence.

Hope watches. Hans watches.

The Kolvaxian's movements abruptly change. It swats at the grey cloud as if trying to shoo away a swarm of bees. This proves to be the wrong choice, as the cloud easily adheres to the Kolvaxian's limbs and begins burrowing inside.

The moment every nanite from the canister has clamped onto their prey, the Kolvaxian bursts into flames!

Empowered by some unknown magic, the Nanites transform into thousand-degree molten spores, liquefying the Kolvaxian's insides. Its durable bones shudder and weaken. Its skin rapidly blackens, then peels off and slops to the floor in a disgusting, putrid display that makes Hope's eyes water. The creature staggers, trips, and falls to its knees, its movements becoming indescribable.

The Kolvaxian finally becomes inert. It flops lifelessly to the ground, its body only twitching reflexively, no longer through any conscious effort.

Hope grins. He squeezes Hans' shoulder. "Amazing. Yet another success. You never have a bad day, do you?"

Hans doesn't appear quite as satisfied. "Zee nanites are not reusable. A single canister only kills one Kolvaxian. Zis is not a good long-term strategy."

"It's a weapon that can kill previously-thought-unkillable enemies." Hope says, his smile turning gentler. "Don't lose sight of that. Every weapon in our arsenal is another tactic we can use against these monsters."

"I will keep working on zee other armaments." Hans says with a wave of his hand. "You may go. Zees are all zee demonstrations I have to show you today."

Hope nods at Hans. He shoots one last glance at the Kolvaxian as its body crumbles to ash, then he turns and exits the Containment Hall.

"Hey! There you are!" Amelia says the moment he steps into a nearby Hall of Recreation, one of many scattered around the Hall of Heroes. This particular one has a large park with simulated sunlight, hundreds of trees and flowers, and more than a few Technopaths who have been assigned to its daily care.

Hope smiles at his wife. Despite having aged nearly 60 years, Amelia is just as young and beautiful as ever, with not even a hint of aging visible on her face. She looks exactly the same as the day she entered the Hall of Heroes, as does Hope.

"The test was a success." Hope says, as he walks over and plants a kiss on his wife's cheek. The two of them were married over 6 months ago in Realspace terms; 56 years in the Hall's time-frame. "One dead Kolvaxian, served crispy-fried."

"That's great!" Amelia chirps, before suddenly falling silent and looking at Hope intently.

Hope blinks.

"What?"

She doesn't answer.

"What??" Hope asks. "Is there something on my face?"

Amelia frowns. "Hope! It's Blake's birthday! I told you last week it was coming up! How could you forget?!"

"Oh, *shit*." Hope curses, slapping his face. "That was today? I completely forgot..."

"Boys only turn sixteen once." Amelia chides him gently. "We need to make today a special one for him."

"I already made him his present." Hope says. "I'm just glad you reminded me before it was too late. Did you make a cake or anything?"

"Darn right I did." Amelia snickers. "I suppose I could have you magic one out of thin air, but nothing beats home cooking!"

"That's for sure." Hope says. "Now, uh, give me fifteen minutes, then bring Blake over to the Forging Hall. I'll get Mandy and Levi so we can surprise him."

Amelia nods, shoots Hope a sweet smile, then scampers away. Hope can't help but take in the sight of his wife's backside as she zips around the corner.

"Hate to see her leave, but I love to watch her go." Hope chuckles slyly to himself.

Hope turns and leaves. He heads the opposite direction, to the Hall of Forging, where the ancient Heroes construct artifacts of different types. The moment Hope steps inside, he blinks in surprise upon spotting his oldest son, Levi, and his middle daughter, Mandy, aged 50 and 30 respectively. The two of them stand with more than three dozen Heroes, including the Heavenly Blacksmith, Elizabeth Kindelmann, alongside many others.

"You're already here?" Hope asks.

"Well YEAH." Mandy snarks. "Unlike you, *daddy*, we've known it was Blake's birthday all week. Don't tell me you forgot and mom had to remind you."

"Ah... haha... I do have his present ready. I just... forgot it was today." Hope says helplessly. "OH! Right, that means I need to bring your aunt and uncle here! One moment."

Hope focuses his attention for half a second.

"Locate. Locate. Examine. Return. Return."

Just like that, Neil Adams and his wife, Linda Adams, appear inside the Hall of Forging before Hope. Linda, looking just a little bit pregnant, leans onto Neil as she blinks in surprise.

"Oh! Is it now?"

"It is." Hope answers. "Hey Neil, Hey Linda. It's Blake's birthday, so I wanted you two to be here for it. He'll be here in just a few minutes."

"I didn't get to bring his present." Linda says, disappointed. "I didn't realize you'd pop me over so abruptly."

"Where is it?" Hope asks. "I can teleport it here."

While Hope quickly takes care of those matters, Neil sizes up Hope's other two children, Levi and Mandy.

"Wow, look at you." Neil says, appreciating Levi's incredibly muscular and powerful body. The faint glimmering of scales can just barely be seen beneath his skin. Levi's thick

black hair gives him an almost feral, animalistic appearance. "You have only grown more impressive since I last saw you, boy."

Levi smiles. "Thanks, Uncle Neil. I train in the Battle Chamber every day. My father has a strict workout regimen prepared for me, and I always follow it to the T."

"And Mandy!" Neil says, leaning over to kiss the pretty middle-aged woman's cheek. "You're as beautiful as your mother. Have you made any fun new discoveries?"

Unlike Blake, who has shaggy black hair, Mandy has soft, brown, bouncy hair with some light curls. Her coquettish smile belies her true nature as a scientist and experimenter. She bats her long eyelashes at Neil and smiles.

"More than a dozen in the last year! Crafting new runes is always such an exciting venture, but I never have enough materials. Say! Uncle, since my birthday is coming up in a few months, could you maybe try and secure some new Exotics for me? Our supplies are running low and I use them up faster than Realspace can replenish them."

"Exotics, huh?" Neil mumbles. "Easier said than done. The number of exotics present on human-controlled worlds is practically none. We might have luck with Pixiv, but the demon and Volgrim worlds are still no-go zones. Maybe I can try bartering with one of the Deities..."

Suddenly, Hope speaks up. "He's coming!"

Just like that, Hope and his kids, as well as Linda and Neil, sneak off to hide while the Heroes who usually populate the Hall of Forging return to their busywork, acting as if nothing is amiss.

Moments later, Amelia and a teenage boy step into the Hall, with the young man looking a little perplexed.

"But why does she need me, mom?" Blake asks.

"Elizabeth is working on a shadow-affinity artifact." Amelia explains. "We're hoping it will resonate extremely well with you. And if it doesn't, well, there's always..."

"SURPRISE!"

Suddenly, Blake's extended family jumps out of several prepared positions, startling the young man and making him burst into a huge grin.

"You guys DID remember!" Blake exclaims. "Oh, I should have known you were trying to trick me, mom! Hahaha!"

Levi and Mandy both laugh, delighted at Blake's genuine surprise. Levi claps his little brother on the back, nearly knocking Blake off his feet. Luckily, Blake manages to stabilize himself by attaching his feet to a stray shadow cast by his sister's body.

"Happy birthday, son." Hope says, wrapping an arm around Blake's shoulders. "Sixteen years old, about to become your own man. Everyone here got you a present, but naturally dad's present is the best!"

"AHEM." Amelia coughs, clearing her throat. "That's why *dad* is going to go last!"

"I don't care about the presents." Blake says with a huge smile. "I'm just glad Uncle Neil and Aunt Linda made it. Why don't you two visit more often?"

Neil smiles helplessly and shakes his head. "Young man, if Linda and I were to come for every one of your birthdays, we'd never get anything done! Each of you ages a year every three-and-a-half Realspace days. That means you'll have a birthday roughly every one of our days! I can't afford to be coming here constantly when there's so much to do in Realspace."

"Oh, yeah." Blake says, his smiling fading a little. "Dad, when can I go and visit Realspace?"

"Your brother and sister already do, once in a while." Hope says. "But you have to wait 'til you're eighteen. Then you can go if you like. I don't recommend visiting too often, though. You'll suddenly find your siblings are tens of years older than before if you're gone too long!"

"Yeah, but we're immortal." Blake points out. "The whole 'years' thing doesn't really matter, does it?"

"When you're sixteen, one year is 1/16th of your life." Hope explains. "The individual years matter less and pass quicker once you're a hundred, a thousand, and so on. That's what I've picked up from the Technopaths, anyway. For now, you really don't want to miss all that potential bonding time with your siblings."

"Yeah, yeah." Mandy says, waving her dad's words away. "Now enough with the philosophy. Come on, Blake! Let's open your presents!!"

Everyone quickly gathers around, including the many different ancient Heroes of the Forging Hall. Blake opens one present after another, each one an absolutely shocking artifact, priceless treasure, or even heartwarming gift carefully planned for the birthday boy.

"Wow! These two daggers are great!" Blake exclaims. "Thanks, Aunt Elizabeth!"

"They should meld well with your shadow-powers." Elizabeth says, smiling sweetly at her adopted nephew. "Be sure to practice with them later."

"Is this a new Exosuit variant?" Blake asks, looking at his mom a minute later.

"Yes, it's similar to mine. It's called a Spectre T-REX, I asked Phoebe to custom-build one for you. You can consider this a joint gift from her and me both. She did want to apologize for not visiting, but you know how she feels about entering Hypertime, especially now that she's had the baby."

Blake grins widely. "That's fine! When I go to realspace I'm gonna give her a big hug! For now, I'll just have to give you a hug first, mom!"

Spoiled half to death, Blake gets one present after another. Even his Aunt and Uncle give him something special.

"This is from me, Linda, and Hans." Neil says, as he hands a small spherical device to the young man. "I'll admit, Hans did all the work building it, but Linda and I worked for a few days on the concept when we had free time. We deserve a little credit."

"Rotate the top and bottom of the sphere in opposite directions." Linda says helpfully, as she gestures to the small metal orb in Blake's grasp. "It has two settings."

Invisible question marks pop up over the teenage boy's head. Puzzled, he rotates the top clockwise, then counter-clockwise. An image of Neil suddenly materializes in the air, a small hologram that floats over top of the sphere.

Holo-Neil smiles at Blake. "Hey, Blake. I'm here whenever you need me now. Always ready to talk if you want to vent."

Blake flinches in surprise. He looks at his aunt and uncle in disbelief.

"Wait, so this...?"

"It's a sphere that contains holo-clones of our current selves." Neil explains. "As time goes on, those two will diverge from the Linda and me of today, but still, they're

effectively a lot like us. We actually had the idea because of Phoebe and her spiritual clone, Fiona. I'd be honored if you could help our clones choose new names."

Blake quickly rotates the orb in the opposite direction, causing a projection of Linda to appear instead. For a brief moment, he falls silent. Then, tears well up in his eyes.

"This... this is such a great present. Th-thanks, Aunt Linda. Uncle Neil. I... I always wished I could see you more."

"Oh, sweetie. You don't need to cry." Linda says, her heart warming upon seeing his reaction. She reaches over and pulls him in for a hug, while Neil does the same. "We're just sorry we couldn't be here for you more often."

"When you deactivate the sphere, our clones will go into hibernation." Neil says. "For them, between activations, only an instant will pass. Just twist the sphere whenever you feel lonely. It's not as good as us being here in person, but it's the next best thing."

Blake wipes his teary eyes. "This is... it's so good... thank you both, so much..."

Hope watches his son crying, feeling a hint of dismay deep within himself.

Unfortunately, none of Hope's kids have lived normal lives. 'Normal', of course, being a difficult-to-define word. They've mostly been stuck inside the Hall of Heroes, which is indeed a massive dimensional space, but feels too clean and pristine compared to the rawness of Realspace.

Hope wishes his children could have lived with their fellow humans and grown up around other children their ages. But unfortunately, the circumstances did not allow for such a thing to occur.

The Plague's threat has only become more omnipresent. Time is not on humanity's side. Hope's children will someday become core protectors of the human species. They cannot afford to age slowly and peacefully. They must reach their full potential, and *soon*.

"One last present, son." Hope says. "Honestly, it's not as good as Neil and Linda's holo-clones, but... well, I just thought it was neat."

Hope holds out a small box with a bow on top. Blake takes it, then unwraps it to reveal a blue, oval-shaped object with a scaled pattern covering its exterior.

The teenager blinks. "An egg?"

"That's right, son. And not just any egg. This is actually the egg of a recently deceased exobeast on Pixiv. It's a type of winged serpent... kind of like the old Chinese Dragons of ancient Earth myths. Probably not as cool, but, you know."

Hope shrugs. "I was thinking of getting you a dog, but personally, I thought an exobeast pet would be a lot more fun. If you don't want it..."

"What do you mean?!" Blake exclaims. "Of course I want it! I get a freaking exobeast?! Dad, this present is so cool! Thank you, thank you!!"

Blake hugs his father, making Hope and Amelia smile warmly at each other.

"I don't know much about the creature, so I don't know when it will hatch. I don't even know what it eats... but I had Mandy put a seal on it so it won't attack humans once it's hatched. That way it'll be safe to handle."

"I'll take good care of it. I promise." Blake swears solemnly. He looks at his older brother. "Levi, did you ever get a pet?"

"Nah. Didn't really want one." Levi says, rustling his brother's hair. "I know you're gonna love this little guy though. Or girl, maybe. I actually helped dad get the egg. Unfortunately, its mother died during an attack by another exobeast, so the egg would have likely withered and died if we hadn't found it in time."

Blake's birthday party continues for a while longer. Amelia reveals the large cake she made with the help of one of the Technopaths, and all the people except for the spiritual-bodied Heroes partake in the confection, crowing about how amazing Amelia's cooking has become over the last fifty-plus years.

"I sure hope it's improved!" Amelia laughs. "Not like I've got much else to do around here than train in the Queen Network and raise my kids!"

"Oh, you use the Queen Network?" Linda asks, surprised. "I haven't seen you in there."

"I don't bother with the ranked ladder." Amelia explains. "I also play asynchronously, so I play against recorded opponents, not live battles. The time dilation makes it impossible to join the live leagues. Oh! I also play with the original power level of the Black Queen, so... I tend to fight against projections of Demon Emperors and other similar powerhouses."

Linda glances at Neil. He nods. "I heard about it from Hope a few months back. The Queen Network has been instrumental in helping offer a solid training platform for our

troops, Amelia, so I want to thank you for all the hard work you and the Fairies have put into maintaining and updating it."

Blake perks his ears up. "The Queen Network? Mom, can I join it now? I'm sixteen. I'm practically an adult!"

Amelia starts to reject him, but then she pauses and tilts her head.

"Hmm. I suppose that's fine. You have your powers now, but putting you up against an experienced demon opponent might be too much. Let's start with one of Jephthah's Legionnaires, okay? We'll call it my birthday present to you. But FIRST, young man, you go and put that egg your dad gave you somewhere warm. Make sure to take good care of it until it hatches, okay?"

"Okay, sure! Just gimme a few minutes and I'll be right back!" Blake shouts, before jumping up, carefully grabbing the egg, and hauling ass out of the Forging Hall to head back to his personal dormitory

After Blake leaves, the adults remain quiet for a few moments.

"Hope, when we're done here, would you mind sending me and Linda over to Volgarius?" Neil says, interrupting the silence.

"Volgarius?" Hope asks, surprised. "What for?"

"I have a meeting with Founder Unarin today." Neil explains. "I was going to ask you to teleport us there before I remembered it was Blake's 16th. Might as well kill two birds with one stone."

Hope nods slowly. "You want to go there alone? No bodyguards? At least let me go with you, or heck, why not bring Levi along?"

"Absolutely not." Neil says, raising his palm decisively. "Hope, optics matter. Going there with Linda gives an impression of strength. We already have a Wordsmith in the back wing. Unarin won't try anything. But bringing your oldest son would send a message of weakness, implying we need backup or we fear reprisal. I also don't think Levi would be able to stand up to Dosenia or even the Executors, so why put him in a position of danger?"

"Uncle Neil's right." Levi agrees with a nod of his head. "With so much uncertainty swirling around the Plague, now is not the time to look weak in front of the Volgrim."

Hope shrugs. "Well, alright then. I'll be keeping an eye on you though, Neil. In case you need help. I'll give you a talisman you can activate that will instantly alert me if any tomfoolery happens."

"That much is fine." Neil says. "I'll be relying on you."

Some time later, after Blake's birthday party concludes, Hope sends Neil and Linda back to Realspace, then he watches as his wife and kids head out with Blake over to the Hall of Competition, where the Queen Network Nodes await.

Hope, however, remains behind. His expression becomes solemn.

Neil didn't tell me he set up a meeting with Unarin. I haven't been keeping much of an eye on him or anyone else over the last few years. To think I let something this important slip past me...

Part 578: Meeting With Unarin

Hope teleports Neil and Linda to the landing platform of the Founder's Thumb on the world of Volgarius. The moment they arrive, the husband and wife duo pause for a few moments to get their bearings while turning and looking around themselves.

An island of foliage forms a green barrier separating the Founder's Fingers from the not-too-distant hellscape of glass and steel that has come to devour every last inch of the rest of Volgarius. Even from their high vantage point, Neil and Linda cannot make out the tops of the Stratoscrapers that have pierced miles above the planet's thick cloud-cover. Only the area directly above the Founder's Fingers lacks clouds, allowing them to faintly make out the distant Void they can never hope to touch with their mortal abilities.

Unarin's residence, the Founder's Thumb, is without a doubt the most politically important strategic position in the entire Milky Way. It is from this lone skyscraper, far smaller than the stratoscrapers in the distance, yet somehow much more imposing as a result, that countless decisions take place on a daily basis which will affect the livelihoods of trillions of Volgrim.

Neil's heart thumps in his chest. Despite trying to maintain his cool, seeing is believing. Compared to the paltry little 'city' he has constructed on Maiura, he cannot help but feel like an uneducated country bumpkin stumbling into the castle of an intergalactic deity.

Neil is nothing at all. He is dirt beneath Unarin's shoes. Were it not for his moderate intellect, which Unarin has found slightly interesting, he might not have even been invited here today.

What 'leader of humanity's military'?

What 'man who holds the Wordsmith's ear'?

These are meaningless titles before true political power. He has no prayer of throwing his weight around before Unarin. The best he can do is act with shrewd intent, putting his unique Terran strengths to the test.

Perhaps, something useful may come of this visit.

* * *

Five minutes pass while Neil and Linda survey the distant horizons, the buzzing of spaceships numbering in the millions as their speck-sized silhouettes zip across Volgarius's sky. Eventually, they turn when they hear the quiet footsteps of someone approaching them.

"Greetings, Neil Adams, leader of the human army. I am Muuxunuu, First Founder Unarin's Head Administrator."

A beautiful pink-skinned Ascended stands before them, her limpid blue eyes transfixing the attention of both Terrans. For a moment, Linda suddenly feels ashamed, as if she is but a mud wasp standing before a fairy queen. She momentarily feels inadequate as a woman, devoid of any feminine charm. She feels old, ugly, and perhaps even a little bitter.

That thought passes when she sees no affection in Neil's eyes. He truly has no interest in the beauty of an alien princess or whoever this 'Muuxunuu' might be.

"I have come to pay the lauded First Founder a visit at his request." Neil says, his tone neither servile nor overly egotistical. "I pray I did not arrive too early?"

"You have arrived at the designated time." Muuxunuu says, turning her attention to the woman at Neil's side.

"My wife, Linda Adams." Neil says, gesturing to his right.

"I hope my coming here was not a breach of decorum." Linda quickly says, lowering her head when she meets Muuxunuu's gaze. Unlike Neil, she is not an adept politician, and she cannot help but react involuntarily when placed before a creature of such exquisite beauty.

"Founder Unarin will be pleased to meet the wife of Neil Adams." Muuxunuu says, her tone giving no hint as to her own thoughts on the matter. "Please follow me. I will guide you to Unarin's Garden."

Neil and Linda nod. They follow behind Muuxunuu, remaining silent as she begins leading them down various hallways, past Technopaths and Changelings of many different types. Some of the Changelings are in their natural states, but more than a few have half-adopted the forms of other Sentient creatures across the Milky Way. One Changeling even sports fairy wings, making Neil frown.

The halls they travel through are bleakly nondescript. No interesting murals have been painted on the walls, nor have any words been etched or portraits been placed. Neil's mind swirls with countless observations as he realizes just how bland the lives are of his presumptuous alien overlords.

They have no imagination. They seemingly lack all creativity and interest in art itself.

Their society is stagnant, and they have lost their momentum.

A smile flickers on Neil's face for half a second. It quickly disappears.

So it's like that, hm? Neil thinks. *Perhaps I can use this to my advantage.*

It takes nearly twenty minutes to ride down various turbolifts and walk down different floors and halls of the Founder's Thumb before they arrive at the bottom level and step outside into the sunny day. Volgarius's star burns a little more orange than Sol did on Earth, but Neil only notices the difference if he really looks for it. He and Linda follow behind Muuxunuu as she leads them across a paved walkway adorned with beautiful blue and green color patterns. For the first time, Neil notices a hint of artistic flair, and it slightly surprises him.

That flair becomes more and more pronounced as they draw closer to Unarin's Gardens, a beautiful oasis of greenery complete with trees, terraces, and a large central fountain with a statue of a male Ascended at its peak, the man's hand raised up to the sky as if trying to grasp the universe within the palm of his hand.

Neil and Linda both pause to look up at the statue. Having seen Unarin's image several times in the past, they can't help but think the fellow depicted is not the First Founder, but someone else. The details don't quite line up, but they aren't familiar enough with Ascended appearances to pinpoint what details are incorrect.

Just as they're about to ask Muuxunuu, a voice speaks from the opposite side of the fountain.

"His name was Vedric. The greatest Ascended to ever live."

Unarin steps out from behind the fountain, slowly walking around its large water-filled border as he speaks.

"He was the first of our kind. He mastered our unique abilities and helped to make our sub-species rule over the others. While he held no aspirations for leadership, his gifts for visions of the future were unparalleled."

"Unarin." Neil says, bowing his head slightly to be polite. "It's good to finally meet you."

"And to meet you as well." Unarin says with a smile.

"This is my wife-

"Linda." Unarin says, nodding to her in response before Neil can finish his sentence. "I do try to keep abreast of humanity's political situation and important marriages where pertinent. My dear Linda, you are quite the lovely flower."

"Oh, you're just being polite." Linda says, lowering her eyes. "I'm not pretty at all."

"Au contraire," Unarin says with a nod to Neil, "I beg to disagree. Your species has such a unique aesthetic, I always enjoy looking at its males and females."

The three of them exchange some more words while Muuxunuu wanders off, leaving Unarin alone with the two humans. Neil eventually gestures up at the statue.

"Vedric, you said? And he was able to see into the future?"

"That's correct. The tapestry of time is not one mere mortals can peer through, but Brother Vedric was a unique case. He was one of the Milky Way's Four Envoys, the Envoy of Karma. As such, he was able to see the karmic web woven by the actions of his future descendants."

Unarin sighs softly. "But unfortunately, one day, he peered too far into the future. He saw something he was not supposed to see, and died shortly after. The last words he spoke to me were..."

Unarin trails off, causing Neil to raise an eyebrow. "They were?"

"*The Great Shattering*." Unarin says softly. "He told me I would be one of its causes. Beyond that, I've little understanding of just what it was that my brother saw. A monumental event certain to affect the balance of our galaxy in some drastic way, at the least."

"It sounds ominous." Linda says. "I don't look forward to things being 'shattered.' It's always a negative event."

Unarin looks at her for a moment, then he nods.

"You're probably right."

He pauses, then gestures toward the Garden's interior.

"If the two of you would be so kind, I'd like to meet with someone to complete our little party."

Neil and Linda follow behind Unarin, slightly puzzled by his implication. They pass through a pair of stone columns attached to a moss-covered wall, where they enter the heart of Unarin's Garden. Inside, a long brook trickles quietly, and small birds and insects buzz around, preying on those weaker than them. Some of the bugs seem quite familiar to Neil and Linda, but others are truly alien.

However, they don't pay much attention to the sights, because what they find inside is a powerful Demon Emperor standing with her arms folded behind her back.

"Emperor Crow." Neil says, his kindly eyes hardening in an instant. He examines the blue-feathered Emperor with visible hostility, but keeps his words in check so as to not disturb Unarin or make a scene.

"I understand you are not friendly with the demons, Neil." Unarin says, turning to look back at the two humans. "This is not conducive to a good future between our species. The four of us will sit and discuss this matter."

Crow and Neil both nod. Unarin and his three guests sit at a small wooden table while a pair of beautiful Technopath women bring them refreshments. Neil and Linda remain silent, waiting for Unarin to continue the conversation.

"So this is why you had me wait." Crow says instead. "You want me to parley with the humans."

"I want all of us to talk. To speak without holding anything back. And to *resolve* a certain number of longstanding issues." Unarin says, correcting her with a mild tone. "The Milky Way is on the precipice of defeat. Only by uniting all of our species together can we defeat the New Kolvaxians. It will not *do* for me to have to worry about one of you backstabbing the other at a critical moment."

Unarin directs a harsh look at Neil. "This especially means you. Even now, you are barely capable of suppressing your bigotry in a setting this cordial."

"It isn't bigotry." Neil snaps back. "That would imply an *undeserved* hatred of another race or species. The demons deserve to be hated for all the horrors they've wrought on humanity."

"Indeed, I will not deny those past actions were truly vile." Unarin affirms. "I must also confess to my own tacit acceptance of the old status quo. I allowed the demons to predate on your species. In hindsight, I should not have done that. I should have taken a more active role in brokering peace and unity between the two."

Neil nods. "Yes. You should have."

"Still, nobody can change the past." Unarin says. "Many have tried, all have failed. What is more important is the journey we must take as we approach the future."

Unarin pauses for a moment. He clears his throat before he continues speaking.

"I want to clear the air between our three factions. Right here, and right now. I believe all three of you may hold false assumptions about me and my goals. It is essential these beliefs be rectified in order for us to cooperate more closely."

Linda tilts her head. "What do you mean?"

"I have little doubt, based upon observations I've made and reports I've read, that many humans, demons, and monsters think me a tyrant hellbent on holding power." Unarin carefully explains. "You believe that I want nothing more than to control the entire galaxy, place your species in submissive positions, and humiliate you for my own pleasure."

He pauses.

"Well? Am I off the mark?"

Neil maintains a tight smile, but his eye noticeably twitches. Crow doesn't respond, and neither does he.

Their silence speaks volumes.

"I can understand why you would believe such a thing." Unarin says. "Your species have entire libraries filled with tales of mighty Emperors, Kings, and Presidents who committed horrifying atrocities to further their own ambitions. If these histories are filled with such commonalities, than how can you possibly trust any self-appointed galactic ruler such as myself?"

Once again, Unarin falls silent, allowing his words to percolate in the air.

"I cannot offer you anything beyond my word. I am willing to divide the Milky Way into four sections if we win this war. The Human Empire, the Demon Empire, the

Monster Empire, and the Volgrim Empire. Compared to the upcoming Akashic War, our squabbles are nothing at all. We would do well to unify our strengths and work together to seek common ground."

Neil blinks in surprise. He didn't expect Unarin to take the discussion in this direction.

"You would give up three quarters of the Milky way to other Apex Species?"

"Of course." Unarin says. "The Plague has not been entirely negative toward the Milky Way. Did you know that every world the Plague infests will, over time, grow to become a Paradise-class planet? The Plague devours life, but at the same time it spreads life abundantly. It *kolforms* worlds from dead rocks into life-rich planets any of our species would thrive on."

Neil glances at Crow. She looks back at him, both of them having only heard this information for the first time.

"So." Neil says. "We work together, exterminate the Plague, and there will ultimately end up being far more worlds for our species to colonize than before? A hidden benefit to tens of millennia of brutal death and violence?"

"Precisely." Unarin answers.

Linda clears her throat. "How do we know that you will keep your word? And how do we know our species united *can* take the Milky Way back?"

"As I said," Unarin says with a sigh, "I can only make a verbal promise with you. You would have to take me at my word. As for whether or not our species will succeed, that doesn't matter now, does it?"

"It doesn't?" Linda asks, bewildered.

"Of course not." Unarin retorts. "I am saying that in the event we succeed, we will divide the galaxy four ways. But if we don't succeed, it doesn't matter. We'll all be dead anyway."

"I can't agree to a proposal this important on my own." Crow says. "I am only an envoy for the Deities, here to represent their interests, not to make decisions on their behalf."

"I don't expect an immediate answer." Unarin says. "But before you drag your feet to see if you can entice a better offer out of me, I'd like to show all of you something."

Unarin activates a holographic display on the table, showing a map of the Milky Way.

"You three may be under the impression that the Kolvaxians have gone into hibernation, or have fallen inert. That is not the case. Rather, they seem to have either lost or given up the ability to infest dozens and hundreds of worlds at once. Now, they appear on a single world at a time, but without infesting the planet's core. They materialize on the surface, but differently from how they used to."

Unarin shows a series of red dots showing Kolvaxian infestations over the past seven Tarus-months.

"Only fifty worlds lost." Neil notes. "A sliver of a fraction of what it used to be."

"In the past, we would lose a thousand worlds a day. You're not wrong." Unarin says slowly. "But the difference is, now the Volgrim, and any other species on the worlds being attacked, have no recourse at all. The Kolvaxians wipe out only one world at a time, but it no longer takes them ten to twenty cycles to fully exterminate all Sentient life. They can do it in less than one, and *nothing* we throw at these menaces can exterminate them. They have become too powerful."

Crow's expression becomes gloomy. Neil remains impassive.

"Hold on." Linda says, frowning as she looks at the map. "Is it just me, or does it seem as if the worlds infected all directly link to one another? As if the Kolvaxians are moving from one planet to the next in a line of some sort?"

Unarin raises his eyebrow. "An astute observation, Miss Adams. I see why Neil married you. Yes indeed, there *is* a pattern, and it shows that *whatever* method the Kolvaxians are using to world-hop, it seems to be moving toward the core planets."

"Towards Volgarius." Neil says.

"Not just Volgarius." Unarin correct him. "Numaria is in the path of a future attack, as are Tarus II, Maiura, and Pixiv. These are all key strongholds we do not wish to lose."

Linda points at one of the dots. "This one is the most recent attack, right? But it's dated over a month ago."

"And that is why I called you here today." Unarin says, once again nodding appreciatively at her. "The Plague has gone silent for twenty-nine of your Maiuran cycles. It has not infested any worlds, which implies to me it is about to planet-hop to a very important strategic stronghold. I do not know which one, but I fear it will cause a great disaster if we are not prepared."

Unarin abruptly slams the side of his fist on the wooden table, making the other three jump!

"Now is NOT the time for division or civil wars!" He exclaims, startling the others with his sudden change in demeanor. "The Plague is but the weakest footsoldiers of our future enemies. How can we stand with our chins held high during the Akashic War if we are too busy biting at each other's ankles like dumb, untrained mutts? I am pledging now that if any Kolvaxians attack one of your allied worlds, I shall dispatch my Executors to assist you in your defense. Since they no longer need to spread themselves out around the galaxy, my High Psions can mass their strength to tilt the fight in a more favorable direction."

"But didn't you say before that you weren't able to save any worlds from falling to the New Plague?" Crow asks pointedly.

"That's true. We're still attempting to create weapons that are effective against the Enhanced Plaguehosts." Unarin admits. "We *can* kill individual Kolvaxians, let there be no mistake, but when they clump together, there is little we can do to wipe them out en-masse. That is why I want the Demon Deities and Wordsmiths to join hands with my High Psions. If the Plague only attacks one world at a time, then together we might be able to stop their momentum!"

"I don't know about that." Linda says, crossing her arms. "What if the Plague is toying with us? What if its central hivemind is only *pretending* to be capable of attacking one world at a time? Perhaps if we mass all our forces together, it can instead lash out at ten thousand worlds and eradicate them in an instant. We'd be playing right into its hands!"

Once again, Linda makes an excellent observation that forces Unarin to cool his engines. He nods brusquely at her.

"I have considered that possibility. Naturally, if we are all working together, we will be at a disadvantage if such a situation occurs. But what does it matter if that is the case? If the Kolvaxians attack like before, we cannot stop them as easily than we did in the past. The only evidence I have to refute your question is that *the Plague no longer infests world cores*. Every Executor I've sent to investigate has said as much."

Linda and Neil look at one another. This sudden expectation of laying down their arms has caught them off-guard, but it has come at a truly opportune time. Nobody wants to

face this terrifying and unstoppable new Plague on their own. Certainly not the humans, who don't have a single Cosmic in their ranks.

"I..." Neil says slowly. "I... will accept your generous offer, Unarin. Humanity will pledge to fight alongside the Volgrim... and the *demons*... if the Plague should attack any of your worlds."

Unarin smiles perfunctorily at Neil. "Excellent. That is what I was hoping to hear. And what about you, Crow?"

Seeing Unarin's attention shift to the Demon Emperor so suddenly, Neil's expression turns slightly darker. He immediately realizes that while Unarin would like to secure the Wordsmith's assistance, it is truly the demons with their multitude of Middle Cosmics who have the firepower he needs to protect the Volgrim's worlds.

Compared to the lauded demons, the humans simply... don't measure up.

Neil sneers deep in his heart. *You want to underestimate humanity? Feel free to do so at your leisure, First Founder. You may find my humble species has a bigger bite than bark when the going gets tough.*

As for Crow, she maintains an aloof posture. "I will bring this matter up to the Deities. I promise to have an answer as soon as possible, and pray that we will be able to come to an... amicable resolution of interests."

"As do I!" Unarin says with a wide smile. "Now, before you all go on your way, why don't I introduce you to some long-lost Volgrim delicacies? You might as well have a taste of what our old culture has to offer, hmm?"

Neil and Linda laugh politely. "How could we refuse such graciousness, First Founder?"

Part 579: Queen's Gambit

Back inside the Hall of Heroes, Amelia and her three children walk through the labyrinthine layout of the special dimension quickly, bee-lining toward the Hall of Queens, where several Queen Network nodes have been constructed. As one of the most reliable ways to train and gain battle experience, the Queen Network has exploded in popularity over the last seven months, surpassing even the training areas inside the Cube as the most-desired place for human soldiers, monsters, and allied demons to put their lives on the line.

Blake's heartrate rises as they enter the chamber. Inside, they find twenty-five comfortable-looking chairs with orbs mounted on the arm-rests where their hands are meant to be placed. Amelia immediately sits in one of the chairs, while Levi and Mandy sit on her left, leaving one chair open on the right. Blake pauses for a moment, noticing a couple of Technopaths and even one of the ancient Heroes are already in the middle of virtual training sessions.

"Who's that old guy?" Blake asks, pointing at the spiritual apparition sitting in one of the chairs. Somehow, there is actually a Hero he's never met before.

"Don't be rude, young man." Amelia says sternly. "That's Jeremiah. He's a reclusive Hero, usually stays in his own special domain, a forest Hope created for him."

"Oh... I didn't know there were still Heroes I hadn't met." Blake says, sitting in the chair to his mother's right. "What are his powers?"

"I'll take you to meet him sometime." Amelia says. "Then you can ask him yourself. It's not nice to talk about people behind their backs."

"Sorry, mom." Blake says, looking away with a hint of guilt. He didn't mean to pry, but his curiosity got the best of him.

"Anyway." Amelia says. "Rest your arms on the sides, then place your palms on the control orbs. Lean back in the chair, and the Queen Network will automatically activate."

Blake glances at his brother and sister. Already, Levi and Mandy have closed their eyes and fallen into a trance, so they don't add anything to the conversation. Seeing how quickly they fell into a daze, Blake just does as his mother says, leans his head back, and...

* * *

[Welcome to the Queen Network. My designation is the Unified Management Interface. You may refer to me as UMI. Please enter your desired username before continuing.]

Blake blinks twice. He stares in momentary confusion at the black void before him, where a digital representation of a woman made of binary code stands idly, looking at him with an expressionless face.

[Huh?] Blake says, his mouth not moving, but his thought projecting into the void. [Where am I?]

[You have entered the initial setup screen for the Queen Network.] Umi says. [Please enter your username so we may continue.]

Blake stares at her for a few seconds. [What's a... 'username'...?]

[In the Queen Network, you may use your real identity or a pseudonym. Many users prefer to keep their exact identity unknown. Since you may interact with hostile users, for the sake of preventing bullying and other undesirable behavior, it is recommended that you operate under a pseudonym. Please enter your username.]

Blake scratches his head. He isn't a kid raised on the ancient Internet, so all of this is rather new to him.

[Um... how about, uh... Dark Master?]

[That username is taken.] Umi answers. [Please select another.]

[What? Taken? How is it taken?]

[You are not allowed to use the same username as another individual.] Umi impatiently explains. [Select a different username.]

[Uh, alright. What about, um, "Dark Master 1"?]

[That username is taken. Please select another.]

[What?! Then how about Dark Master 2??]

[That username is taken. Please select another.]

[Dark Master 3???

[That username is taken. Please select another.]

Blake grabs at his hair in a frenzy. [How many goddamned Dark Masters are there??]

[In total, seven point three trillion users have entered the Queen Network at one time or another.] Umi explains. [Many of them include demons talented in the manipulation of darkness. Thus, common usernames have already been taken.]

[Holy hell, you've got to be kidding me. Alright, then how about, uh, 'Lord of Darkness?']

[That username is taken. Please select another.]

[Shadow King?]

[That username is taken. Please select another.]

[OH COME ON!]

* * *

Seemingly half an hour later, Blake's bloodshot eyes finally pop open in surprise.

[That username is not taken. Welcome to the Queen Network, xXSexyDarkBoi42Xx. Would you like to create an avatar so as to keep your identity a secret?]

[An avatar? Uh, sure, I guess.]

[Entering avatar creation. Please select the ideal parameters for your appearance.]

Blake's eye twitches. A holographic person appears before him, mirroring his exact appearance. Beside it, a massive horde of sliders and dropdown menus also appear, allowing him to customize any part of his avatar's appearance.

He glances at the first one and his eyes nearly pop out of his head.

[What the heck?! I can change my gender??]

[Naturally. Many users opt to do so. Do not assume every male user you meet is a man in Realspace, and the same is true of female users.]

Just out of curiosity, naturally, Blake changes his gender to female, gawking slightly when his avatar's appearance changes to fit the new mold.

[Is that what I'd look like as a girl? Damn, I'd be kinda cute.]

He discards the idea immediately, though. Given he's about to hang out with his mother, brother, and sister, they'd tease him relentlessly if he made his avatar into a girl.

Blake spends more than an hour customizing his character's appearance. He can't help but bulk up xXSexyDarkBoi42Xx's muscles a bit, make him just a little taller and more handsome, maybe turn his jawline a little more pointed...

By the end, when he looks at his new character, he is able to smile with satisfaction. [Damn, I wish I actually looked like this. I'd be able to get a girlfriend, easy. Not that there's a lot of options inside the Hall of Heroes...]

[Avatar creation confirmed. Depositing player xXSexyDarkBoi42Xx into the Hall of Heroes lobby.]

Seconds later, Blake's vision changes. He materializes inside a large green outdoor park with mystical marbles of light floating in the air around him. Not far away, he spots several 'booths' with holographic UMI companions and floating words above the booths reading things like "1v1 Arena" and "Paired Duels" and "Free for All".

"Uh... Blake?" A voice says behind him when he appears.

Blake turns around to see a cute-looking bipedal dragon-girl with a long, pointy tail. Her soft eyelashes bat at him seductively, making his heart skip a beat.

"Who are you?" Blake asks, bewildered. "I thought this place was supposed to be anonymous?"

"I'm... your brother." The cute girl says. "Levi."

"The hell?!" Blake gawks, choking on his own virtual spit. "Why are you a chick??"

At that moment, a massive man covered in heavy armor walks over and slaps Blake's back, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"Oh come on, little bro. It's fun to change genders! It also helps obscure our identities!"

"Mandy?!" Blake asks, nearly fainting from shock. "You're a guy in here??"

His sister, now wearing the skin of an 8-foot-tall male Orc, looks terribly fearsome compared to her usual demeanor. She chuckles, those usually-wholesome sounds feeling a bit sinister when leaving her monstrous mouth. "Why not? You can look like anything you want. Later on, you can even change your appearance if you earn enough Platinum Queen Points. I like to change things up a lot."

But then, amidst the insanity, Amelia walks over, looking the same as she always has. Unlike Blake's siblings, Amelia has opted to maintain her exact appearance from the real world, which baffles Blake even further.

"Now now, there's no need to tease your little brother." Amelia says, scolding Levi and Mandy both. "He's not used to how things work in the virtual world."

"Why do you look the same, mom?" Blake asks.

She shrugs. "I didn't feel the need to alter my appearance. I have enough identity issues without compounding onto them."

"Oh."

Levi smirks. "Nice nick, *xXSexyDarkBoi42Xx*."

"Oh come on!" Blake protests. "Every good name was already taken! This was the best I could get! What about you, huh??"

Levi's smirk widens. He points above his head, and for the first time, Blake realizes the word above his brother's head is the username he chose.

"What?! *DRAGON??* Your username is *Dragon*?! Why do you get such a simple name?!"

"I joined the Queen Network way earlier than you." Levi says with a shrug. "My good luck, I suppose."

Blake snaps his gaze toward his sister. Her username is *Runemaster*.

And as for his mother? *Dark Queen*.

"GREAT! So I'm the only one stuck with a lousy username. This sucks."

"I'll pull some strings to get you a better username." Amelia offers. "I helped design the Queen Network, after all. I'm sure I can ensure my children get preferential treatment."

She pauses before chuckling to herself. "The way you made yourself look all macho... it reminds me of Jason Hiro, back in the day. He used to look like a skinny twig, but then he beefed himself up with his Wordsmithing. At the time I thought it felt disingenuous. Now I see it's pretty normal."

"Uncle Jason, huh?" Blake mutters to himself.

Amelia and her kids ultimately wander over to a nearby display terminal, one that shows all sorts of numbers and stats. Blake examines it for a minute, observing that it seems to show a list of usernames followed by a ranking from #1 all the way to the bottom of the heap. Additionally, the higher the rank, the more 'points' each user seems to have.

"There's a whole leaderboard system in play." Levi explains, batting her eyes cutely whenever she speaks as if to play up her female persona for shits and giggles. "See, the first-ranked user is Lord Henry, since he frequently joins the Queen Network to have a bit of fun. He has over fifty million points with an ELO of 4200."

"Uh. What's an 'ELO'?" Blake asks, worried the question might sound stupid.

"It's a general numerical ranking. People start with 800 points at default, and can go up or down based on who they match against." Mandy jumps in to explain. "I have an ELO of 3317, so I'm considered as being a high ranked user, but I'm nowhere near the top. If you win a fight against someone with a lower ELO than you, you'll be lucky to get one or two points added, but if you lose to a lower-ranked ELO user, then you'll lose a LOT of points. The same is true in the inverse, of course. Generally, most people try to battle against people with as close of an ELO to them as possible, though sometimes new users do join and start challenging high-rankers immediately."

Blake scratches his chin absentmindedly. "How is Lord Henry ranked number one? Aren't there Demon Emperors stronger than him? What about the Demon Deities or the High Psions?"

"Cosmics aren't allowed to participate in the Queen Network." Amelia explains. "Besides, their cosmic power would probably corrupt and ruin the network anyway. It's better if they keep their distance. Not that they'd want to join anyway; there's no challenge for them in fighting a bunch of weak little mortals."

"If they did join though," Levi jumps in, "there are different types of Leaderboards. Lord Henry is only ranked #1 in the singles 1v1 leaderboard. There are also 2v2s, Group Battles, Skirmishes, Battle Sims, and all kinds of other competitive and non-competitive simulation zones. Mom has worked hard to add new and exciting ways of letting people train their abilities. Perhaps we might someday add a Cosmic Battleground or something."

Amelia smirks. "Yeah. Maybe someday. You can add it yourself!"

A few minutes pass. Amelia glances at Blake a few times, as if to assess his strengths. Having trained all of her children in how to control their abilities, she's fairly confident she knows what the broad scope of their abilities are.

"Levi, you and Blake can train in a 1v1 battle to start. Mandy and I will watch from the spectator stands."

"Aw, but MOM!" Mandy protests, stomping her massive foot against the ground. "I wanted to push Blake around!"

"I know you did, but Blake is inexperienced." Amelia chides. "Levi is a better trainer. He'll take it easy on his little brother. *Right*, Levi?"

Levi giggles in a weirdly cute way and covers his mouth. "Oh, mommy, of course I will! You know me!"

"Stop acting cute. No traumatizing your brother." Amelia warns.

"Yeah, yeah, fine." Levi concedes, rolling his eyes.

Blake's right eye continuously twitches. Seeing his brother acting like a cute teenage girl has his brain all sorts of fucked up. He always believed Levi was a big, macho dude, but seeing this side of him has Blake questioning everything he thought he knew.

Moments later, Blake and Levi teleport into a dirt arena with overbearing heat pounding down on them, a brilliant sun in the sky, and tall rock pillars planted in the ground, many of them angled diagonally to various degrees. These towering pillars appear to have been naturally formed over the ages by erosion. Their bodies project huge shadows to shelter users from the heat.

Blake looks up at the sky, toward the scorching sun. "Wow, this simulation is realistic as hell. I'd never have guessed I wasn't really in a desert if I didn't remember entering the Queen Network."

"It's a bit of an unfair battlefield." Levi says, wrinkling his nose. "You're a shadow-master, right? Not many shadows around here. If I stay in the light, you won't be able to hurt me!"

Blake grimaces. "Don't take me for a weakling! I've trained with Solomon lots of times!"

Before Levi can retort, Blake abruptly disappears. He pops out of a nearby shadow behind the high point of a pillar, then pounces down at his brother from behind,

conjuring a wispy shadow-knife that becomes less distinct when the sunlight hits it.

Slash!

Blake swipes at his brother, but Levi casually steps to the side and chortles.

"Nice try, dummy. You're not tricking me that easily. I know all your tricks."

THUMP!

Levi's fist drives into Blake's stomach, sending him flying away. Blake crashes into the dirt and skids twenty feet, tearing his skin to bits and making him roll around uncontrollably.

"Ugh! Guh... guhuk..."

He coughs out blood, feeling a sense of terror in his heart. Levi's strength is insane! It felt to Blake as if his brother hit him with a sledgehammer!

"Hey! LEVI! You little shit! I TOLD YOU to go EASY on Blake!" Amelia roars from a hovering spectator platform in the air. "Don't MAKE ME come down there, young man!"

Levi's smile instantly disappears. He looks up, then swallows heavily. "S-sorry, mother. I thought I pulled my punch-"

"I have eyes! Don't even TRY to wiggle out of this one. One more hit like that and I'll shove you back up where you came from!"

"Y-yes, mother." Levi says, his expression turning a little glum. He hurries over to Blake to help him up. "Hey, hey are you okay, little bro?"

Blake coughs painfully. The simulated pain in his stomach feels so real he wishes he could die. "I'm fuh-fine, fine..."

He stumbles to his feet, feeling weaker than he ever has before. Raised from birth to become a Hero like his father and siblings, Blake has always considered himself a powerhouse. Yet it is now that he realizes his physical capabilities really aren't that much better than a baseline human. If his brother had used his full draconic strength, he might have been pounded into meat paste.

"You can't just jump at me like that." Levi explains. "In a real battle, I'd have swooped in and finished you off. Use your head, bro. Your shadows are what you should fight with, not your flimsy little body."

Levi pauses.

"Maybe we should have you wear that new Spectre suit you got for your birthday."

"Nope!" Amelia says from above, her keen ears picking up on the conversation. "You just play defense, Levi. No T-REX shenanigans for now. Let your little brother see if he can knock you on your butt."

"Yes, mother." Levi says meekly, not daring to argue with her.

Once again, Levi and Blake take up battle stances. Blake starts teleporting around, firing shadow knives, shadow nets, and other items at his brother from afar. Each time, Levi handily breaks them, dodges them, or tanks the hit without feeling a thing.

Minutes pass. Blake becomes more and more frustrated as his paltry dark abilities fail to do anything to his brother's formidable body.

"This is so unfair!" Blake complains. "There's too much light in this arena! I can't use my shadows when they're this weakened!"

"No complaining." Mandy says from her spectator platform, next to Amelia's. Her deep masculine voice booms across the arena. "In the future, you'll fight enemies under even more unfair conditions than this. You have to adapt to the situation!"

Blake grimaces. How can he adapt? He can barely even make his brother flinch. The most his wimpy little shadow-attacks ever seem to amount to is a splash of water against the dragon's face.

Over and over, Blake tries to knock his brother down, or even make him stumble a bit. He keeps failing, and his despair reaches its apex.

"Goddammit Levi!" Blake finally wails, dropping to his knees in frustration. "Why are you so strong? Why did you get all the good powers?! My abilities SUCK! I can't do anything when there's light around, and who the hell wants to fight a battle in the darkness? I'm USELESS!"

Amelia frowns, watching from above. "Blake, don't say that. Shadow powers and darkness aren't 'useless.' They once happened to be my core power-set. You're just not using them correctly."

"Then HOW do I do better with them?!" Blake asks, looking up to his mother with a glimmer of hopefulness in his eyes.

"I... don't know. The 'concept' of your abilities is different from how mine used to work." Amelia says hesitantly. "Mine were a bit... punchier. My shadows weren't

weakened much by light."

"Well mine ARE!" Blake howls again, feeling even more outraged. "This is so unfair. SO unfair!"

"Come on, Blake." Levi says, his girly and cutesy voice sounding aggravating to his brother's twitching ears. "Don't be like that. You just need to grow a bit more. My powers were a lot weaker when I was sixteen. Yours will surely improve over time!"

"That doesn't help me NOW!" Blake roars jumping to his feet. "All I need to do is knock you off your feet! That's all! I just need a push! I need the light to stop weakening me!"

Blake pauses.

He glances up at the scorching sun. Its omnipresent heat makes him feel miserable, hot, and sweaty. But at the same time, it is a source of seemingly limitless energy. Even if the star itself is fake, its conceptualization still exists in the simulation.

For several seconds, he remains silent.

Why did I have to get stuck with crappy darkness magic? Blake rages inside his heart. I could have had any power, but for some reason, I had to become a so-called 'master of shadows.' Some master I am! I'm no stronger than a Demon Lord! If only there was another way... a way to make my shadows... stronger...

Blake's heart skips a beat.

He looks up at the sun, and somehow, the temperature seems to cool around him by a few degrees.

The sunlight warms his body.

It energizes him.

His breathing quickens as he slowly turns to look at his gloating brother. Despite Levi's look of 'sadness' at Blake's despair, it becomes obvious to Blake at a glance that his older brother is actually quite pleased at being able to stand strong. He seems to enjoy projecting his strength, even if he can't show it in front of Amelia.

You're looking down on me. Blake thinks, as his right eye starts to twitch. *But you won't look so damn smug if I knock you... flat... on your ass!*

The sunlight empowers Blake. His eyes flicker with a golden color, then he abruptly takes a heavy step toward Levi, stomps his foot down, and thrusts his hands forward, aiming both his palms at Levi.

WHOOMPH!

A blast of light fires out of Blake's hands, crosses the thirty-foot distance to Levi instantly, and slams into his chest.

Thump!

Levi flies backward and crashes onto his back, a dumbstruck look on his face.

"What?" Mandy cries.

"WHAT?!" Amelia exclaims, even louder. "Was that... light magic?!"

Blake stands, frozen. He stares with a look of delight at his brother's girly figure laying in the dirt. It takes three seconds before Levi picks himself up and looks at Blake, astonished. Blake's unexpected attack didn't hurt him at all, but it definitely startled him.

"Hey... Blake..." Levi says slowly. "You, what did you, I mean... how?"

"I don't know!" Blake shouts. "I just- I felt like my shadows were limiting me, so I reached into myself and... boom! I shot a light-blast! It was way stronger than my shadow-attacks too!"

Amelia and Mandy drop down out of the sky. They land beside Blake and evaluate him carefully.

"Light magic." Amelia says, having composed herself. "This... this is a strange development, Blake."

"I know, right?" Blake exclaims, grinning giddily. "Have you ever heard of someone wielding light and dark magic at the same time, mom?"

She nods seriously. "I have. Archangel Uriel could do it, after possessing the body of Barbatos. But... your new ability made me think of something else."

She glances at all three of her children, one by one.

"Levi. When you were born, your dad and I agreed to name you after my best friend, the last living dragon, Leviathan. You went on to gain draconian traits as you aged, making you resemble him in ways I never expected."

"Mandy. We named you after Hope and Jason's foster mother, Amanda. Your runecrafting powers didn't seem to come from anywhere in particular, but they did appear to form in response to your interactions with fairies over the years."

"And Blake. We named you after my companion later in life, Blaarjiim. He was an orb which granted me the power of darkness. It did not escape my notice that you, likewise, gained shadow-powers."

She pauses.

"But Blaarjiim had a brother. A companion orb named Hoarhiim. He was an orb that possessed the power of light. The two of them were inextricably linked. When Blaarjiim died, Hoarhiim followed not long after."

She crosses her arms and nods meaningfully at each of her children.

"Levi and Blake, for some reason, have inherited powers from the people we named them after. Levi gained the powers of a dragon, while Blake gained the powers of darkness, and now light as well. As for Mandy, her powers don't seem to have had any specific 'idea' behind them."

"What are you saying, mom?" Blake asks. "Is this good or bad?"

"It's... uncharted territory." Amelia says slowly. "You see, not long after you were born, Hope and I had a long talk with Solomon. The Knowledge-Seeker informed us of a hypothesis he was pursuing, and one that now seems to make sense, especially given the new ability you've just demonstrated."

She continues. "Solomon believes that all three of you are Trueborn Heroes. But this shouldn't be possible, because the only way to become a Trueborn Hero is by the previous Trueborn Hero *dying*, which would cause the Heroic Aura to pass on to another worthy human."

Levi, Mandy, and Blake all nod in unison. They've heard the explanation of the Heroic Aura many times from many different Heroes over the years.

"So how can we all be Trueborn, then?" Levi asks. "And what does that have to do with Blake's new control over light?"

"Well," Amelia answers, "Solomon's theory has several parts. He believes that with you, Hope and I had a strong 'conceptualization' in mind when we named you. Leviathan

was my closest companion for millennia. I loved him dearly. So by naming you after him, I 'imagined' the traits of a dragon within you."

"Then, for Mandy, we didn't have any particular traits in mind when we named her. We only intended to honor Hope's foster mother. So, Mandy developed unique powers on her own."

"Then there's me." Blake says, looking at his mother with interest.

"Yes, you." Amelia affirms. "You were named after a shadow-orb, and gained shadow powers. But now you've also obtained light powers. Is that because Blaarjiim and Hoarhiim had linked powers that have now transposed themselves into you, or is it because you conceptualized a new usage of your powers? What exactly caused you to tap into the opposite of your existing shadow magic?"

Her question gives Blake pause. He remains silent for a few moments, touching his lip and looking down as he falls into thought.

"I'm not sure exactly. I just thought it was annoying that my shadows wouldn't work in the light, and that it would be so much better if I could make use of the light for my own purposes."

Mandy immediately chimes in. "That makes sense."

"It does?" Blake asks.

"Of course." Mandy replies, adopting a know-it-all attitude as she smugly smirks with her orcish face. "After all, what is darkness but the absence of light? Maybe you've never actually been a darkness manipulator. Maybe you're a light manipulator! Or maybe you've always been both, but mom just steered you toward a more limited path unintentionally."

"I'm sorry if I did." Amelia says, bowing her head contritely. "I'm just glad you've become stronger, sweetheart."

She pauses before continuing.

"Solomon hypothesized that human children who are born without the Flaw and later gain powers might be 'steered' toward a specific set of powers through Conceptualization. I wasn't sure if his words had any merit before, but we seem to have hit the bullseye two out of three times with you and Levi. Only Mandy differs, but it also seems to prove the rule."

Levi tilts his head. "Then... what about Daisy?"

"Jason's daughter?" Amelia asks, taken aback. "We... never really got to see what she was capable of. She was *taken* from us too soon. But her powers seemed quite formidable. They included healing on par with Belial, telekinesis, and even summoning Titans."

"She wasn't named after anyone?" Levi asks.

"No. Neither was Timothy." Amelia says, before pausing to add, "I wonder if he'll develop powers next."

"I bet he will. But he's still super young." Mandy says. "Nobody can tell what abilities he'll get in due time. The problem is, if he stays in Realspace, we'll all be hundreds of years old before he turns sixteen. Who knows what the galaxy's situation will be like by that point?"

"I'm not sure why Phoebe is so wary of entering hypertime." Amelia mutters. "She'd make a lot more progress inside of it."

"Maybe Jason hasn't solved all the side effects?" Levi suggests. "She probably didn't want to go inside while she was pregnant. Or maybe she's worried it will affect Timothy negatively."

"Well, we turned out fine." Mandy says with a shrug. "We'll just have to see if we can convince Aunt Phoebe to take Timothy inside later."

* * *

The group continues to test Blake's new power, but unfortunately, all he seems to be able to do is make his eyes glow and fire off a bolt of light energy when he absorbs the light around himself. The concussive force is surprisingly strong, but unfortunately, it lacks penetrating and destructive power.

By the end of the training session, Blake feels a little better, but also a little worse.

"I gained a new ability, or at least a new understanding of my existing powers... but my 'light manipulation' sucks. What good is a shitty 'Light Punch'?"

"I can't help you with this aspect of your powers." Amelia says. "But we can talk to your dad later. I think King Arthur might be able to help you, since he was one of the most powerful Light Masters of all time. Maybe your father can lend you Excalibur."

Blake jumps in fright. "No, mom! I can't ask dad that! There's no way I'm worthy to wield Arthur's blade! It's too dangerous."

"You're advising caution?" Amelia scoffs. "And here I thought boys were supposed to be headstrong and reckless. Don't worry, I'll make sure everything is in order first. Let's head home and eat some food before we look for your dad."

Amelia leads her kids over to the exit point, but Blake pauses before they leave. "Wait, what about me fighting with Mandy? I've never seen her magic in action before!"

"You can do that later." Amelia says, waving her hand flippantly.

"We can." Mandy says with a nod. "Come on, Blake. I'm not much of a fighter, anyway. I'd only be embarrassing myself."

"Aww, man." Blake grumbles, falling into step behind the others.

As the family leaves the Queen Network, they pass by a familiar old man they saw earlier. The Mountain Hermit, Jeremiah, stands off to the side, looking at the scoreboard. He glances at Levi, mutters something under his breath, then saunters off, leaving Amelia and her kids scratching their heads.

"What's that about?" Blake asks.

Levi's expression changes. He quickly runs over to the scoreboard and scowls. "Bastard! He beat my Target Breaking record again! That slippery old fart always manages to squeeze out more points when I have my back turned!"

Mandy snorts. "Oh, you poor baby."

Part 580: Daughter's Defiance

"The ancient angels teach us that love and acceptance are core to spreading the faith of the Divine across human civilization." A beautiful black-haired woman says, as she stands before a church filled with people listening intently to her words.

Most of the seats, save a few scattered spots at random, have been filled with men, women and children, all of whom focus their full attention on her speech.

"I posit now, that in humanity's period of growth, love and acceptance should come second to the power of belief." The woman says, as she gestures to a gigantic painting behind her, a painting of a female angel with a halo above her head. Few in the audience recognize the painting, but it depicts the angel known as Cassiel, rescued months earlier by the Wordsmith.

"Our goddess, Lady Cassiel, is no ordinary angel. She is the last of her people." The speaker continues. "She has survived for ages, but her power is weak. Long ago, she was a formidable existence. She was a terror to the demons, capable of killing even the mightiest of Emperors! If you put your faith in her, pray to her, and spread the word of her love, Cassiel will grow more and more powerful, someday even stepping out of the darkness into the light. She will become a beacon for all of us, leading humanity to a glorious future, safe from the machinations of our enemies!"

The woman pauses for half a breath.

"Times are different. Long ago, demons were humanity's blood enemy. These days, a noteworthy portion of our former enemies have become our friends and companions. But make no mistake. The same Emperors who once roamed Earth still live on various worlds, having become more powerful than any of you can possibly imagine. A day may yet come when we require Cassiel's power to save us. But she cannot save those who are unwilling to save themselves! By placing your belief in our Lady, by praying to her daily, you can strengthen her and make her capable of becoming our bulwark!"

The woman continues speaking at length, extolling the virtues of her Lady, as well as the feats Cassiel once accomplished when she walked Old Earth.

"Trained by Archangel Raphael, she mastered her angelic powers to a degree no other Lazarite could match! Unlike those pompous 'true' angels, Cassiel is a former human, like

our brave Respected, a woman who gained divine power after death. It is because she is a former human that we can trust her to hold humanity's best interests in high regard. She needs us as much as we need her! I hope that someday all of you faithful ones will be able to meet her in person!"

Unbeknownst to the audience, an ordinary-looking brown-haired woman sits silently, fixated on her companion who is speaking to the audience. Blending in with the other humans, nobody notices the Heaven's Shroud locket concealed beneath her clothes, allowing her to maintain her false appearance.

Cassiel, currently in her persona of 'Cammy', watches as her friend Soleil, posing as 'Serra,' offers persuasive words to the audience listening with rapt attention.

Twenty minutes later, Soleil asks the audience to close their eyes and focus their minds, offering a hearted prayer to Cassiel as a small flow of spiritual energy travels from their bodies to the painting above, which then enters Cassiel's soul through a mystical link unimaginable to science.

"Everyone, thank you for coming today." Soleil says warmly. "Before you leave, please take some literature packets from the tables beside the entrance, as well as a bag of cookies. I offer my sincerest gratitude to the volunteers who helped me bake them fresh this morning."

The people in the audience rouse themselves, stand up, and shuffle around as some of them talk to the people closest, while others make their way toward the cookies and literature near the exit doors.

Meanwhile, Cassiel and Soleil stealthily meet up with one another, Cassiel blushing as she finds it hard to meet her closest friend's gaze.

"It's... still so embarrassing, even after half a year." Cassiel mutters. "All those words you say, claiming I can save humanity. I don't believe any of it."

"I speak from the heart." Soleil says. "You're stronger than you know. Just because you've lost confidence in yourself doesn't mean I have."

Cassiel shuffles her feet, looking shyly at the men and woman a short distance away. She can make out some of their conversations, where they talk about her, unaware the idol of their affection stands a mere stone's throw away.

"You know." Soleil says, interrupting Cassiel's thoughts. "It would make a big impression on everyone if you showed up in person. Lots of people have heard rumors that an angel saved the lives of several children earlier this year. If you gave a speech, we could sextuple the spread of Cassiel's Children overnight!"

Cassiel grimaces. "I didn't save anyone. Gressil... still killed them."

"That wasn't your fault." Soleil says gently. "You can't blame yourself."

"I can, and I will." Cassiel mutters stubbornly. "If only I'd done more, those kids would still be alive."

Soleil shakes her head. "Well, it's probably best we don't reveal you anyway. I wouldn't want one of those Demon Deities turning their attention toward us to snuff out your light before you're strong enough to protect yourself. Even I'm no use against a Cosmic."

* * *

Some time afterward, the church clears out and the people mostly all leave. However, one dark-skinned woman remains behind, seated in the pews all by herself. Given the total emptiness of the seats around her, Soleil and Cassiel easily notice her sitting by her lonesome. The woman sits with her head bowed and her eyes closed, seemingly deep in prayer.

Cassiel blinks. The woman's bright pink hair pops out, drawing anyone's eyes who might gaze her way.

"Excuse me." Cassiel says timidly, walking a few steps toward her. "Lily? Are you doing alright?"

Lily Brown, daughter of Benjamin Brown, raises her eyes to look at Cassiel. She smiles cutely.

"I'm doing FINE. I just want to be *extra* sure I'm giving you as much faith energy as I can."

Having seen Cassiel transform from human to angel months earlier, when Cassiel saved the group of young girls, Lily is well aware of her true identity. In recent months, she has tried coming to the church as often as possible, especially now that her father has departed Tarus II.

"I appreciate the thought." Cassiel says. "Me and Soleil were thinking about entering the Queen Network after service today. Want to join us again?"

"I'd love to!" Lily says, jumping to her feet. "I always love fighting other people on there."

"I... also enjoy it." Cassiel says, sighing softly. "In cyberspace, I don't have any limitations."

Cassiel, Soleil, and Lily all walk into the back of the church, where a specialized room has been set up with five connection nodes to the Queen Network. Cassiel and Lily each take a seat, but Soleil doesn't join them. She instead stands guard beside Cassiel, keeping a watchful eye for Gressil. He hasn't approached Cassiel in seven months, but Soleil always assumes he could be lurking nearby. She never stops keeping her guard up.

Cassiel joins the Queen Network. She materializes inside the church's lobby alongside Lily, who maintains the same appearance she has in reality. However, Cassiel assumes the appearance of a beautiful white-haired Frenchwoman, one with a helmet covering her head, armor protecting her body, and angelic wings attached to her back.

Her username, if seen by any Emperor in the know, would not necessarily draw attention.

Archangel of Retribution.

Donning the falsified identity of Uriel, Cassiel always takes care to pretend she is the Archangel herself, a fact which has caused many Emperors who joined the Queen Network and went up against her to immediately resign. If she were to act as her true self, she might cause the demons who encounter her in the virtual world to pay attention, realizing an important historical warrior has somehow survived to the modern day.

That would not be good. There are only a few places such an angel could be hiding, and it wouldn't take long for them to sniff her out.

As for Lily Brown, she has a unique username of her own. *Smashing Flower*.

While she is nowhere near the top of the power rankings, she is more than capable of holding her own in the Mortal tier. When facing the average Demon Lord, and sometimes even the weaker Demon Barons, she can defeat them in 1v1 combat.

"I'm really excited!" Lily chirps. "I'm hoping to break past 1400 ELO today. How about you?"

Cassiel blinks. "I don't pay much attention to that. Sorry."

"You must be highly ranked though, right?" Lily asks. "Lemme check."

She walks over to a nearby terminal and looks Cassiel's username up. What she finds causes her nose to crinkle.

"Oh, come on! *This information is restricted?! What's up with that?*"

"Miss Amelia hid the information at my request." Cassiel explains. "The less information other users know about me, the better."

"Oh. I suppose that's fine then." Lily says, somewhat unconvinced.

"Yes. But I don't like having to hide." Cassiel says while softly massaging her left arm. She looks away, sadness hidden beneath her eyes. "I used to be *someone*. Now I'm a nobody. I fear I don't have what it takes anymore to step back up to my duties."

"Your duties?" Lily asks.

"Protecting people. Fighting for justice." Cassiel says numbly. "It used to mean everything to me. Now I don't know if it means *anything*."

She shakes her head. Then she turns away, changing the subject to focus on her surroundings.

"I'm going to fight." Cassiel says.

"Okay. I'll watch from the stands for now." Lily says, smiling cheerfully. "I can always fight someone later. Good luck out there. I'll be cheering you on!"

Cassiel activates the 1v1 Battle option, causing her body to dissipate into particles of light and reappear inside a virtual arena. At the same time, Lily appears in the spectators stands, surprised when she finds several hundred demons already in place to watch the fight.

"Ohh!" One of the demons says. "Look! The Boss is gonna fight... the heck! Is that an angel?"

"It's Archangel Uriel!" Another demon exclaims. "I didn't know she was in the 'Queenie' too?"

"I heard she's been popping up once in a while." A third demon says. "How's the Boss gonna handle this, I wonder?"

"She's untouchable. Don't you even worry!"

* * *

Cassiel finds herself standing atop a large asteroid under nearly pitch-black fighting conditions. The light of billions of distant stars faintly illuminates the rock around her, but the lighting conditions are so poor that if it weren't for her divine constitution, she'd be practically blind.

The asteroid's gray dust crunches beneath her feet. Cassiel looks ahead, where she sees a Demon Emperor standing in the distance, the demon's feathered body faintly glowing blue as a result of her infernal energy.

"Oh?" The demon says, her voice dark. "Archangel Uriel? I heard you defeated Emperor Zagan recently. Don't you think it's beneath you to participate in these battles among mere mortals?"

Cassiel says nothing. She merely looks at the bird-like figure through the eye-slits in her helmet.

Emperor Crow. One of the most physically powerful demons of all time, even competing with Bael when he was a Duke.

Cassiel knows all about Crow.

After all... The Daughter of Heaven killed *Emperor Red Raven* 100,000 years ago.

After a moment of silence, Cassiel holds out her right and left hands. A tower shield materializes in her left hand, while a spear pops into existence within her right.

She slams the bottom of the shield against the ground and takes up a defensive stance, eyeing her opponent coldly.

"Right to the action?" Crow snorts. "Even for you, Uriel, this is awfully rude. Don't you want to fire off a few barbs before we do battle?"

Cassiel deliberately deepens her inflection. She infuses mana into her vocal organs, altering them as she's practiced to perfectly mimic Uriel's voice.

"Shut up and fight."

Crow's taunting smile vanishes. She sneers at her opponent's arrogant words.

"Fine. Since it's you, I won't be able to hold back. I should warn you now... even I'm not sure how strong I've become in recent years. HUH!!"

She suddenly launches forward, traveling the fifty-meter distance instantly. She sweeps her leg out and smashes it against Cassiel's light shield, bashing it against her

opponent's upper body and sending the angel hurtling away!

But in a single second, Cassiel flaps her wings, spins her body, and converts the reverse-momentum into an agile backspin. She tilts her wings and launches up into the sky, using her magic to create a sort of 'slide' in front of herself. She bends her body, twists around, and flies back at Crow while holding the shield up.

BOOM!!

Cassiel crashes into the Emperor of Sacrifice from above, smashing her into the dirt. She uses the full weight of her body, the speed of being launched away, and the durability of her shield to turn herself into a battering ram.

Crow gets knocked fifty feet into the Asteroid's hard surface, groaning as she takes the full impact.

"Ugh! Damn!"

Still, because of how hard her feathers are, along with her body's innate durability, Crow doesn't suffer much of an injury. She swings her arm toward the top of the crater, firing iron feathers as if they were ballistic missiles.

Cassiel raises her shield, and Crow's feathers crash into it with thunderous force, each strike blasting her backward five steps at a time.

"Grrrgh!"

Cassiel growls under her breath. One of the feathers strikes her enchanted helmet, but it luckily glances off and doesn't cause a severe injury. By the time she's recovered from Crow's second attack, the Demon Emperor has already jumped out of the pit and continued to press her advantage.

* * *

Minutes pass.

Crow and Cassiel launch attacks that run the gamut from probing strikes to feints to all-out full-power blasts.

In one second, Cassiel conjures a greathammer made of light. She smashes it against her opponent and leaves Crow reeling.

In the next second, Crow rakes at Cassiel's chest with her talons, ripping through the metal and tearing huge gashes across her sternum.

As the battle progresses, Crow looks at her opponent more warily than before.

Something isn't right. She thinks. Uriel has only used light magic this whole time. She hasn't tapped into her flames, water, air, or even Barbatos's magnetism. Perhaps she cannot wield the latter inside the Queenie, but why would she neglect the former?

Crow suffers an especially violent blow to her head, leaving her reeling. She jumps backward and nearly trips from dizziness, but quickly shakes the pain off to glare daggers at her opponent.

"How dare you!" Crow shouts. "You think you have the right to look down on me?! Filthy pigeon! Bring out your entire arsenal! I know you're holding back!"

Cassiel remains emotionless. **"I use only the powers required. Thou art not worthy of the rest."**

"The HELL I'm not!" Crow roars, enraged at this obvious attempt at humiliation.

How dare Uriel look down on her! How dare she hold back, implying Crow isn't worthy of her full power.

I might not be a lauded Cosmic, but I still stand at the apex of the Mortal realm! I'll show you what it means to underestimate me!

At the same time, Cassiel breathes heavier than at the start of the fight. Sometimes her breaths even come in ragged gasps.

She isn't holding back. Crow is an extremely strong adversary, and just to cause her opponent any amount of long-term damage, Cassiel has to use 100% of her attack power with every blow, leaving herself exhausted.

I used to be better than this. Cassiel thinks. My skills have grown rusty. I've forgotten to use the weapon that makes Lazarites have potential far beyond what the Archangels intended.

She frowns. *But if I do that... it might reveal my identity.*

Suddenly, Crow launches toward Cassiel. Her eyes glow redder than before as she enters a berserk state, causing her muscles to bulge and speed to double.

I... I can't hold back! Cassiel thinks. I'm tired of being afraid! I'm tired of living in fear!

Just as Crow is about to land a punishing blow on her enemy, Cassiel takes a step backward, holds up her palm, and conjures a pair of circular disks of light in front of and behind herself.

Foop!

Crow passes through the disks, revealing them to be portals. She travels right past Cassiel, whiffing her punch across the open air while invisible question marks pop up above her head.

Huh? Crow thinks, turning around to look at her opponent.

What she sees next completely bewilders her.

Cassiel abruptly changes shape. A massive set of light armor phases out of the ground, wraps around herself, and lifts her into the air. Crow turns around and gawks as, within the space of just three seconds, Cassiel becomes engulfed in a towering metallic-looking mass of robotic parts, allowing her to stand over twenty feet tall.

Sporting a high powered Gauss Cannon on her right arm and a flamethrower on her left, Cassiel takes the form of a large bipedal robot, a sight so absurd that it nearly makes the eyes pop out of all the demonic audience members.

"What the hell?!" One of the demons exclaims. "Ain't that one of those human machines?"

"I saw one kinda like it during Stormbringer!" Another demon says. "Well, not me, but one of my buddies among the Warpers did."

"That's so cool!" Lily squeaks, stars dancing in her eyes. "I didn't know Cass- I mean, Uriel could do that!"

Crow's stomach sinks. Seeing this massive machine isn't exactly frightening to her. After all, it is merely a projection of light energy, and will crumple apart if struck with a heavy enough blow.

The problem is that the machine represents something she never would have thought of if she hadn't seen it in person.

"Who the hell are you?!" Crow snarls. "You deceiver! You're not Uriel! You're an imposter!"

"That isn't important." Cassiel says, her voice strangely calm. "What is important is that I win."

Cassiel's mechanized Warframe body moves fast, far faster than it should have any right to. Since its frame is made out of weightless particles of light that are held together by Cassiel's mental power, it can move the same speed as her human-sized body.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

The Archangel Frame stomps toward Crow at a frightening speed. Crow presses her beak together and chitters like an angry bird, enraged at this deception.

"If you won't tell me who you are willingly, I'll FORCE it out of you!"

"Nobody will *ever* force me to do anything against my will again." Cassiel vows, taking aim with the flamethrower on her right arm.

Fwoosh!

Three thousand degree flames belch forth, blasting Crow and pushing her backward. She claps her wings together, sending a shockwave out to blow away Cassiel's fire, but the flames continue to spew out of her left arm-cannon unerringly and quickly press back against Crow's feathers.

This angel isn't Uriel. Crow thinks quickly. That means she shouldn't have access to Uriel's multitude of abilities, yet she is somehow able to conjure flames? How is that even possible?!

Cassiel stomps her foot down, but Crow jumps to the side, causing the robotic leg to stomp the asteroid and send shards of rock out in every direction from the impact zone. Cassiel whirls her primary cannon around and fires a heavy Gauss cannon at Crow, blasting the Demon Emperor of Sacrifice with energized ballistic rounds traveling at near-light speeds.

CRACK!!!

The shots blast apart the position where Crow is standing, slamming her into the asteroid and causing a massive chunk of it to break apart and fly off into the void, along with Crow herself.

All the while, the spectator stands gawk and gasp, horrified by the amount of power the false Archangel is demonstrating.

"If she's not Uriel, then who the hell is she? Another Archangel?"

"I heard Camael reappeared recently. Maybe it's her!"

"It can't be any ordinary angel. She must be an Archangel! But why is she trying to hide her identity?"

"She's training here to hone her power and learn our secrets. She's one wiley pigeon bitch!"

All the while, droplets of virtual sweat cling to Lily's back. She realizes the demons here are beginning to draw closer and closer to the truth of Cassiel's identity, but Lily never bothered to hide her face. Lily's bright pink hair stands out, and her identity is well-known to many of the higher demons.

If Lily says anything, she'll only draw more attention to herself. Thus, she keeps quiet, slinking down in her chair in a half-assed attempt to blend in.

Meanwhile, the battle between Cassiel and Crow rages harder and harder. With her mechanized Warframe, Cassiel gains a tremendous advantage in the virtual space she'd never possess in the real world. Crow becomes spooked as she witnesses the power of this hidden 'Archangel', and even she begins to believe this must be Camael in disguise.

The powers Cassiel is displaying are a little weird, especially the way she seems to conjure humanlike machinery, but Camael was a crafter of artifacts. Surely, she could build excellent copies of whatever the humans make.

"You deceiver!" Crow roars, lunging at the Warframe to try and smash it to pieces. "I'll kill you!"

But before she can land her attack, Cassiel summons a gigantic greatsword in both of the Warframe's hands, then swings it down at Crow with all her strength.

CRACK!!

Crow's durable body takes the slash without splitting in half, but the sheer power behind Cassiel's attack slams Crow into the asteroid for the last time, breaking half the bones in her body and reducing her internal organs to mush.

An instant later, everything concludes with the virtualized voice of Umi speaking to the combatants and audience to announce the verdict.

[Combatant 'Archangel of Retribution' has won. ELO rating increased by 140 points. Ranking adjusted from 145th place to 137th place.]

Crow lays on the ground, her body wracked with virtual agony. She looks up at the menacing machine towering over her with eyes full of hatred.

"Cam...ael...you...evil..."

Cassiel, likewise, looks at her enemy's broken body. She says nothing, turns around, and disappears from the arena, leaving Crow with her audience of demon fans.

At the same time, Lily surreptitiously disappears from the crowd, breathing a sigh of relief that the self-absorbed demons didn't seem to notice her.

She and Cassiel reappear in the Church Lobby, and Lily starts hopping up and down excitedly. "Wow, Cassiel! That was amazing! Awe-inspiring! I didn't know you were so strong! Have you always been able to do that?"

Cassiel looks at her human friend quietly for a moment before answering.

"Do what?"

"The- the THING!" Lily squeaks. "You made like a HUGE robot! I thought angels didn't understand technology!"

"I'm not a pure angel." Cassiel says, her voice soft. "I am a Lazarite. A fallen human revived in an angel's body. My powers and abilities are the same as every other Lazarite who once lived."

"Ohh, a Lazarite." Lily nods. "I think you mentioned that before. That's why you have a halo over your head, right?"

Cassiel nods.

"Lazarites have only one ability. We can manifest our imaginations into reality as physical constructs made of light."

She continues. "In the ancient past, Lazarites used their imaginations to conjure simple weapons, shields, and armor. They never manifested items that were especially complex because the Archangels led them to believe this was impossible."

Cassiel lowers her eyes. She suddenly appears sad in a profound way, even a little despondent.

"I was different. Because of my life's circumstances, I believed I could do more with my abilities. I began to experiment. Those experiments were successful. And that is when the Archangels took notice."

Lily nods, remaining silent while her friend talks.

"Raphael took me under his wing. He trained me to become the mightiest Lazarite. He called me the Daughter of Heaven, Heaven's Chosen, and the Child of Light. All titles designed to give me a fearsome image. But he... he made me promise not to tell the other Lazarites the truth. Only I could know the true power of human imagination."

Cassiel holds her palms at her waist, looking at her fingers as if they were covered in blood.

"I listened to Raphael. I did as he said. All the while, that nagging feeling ate at me, told me I was betraying my fellow Lazarites. I wish I'd listened to it, back then. I realize the truth now."

"The truth?" Lily asks.

Cassiel looks up into Lily's eyes.

"Raphael was afraid. Lazarites outnumbered the Pureblooded angels a thousand to one. If these former humans realized the true power of their Imagination, they might rise up and seize control of Heaven. Even if they were weaker individually, the power of Lazarites could easily merge with living humans on Earth, leading to an unstoppable insurrection. That is why Raphael chose to make me his *pawn*."

Cassiel drops her arms to her side, defeated.

"I did what he ordered. I killed who he told me to kill. In the end, the angels lost the war. All because of his fear and greed. Even now, I still listen to him whenever he tells me to do something. I'm like a beaten dog that only knows one trick."

"No..." Lily says softly, reaching out to take Cassiel's hand. "You're not. Don't say that. You're strong! You have the power to stand up for yourself."

"I don't." Cassiel says with a sigh. "In this virtual world, I possess a strength greater than I ever had in reality. Even at my peak, I would still drain my power if I fought a long battle. I would need more Faith Energy to restore my reserves. And as for now? I'm no match for even a Demon Lord."

Lily frowns. "That just means we need to spread faith in you across all of human space. If we can get more people to believe in you, we can make you stronger!"

For a time, Cassiel doesn't reply.

She lowers her eyes and stares at the floor, her eyes hollow.

"Why would anyone believe in me when I don't even believe in myself?"

Emperor Crow exits the Queen Network from a node on Diabolus, one created by the fairies at the demons' request. She arrives in her private underground chamber and balls up both her hands into fists. Her bloodshot eyes boil with rage as she recalls the humiliating loss she just suffered.

"No... no! I can't believe it! How can she be Camael? If that angel is Camael, I'll shed all my feathers and boil myself alive! Her powers were too different from any of the Archangels! Too exotic. They reminded me more of..."

She pauses. The Queen Network interface hums behind her, a blue light subtly illuminating her small, private room filled with a thousand trinkets depicting different birds found across the Milky Way. As an avid avian appreciator, Crow has observed countless feathered and featherless flying creatures over the millennia, studying them as a hobby when she's bored.

But now, her eyes look at nothing in particular. A devilish smile plays upon her face.

"She... isn't... an Archangel. *No*. She's a *Lazarite*. I've seen that ability before. She summons complex devices in a way only a former *human* could. That would explain why she is so strong. But if she is a Lazarite, then how has she survived and evaded our detection for all these years? Is she the only one? Or are there others?"

Crow's eyes flicker with insight. She slowly releases the tension in her fists, unballing them as she thinks carefully on what these revelations might mean.

"There was a Lazarite once. Long ago. The Mightiest Lazarite. The Daughter of Heaven. Could it be her? But I remember that she was captured by demons, raped, tortured, and killed. It couldn't be her. Perhaps one of her comrades? A copycat?"

Crow's beak clicks repeatedly as she taps its lower and upper points together in thought.

"It is her. I'm not wrong." Crow muses. "She's the Daughter of Heaven. Raphael's Champion. The *killer* of Emperor Red Raven."

Crow's eyes flash with venom.

"She killed my husband. That *bitch*. She's still alive, somehow, and now she's honing her skills in the Queen Network."

The Emperor of Sacrifice hunches her body over and begins pacing back and forth.

"Why fake her identity? Perhaps she isn't strong enough yet to stand on her own. She's strong in the human's false battle-world, but weak in realspace. That means she's hiding somewhere. She's vulnerable."

Crow smiles evilly.

"HEH HEH HEH. THAT MEANS IF I FIND HER, I CAN CAPTURE HER. TORTURE HER. PEEL HER APART."

Her eyes turn feral as her tongue snakes out and licks the sides of her beak.

"HUSBAND. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, A DELICIOUS OPPORTUNITY HAS PRESENTED ITSELF. I CAN GET REVENGE. HEH HEH HEH."

Crow turns her eyes toward the doorway. She strides toward it, shoves it open, and strides outside.

"Can't tell the others. That filthy grey-feathered bitch is *mine*. I want her all to myself. I'll draw out her suffering until she's lost all the life in her eyes. Then I'll eat her and obtain her power for myself! GEHEHEH!"

The door closes behind Crow. As she walks away, the dimly lit Queen Network abruptly loses all its light. A figure appears in the darkness, looking at Crow's departing silhouette through a crack in the door.

The two-headed figure glares at her. He says nothing, then disappears, returning the magical power back to the room.

Crow never even senses his presence.

Part 581: Evolution Revolution

[Your skills are inferior.] Initiator Ferral brags. [This race belongs to me. I am more than a hundred kart-lengths ahead of you.]

"It's not over 'til it's over." Jason says, as he stares at the screen. "This is the final lap. Anything can happen."

[I have been in the lead since the very beginning. It is impossible for me to lose. This game is no challenge at all.]

"Yeahhh, we'll see about that." Jason says, as he drives over an item box.

Seconds later, Jason's Kart transforms into a Bullet Bill, racing ahead at hypersonic speeds and knocking two racers out of his way. On the final turn, he shoots up behind Ferral, causing the Initiator's heart-rate to spike.

[No! This is impossible! You were in the seventh position until this lap! How could you suddenly be in second?! You are cheating! Gah, and I keep getting only COINS! Why are my items so much worse than yours? I cannot even time the button presses to get a good item!]

In the last few seconds, Jason lobbs a red shell forward, smashes it into Ferral's kart, and takes the lead on the final turn, stealing first place while three other karts also pass Ferral's momentarily incapacitated Donkey Kong. Ferral jumps out of his seat, roaring in fury.

[How could I lose?! My skills were clearly superior! This game is rigged!]

Jason leans back in his seat, looking up at the giant projected screen in his personal gaming studio with a look of pure smugness. "Ah, it's too bad, Ferral. You still don't understand Mario Kart's 'rubber banding' system. It gives better items to the people who aren't in first place to make it easier for them to catch up."

[That system is stupid!] Ferral complains. [The superior racer should win based on his skills, not cheap items that grant a last second advantage! I do not like this game!]

"Well they do say not to hate the player; hate the game." Jason says, his grin widening. "Looks like you're on the right track. Anyway, it's about time for me to head out. Seems I

whooped you pretty good today, Ferral. Maybe work on your skills a bit more and we'll have a rematch next time, eh?"

[You did not 'whoop' me.] Ferral says, sulking with his arms crossed and dropping his controller at his feet. [You cheated. Terrans only know how to cheat when faced with the glorious capabilities of a trueborn Volgrim.]

"Yeah yeah, that's what a *loser* would say." Jason taunts, as he gets up from his chair and stretches. He looks at a nearby clock, then strides away. "I've got work to do, and Fiona will get mad if I play games for too long. See you later."

Ferral doesn't reply. The young Initiator simply continues to grumble in his head, muttering incomprehensibly about what a bunch of cheating mud-dwellers the humans are.

Jason walks through his gaming and entertainment room, a massive center with more than a thousand video game consoles and a huge digital library of movies, TV shows, and other entertainment taken from Earth before its destruction. Thanks to the Volgrim collecting every piece of cultural media humanity ever created, Jason was able to recover humanity's gaming heritage as well as its filmography and music by secretly raiding the Volgrim's data stores. Now, he can play any game ever made, watch any movie, listen to any song, and even admire humanity's greatest pieces of artwork as desired.

In his youth, Jason would have simply set up his life in here and never left, but unfortunately, he is an adult now with adult responsibilities. He can't spend much time playing games or watching movies. Therefore, he mostly leaves the room to Ferral and also Kar's kids. At least, those among them who are interested.

Jason exits his underground entertainment theater. He steps onto Chrona's surface and inhales the fresh morning air, looking up at the artificial sun in the sky with a smile on his face.

After 144 years living inside Chrona, Jason has made lots of improvements to the mirror dimension. Now, 'fake' stars hover in the sky, and Chrona even has a day and night cycle. The dimension's internal space has expanded by more than ten times as the Crocodiles spread out, taking up residence as Chrona's primary life-forms. Kar and Blinker live inside a large mansion up on a hill, acting as the de-facto leaders of Chrona, attending to its daily needs while Jason and Fiona continue to put all their focus on using Chrona as a tool to improve humanity's situation in Realspace.

At the same time, the few Psion residents of Chrona have opted not to all live together. Each one has constructed a residence for themselves in some isolated area, with one of them living near a lake, another up in the mountains, and so on. Only Ferral is the weird one, as he has chosen to live in the middle of Chrona's biggest city, which formerly was the *only* one. Blinker Bay, as many of the crocodiles have taken to calling it, is named after their mother, and now exists on the edge of a large lake filled with lots of fish and other creatures. Thanks to Blinker deliberately importing creatures from Realspace into Chrona, her beautiful crocodile children and grandchildren have plenty of delicious fish to eat, whenever they want.

And like the Labyrinth, Chrona now expands on its own, slowly, over time. It feeds off the excess life energy produced by its inhabitants, expanding perhaps a foot in diameter every single day that passes. While the growth may not be noticeable in short bursts, over the years, it has greatly expanded, allowing for many new areas to open up and become inhabitable.

Even Jason himself doesn't know exactly how the process works.

The Wordsmith walks over to his mind-wife's workshop, where he finds Fiona and Rebecca hard at work like usual. He gives Fiona a kiss on the cheek, her corporeal appearance no longer a surprise to him, while gently squeezing Rebecca's shoulder. "Hey, what did I miss?"

"Done playing games with Ferral?" Fiona asks, amused. "Rebecca thought we might be able to improve the Healing Orbs today by making them use Exotics to provide different types of healing effects."

Rebecca holds up a necklace with a glowing blue marble attached. "My tests with the Healing Orbs have proven they work, but the effects are rather slow. Compared to Belial or Leeroy taking deliberate action to heal people, the orbs are vastly inferior. People will be in pain for much longer than if they paid those demons a visit."

She gestures to the table, where different forms of powder have been dumped in tiny piles here and there. She points at a pile of faintly glowing black powder and begins to explain. "This is Rhizite. I crumbled a few milligrams of it into dust form so the Healing Orbs could more easily absorb it. My tests have shown it can speed up the healing factor by about 25%. Unfortunately, it also increases the pain of healing by a moderate amount."

She points at some poisonous-looking pink-and-green liquid in a vial. "And this is an extract from the fangs of a Pelorin, a creature living on one of the Volgrim's designated exobeast reserve worlds. It's exceptionally good at countering toxins and parasites, but it also causes severe seizures and headaches during the healing process."

Jason frowns. "The side effects of each of these sounds severe."

"Yes." Rebecca acknowledges. "I'm not having much luck finding a panacea. The best method for healing someone in bad condition is still for you, Leeroy, or Belial to take personal action. These Healing Orbs are only suitable for mass healing on a budget."

"At least they're better than the body's natural response." Fiona chimes in. "Humans can't naturally regenerate a lost limb. Even if it takes a few years, Healing Orbs make that possible."

"We'll take things one step at a time." Jason says with a smile. "I'm going to practice in the Battle Arena for a bit. Then later, I'm heading to Realspace to visit Phoebe and Timothy."

Rebecca frowns. "I assume you'll be gone a few weeks. Jason, before you leave, I need you to stabilize Chrona's Time Dilation Matrix again."

"Again??" Jason asks, bewildered. "I stabilized it just the other day."

"Actually, that was nine days ago." Rebecca corrects. "Since then, the dilation has risen from 251.466 to 251.985. The acceleration is occurring more often and rising faster when it does."

Jason looks at Fiona and Rebecca solemnly. "Any ideas why?"

"Best guess, it's because Chrona's size is increasing." Fiona explains. "As the number of crocodiles increases, the amount of life energy available also does. This causes Chrona to expand a little faster over time, which is accelerating the frequency you'll need to keep stabilizing the dilation. It's a similar principle to the Labyrinth, but with the added complexity of time dilation thrown into the mix."

Jason groans. "Man. I'll need to craft a whole magic-based system to stabilize Chrona on a more permanent basis. But I don't have a lot of understanding in the field of temporal mechanics. Looks like I'll need to study for ten or so years just to get a grip on it. Bah, I'll do that later. For now, stabilizing things manually is working fine."

"I wouldn't say things are 'fine.'" Rebecca quips. "Eventually, you're going to be stabilizing the time dilation every few days, then every day, then every so-many number of hours. You need to create a solution sooner rather than later."

"I know, I know." Jason says, waving his hand. "And if the time dilation gets too high, the solutions I've made for Time Dilation sickness will stop working. Nobody will be able to leave Chrona as the dilation shoots upward. It's a whole mess."

He shrugs. "Unfortunately, I don't have a simple solution. Like I said, unless I invest ten years in studying temporal mechanics, I'm not going to be able to solve this problem."

Fiona hesitates.

"...You could probably get the answer if you put on Solomon's Crown."

Jason's expression turns stern. "You know that's not an option. Even if I wanted to, which I definitely *don't*, Hope wouldn't let me. I don't trust that old man, and I don't trust Raphael either. Both of them are hiding lots of secrets. It's best we solve these problems ourselves."

Jason continues talking to both women for a little longer, then eventually he splits off. "I'll see you two later. And don't worry, I'll take care of the time dilation before I leave today."

"Bye, Jason." Fiona says, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Tell Phoebe I said 'hello.'"

Jason gives his mind-wife a loving squeeze on the shoulder, then makes his way outside. He heads toward a special Battle Zone crafted over 80 years earlier, one filled with magical symbols focused on protection and containment.

One he draws within a block's radius of the facility, he begins to feel the tell-tale vibrations of combat impacts taking place inside. He walks over to the entrance, pauses to put some earmuffs on, then steps inside.

WHUMP! WHUMP!!

Deafening aftershocks rattle Jason's bones. He walks down a long hallway into an auditorium with a few hundred seats placed behind a containment barrier, and a specialized arena not dissimilar to the Queen Network's battle zones. However, this arena is not made in a virtual space, but in reality itself.

A field littered with tall trees sits in the center of the courtyard. There, a powerful-looking crocodile wearing glorious golden battle armor engages in violent combat with

one of the Psions, Initiator Dunal. As a mere 1st Level Psion, he is extremely weak compared to any other member of his species, but he is still thousands of years old and possesses a decent level of combat competency.

Dunal's opponent turns out to be Kar and Blinker's thirdborn child, Kallista. As a crocodilian warrior over 140 years old, she has spent more than a century honing her combat skills with the spear to a level far surpassing her brothers and sisters. She may once have been a whiny brat, long ago, but those were the ancient times. Now, she is an elite of the First Generation of crocodile warriors.

Blinker and Kar have not stopped having children. Every few years, without fail, Blinker has given birth to a new pod of croco-spawn, and by now more than 50 generations have been born in Chrona's space. Whether she has three children at once or as many as a dozen, Blinker names and loves all of them, using her superior mind to recall all their names and childhoods.

Kallista bobs and weaves while Dunal fires off powerful blasts of Primal Psionic energy. The somewhat slow-witted Psion moves with deliberate care, always keeping distance between himself and his adversary. Each blast of raw telekinetic power strikes Kallista as if it were a punch manifested from mental energy, knocking her back, but her armor deflects and absorbs the blows, preventing her from suffering severe damage.

Kallista flicks her tongue out. Her blue scales shine from the gaps in her golden armor, revealing potential 'weak points' Dunal would never be so stupid as to attack. She pants like a dog, one of her signature traits, and darts toward Dunal while stabbing her spear at his stomach.

The Psion instantly conjures a shield of raw telekinesis, revolving it around himself as if it were made of water. He forces Kallista's deadly attack to the side, causing it to miss entirely. He then punishes her with a telekinetic punch to the face, pummeling her into the dirt!

Inside the audience, several dozen crocodiles, all of them much younger than Kallista, whoop and cheer at the sight of this incredible fight! While Kallista and Dunal might only technically possess the power of mere Demon Lords, they are both far better in the realm of combat than any demon of comparable strength. Inside Chrona, aside from playing the Wordsmith's video games, the best way to let off steam and have some fun is either by

fighting virtual opponents inside the Queen Network, or real flesh and blood opponents in the Battle Arena.

As such, the vast majority of crocodiles and Psions have become battle maniacs! All they do every day is train their bodies and their minds. If they aren't actively fighting one another, they are meditating to enhance their insights into the art of warfare. They frequently consult one another to offer insights and pointers.

As it stands, the most powerful entity inside Chrona is undoubtedly Jason Hiro. The second strongest, most would argue, is Blinker. After her, most would say that Aspirator Raavul is the next pillar of Chrona's might, but a few in the know also posit Rebecca must be exceptionally strong thanks to her Cybernite body and built-in skills. While she has never bothered engaging in these petty battles, her strength must surely be impressive!

As for the 1st Level Psions and the crocodile children, they are far weaker than the previous four mentioned, but they are still highly trained warriors with a profound grasp of the technical aspects of combat. Their reaction times and combat impulses have been beaten into them over many decades by their mother and their peers outside Chrona, in the Queen Network.

* * *

Jason stops at the edge of the Arena. He glances around until he spots a familiar face, then he walks around the seating area, inside the combat barrier. Soon, he arrives at the densest cluster of crocodiles, where he finds Kar lounging in a chair, munching on some fish.

"Hurgh. Turtle. Are you here to fight?" Kar asks, his words causing the younger Crocodiles around him to take notice of the Wordsmith's presence.

"Not really. I was thinking about it, but instead I decided to spectate for a bit." Jason answers. "Kallista's spearmanship is better than I remember. She's been improving a lot."

"Hurgh! If only you knew. She found a powerful Demon warrior inside the Queen Net." Kar explains. "His virtual self has been teaching her spearmanship at her request."

Jason nods approvingly. "I think someday your kids are going to make a big difference in the War outside."

"Of course!" Kar boasts. "They are MY spawn, after all! They come from the seed of the mightiest Crocodile!"

Jason smiles and pats his friend's back, but inside he can't help feeling a little sad.

The damage Mephisto caused to Kar's soul has proven irreparable. No matter what Jason has tried, he simply hasn't been able to heal Kar's injuries, leaving him forever incapable of obtaining the power he once held. At best, Kar can obtain a cybernetically augmented body and increase his combat strength to the peak of whatever human technology might someday achieve, but his magical potential will never return.

Even so, Kar appears undaunted. He lives in the moment, reveling in his children's accomplishments with the utmost pride, living vicariously through them as if he were still in his glory days.

Jason can't help but surmise that Kar, despite losing the power he once held, has achieved true happiness. He is a warrior no more, but he has restored his species, and that has given him a deeper feeling of contentment than any transitory state of 'power' ever could.

Huh. Maybe Kar actually has life all figured out. Jason muses.

"Look, papa!" One of the younger crocodiles exclaims. "Big sis is about to go all-out!"

Jason and Kar turn their attention to the arena, where Initiator Dunal has once again knocked Kallista to the side. His psionic blasts might not be too strong, but they have become highly focused over time, striking with the impact of cannonballs. Were he to fight a human military during Earth's 21st century, he would surely be able to punch holes in tanks and flip over vehicles via his metacognition.

Unfortunately, his opponent is also a master of combat. Born with the inherent spiritual power of her mother and the physical strength of her father, Kallista has already begun walking a road with no known upper limit, and she may someday surpass even Kar in his prime, as may all of her brothers and sisters.

Kallista's tongue lolls out as she pants excitedly. "I can feel your attacks weakening! You are running out of stamina, Dunal!"

Dunal's expression appears the same as ever, but any observer who knows him can easily see that Kallista's words ring true. He is visibly fatigued and no longer able to fight as fiercely as he did at the beginning of the battle. Dunal's senses pick out the audience members, and he feels a pang of shame when he senses the Wordsmith's presence.

The Mightiest Human is watching! Dunal thinks. I cannot afford to lose so pitifully while Jason Hiro is here. I will bring shame upon the Volgrim Empire if I do! But I am at my limit! Every time we battle, I only fall further and further behind! I haven't beaten Kallista in the last five years, and this time will not be any different!

His expression darkens. It's infuriating. These mud-dwellers should have no chance against me, but I am limited by the output of my body! If only there was a way I could overwhelm her and make Kallista concede defeat, but her vitality is simply too strong. I will once again fail and make my fellow Psions weep...

Kallista lunges at Dunal. Her spear stabs out three times, and he quickly manages to deflect the attacks, yet his offensive strength has dwindled to such a point that he can only step backward time and time again, allowing his crocodilian adversary to press her advantage!

Repeatedly, Kallista steps toward him, dancing with her spear, making sweeping strikes to knock him off-kilter, and constantly barraging his ever-weakening psionic shield.

Kar's daughter shoots a glance toward the spectator stands. She grins to herself, seeing the Wordsmith watch her with an impressed expression.

My idol is here! Kallista thinks. He is happy to see my performance! He admires my improvement! I'm not at Uncle Jason's level yet, but I will someday reach it, then surpass him! I'll make my father proud and become the strongest of all my siblings!

Fantasies dance in her eyes, but those thoughts momentarily cloud her judgment. As she revels in the admiration of her siblings and her idol, Kallista fails to notice a storm brewing on Dunal's face. The Psion, pushed back time and time again, soon finds himself drawing worryingly close to the edge of the arena barrier. With his back against the wall, he can no longer fall back any further!

I'm going to lose! Dunal roars in his head. I cannot fall here! Not with the Wordsmith watching me! I might as well give up my Path and become a recluse! What good is the raw power of Primal Psionics if all I can do is knock around a mud-dweller for a bit before suffering such a humiliating defeat? I need more power!

More power! Dunal thinks.

MORE! POWER!!

Dunal's emotions turn turbulent. His rage grows explosively, and at the same time, an invisible crack rapidly spreads across his Psionic seed.

Elsewhere on Chrona, Aspirator Raavul, meditating inside her personal study, suddenly opens up her eyes and looks toward the Battle Arena.

[It's happening! Finally!] She thinks, shocked beyond words. [But... so soon?!]

Dunal's Psionic Seed cracks faster and faster. Too late, Kallista turns around and looks at him in horror as his power begins to climb up, up, up!

"What the-?! You! Shit, how are you...?!"

Kallista starts to jump backward, but she's too late.

Dunal's Psionic Seed explodes! It erupts with the full power of an awakened 2nd Level Psion, shattering with a force far beyond his comprehension. In an instant, Dunal taps into the Psionic Well, and his eyes close as visions of an ancient Psion flow into his mind.

At the same time, the eruption of energy rushes out of his body, slams into Kallista, and throws her back with horrifying strength. She screams as she hurtles across the arena, crashing through two giant trees and slamming into the distant barrier on the complete opposite side where she stood only moments before. Luckily, because of her innate durability and the armor protecting her, she only suffers minor injuries, but the shock to her psyche is much more profound.

"You! You're evolving?!" Kallista exclaims, scared at first, then overjoyed as she realizes Dunal is the first Initiator to jump to the rank beyond that of a 1st Level Psion.

But Dunal does not answer. He remains silent as his mind merges into the Psionic Well, falling deep into conversation with an ancient Psion who also once mastered the power of Primal Psionics.

Jason's eyes shine. He crows to Kar, "It's actually happening! What luck for it to happen right on one of the days I visited!"

Kar chuckles. "Hurgh. Perhaps it was not merely luck, little Turtle. My children, and the Mother Psion's Disciples, they all look up to you. Your presence alone can inspire greatness in others."

Kallista respectfully does not attack Dunal. She remains standing, tending to her wounds while his Psionic Seed coalesces into its ultimate form. It gains a red sheen,

though none of the people present have any way of observing it, and then that red color fades away...

After less than a minute, Dunal opens his eyes. Because of Chrona's extreme time dilation, a ritual that would ordinarily require several hours to complete occurs in a fraction of the time. Two hundred and fifty minutes worth of mind-merging happens in less than one, and he reaps all of the gains at a speed that would disturb any other Psionic master.

Dunal's aura changes. A sense of gravitas surrounds him. He taps into the same well of power as he did before, but now his understanding of the universe's principles evolves far beyond its previous barriers.

[I comprehend now.] Dunal says. [My mind is Awake. I was but a foolish seedling before, ignorant to a great many Truths. No wonder it took me seven thousand Cycles to grok enough Truths to finally ascend. How pitiful my view of Reality was. I must give my deepest thanks to my Ancestor. She has taught me well.]

All of Dunal's fatigue from before disappears. His Seed, energized by his Awakening, burns with fiery heat, igniting his pores and allowing him to drink the faintest, weakest wisps of the universe's Cosmic power. Unfortunately, he is still far too immature to baptize himself in True Cosmic Energy, but someday, should he reach the 6th Level, that will change.

Raavul bursts into the Battle Arena's entrance. She quickly levitates forward to evaluate her student, and a look of shock passes across her eyes.

[A Perfect Ascendance! Dunal, how is this possible? For you to Ascend before your peers is already miraculous enough, but never in my wildest musings did I believe your Seed could Ascend at this quality! You have obtained the firmest possible Foundation upon which to build your future growth!]

Dunal's eyes shine. He bows respectfully toward his teacher.

[Master. I was slow of mind before. I was dull, uncoordinated. It was your excellent teaching, and the competition with my peers that have allowed my Ascendance. I spoke to a Progenitor who lived over one point five million cycles in the past. She informed me that a Perfect Ascension was something only achieved by a select few of our people, including Second Founder Dosena herself...]

Dunal quickly recounts the discussion he held with the ancient Psion master, causing Raavul's eyes to widen and narrow repeatedly. The more profound Truths escape her understanding, but even the shallowest words spoken from such an ancient legend cause her nostrils to flare and her breathing to quicken.

[I see! All this time, I believed that Comprehension was the crux of a solid Foundation, but there was more to it after all. True Combat is a key component of forming a Psionic Seed. Since you have successfully replicated a feat the Second Founder once accomplished, that means you could someday walk the same path as her.]

Jason, listening in on the sidelines, frowns slightly. He crosses his arms and strolls into the Battle Arena.

"Hold on. You're saying because Dunal has repeatedly engaged in battle with the Crocodiles, it helped solidify his Psionic Seed to the level of Perfection?"

Raavul turns to the Wordsmith and quickly nods. [Of course. Why? Did I say something incorrect?]

"No, I wouldn't call it incorrect..." Jason says slowly. "It just seems... obvious? Have your people been taught not to engage in combat?"

[Of course we fight.] Raavul says. [...but not until a Psion reaches the 3rd Level are they typically put in extreme combat situations. It has been the common belief that fighting before one's Path is set will lead to a worse outcome. I am very surprised at this upending of common knowledge.]

A brief moment of silence follows. Jason's expression becomes uneasy.

"You're a warrior species. Don't you find it a little odd that the solution to a 'perfect seed' is simply to fight more? Doesn't this seem obvious to you?"

[Of course, now that the logic is laid out, it makes perfect sense.] Raavul says. [The more we fight, the more we condense our Seeds. I still do not see a problem.]

Jason looks at Raavul. Then he looks at Dunal.

"I guess I'm not spelling it out plainly enough. Who decided that avoiding combat until a Psion reached the 3rd Level was 'common sense'? Doesn't that seem almost... deliberate? As if someone were trying to hide an important Truth about Psionic Ascension?"

He leans forward. "Someone *important*?"

Raavul's smiling eyes lose some of their glimmer. She looks at Jason, troubled, then looks away.

[Someone important. Someone who would benefit from keeping Psions in the dark about the true Path we should all walk... someone who would... stand to gain from our ignorance.]

Jason continues to gaze at the side of Raavul's head. Her expression gradually becomes more and more disturbed, until she finally looks at the Wordsmith again.

[You are strongly implying Founder Dosena is the culprit.] Raavul accuses. [That notion seems far-fetched.]

"Does it?" Jason challenges. "I find it rather suspicious the Volgrim have never had a Psion break past the level of Executor since the end of the Seven Great Wars. Don't you? And now we see that Dunal here has just done something previously thought 'impossible' by following what I would certainly call common sense training. That doesn't strike you as odd?"

Kallista, having approached her opponent a while ago, looks just as bothered as the others. "Uncle, are you saying the Volgrim Founders are deliberately weakening the Psions? I don't want to insult your intellect, but considering they are fighting a losing war against the Plague, doesn't that seem rather foolish? Wouldn't they want to have the strongest armies possible?"

"I would hope so." Jason answers. "But maybe Dosena is keeping her 'people' down deliberately. I've heard that in the ancient past, she killed all the other 9th Level Psions. Maybe she has an... *ego problem*. She doesn't want someone else challenging her position."

[My apologies, Wordsmith.] Raavul says curtly. [But that does *not* sound like the Second Founder I know.]

"And just how well *do* you know your Second Founder?" Jason retorts. "Ever had a chat with her? Because I have. Her every word exudes arrogance."

[The Second Founder helped save our people from the Sentinels. She has every right to be arrogant.] Raavul replies, no longer looking at Jason in quite the same friendly manner she did only a few minutes before. [I would appreciate it if you discontinued disparaging the Mightiest Psion. She is not the villain you are making her out to be.]

"Right, I was only hypothesizing." Jason says, holding up his palms. "Sorry. I went a little too far. Maybe this is all just a big coincidence. In any case, we should all be grateful for Dunal's Ascension. He's going to become a real powerhouse in the future!"

Raavul's frosty eyes warm a little. She looks away from Jason toward her student. [Yes. Congratulations, Dunal. I look forward to seeing your growth over the coming cycles. I will also be putting your peers on much stricter combat training in the hopes they can someday obtain a Perfected Seed, as you have.]

[I contemplate and comprehend your wisdom, Aspirator.] Dunal says respectfully. [From now on, my title shall be Servitor. I shall continue my studies and aim to surpass the legends of my Progenitors, becoming a master of Primal Psionics. And next, to enhance my thinking speed, I shall walk the Path of the Second Founder, becoming a Brain Enhancer to complement my raw Primal power.]

"Don't get ahead of yourself." Jason says with a chuckle. "Take things one step at a time. You still have a long way to go before you reach the 3rd Level, if past Ascension rates among your people are anything to go by."

[Inside Chrona, I have nothing if not time.] Dunal says, bowing his head politely. [Now then. I have kept my opponent waiting long enough. Daughter of Kar, are you ready to suffer a defeat most humiliating?]

A sneer fills Kallista's countenance. "Well well, seems your little power-up has made you a lot cockier! Don't think I'll go down easy, because Kar's spawn always fight until we can't move anymore!"

Jason and Raavul make their way out of the Arena. They watch from the sides as Dunal and Kallista once again do battle.

But this time, the situation completely inverts. Dunal's power rise is so shocking that Jason cannot help but gasp repeatedly as the newly Ascended Psion makes short work of his opponent. Using nothing but raw telekinetic power, Dunal thrashes Kallista around, slamming her against the barriers with brutal force, pounding her into the dirt, and otherwise treating her like a chew toy. No matter how incredible Kallista seemed before, anyone with two brain cells to rub together can easily see that she has completely and overwhelmingly lost the fight.

Less than a minute later, Kallista collapses, her body beaten and broken. Despite the horrific beating she took, Jason still gets the impression Dunal didn't act overly

aggressive toward her. In fact, at several points, he held back his true power, taking care not to land any overly deadly strikes.

"Absolutely unbelievable." Jason says to Raavul as they watch the fight conclude. "He's as strong as a Demon Baron now. Stronger even, in some ways."

[The first Four Levels of Psionic Ascension are roughly equal to the power of Demon Mortals.] Raavul explains calmly. [At the 4th Level, Psions should be about as powerful as most Demon Emperors, depending on the matchup. At the 5th Level, Psions are overwhelmingly superior to all but the strongest Demon Emperors, such as Satan, and they become eligible to enter the Volgrim military. At the 6th Level, not even Satan himself could touch a Psion.]

"And at the 7th Level, they become Bottom Cosmics." Jason says, his expression becoming a frown. "Hmm. Kind of strange, don't you think?"

[Strange?] Raavul questions.

"Yeah. If the absolute peak of demonic power is equivalent to a 5th level Psion, then why is the next evolution for a Demon the rank of 'Deity'? Shouldn't there be something in-between? Like... I dunno... Demon Half-Deity, or 'DemiDemon,' or Demon Demigod. You know what I mean? Feels like there's a rank missing."

[Demons are innate Soul Manipulators.] Raavul posits. [Perhaps the forcible evolution to Deity simply bypasses a rank demons could acquire normally if they were not hampering themselves via Soul Manipulation. Perhaps if a demon could grow to the rank of Emperor without feasting on souls, in much the way they are doing now on Tarus II, they might discover a level beyond Emperor.]

She shrugs in a decidedly 'human' manner.

[Or perhaps such a rank simply doesn't exist.]

"Yeah. Maybe it just doesn't exist." Jason grunts. "Sure would be neat if it did, though. Well, scary, now that I think about it. Since at least even Bottom Cosmics are limited by the Akashic Rules. I wouldn't want a 'planetary threat' among the Demons who could act recklessly and genocide billions without consequence. Probably better we never pull the genie out of that bottle."

Jason shakes his head. He walks over to Kallista, not bothering to heal her as her brothers and sisters instead haul her off to the Recovery Rooms, where she will take a

bath in a vat of magical energy and slowly heal herself back to full.

"You may have lost, but it was a good fight." Jason says to the barely conscious crocodile. "Lots of fun to watch. I'm really proud of you, kid."

Kallista gurgles out a bloody chuckle. "Kyargh... thanks... uncle Jason. Kyahaha..."

After Kallista is escorted away, Jason also makes his departure. He says goodbye to Kar, offers Dunal his praises over his evolution, then teleports to a platform on the edge of Blinker Bay. A teleportation matrix leading back to Realspace stands in isolation, its magical runes belying a thousand powerful enchantments designed to ward away the effects of 250x Time Dilation for those returning to Realspace. Over the decades, Jason and Blinker have worked with Rebecca many times to improve the system. Now, anyone can return to Realspace with little to no side effects.

However, the Psions have already decided to make Chrona their permanent home, and Blinker won't let her kids go back. Instead, everyone has decided they quite enjoy living in a 250x accelerated dilation-space, so literally nobody but Jason ever uses the Transfer Matrix.

Before doing anything else, Jason utters several Words of Power, targeted at Chrona's dimensional space. He stabilizes its time dilation, then he turns his attention to the teleporter.

The Wordsmith steps onto the platform. He keys in some commands onto the magical transference system, setting it to 'outbound' mode, then he targets a carefully calculated position on Tarus II, one of the designated safe landing points where he won't accidentally teleport inside someone, killing himself and that person.

Of course, if Jason wanted, he could also use Chrona's Transfer Matrix to teleport people into the time-accelerated realm without any issues. But that isn't his goal today.

After setting all the options, Jason inhales, then gazes at the center of the teleporter runes.

"Time to play with my baby boy. Heehee! I'm so excited!"

A second later, Jason vanishes from the spot.

Foop!

Part 582: Beginning of the End

"There he is! Little Timmy!" Jason excitedly whispers. His eyes light up with the joy of fatherhood as he hovers over his one-month-old son's crib, where the infant snoozes quietly, having just gone through another long and tumultuous day of babyhood.

Phoebe stands beside Jason, looking a little tired, but with eyes as warm as any happy mother should have. She hugs onto Jason's arm and yawns, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

"I just put Timothy to bed." Phoebe whispers. "Let's keep the volume down."

"Man. I should have come here a few days ago." Jason grouches. "I'd have loved to put him down."

"I'd have liked that too." Phoebe says.

Jason's wife is acutely aware that every minute he spends in Realspace is 250 minutes he's giving up in Chrona. Humanity is still plenty vulnerable, even despite their incredible acceleration over the last seven months. Every extra day Jason spends working on a new device, or a magical augment for humanity, or literally anything of value is a day humanity as a whole gains another handhold against the Plague.

In many ways, it saddens Phoebe, making her feel as if she's selfishly wasting the time of humanity's mightiest guardian. Only the knowledge that Hope is also making gains for humanity helps stave off those dark thoughts.

Jason glances at his wife. His smile fades as he sees the indecisiveness on her face.

"Phoebe. I know what you're thinking." Jason says softly. "There's an easy solution. Just come back with me to Chrona. I know you were worried the time dilation might affect your pregnancy, but Timothy has already been born. We can raise him quickly inside Chrona and make a new family together, like Hope and Amelia have done with their kids."

Phoebe sighs. "I don't want to do that, Jason. Not that I don't love Kar and Blinker, but I don't want our son being raised without any fellow human children around. All my friends are here in Realspace too. I'd have to leave them behind and age decades while they remained practically frozen, barely inching along day by day..."

"That's what I've had to do already." Jason points out. "Aging almost 150 years while you've barely changed at all has been exceptionally difficult for me."

The Wordsmith looks away. He closes his eyes and rubs his glabella in frustration.

"It won't be as bad as you think. In fact, it'll be an amazing experience." Jason says after a few moments of contemplation. "Think of all the amazing inventions you could have worked on if you'd been in Chrona with me. We could have been keeping each other company all the time..."

Phoebe shakes her head slowly. "And Timothy?"

"Look, if you want our son to make friends with other kids, that's an easy solution. We'll just bring more humans into Chrona." Jason says. "I've been thinking we'll need more anyway."

"What about the Changelings?" Phoebe asks. "You still haven't found a way to uncover them. Right? The only foolproof method is by using Jephthath's power, and that would entail bringing members of Jephthath's Legion into Chrona."

"Yeah... still pretty stumped on that." Jason says with a groan.

Thankfully, as has been the par in recent years, Jason has always proactively put down information barriers whenever he appears in Realspace to ensure no pesky Psions can spy on his discussions. They might not be capable of keeping out Dosen, but they should be 100% effective against weaklings like Creator Demila.

"Then it's a no from me, Jason." Phoebe says. "Besides. If what Fiona said is right, then Chrona's dimensional stability is deteriorating over time. Every new life form that is born or enters Chrona will cause it to accelerate faster and faster, forcing you to manually stabilize it each time. Timothy and I would only add to that deterioration."

She continues. "And let's say you have to leave Chrona for an extended period. If I'm in there and the time flux gets high enough, I'd lose contact with Realspace. Decades, centuries, or millennia could pass before you returned. No doubt I'd invent amazing things, but the social isolation... I don't know if I could handle it, Jason. I don't know if I could live thousands of years without you."

Jason sighs. Then he chuckles.

"I think you're being a little melodramatic, honey. Nothing that nuts is going to happen."

Phoebe crosses her arms. "Jason, you can't even sleep a single night with me in Realspace anymore. Staying with me for a couple of hours at a time is your limit. If you were to stay with me for one day, 250 days would pass in Chrona and the breakpoint would occur. You already have to stabilize the dimension-space once every few weeks. What happens if you miss that time cutoff, and then MONTHS pass without you inside? Don't you understand that things would become so dire you couldn't even return to Chrona without suffering severe after-effects?"

For once, Jason falls completely silent. He touches his chin and looks at the floor, falling deep into thought as he debates the finer merits of her points.

"...Alright." He says, after a minute of silence. "But can you at least consider transferring to one of the Cube-spaces? Even a ten-times acceleration would make things easier for us. Then when I come to visit you, there will only be a 25x time differential between that Cube-space and Chrona."

Phoebe frowns, causing Jason to quickly add, "Oh! And there's LOTS of human kids there! Timothy could make plenty of friends! Plus the Cube-spaces are completely stable!"

Phoebe's frown vanishes. She rolls her eyes, sighs, then smiles.

"I'll think about it."

"Great!" Jason chirps. "That's all I wanted. Now, what say we try making another baby, eh?"

"You are such a horn-dog." Phoebe says helplessly. "It's not a race to catch up to Hope."

"No, I know. I know." Jason says. "I just... want to have more kids. If all of Hope's children have powers, and Daisy had powers, then Timothy likely will too. And that means our future children will. I don't know why things are working out like that, but I feel we have a duty to create more future protectors for humanity."

Phoebe groans. "Oh, how *romantic*, Jason. And here I thought you wanted kids because you wanted to make a big happy family with me."

"Hey! I do!" Jason protests, turning his attention to the sleeping baby. "I mean just look at him. *He's so cuuute!* I wanna squish Timmy's little cheeks and tell him I love him and give him a brother, and a sister, and another brother, and another sister-"

"I get the point!" Phoebe says, bursting into a smile. "Alright, alright. Just give me some resting time. Giving birth isn't exactly fun, Jason. Women aren't babymaking machines, and I have a lot of projects on my plate."

An invisible lightbulb pops up over Jason's head. "Oh, I know! I can better fulfill my duties to humanity if I have more kids, so what if I get two or three side-chicks, honey? I bet I could put a baby in each of them if I- OWW OWW hey, I was joking! I was joking!! Haha!"

Phoebe socks Jason in the arm twice, growling at him as he actually has the audacity to bring up cheating on her. Luckily, they both know Jason is way too loyal to actually do such a thing, but Phoebe still feigns anger at the thought.

"You just keep it in your pants for a few months, buster." Phoebe snarks. "We'll have another one when the time is right."

"Maybe we can have twins!" Jason suggests, which elicits another pair of punches on his shoulder. "Oww, oww! Kidding, kidding! Haha!"

Phoebe pauses her 'vicious' onslaught to tilt her head. "Well, I guess I could consider it. But not unless you promise to develop a babyporter."

"The hell's a 'babyporter'?" Jason asks, bewildered.

"You know. It would teleport the baby out of the womb painlessly." Phoebe explains. "I bet you could create something like that."

"Huh. I never thought about that." Jason says. "I'd need to find a way to seamlessly sever the umbilical cord, displace the baby's mass without abruptly causing a spatial bubble inside your- huh?"

Jason pauses.

He turns to look off to the side, and his facial expression warps.

"What! Shit, now? Of all times?!"

Phoebe flinches on seeing his reaction. "What's wrong?"

Jason looks at her, his expression grim.

"It's happening."

On the world of Maiura, Henry and Ashley enjoy a rare day off from their duties, training, and other essential work. Having spent most of the previous week either inside the Queen Network or working with other recently empowered members of the Legion, Henry is quite tired mentally from being in constant Work Mode, and Ashley feels much the same way.

Unlike Henry, she's spent most of her time over the last seven months mastering her Monsterization. As time has passed, her ability to transform into an Orc has become second nature to her, to the point she can morph her body in seconds without even needing the Power Glove, and be able to maintain that level of strength indefinitely.

In fact, her strength has gradually increased to levels well beyond what any human doing ordinary strength training could accomplish. In a pinch, she can rip apart heavily armored tanks with her bare hands. She can easily lift a ten ton weight and throw it several hundred feet! She might not be at Henry's level yet, but she has the sense she may reach him in due time, and someday even surpass him.

But neither of the two thinks about those things.

Instead, they sit on a picnic blanket in a flower-covered field at the base of Mount Adams where one of the smaller local villages has sprung up spontaneously. Not many people live down there, but those who do tend to be civilians and non-essential personnel working light duty.

A warm spring breeze wafts across the meadow. One of the more interesting features of humanity living on two planets is that while spring might be happening on Maiura, it's already Autumn's equivalent on Tarus II. By the time summer arrives on Maiura, the snow will have begun to fall across humanity's main living areas on humanity's previous homeworld.

This has created an interesting but unexpected tourism mini-industry, one which will surely germinate and grow as the centuries and millennia pass. Someday, it will be completely ordinary for people to leave one of the worlds during the winter to live on the other in a summer home, even if the two populations 'technically' reside on one of the worlds primarily.

Ashley munches on a sandwich made with meat from a locally sourced Maiuran animal, some creature hunted in the nearby forces by the local villagers, with a couple

slices of a tomato-like vegetable thrown in for added flavor. A line of meat-juice drips down her chin, which she hurriedly wipes away.

Henry lays on his back with his hands behind his head. He looks up at the sky, admiring the beautiful and thick cloud formations swirling above, making distinct patterns that he sometimes ascribes with anthropomorphic features subconsciously.

"Hey, can you pass me the juice?" Ashley asks, gesturing to a small container of liquid on Henry's opposite side.

He casually grabs it with one hand, passes the container over his chest to his girlfriend, then puts his hand back behind his head.

"Thanks." Ashley says, smiling at him.

She pauses for a moment, noticing Henry hasn't smiled back. He continues to look up at the sky, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

After pouring herself a cup of some locally sourced berry juice, Ashley sighs. "You're doing it again."

"Huh? Doing what?" Henry asks, blinking a few times as he slightly turns his head to look at her.

"You're living in your head. Again. With all the 'others.'"

Henry frowns slightly, then returns to looking up at the sky.

"Babe, I'm the leader of the Legion. I have to stay in contact with them. It's just a subconscious thing. I'm still right here, ready to talk whenever you need."

"We're supposed to be enjoying a day off *together*." Ashley says, her voice a tad bitter. "But you're always devoting a large part of your mind to *them*. It makes me feel like... like an accessory."

Once more, Henry looks at his girlfriend with a slight turn of his head. "Why do we always come back to this topic?"

"Because it's the big divide." Ashley answers, forcing herself to maintain a neutral tone. "I understand you have your responsibilities, Henry. But I'm always playing second fiddle to a thousand other people."

"Well, it's closer to fifty thousand now." Henry adds, before wincing when he realizes he only made her point stronger.

"Fifty thousand!" Ashley says, a little louder. She gives him an exasperated glance, then angrily chomps into her sandwich. "What are they telling you right now? That I'm whining again? Like always?"

"Babe. It's not like that." Henry says, rolling onto his side to lift up his head and rest his cheek on his palm. "I can't turn off the connection. They're always present, but we don't always... talk to each other? It's just a passive thing."

"It makes me uncomfortable." Ashley says, after a moment of silence. "Really uncomfortable. Sometimes, when I see you looking at me, it feels like, like, I guess like *twenty five thousand other men* are also getting an eyeful. What are they saying about me? Are they judging me? I don't know. I can't hear them."

"Right, you can't hear them." Henry says. "So why does it matter?"

Seeing her expression darken, he quickly adds, "Look, you could just join the Legion, honey. It feels great, and you'd become so much stronger. Like me! What's wrong with that?"

"Humans aren't meant to share their every waking thought and emotion with a collective." Ashley counters. "We're not *bugs*, Henry. We might be social creatures, but too much intimacy is weird. I don't want to join Jephthah's cult."

Henry lowers his eyes to stare at the grass.

"It's not a cult..."

His argument feels feeble in the moment. Truthfully, he can't help but acknowledge her argument is an emotional one, but he understands why she feels that way. Perhaps he'd feel the same if he swapped places with her.

"Hey." Henry says, looking back up at her. "Is this why... you and I... we're never...?"

"Never what?" Ashley asks, meeting his gaze.

"You know." Henry says. "*Intimate*. You rarely kiss me. We've never had a toss in the sheets. We're basically just friends who look at each other affectionately. Is our relationship doomed to stay like this?"

This time, it's Ashley who breaks eye contact. She looks off into the distance, sighing with a heavy heart.

"Doomed? I don't know. I can't get that feeling of being watched out of my head. It wouldn't just be you and me. I'd feel as if I were being... ogled. Watched by a bunch of men I can't see or interact with. A peep show for creeps. It makes me... so uncomfortable."

Henry lifts himself up into a sitting position. He reaches out to touch Ashley's shoulder.

"Babe, it's not like that. I see and feel what the other Legion members feel. We're all so used to, you know, to frolicking and that other stuff, it's not like we're a bunch of perverts. There's just as many women as men in the Legion. For all of us, it's more of a... an emotional bonding experience. We all enjoy romance, love, sex... we all enjoy the carnal pleasures of the flesh, but we also experience what it feels to give birth, to experience the pain of motherhood. It brings us closer together."

"But see? See??" Ashley snaps, pulling away from his touch. "That's weird! It's creepy! God, hearing you describe it makes me feel even dirtier. *Carnal pleasures*, do you even hear the words you're using?"

Henry lowers his arm and hangs his head helplessly. "I... I don't know what to say. I'm just trying to--"

He pauses for a moment as a thought enters his mind, a thought transmitted from one of the female members of the Legion.

Slowly, he lifts his eyes up to look at the profile of his girlfriend's face, slightly alarmed.

"Hey... uh... this, uh... what is this... really about?"

"Pardon?" Ashley asks, glancing at him with a look of alarm.

Henry remains quiet for a moment. He decides to fess up.

"Lauren- you remember Lauren, right?"

Ashley nods slowly. "We met a few months ago. What about her?"

"Well, she told me just now... ah, I don't know if I should- well, I'll just... I can't stop thinking about it, now that she's mentioned it."

Henry bites his lip. He looks at Ashley with a guilty expression.

"You... do you have some... other reason, for worrying about, you know... the 'peep show' stuff. It doesn't quite- you know? It doesn't feel like it's coming entirely out of thin air."

Ashley looks at Henry. Her expression remains neutral for a moment. Then, her eyelids sag a little. She slowly looks at the ground.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Henry's heart skips a beat. "So, there is something- I, I mean... something bad?"

Ashley quickly shakes her head. Her expression becomes stony as she turns her head away from Henry.

"I *don't* want to talk about it."

Inside Henry's head, the Legion remains quiet. All of them feel a deep and serious solemn pain cross their souls. Several of the women, and a surprising number of the men, they transmit a series of shared experiences among the collective. Henry experiences those emotions. He replays those painful memories, raw emotions that hurt to feel, as brutal acts of violence play out in all their minds.

Sadistic acts. Acts that no woman or man should ever have to suffer. Being pinned down, forced by someone stronger than them...

A flicker of rage passes over Henry's face, followed by an equally painful feeling of helplessness.

Ashley doesn't need to tell him what happened. After seven months together, the reasons for her hesitation become clear, making him feel guilty for not having noticed the signs sooner.

"I'm sorry." Henry says softly. "I didn't know. If... if that's the way you feel, I can see why... this relationship might not work out between us."

Ashley's body jerks slightly. She quickly turns her head to look at him.

"Henry, no. I- I don't want to... break up. I don't want that."

"I'm not going to subject you to any further pain." Henry says solemnly. "Humans suffered unimaginably before the Wordsmith appeared. I lost my friend Piper years ago. I know what the demons did to humans even before that. Hell, it wasn't just the demons, or

the monsters. Humans could be equally cruel to their fellow men... and women. I can only imagine what you endured."

Ashley's breathing hastens. She lowers the half-eaten sandwich in her hand, shakily setting it and her drink on the picnic cloth before clasping her hands together.

"It's not like that, Henry. I just- I need to get over some stuff, okay? I'm trying to... to cope. I want to be strong and stand up for myself. I don't want to be weak... like I was before. But sometimes, there are these dark images I can't get out of my head. Memories."

She looks at him for half a second, then looks away.

"When I look at you, I think of when... when other people were looking at me. Laughing at me. Humiliating me. I should have said something sooner, but I've just kept it all inside for seven months, and now it's ruining another relationship. It always does."

"Nothing is ruined. Not yet." Henry says, steeling his voice. He quickly reaches out to touch her shoulder again. This time, she doesn't pull away. "Whatever you've gone through, I want to be there for you. I won't judge you for it. I won't blame you. How could I? It wasn't your fault."

He shifts his weight slightly, pulling himself a little closer. "Ashley. I love you. Okay? I really love you. And if this Legion thing bothers you. If it *really* bothers you... I'll give it up."

"What?!" Ashley exclaims, turning to look at him in shock. "No! Henry, you can't. You have a duty. An obligation to humanity."

"No one man is the Legion." Henry says solemnly. "Obviously, if I could choose, I'd pick to keep you and the Legion both. But even if it means losing my new status, my superhuman powers, or all the rest of it, I'd still pick you. Because I think you're worth that much."

"What does it mean to be a human?" Henry continues. "Humans are so many things. We seek justice, we seek freedom... but we also seek love. Love is so important, and our enemies always underestimate just how essential it is to us. The demons never truly understood the love we feel, and neither did the angels. Especially not the Volgrim. It's why mothers give their lives to save their children, and fathers give their lives in war for their families. Frankly, if I wasn't willing to give up the Legion for you, I wouldn't be worthy of calling myself a man."

Ashley's expression softens. "You... don't have to go that far, Henry. I know how hard it was for you before you joined the Legion. I'd never make you give it up."

"You wouldn't be making me do anything." Henry says sternly. "I'd do it freely. For you."

Ashley smiles, a sad expression tinged with relief. To hear the man she loves finally putting her above the Legion makes her feel an unexpected warmth. She looks at Henry with a deeper affection than before, suddenly feeling her previous fears wash away.

"No. You stay with the Legion, Henry." Ashley says. "And you stay with me. We've needed to have this talk for a long time. I'm glad we did."

"I am too." Henry says, smiling toothily. "We'll work out the other stuff along the way. If you still have doubts moving forward... just tell me. Okay?"

"I'll tell you. I will." Ashley promises. "Thank you for being so understanding."

Henry and Ashley lean forward. They give each other a gentle kiss. She blushes cutely, then pulls away, returning to finish her sandwich, a happy glow on her face. At the same time, Henry smiles, feeling satisfied with how things have progressed between them.

Love is not a sprint, after all, but a marathon.

Only with understanding and acceptance can two people truly forge a lifelong bond.

In time, they can iron out the trauma she has experienced, and perhaps even move beyond it.

Sometimes I forget just how much damage our species has endured, Henry thinks. *Today was a reminder not to live in my head and be so self-absorbed. Everyone has it rough, but some people have it worse than the rest.*

Some time later, Henry returns to laying on his back with his hands folded behind his head. This time, he puts much more of his focus on his girlfriend, giving her the attention she deserves. As for the Legion, they do not bother him as much, and seek to keep out of his affairs to keep the cross-chatter to a minimum.

Their leader has earned that much.

Ashley takes a long sip from her drink. She turns to Henry as if to say something, then she pauses and cocks her head.

"Hm? Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Henry asks.

He sits up and looks around, yet even his superhuman hearing doesn't detect anything.

But then, after a few seconds, a distant scream of terror, barely audible, reaches his ears.

"Huh? Something's happening." Henry says, quickly jumping to his feet. "Stay here."

"No. I'll go with you." Ashley says, immediately monsterizing her body.

In just five seconds, she grows from five and a half feet tall to over eight feet, towering above her boyfriend. Then, she and Henry take off toward the commotion.

As they race across the meadow, the distant scream becomes several. They quickly spot dozens of people running toward them in a panic, fleeing from something unseen. Looks of terror hang on all of their faces as they scramble over and around anything in their path, running like panicked animals.

It doesn't take Henry and Ashley long to find what caused the disturbance.

At the edge of the village, five bipedal creatures with mottled green skin and faceless heads grab hold of people, stab their arms into those people's chests, and penetrate their ribs with green slithering tentacles that invade their veins and infest their hearts.

Henry's heart goes cold. In a single second, his terror washes across the Legion, waking all of them up and rousing them from whatever activity they all might be pursuing at that moment.

[KOLVAXIANS ON MAIURA!] Jephthath's voice telepathically booms. **[Everyone! TO ARMS!]**

Part 583: All Hell Breaks Loose

In an instant, countless failsafe warnings go off across human space. People jump into action, immediately enacting previously-prepared battle plans. Both of the Wordsmiths act in unison, and Neil Adams, still on Volgarius, receives real-time updates instantly.

Jepthath stands inside the Hall of Heroes, transmitting his thoughts and the vision of multiple Legionnaires onto viewscreens inside a command center built specifically for recon purposes. A live video feed of what Henry is seeing streams to one of the consoles, while similar livestreams play out from the POVs of more than a hundred other high level Legionnaires. Because of his dedicated magical abilities, Jepthath is easily able to synchronize all of their visions into a cohesive narrative, delivering updates to his fellow Heroes.

Solomon strategizes. He examines the data feeds and begins barking orders, allowing Jepthath to lead the Legion around where the need is greatest.

"Five Kolvaxians sighted on Maiura." Solomon says. "Other Kolvaxians assumed to be in the area. Legion Leader Henry is on the scene. I want Legion Generals Lauren and Diego moving people to Region Adams-114 and Adams-117. Additionally, I want scouting intel on Tarus II, Pixiv, and Sharmur. We need to know if there are Kolvaxians attacking other human-heavy worlds."

While Solomon assists Jepthath, Hope meets up with his kids and wife.

"I want to help!" Blake protests. "My powers can make a difference!"

"Absolutely not." Mandy says, shaking her head at her little brother. "You're not ready. You're too young. Dad and Levi will be taking the fight from the front and I'll be assisting from the back. If you go out there, as fresh of a newbie as you are, you'll just become a liability. You need years more training."

"Mandy's right." Levi says, squeezing his little brother's shoulder. "You stay here. I know in time you'll become a powerful weapon for humanity. But that time is not now. Not today."

Hope nods at his kids, his expression grim. "Levi, I need you to be extra careful. Fighting against one Kolvaxian in the training room won't be like fighting tens, hundreds,

or even millions of them in Realspace. We do NOT want a repeat of *Artoria*. If they grab you, I fear they might make another evolutionary leap in their physical biology again."

Levi nods. "Don't worry, dad, I'll be careful. I have Aunt Elizabeth's Greathammer. Together, we'll be unstoppable."

"The Kolvaxians are extremely resistant to blunt damage." Amelia warns. "If you find your attacks aren't landing, switch to a blade. I'll have Karla on standby for you."

"Right. Thanks, mom." Levi says, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "Wish us luck."

Not long afterward, Hope, Levi, and Mandy all vanish in a flash of light, teleporting to Realspace and leaving Blake and Amelia behind. The young man scowls bitterly, his lower lip trembling as he wrestles with feelings of dismay.

"It's not fair. I could help out there. I should be out there!"

"Don't be selfish." Amelia says, her expression darkening. "You think I don't want to go out there and help, young man? I assure you, it hurts just as bad that I'm stuck here, like a useless invalid. I used to be powerful in the past. I used to command magic that made Demon Emperors fearful. Now I'm only an ordinary woman."

Amelia's eyes flicker with self-recrimination. "I used to *be* somebody. Now I'm an ordinary housewife. I could still go out there and be more effective than ordinary human troopers in a lot of ways, but if I did, I know I'd be making Hope worried all the time and forcing him to keep an eye on me. It's like I'd be tying up half of his attention because he'd constantly be afraid of me getting killed. That's why I have to stay here."

Blake lowers his eyes. "But then... what can I do right now?"

"Go and train in the Queen Network." Amelia says. "Don't stop training. Master your abilities. The sooner you become a capable fighter, the sooner you can go against the Kolvaxians and humanity's other enemies."

A moment of silence follows. Blake nods slowly, then he reaches over and hugs his mother.

"Alright. Sorry, mom. I didn't mean to make a scene."

"It's fine, baby." Amelia says softly. "Let's just do what we can to help others in the meantime, okay?"

"Okay, mom."

On Volgarius, Neil and Linda receive news of the attack only moments before Unarin. By the time they've turned to inform him of the happenings on Maiura, Unarin has already been fully appraised of the situation.

"I knew it." Unarin says coldly. "This attack has been nearly a human-month in the making. Neil, I will dispatch my strongest Psions and Technopaths to Maiura, post-haste. You should return there in the meantime."

Emperor Crow looks at the two humans for a second, then closes her eyes sagely. "The demons will also-"

"We don't need the help of any demons." Neil interrupts. "My people will be fine with the help of the Volgrim."

"Mister Adams." Unarin says. "Now is not the time for your bigotry. This war is bigger than you. You must set aside past prejudices if you are to crush the Kolvaxians. To date, no worlds have ever survived a Kolvaxian invasion, especially not after their Empowerment."

"I agree with Unarin." Linda quickly adds. "We need all the help we can get. Don't turn the demons down, Neil."

The human military commander hesitates. He looks at Crow, and she crosses her feathered arms.

"Hey, if you don't want our help, you're free to tackle the unkillable death machine on your own." Crow says smugly. "Knock yourself out."

"Fine. We'll take the help of the demons. And if we survive this, we'll help your people if you ever get attacked too." Neil says. "It's only fair."

"Right. It's only fair." Crow replies, echoing Neil. "Such a generous man. Well? You'd better get going."

Neil swallows the words he truly wants to say. He taps a magical pendant on his chest, and a moment later, he and Linda vanish, teleported by Hope's power.

After they disappear, Crow stands up from her seat and cracks her back.

"Thank you for the meal, Unarin. This has been pleasant."

Unarin looks at her coldly. "You should stop antagonizing the humans. I'm loathe to say it, but the Volgrim need their power. And so do you."

"We demons are powerful enough." Crow retorts. "We can handle ourselves. In case you've forgotten, we have more than half a dozen Middle Cosmics. You have *one*."

"You think that's impressive?" Unarin asks derisively. "In case you've forgotten, above a Middle Cosmic is a High Cosmic. And above those are Apex Cosmics. The Milky Way has neither of the latter ranks, but other galaxies have *many*. We are weaklings. Your paltry starbound Cosmics would crumble if but a single High Cosmic entered the Milky Way's Akashic Barrier, let alone an Apex Cosmic. I think the recent appearance of that Archangel should be proof enough."

"We've unlocked the secret to breaking through." Crow says confidently. "We will figure something out in time."

"No. You won't." Unarin growls. "Diablo was your sole path to Ascension. With him gone, the number of Demon Deities can only decrease."

"And just *who* do you think taught Diablo the way to Elevate our people?" Crow fires back. "The First Emperor. He's still around. He will come up with a new plan, assuming we don't do that ourselves."

"Hah hah hah..." Unarin laughs joylessly, lowering and shaking his head at the same time. "Oh, how little you know. Do you still not understand the truth? That Voidborn is no 'demon' at all. The fact he pretends to be a Demon Emperor while truly being a Cosmic should make you quite worried. Whatever he is, he's playing your species for fools. He's using you like pawns. I fear the day will come when he will plunge a dagger into your back, as well as all the rest of us."

Crow frowns. "If he's not a demon, then what is he? Do you even know?"

"I don't. And that's really the problem. He's an enigma, even to me." Unarin concludes. "I have guesses, of course, but there's simply not enough evidence to substantiate any claims."

The First Founder waves his hand flippantly.

"You should go. Time is of the essence. I need to coordinate my Psions to reach Maiura. You and the Deities should hurry up and reinforce the humans before it's too late."

"Yes. We'll get right on that." Crow says, gurgling sinisterly in her throat.

She steps away from the table, and a few moments later, a portal opens up, created by Demon Deity Yardrat halfway across the galaxy. She passes through it and disappears.

[Dosena.] Unarin thinks. [How long until our forces reach Maiura?]

[Three standard time units.] Dosena replies.

[Too slow. Far too slow.] Unarin says with a scowl. [Use the Warpgates. Speed things up. I don't give a damn about your pride. This is our chance to make inroads with the humans. We need them to feel grateful to us.]

Dosena's voice takes a moment to respond.

[...Very well. We will use the Maiuran Warpgate to accelerate our arrival time.]

[Oh, don't get all pissy with me.] Unarin snaps. [Dammit, Dosena. This is important.]

[I simply think you're taking these mud-dwellers too seriously.] Dosena says blandly. [What can humans do that our greatest Technopath inventors cannot?]

Unarin snorts. [I guess you'll just have to wait until you've reached Maiura, won't you? You'll know then.]

On Maiura, three seconds pass from the moment Henry spots the Kolvaxian to the moment he takes action.

Merely three seconds.

And in that time, 300 seconds pass in the Hall of Heroes, while 750 seconds pass in Chrona.

Without delay, a dozen other Legionnaires teleport into the Hall of Heroes, arm themselves with pre-planned loadouts of artifact armors and weapons, then teleport onto Maiura to stand tall beside their Champion.

Simultaneously, Amelia controls the teleportation networks inside the Hall of Heroes to begin rapidly and efficiently teleporting any human and monster civilians out of the line of fire. Those people vanish, moving from the Kolvaxian landing zone up into the heavily reinforced city atop Mount Adams.

Just as the Legionnaires appear, so also do Hope, Levi, and Mandy. The three Heroes of Humanity stand tall, quickly taking in their surroundings while the Legion's reinforcements move to assist their Champion.

Mandy waves her hand, and a piece of magical parchment appears in her grasp as if pulled out of thin air. Her eyes flicker with light, and the paper explodes into flames, causing a magical rune to materialize above her head. That rune pulses with powers, sending something like a sonar ping out in all directions through the air and ground.

"Seventeen more Kolvaxians." Mandy says grimly. "Burrowing away from us at high speeds. They're traveling toward the distant civilians we haven't teleported yet."

"So many already? Damn!" Hope curses. "Mandy, Levi, you two work together to take out any you can find. I'm going to help with these five first!"

"Okay." Levi says, turning to his sister. "Lead the way."

With his sister's massive rune pinpointing the enemies hidden below the soil, Levi and Mandy race off to the west to chase after seven closely grouped-together Kolvaxians, while the other ten creatures disperse and make it too difficult to follow them.

Meanwhile, Henry stands alone for a few moments against those five. His aura explodes with power as he reaches into the pocket dimension of a small pendant hanging around his neck. He pulls out Artoria, his mightiest weapon, and switches it to its heaviest setting while also activating its flame-mode.

Then he attacks!

Wearing no armor or anything to project his seemingly fragile human body, Henry lunges at the Kolvaxians to draw their attention and present himself as an appetizing meal. After many months of occasionally visiting the Hall of Heroes to train against captured Kolvaxians, Henry has long grown accustomed to fighting them. No human, except for possibly Levi, is as adept at combating the faceless monsters in the same brutal manner Henry is.

His sword swings slowly, each heft of the blade a deliberate and ponderous action empowered by the strength of his muscles. In his first swing, he diagonally cleaves one of the Kolvaxians from its neck to its hip, severing it in two while also instantly cauterizing the wounds with magical flames. The monster collapses to its knees, then it falls over and starts writhing around, trying to grab anything nearby purely out of reflex.

Henry easily avoids the fallen creature. Even though cutting it in half won't kill it, the cauterization ensures it won't regenerate quickly. He pivots to the remaining four, all of which rush him and try to rake his skin with their claws. One of them grabs his shirt, but

Henry pulls away, tearing the cloth and leaving the Kolvaxian to grasp at the air futilely. He spins the sword around and lops off the Kolvaxian's head, decapitating it in a single move! Even so, its body falls to the ground and spasms, still alive.

While Henry swiftly brings each of the Kolvaxians down one by one, his girlfriend remains in her monsterized form. Ashley wields a massive greathammer made at her request, one which doesn't have the cutting potential of Artoria, but which does have a special function built in.

A magical jet booster on the opposite side of his flattened head ignites as she raises the hammer overhead, allowing her to swing it down with ten times her usual strength. She smashes the head of the Kolvaxian Henry bisected, splattering its brains and killing it on the spot. As for the second Kolvaxian, it takes her a few seconds to extract the hammer from the splattered corpse, raise it overhead, and bring it down once more.

SPLAT!!

She and Henry have trained together in a special chamber made by Hope for people like them. They have grown closer over the last several months and learned to refine their teamwork. As such, Henry brings down the Kolvaxians, and Ashley finishes them off, allowing the duo to hunt and kill at maximum efficiency.

Simultaneously, the other nearby members of the Legion attack the remaining Kolvaxians from the sides and from behind, hemming the creatures in and restraining their movements. While these lesser Legionnaires might not be at Henry's level, they can still put up far more of a fight than any other mundane human soldier. Even the humans who have reached the maximum of what their bodies can tolerate from the Body Boosters are no match for ordinary Legionnaires.

Within a single minute, Hope and Ashley work together with the lesser Legion members to kill off those five Kolvaxians. But their expressions don't turn to smiles.

"There's still more Kolvaxians appearing." Henry tells his girlfriend with a grim expression. Since she isn't part of the Legion, he has to keep her verbally informed on the situation. "Kolvaxians are still emerging elsewhere on the planet. They infected multiple monsters and several humans. The seventeen that left before have become forty-nine."

"Forty-nine *known* Kolvaxians, Lord Henry." Says Lauren, one of the Legion Commanders. "There are likely others we can't sense."

"Every second is precious." Ashley adds. "Let's split up in groups of two and three."

Even in these few seconds of exchange, the Hall of Heroes continues teleporting more Legionnaires from across the galaxy to Maiura, continually reinforcing the soldiers there. But, at the same time, Kolvaxians keep appearing on the planet from a mysterious source. The Legionnaires nod along to Ashley's suggestion in unison, then they all split apart and rush off, leaving Ashley and Henry by themselves.

"Come on!" Henry says, anger growing on his face. "Let's kill these bastards!"

Hope gives chase after a pair of Kolvaxians. He wields the full power of Excalibur, his feet blazing with light as he 'skates' just above the ground on a pair of mystical shoes boosted by his daughter's Runes. Thanks to having humanity's first Runecrafter for a child, Hope has gained access to powerful enchanted armor and weapons, a fact that has helped him catch up to Jason's own homegrown artifacts.

The Second Wordsmith moves quickly. His eyes light up as he spins around to build momentum, then violently slashes across one of the Kolvaxian's midsections, cutting it across both of its arms and chest. The monster topples forward and collapses to the dirt, while Hope follows up with an empowered burst of divine magic channeled through Excalibur's blade. He impales the Kolvaxian's head, killing it on the spot. Then he turns to fight the second one.

But at that second, Jason appears!

Jason, now decked out from head to toe in a flashy golden set of armor, does not come alone. Two other copies of himself, his 'Dronesmiths', join the original body, controlled via a combination of his thoughts and artificial intelligence. They attack the Kolvaxian, one of the drones stabbing its thigh and the other one stabbing it throat. Their combination attack pins it in place long enough for Jason to land the killing blow, obliterating its existence with a slash of his Subatomic Atomizer Sword. The SAS instantly disperses a cloud of nanites throughout the Kolvaxian's body, eating it alive and turning it to dust in less than three seconds, causing it to melt into a cloud of ash and blow into the wind.

Hope's face warps in fury. "Hey! What the fuck was that? I've GOT it! I can handle myself, Jason! I didn't ask for your help!"

Jason barely even registers Hope's anger. He's grown all too used to his clone's outbursts over the years.

"Next time, a 'thanks' will suffice." Jason says blandly. "I just came here to tell you I'm going to work on cleaning up the Kolvaxians in the north. Their numbers are rising quickly. If you tackle the south side of Mount Adams, we can sweep around and take them all out."

"No. NO. Absolutely not!" Hope exclaims, this time eliciting a set of raised eyebrows from Jason and both his Dronesmiths. "Maiura is MY world. Stay the fuck out of my business. I don't need your help."

"What? Are you being serious right now??" Jason asks, bewildered. "For god's sake, Hope. This is NOT the time for your petty bullshit. Lives are at stake. People are being infected as we speak!"

"And I'll eliminate anyone who is infected. I WILL." Hope states, snarling at his original body. "I don't WANT, I don't NEED, and I sure as fuck don't DESIRE your help! Stay out of my business! Go play with your baby! My people have prepped for a Kolvaxian attack. We can handle ourselves!"

"You're being completely unreasonable! You're being an idiot!" Jason fires back. "The Volgrim can't stop the Kolvaxians, so what makes you think you're any different?!"

"I AM different!" Hope shouts, causing a blood vessel on the side of his head to pulsate. "I'm not YOU. I'm not a goddamn fuck-up who got his own daughter killed! I sure as hell don't want you ruining things here like you did on Tarus II!"

Jason blinks.

He takes a step back, looking at Hope in disbelief.

"...After all this time. You'd really go that low? Fuck you, Hope. You want to handle this on your own? You want to wear the big boy pants? Show everyone what a badass you are? Fine. I'll stay out of your way. Maiura is yours. But if those Kolvaxians show up anywhere else, I'm not letting this farce proceed any further."

"You don't need to worry about that. We'll be just fine on our own." Hope counters. "Now leave! LEAVE!"

Dismayed, Jason looks at Hope with an expression of disgust. Never did he imagine Hope's hatred had grown to such a level. The fact Hope would put lives at risk disgusts

Jason more than anything else Hope has said or done.

"Let's pray your little ego trip doesn't cause any problems." Jason says, before turning away. "**Return.**"

He vanishes. A moment later, so do the Dronesmiths.

Jason appears inside Chrona, his expression downcast. He walks over to the Spynet Sphere, where he sees a bewildered Fiona looking at him strangely.

"What was that about?" She asks.

"Hell if I know." Jason mutters. "I thought Hope moved past his hatred for me. It seems he's gotten worse since last month, even."

Fiona shakes her head. "So we're just going to sit here and do nothing?"

"Of course not." Jason says, standing up straighter. "My other half might choose to be a moron, but I'm not throwing lives away. Let's put all those teleportation matrices to good use. Start moving anyone who isn't in the Legion off Maiura. Make sure to target isolated people so Hope doesn't notice."

"Where should I move them?" Fiona asks.

"We have several options." Jason answers. "Cube spaces. Tarus II. Pixiv. Even Sharmur, I suppose."

"I'd advise against Sharmur." Fiona interjects. "Maiurans are not receptive to the demons. Best to keep them separate."

"Right. Not Sharmur then. Pixiv and the Cube spaces should be fine." Jason says. "Let's get to working. Every second that passes in reality is potentially another casualty. The new Plague infects FAST."

"Yeah. It sure does." Fiona says glumly.

She turns back to the screens monitoring the Milky Way, and Jason falls silent, thinking different thoughts to himself.

Why the hell is Hope acting so damn irrational when it comes to me? Is he really that willing to throw lives away? Just for his stupid ego? Something doesn't add up...

What context am I missing...?

Part 584: Observing the Chaos

The Plague makes landfall on Maiura, but contrary to the expectations of the demons and the Volgrim, the human species does not immediately fold and descend into chaos.

Utilizing the unique abilities of their Heroes, including both Wordsmiths, all the entities within the Hall of Heroes, and Hope's children, the humans themselves begin activating a series of pre-planned countermeasures to the Kolvaxian menace. At the same time, their allies among the Monsters chip in, though the support of Demons is not looked upon fondly by Maiura's human supremacist population.

Luckily, the Threat posed by the Kolvaxians is far too high for these closed-minded people to have much sway. Even Neil himself gives in, informing the other human worlds that Demons are allowed to participate in this war. However, after his horrible comments on monsters and demons at the Great Debate, more than a few of the monsters who once looked up to him no longer decide to make their way to the world being overtaken by the galactic menace.

And so, within just minutes, a myriad of different human, monster, demon, and Volgrim allies descend upon Maiura, rushing to help the humans during their time of need.

Founder Dosena does not travel there, but she does personally dispatch four Executors and a dozen 7th-Level Psions. They arrive quickly, using the ancient Warp gates to travel across the Milky Way in a fraction of the time that even their superior spatial navigation powers would allow.

Creator Demila is the first to arrive on the scene. She levitates a mile above Mount Adams, scanning the planet's surface with her Psionic senses. She hides within a spatial tear, making herself invisible to the primitive mud-dwellers while waiting for her fellow Psions to arrive. Not thirty seconds later, some of them do, followed by even more.

Executor Vi invisibly flickers past the humans running around barking orders at one another, jumping into position beside her subordinate.

[Status?] Vi asks Demila, though both of them wait for a moment as the other Executors and 7th-Level Psions show up.

Once the bulk of their strongest people arrive, Demila updates them on what she's found.

[The mud-dwellers are holding their own.] She says. [Extremely well. Surprisingly well, even. Hope Hiro's children all possess Heroic powers, and while they are not as multi-faceted as the Wordsmith's abilities, they are certainly strong.]

[I read about them in your recent reports.] Divinator Fellrun, the newest member of the Executors says. [This seems to imply that Heroes who breed can create other Heroes, yet this was not the case during or before the Energy Wars. It appears the Wordsmiths are unique in some way.]

As a Specialist who grew his abilities from a smaller pool of Psionic Powers, Fellrun's quantitative abilities are not as strong as the others, but his preferred specializations grant him a frightening advantage in the realms of reconnaissance. He can easily see through illusions and detect phenomena of which no other Executor is capable.

[Jason Hiro previously had a child named Daisy Hiro. She possessed powerful latent abilities of her own at the age of only six orbital cycles.] Demila explains. As the expert on recent human advances, one who has been observing them carefully for nearly a year, she is much better informed than the Executors who until recently were always on the front-lines of the Kolvaxian War. [It is probably that this genetic predisposition to inheriting powers is being passed down from them due to a magically-induced mutation. I am having our best Changelings observe from afar before we engage in direct experiments.]

Executor Riley levitates with her arms crossed, looking disdainfully at the ant-like humans below. [I do not comprehend. How are these mud-dwellers faring so well against the Plague? I have personally fought the newly enhanced Plaguehosts. They are extremely difficult for even Executors to kill, yet I am currently observing multiple mortal mud-dwellers executing them with ease.]

Her gaze fixates first on Henry as he cuts down a handful of Kolvaxians, then it flickers over to Hope Hiro, and finally to Hope's son, Levi. All three of these superhumans singlehandedly manage to take down one to two Kolvaxians at a time, revealing their extraordinary strength.

[Their weapons are extraordinary.] Divinator Fellrun observes. His keen vision easily pierces the Truths hidden from those with clouded eyes. [The human wielding the flaming sword...]

[He is Lord Henry Cliff.] Demila says, providing context for the Psions not in the know about humanity's key individuals.

[This 'Henry Cliff' is an interesting individual.] Fellrun continues. [His physical parameters are not a match for the Enhanced Kolvaxians. However, he wields an extraordinary sword with a bladed edge capable of cutting alloys beyond what its physical design implies. Its metaphysical properties must be extremely advanced. I suspect the humans have acquired the skills of a Legendary Blacksmith.]

[A Legendary Blacksmith?] Executor Sartran asks with a frown. [Archangel Camael? Is it true that she has reappeared? I believed the rumors to be unconfirmed.]

[Not necessarily the Archangel, no.] Fellrun replies. [It is likely the humans are using the powers of the Heroes they stole from Moonbase Serris. Hope Hiro must have used his Wordsmithing to activate one of their souls for humanity's benefit.]

Sartran nods slowly. He has of course heard about the fate that befell Serris, but unfortunately, as a front-line fighter, he didn't have much time or energy to devote to matters related to the homeworld. He was unaware of the full extent of humanity's treachery.

[If that is the case, then these humans are advancing more rapidly than we predicted.] Sartran says, his words heavy. [We must inform the Founders of this. Creator Demila, take care to report every anomaly while we focus on assisting the humans in surviving this Plague onslaught.]

A flicker of ill intent passes across Demila's eyes, but nobody notices. Perhaps if she had a mouth, she might sneer at her superiors, unaware of her true intentions.

[Of course. I am dutifully reporting every matter, no matter how minor, to the Five Founders.] Demila says, quickly bowing her head subserviently.

Sartran nods. He glances at Executor Huron, the most physically imposing of all the High Psions.

[Huron. Some of these mud-dwellers are killing the Plaguehosts with relative ease. That means they may even be capable of threatening you.]

[Hah. You jest.] Executor Huron spits back. [These clumsy creatures cannot bring out even a fraction of my body's power. What use is a weapon when placed in the hands of an amateur? Do not insult my battle prowess by comparing it to mere Kolvaxians.]

[Those 'mere Kolvaxians' managed to get the better of both of us, and that was before they became empowered by the Black Hole Construct.] Sartran replies modestly, looking at Huron with a hint of pity. [It is not a good look for one to speak so boastfully when they have already lost to an inferior opponent.]

Huron doesn't respond. He simply falls silent, growling inside his own head about how Sartran would dare to speak such words in the presence of others.

Unfortunately, Huron cannot offer a counter-argument. Sartran's assessments are accurate, after all.

Executor Vi patiently watches the battle below. [The humans are containing the Plague decently enough for now. We shall wait to intervene until they require our assistance. Let Maiura serve as a testing ground for how the humans will fare against our enemies, moving forward. If this world falls, they will still have others to fall back to.]

[So we will do nothing?] Demila asks.

[We may pull humans out of the way, teleporting them if the situation becomes too dangerous.] Vi replies. [But the Second Founder's were absolute. We must measure humanity's strength. Other considerations come second.]

[Very well.] Demila says, turning her attention back to the humans below. [We shall do as the Second Founder commands.]

The Kolvaxians continue to split apart, making things difficult for humanity's soldiers. Since each individual Kolvaxian is so powerful that only someone at Hope Hiro or Henry's level can reliably kill one, the ordinary soldiers have but one job; slowing the Plaguehosts down.

Despite the three champions managing to kill over a dozen Kolvaxians in less than a minute, more and more of the creatures continue to appear. The Kolvaxian numbers tick upward slowly but steadily, going from a handful to more than fifty, and eventually even a hundred.

Screams cry out all around the base of Mount Adams. With a population of a few hundred thousand humans on Maiura, even if most of them are located inside the fort built atop the mountain, tens of thousands of individuals still live outside its protective embrace.

A father tries to protect his daughter when one Kolvaxian bursts out of the ground, exploding through the floor into their home. The faceless monster wastes no time in stabbing its hand into the man's chest, impaling him and draining all the strength from his body. The man groans in pain as green tendrils flood into his blood vessels, rapidly infecting him and turning his skin the same sickly color as the monster that attacked him.

Not ten seconds later, the Kolvaxian pulls its hand out. The little girl screams as it attacks her next, repeating the pattern. All the while, her father burrows into the soil to complete his metamorphosis.

The father and daughter fade away from reality, no longer remaining the individuals they once were.

They become one with the Swarm.

Moments after the little girl burrows into the soil, three members of the Legion break down the door. They jump into the shack and battle the Kolvaxian three-on-one, roaring with rage as they realize whoever once lived in this isolated hut has disappeared from human memory. No longer will they be individuals, but monsters condemned to live an existence of pseudo-death.

Two of the Legionnaires wield massive greatswords, empowered with Runes made by Hope's daughter, Mandy. Their edges shine with a reddish sheen, revealing the heat flowing along their blades. But unfortunately, unlike Henry, the two Legionnaires are not nearly as well equipped nor as strong as him. They take turns cutting and hacking at the Kolvaxian to try and kill it, but the creature regenerates its wounds. The third Legionnaire tries to pin the monster down with a trident, using her superior range to stab it from afar. She wishes to immobilize it long enough for her brothers to land a killing blow...

But unfortunately, her artifact is too weak! It fails to penetrate the Kolvaxian's thick carapace. Like a toddler trying to stab a tank to death with a stick, her weapon continuously glances off the Kolvaxian's hide, completely ineffective at its purpose.

Suddenly, the Kolvaxian lunges at her. It wraps its five-fingered hand around her neck, lifts her up, and slams her into the floor like a ragdoll. The woman's vision momentarily goes blank, before the Kolvaxian stabs its other hand into her chest.

"AAAAARGH!"

All three Legionnaires scream in unison. The infection spreads through her body, and her agony transmits to the entire rest of the Legion, including Henry himself!

"AAAH!" Henry screams, doubling over in pain right as he's about to engage his seventh Kolvaxian.

Luckily, his girlfriend jumps in the way and smashes the creature aside with her orcish strength. She saves her boyfriend from being infected, and a moment later, his screams stop.

"Are you okay?!" Ashley asks.

"I'm alright!" Henry says, staggering to his feet. "One of the Legionnaires- she's gone. Jephthah cut her off before the parasite could infect the rest of us- but she's GONE!"

Henry's eyes momentarily mist up. He can't help but remember that one woman's personality, her thoughts and feelings, the fear she felt as the tendrils ripped through her body, turning her into...

But he doesn't have time to mourn. The Kolvaxian Ashley smashed aside quickly re-engages, forcing Henry to fight once more!

And yet, the screams of two more Legionnaires join together in his mind. The trio failed. They weren't strong enough to contain that lone Kolvaxian. It successfully infected the father, daughter, and the three Legionnaires who attacked it.

Thus, five more Kolvaxians join the Swarm. All without a casualty to show for humanity's benefit.

Henry quickly cuts down the enemy in front of him. He kills his Kolvaxian foe, then grits his teeth as painful memories finally come flowing.

"Each time- every time a Kolvaxian infects someone in the Legion, we all feel it! This is bad! This is really bad!"

Ashley looks at him, uncertain. "What do we do, then?"

"Keep fighting! We have to keep fighting." Henry urges. "We need to evacuate everyone."

But inside of Henry's mind, Jephthah speaks.

[No. Not all is lost. We've anticipated this day would come. We've made preparations. Have faith, my Champion. Now is not the time for your mind to buckle. Humanity is FAR

from beaten!]

Neil Adams materializes atop Mount Adams, inside the heart of his empire. He pauses for half a breath to get his bearings, where he finds himself inside his newly built command center with a holographic globe of the planet, now zoomed in on the local region where the Kolvaxians have appeared.

"Neil, you're here. That was quicker than I expected."

Neil turns to look in the direction of the speaker, where he finds General Chadwick standing at attention in front of the holographic display. All around him, other Lieutenants and Corporals move calmly and efficiently, relaying orders to distant platoons as the situation on Maiura continues to worsen.

"Status?" Neil asks, folding his hands behind his back and walking toward Chadwick. At the same time, Linda materializes and joins him.

"So far, we estimate north of one hundred Kolvaxians have taken root." Chadwick says, pointing at a series of red dots surrounding Mount Adams. "We're not able to track the Kolvaxians easily. Their chaotic energies inhibit magical detectors. The Runes laid down by Hope's daughter are of no use. That leaves mundane technologies."

"Surely they must be tripping the underground runic grid." Linda says. "Even if we can't actively detect them, we need only pay attention to which runes are inhibited and where."

"Yes, we're using methods like that to follow the Kolvaxian's underground movements." Chadwick explains. "But Kolvaxians 'swim' beneath the soil *fast*. I'm talking several hundreds of kilometers per hour. They trip one rune, and five seconds later they're already tripping a different rune a kilometer away. On top of that, multiple Kolvaxians can trip multiple runes at a time, making it hard to estimate the direction they're traveling. We're trying to use seismic monitors to track their movements, but they barely even disturb the soil as they swim."

"Troublesome." Neil says, his expression darkening. "Is our killing efficiency keeping pace with their replication?"

"Not even close." Chadwick says. "For every bogey we wipe out, three more take their place. Those isolated settlers are our worst enemies. The Kolvaxians are picking off the

loners and the small families, which gives them even more hosts to aim for the larger settlements. We've only evacuated 2% of Maiura's populace, or 15% of the ones outside Mount Adams. If the situation keeps worsening, the Kolvaxians will hit a critical mass. We won't be able to stop them!"

Before Chadwick can continue, a distant *boom* suddenly rumbles in the air. Every person inside the fortress built atop Mount Adams staggers slightly as the city itself vibrates.

"...They've reached the first defensive layer." Neil says, his eyes betraying no emotion. "We'd better pray Hope's *Wordsmithium* as is effective as the stuff Jason makes."

Boom.

The city rumbles again as a Kolvaxian strikes the underground barrier protecting the city, cutting its upper level off from the soil beneath it.

Several months ago, a massive ten-foot-thick wall of Wordsmithium was erected around the entirety of the city's base. The only way inside is to climb over the city's walls or approach it from above. But luckily, only the Psionic Plaguehosts can levitate, and they are not present on Maiura.

Again and again, the city rumbles as a lone Kolvaxian somewhere in the underground depths pounds on the solid Wordsmithium barrier, but luckily it doesn't even make a dent.

Still, its actions cause people to feel fear. A hint of panic spreads as people look to Neil for signs of security.

The Commander does not falter. He continues to remain impassive, as if the earthquakes beneath his feet have nothing to do with him.

"Start deploying the Secondary Measures." Neil orders. "We need to slow the Plague down. It's replicating too quickly. And get Hans on the line. Tell him it's time for our counter-attack."

Chadwick nods. "Consider it done."

"It's about time we show the galaxy the true might of humanity." Linda says, though her grim expression betrays her lack of confidence.

Hope Hiro charges at yet another Kolvaxian. He lifts Excalibur overhead, then roars with rage as he brings the Divine Blade down, cleaving the monster in two. Before it can regenerate, he slices and dices it into sashimi, killing it as dead as he ever could.

[PILOT HOPE HIRO. THIS SYSTEM IS DETECTING AN ANOMALOUS SPATIAL SURGE.] Centurion's nanites say, transmitting their words directly into hope's mind.

Hope glances around. He breathes heavier than usual, but Excalibur's energy quickly revitalizes his body, keeping him in tip-top shape.

Now inside a small settlement to the northwest of Mount Adams, Hope has already watched ten people be infected by the Plague. Their bodies dove underground to finish the conversion process before re-emerging from the soil, empowered just like all the rest.

It tears him apart when he thinks about how many innocent humans he's had to kill; people who had no choice but to attack him as their infested minds told them to do.

"An anomaly? Where?" Hope asks, quickly looking around.

Then, something happens that shocks Hope to his core.

A Kolvaxian appears in front of him as if stepping out from behind a one-way glass wall. The creature resembles an Orc, but with clawed talons instead of simple human-like fingers. It appears as if teleporting via Wordsmithing, a fact that completely wrecks Hope's conception of reality. Then, it turns to face him, and goes on the attack!

"The hell?!" Hope gasps. "Where did it come from?!"

Nobody answers him. Hope is alone in this fight.

He defends himself, using Excalibur's power to conjure a shield of light. When the monster attacks, Hope summons forth Hammurabi's Stele, making blinding words of radiance flash forth into reality.

EYE FOR AN EYE.

When the creature claws at the barrier, its attack gets rebounded, causing terrible claw-gashes to rip across its chest and send it flying backward. The creature does not scream in pain, due to lacking a mouth, but it does writhe on the ground for a moment before healing its wounds. It draws upon the energy of the soil to revitalize its body, affording it a rate of regeneration far beyond the ordinary.

Then Hope attacks!

He slashes at the creature, but Excalibur only bites into the monster's skin before stopping when it hits a bone. The monster's physique appears much hardier than the others, causing Hope's heart to skip a beat.

Strong! Hope thinks while retracting Excalibur.

He viciously chops at the monster, dancing around while keeping his feet off the ground, always alert for a possible ambush. His hovering boots, empowered by his daughter, grant him a mobility advantage, effectively letting him dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

Crack! Crack! Boom!

Excalibur smashes against the Empowered Kolvaxian, but again and again, Hope fails to cut through its resilient bones. The heavy sword simply lacks the striking power needed to finish the monster off.

Suddenly, it swings a backfist at Hope, catching him off-guard. Hope's mind becomes a blur as that fist strikes the side of his head and sends him flying! He wakes up seconds later face-down in the dirt with Excalibur a stone's throw away.

"Aww... shid..." Hope moans, feeling stars dance in his eyes.

The sounds of feet stomping toward him wake him up. Hope shakily jumps up to see the gorilla-like Kolvaxian charging, its fists raised as it prepares to end his life.

"PUSH!" Hope shouts, conjuring the full power of Wordsmithing.

A wave of power surges at the Kolvaxian. But instead of sending it flying away, the creature's chaotic energy neutralizes the magic of the attack, leaving only the breeze of the shockwave to splash harmlessly against its body.

"No!" Hope cries, horror in his eyes.

Abruptly, a figure appears in the monster's path. A figure Hope never in a million years expected to come to his rescue.

A demon with two heads.

BOOM!

Gressil, the Warden of Faith's End, smashes his fist into the Kolvaxian's face and sends it tumbling backward. He fails to inflict any meaningful damage to it, but still buys Hope

a few seconds to grab Excalibur.

Hope does that.

He dives for the sword, then points it at Gressil, uncertain.

Gressil raises his lip in a sneer. "Haha."

Then, he vanishes, leaving Hope alone with the charging Kolvaxian once again.

Hope's heart turns cold. *What the hell? Why would HE show up here? What the hell is this about?!*

But he doesn't have time to dwell on such thoughts. With Gressil 'gone', or at least hiding somewhere unseen, Hope still has to deal with the Kolvaxian right in front of him.

And so, he does.

Hope goes all-out. He empowers Excalibur with his Wordsmithing, calling upon Arthur's spirit to lash out and unleash a full-powered Divine Slash at a downward angle. He finally breaks the creature's bones, shatters its body, and obliterates it from existence, killing it on the spot.

Afterward, Hope feels no joy. Only worry and fear.

He looks around in a panic, trying to perceive the enemy he knows must be hiding nearby.

"Show yourself!" Hope shouts.

Gressil does not appear.

Instead, his voice speaks on the wind.

"Your time has not yet come, Hope Hiro. You still have a role to play. I won't let you die before I've seen it all through."

Hope's eyes narrow. "Seen what through? I don't have time for your games, goddammit!"

"The moment it all collapses." Gressil says, his tone sinister. *"The moment it all shatters. We're so close. Don't die on me now, Hope. I've always believed in your potential. You're the one who can make it all possible."*

"The fuck does THAT mean?!" Hope spits back.

Gressil doesn't reply. The Wordsmith's question lingers in the wind, unanswered.

Hope snarls angrily. He slashes at the ground in a fit of anger, but ultimately, his rage leads to nothing.

"You fucker. You fucking fucker." Hope hisses. "Eat shit and die, Gressil. **Teleport.**"

He vanishes from the spot, traveling elsewhere to continue the good fight.

Gressil watches from a short distance away. His body invisible, undetectable.

"Haha. He's so close to breaking. All he needs is a push. Just one little push. He doesn't even know it yet. Haha."

Gressil strokes his chin.

"There is... one outlier. Raphael. You really think you're sneaky, don't you? But it's fine. The game wouldn't be fun without other players. Haha."

The Warden of Faith's End dissipates into the wind...

Part 585: Battlefield Star

The battle intensifies on Maiura's surface. As minutes pass, more and more Kolvaxians continue to appear, but what worries humanity's military the most is an unnerving discovery they make early on; a discovery that goes beyond their calculations.

"What do you mean 'it just appeared'?" Neil asks, bewildered. "It teleported in front of you?"

"Yes." Hope answers quickly, his voice transmitting over the communication channel while he battles yet another one of the monsters. "The Kolvaxian simply appeared out of thin air. That must mean they have a way to teleport onto Maiura without conquering the planet's core. The rate of teleportation is much slower, but they can materialize anywhere, and each individual Kolvaxian is worth a thousand of the ones before they evolved!"

Neil's expression turns ugly. "At least you found out early on. This is important information. I'll adjust our strategies to compensate."

Hope cuts off the communication channel, and Neil turns to his wife. "That explains how they're appearing so fast. They aren't just infecting our people, they're bringing fresh bodies here."

"But how?" Linda asks. "I know Kolvaxians have historically made landfall on worlds by teleporting one of their kind onto a planet's surface, but the records implied they only did this once, perhaps because it was difficult to pull off. If they can do it repeatedly, then why didn't they do it sooner?"

"It might be... a new ability." Neil says, closing his eyes. "These creatures have already adapted by devouring Artoria's power. Perhaps they've assimilated another ability now. Either way, it's bad news for us. We have to assume a rogue Kolvaxian could appear inside the fortress at any moment! I want all our people on the lookout, ready to sound the alarm in an instant. Damn, and we still have a hundred thousand civilians inside the walls... we can't possibly keep an eye on all of them."

"You worry about the military." Linda says. "Leave evacuating the civilians to me."

On the northern side of Mount Adams, Hope Hiro battles Kolvaxians alone. A handful of Legionnaires also fight in the area to offer support if he needs it.

On the southern side, Henry and Ashley work together with two hundred Legionnaires, working to systematically take down one Kolvaxian after another.

On the western side, Hope's children, Levi and Mandy, fight alongside their monster and human comrades to inflict as much damage as possible on the monsters.

But on the eastern side, humanity lacks a champion capable of killing the monsters one-by-one with ease. Here, the soldiers fight for their lives, utilizing teamwork to slow the creatures down, cut them apart, and burn their bodies to ash, all while lacking the punching power of Excalibur or Artoria to even the odds.

Two of the higher-ranking Legionnaires join the eastern humans in an effort to help shore up their fighting capabilities. Lieutenants Lauren Mallard and Diego Rivers have achieved resonance ratings worth eighty percent of Jephthah's power when he once roamed the earth. Even both of them combined aren't a match for Henry, but they are still leagues stronger than any ordinary human troopers.

The two Legion Lieutenants each command a small platoon of about 100 soldiers each, some of whom are Legionnaires, but others of whom are ordinary men, women, and monsters empowered through the Body Boosters and their T-REX suits.

Soldiers wearing Spectre Suits raise themselves up into the air via their spinal tendrils. Each of these troopers, once intended to be used in stealth warfare, has taken on a pseudo-aerial support role instead. They stand roughly thirty feet above their comrades, each one holding a newly designed weapon made by Hans; the XM-250 Titan.

These guns are truly massive. Weighing in at 600 pounds (272 kilos), the only way even the enhanced soldiers can properly bear the weight is by constructing the guns to attach directly to their Spectre suits, wrapping around the troopers for stability and accuracy.

Each XM-250 Titan takes advantage of recent advancements made by Hope's daughter, Mandy. In this way, they are able to store fifty kilos of ammunition inside a pocket dimension, reducing the weight each trooper has to bear.

Each Titan's micro-fusion reactor allows it to utilize not only mundane bullets, but empowered elemental rounds and even switch to an energy-firing mode, albeit one that is

not nearly as capable at injuring such resilient foes as the Kolvaxians.

With thirty Spectre troopers supporting from the backlines, the human resistance unloads a hailstorm of heavy gunfire down, the bullets pounding more than two dozen Kolvaxians as they stomp forward, making their way toward the juicy human targets enveloped in armor.

"First bogey approaching the 100-yard danger zone!" Lieutenant Lauren calls out. "Grenade!"

At her command, one of the ordinary soldiers near the front reaches into his bag, pulls out a glassy orb with spiraling streams of energy inside, and he lobs it with all his strength at the closest Kolvaxian.

The orb travels with unerring accuracy. It strikes the ground at the Kolvaxian's feet and explodes, causing a two-meter bubble to burst into existence, enveloping the creature in a dimension of ultra-slow spacetime, freezing it on the spot!

Now moving two hundred times slower than in reality, for every 200 seconds that passes in realspace, just one passes inside the Kolvaxian's bubble. It essentially freezes in place, allowing the troopers to redirect their fire at the creature's allies instead.

Unfortunately, even with the mighty firepower of the XM-250 Titan hammering into the flesh of the Kolvaxians, the humans aren't able to inflict meaningful permanent damage. Lauren grimaces, gritting her teeth as the creatures continue to stop forward, pushed back and slowed down by the unending waterfall of bullets striking their bodies, but not actually stopped or prevented from continuing.

Suddenly, a scream goes up in the middle of her soldiers. Lauren's heart skips a beat as she swivels her head to see a Kolvaxian bursting out from underground and plunging its claw into a woman's chest, infecting her and causing panic to erupt among the ranks.

Reflexively, one of the men nearby throws a stasis grenade at the Kolvaxian, but in his panic the grenade misses its target, instead striking Legion Lieutenant Diego, freezing him on the spot! Diego's attachment to the Legion goes dark, cutting him off until the stasis bubble disappears, but that unfortunately won't happen for another five minutes!

"No, dammit!" Lauren exclaims, grabbing her enchanted sword and rushing toward the Kolvaxian in their midst.

Lauren slashes at the monster, and her sword bites into its skin and bone, but the blade catches in the creature's ribcage and quickly heals up, trapping her weapon inside the Kolvaxian's body.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Lauren exclaims. She lets go of the hilt right as the Kolvaxian slashes its claw at her, narrowly avoiding the attack which would likely have infected her on the spot. Lauren quickly goes into a defensive stances, dodging and weaving after the Kolvaxian tosses the infected trooper aside and attacks her with everything it has.

At the same time, due to Lauren's inability to guide her troops, the front-lines begin to lose focus, allowing more Kolvaxians to draw nearer and nearer. Several stasis grenades land amidst the encroaching Kolvaxians, but a few go wide, trapping empty sections of the battlefield in dimensional bubbles, making their limited ammunition reserves deplete quickly. Unfortunately, due to a lack of time and precious materials, only a few thousand stasis grenades have been properly developed, and more will take time to craft. Every missed grenade is a huge waste of resources!

Lauren's heartrate elevates. Without a proper weapon capable of defeating the Kolvaxian in her ranks, she's a sitting duck! Teetering on the edge of death, not even her enchanted golden armor will protect her for long. Every Kolvaxian has the physical body of a Cosmic. No mortal armor is capable of protecting the humans for long!

Just then, a streak of red light races across the skies. It burns the upper atmosphere, launching from atop Mount Adams as it charges toward Lauren's position. Several soldiers look up just in time to see a huge fireball of ten-thousand-degree heat rush toward the Kolvaxian closest to the front-lines.

BOOM!!

The fireball crashes into the nearest Kolvaxian and slams it into the soil, forming a massive scorched crater. From within that crater, explosive flashes of light burst out, one after the other, before going silent.

Beelzebub, the Emperor of Inferno, steps out of the crater victoriously, his opponent reduced to ash. He ignites a flame-whip in his hand and starts lashing out madly at two nearby Kolvaxians, cutting through their armored skin and bones with a bit of difficulty, in the same way he did years before when battling his mentor, Agares. As it turns out, his fire-whip has enough focused heat-energy to even penetrate through the defenses of these sturdy Kolvaxians.

"Beelzebub? It's HIM?!" One of the troopers gasps.

"Shit, why did it have to be that bastard who saved us?" Another complains.

"I don't give a damn if it's Beelzebub or Satan the Devil! We were all about to die!"

"But he's Beelzebub! He's the one who-"

"Shut your mouth and be thankful! We need all hands on deck, you moron!"

Beelzebub ignores the cries of outrage from some of the shortsighted troops. He's long expected people to reject his help, but helping them even if they hate him takes precedence during this crisis.

After taking out the nearest threats, Beelzebub rockets over to Lauren. He pounces upon the Kolvaxian from behind while superheating his palms with nuclear energy. Beelzebub explodes his palms, directing the energy deep into the Kolvaxian's body and irradiating its internal organs with the heat of a relatively cool star. The monster's body seizes up for a second, allowing Beelzebub's hands to regenerate, and for him to once again direct a second nuclear attack into the monster's muscles and bones.

The creature falls down, dead. The second trooper who was infected only moments before starts to stand up, but Beelzebub rushes over to finish him off.

With a few moments to spare, Beelzebub glances at Lauren, who has retrieved her sword from the dead Kolvaxian's body.

"You're leading this platoon?" Beelzebub asks.

"I am." Lauren answers, her expression failing to conceal a distinct flavor of malevolent hatred. Beelzebub easily picks up on the fact he must have hurt or killed someone very close to Lauren in the past, likely when he ignited his body in the thermonuclear explosion above the former Hero City.

He doesn't have time to spare any mental energy toward her hatred. He has a job to do, and that job is saving as many people as possible.

"I'll kill as many Kolvaxians as I can." Beelzebub says. "Focus on preventing them from reaching you. Keep up the gunfire."

"You don't need to worry about us." Lauren retorts. "We humans can hold our own."

Really? It didn't look that way when I arrived, Beelzebub thinks.

He doesn't vocalize his intrusive thought.

"Just do what you feel is right, then." Beelzebub concedes. "If a few stray bullets hit me, I'll forgive you."

He leaps back into the battle, and Lauren sneers. *As if we'd ever want or need your forgiveness, murderer.*

Beelzebub's whip lashes out time after time, biting into the sturdy bodies of the Kolvaxians and slowly cutting them apart, one by one. Unfortunately, when he tries using other attacks, they badly lack the striking effectiveness necessary to kill the creatures.

Their bodies are simply too sturdy!

Damn! Beelzebub thinks, as he finally whips one of the creatures across its chest to leave a deep enough wound for himself to finish the job with a focused stream of flames. *I feel more limited than ever! Each one of these monsters has a body on par with a Demon Deity! It's a miracle a mere Emperor like me can do anything to them in the first place! Is there a way I can make a bigger impact?*

Beelzebub's thoughts wander for a moment too long. A Kolvaxian melts out of the ground behind him, then stabs its claw into his back.

Riiiiip!

"Aaargh! You piece of trash!" Beelzebub screams, desperately wishing he didn't feel pain so clearly after his return to the mortal coil. "Aaaaugh!"

The humans behind Beelzebub widen their eyes in horror.

If the Kolvaxians capture and absorb Beelzebub, they might obtain another terrifying boost in combat effectiveness. This is something nobody wants to see, not even if they hate the Emperor of Inferno!

"Assist Beelzebub!" Lauren shouts. "Quick! Knock that Kolvaxian down!"

But unfortunately, even when half of the XM-250 Titan Troopers fire their deadliest rounds into the Kolvaxian's back, they barely manage to stagger it. The creature's tendrils writhe around inside Beelzebub's body, working quickly to infect his veins.

Beelzebub instantly realizes the Kolvaxian's goal. It pulls on his back, dragging him toward the ground as it uses all its strength to yank him to his final earthen grave.

"Like HELL I'll let you eat me!" Beelzebub roars. His eyes ignite with flame, and he directs that flame into the core of his body.

The flame rapidly rises past 10,000 degrees Kelvin. It heats to 15,000 degrees, then 20,000. 30,000!

A super-ignition sequence begins as all of Beelzebub's cells burn at their maximum temperature, rapidly charging up for a nuclear detonation.

Lauren's heart goes cold. She and all the troopers nearby gasp in fear as their T-REX's report the imminent self-destruction of the Infernal Emperor.

"EVERYONE! GET DOWN!" Lauren shrieks. "He's going to blow!!"

Beelzebub roars to the sky. Every one of his cells continues to increase in temperature, causing a light as bright as Maiura's star to light up on the battlefield. The human soldiers look away, shielding their eyes as they dive to the dirt. Even so, they know they cannot hope to survive his detonation. They're certainly in the immediate blast zone.

But, after several seconds, Lauren's thoughts brighten.

He hasn't exploded yet? What's going on?

She cracks her eyes open, but Beelzebub's body is still radiating a light bright enough to permanently blind her. Surprisingly, the heat that should have roasted everyone alive has not traveled far from him. Instead, Beelzebub forcibly prevents himself from actually exploding. He deliberately contains and revolves all the heat being output from his bones around his immediate surroundings, containing his power so it won't harm the humans.

The Kolvaxians that should have pressed the attack on the humans all step back, as if fearful of the star that has turned their companion to dust. Already, the Kolvaxian that dared to sneak-attack Beelzebub has perished, evaporating long before he reached his ultimate temperature of 50,000 degrees Kelvin.

Beelzebub grins wickedly. He recalls a conversation he had with Saul and Kiari not even a day before, a conversation about his lack of imagination.

"HEH HEH HEH." Beelzebub laughs. "It seems I don't HAVE to detonate myself. If I contain the power and limit the radiation, I can turn myself into... A LIVING STAR!"

Beelzebub launches forward, buoyed by the heat lifting him off the ground. He races toward the Kolvaxians, and the moment he draws toward the nearest one, its skin rapidly burns away, revealing its muscles and bone underneath.

Beelzebub grabs the Kolvaxian by the throat. With a "HARRUMPH", he sends a surge of heat blasting directly into the monster's meridians, detonating it like a grenade from

the inside-out. The Kolvaxian dies on the spot, exploding into ash!

Over the next few minutes, Beelzebub chases down the other nearby Kolvaxians, though he fails to catch a few that dove underground and swam away. For those unlucky enough to end up in his grasp, they perish within seconds, and Beelzebub ultimately stands tall, having achieved a feat that not even Henry could accomplish.

Gradually, Beelzebub's light dims. His body sags as the immense power he was outputting dies down, leaving him feeling exhausted.

The strain... is immense.

Beelzebub returns to his normal appearance. Frustratingly, he finds that he has once again seared his suit to ash, forcing him to cloak his demonhood, among other things, in flames.

Lauren opens her eyes. She blinks several times, wincing as spots blur her vision. She manages to make out multiple piles of ash, as well as Beelzebub's flaming body, but she cannot see the Kolvaxians anywhere.

"They're dead. Most of them." Beelzebub says, flying back over to the army. "Sorry for the light. Did I blind anyone permanently? Leeroy might be able to heal you."

"Our T-REX's compensated for the change in lighting, at least to a certain extent." Lauren says, looking at him with a faint sense of fear and awe. "You... what did you do? I expected you to... go nuclear."

"That would have harmed all of you. I couldn't go that far." Beelzebub explains. "Instead, I circulated the heat around myself, feeding it back into my body over and over to repeat the process. I'd love to tell you it's a new technique I've been practicing, but it came to me... just now."

"Well. You saved our lives." Lauren says, assessing the Emperor more carefully. "So... thanks."

"Sure. Anytime." Beelzebub says, sighing heavily. "But that attack was too draining. I don't even know where I got the energy to pull it off. Don't feel like I can do it again. Even a Flame Whip would be too tiring..."

"You've done enough. Take a break and leave the stragglers to us." Lauren says. "Well... if you want to pitch in again, feel free to come back a second time."

Beelzebub glances around. He notices that the expressions of the troopers have changed. No longer do they look at him with outright hatred and hostility, but instead faint begrudging admiration.

It's progress. Beelzebub thinks.

Beelzebub moves to the backline to stand atop a sturdy makeshift floor made of Wordsmithium. In this way, Kolvaxians won't be able to pounce at him from below, at least not easily.

He takes a break to regain his stamina, while the Kolvaxians reappear before the human troops, pushing slowly against the wall of gunfire to try and break the defensive lines.

The battle isn't going amazingly. Beelzebub thinks. *A lot of humans have fallen already. But they're holding on. If things continue to progress the way they have, the Kolvaxians will run out of infectable bodies before long. Humanity has been preparing for this attack. They may even be the first world to successfully rout the Kolvaxians!*

He frowns.

But who knows what will happen next? We should be prepared for the worst to happen, as well.

Shortly after Beelzebub takes his rest, Lieutenant Diego's time-stasis finally breaks. For him, a mere two seconds pass, barely even a few blinks of an eye. He reappears in Realspace, looking panicked as he swivels around, trying to locate the Kolvaxian that just attacked his men. Instead, he spots Beelzebub cloaked in flames, looking at him with wry amusement.

"Beelzebub?!" Diego asks, bewildered. "The Kolvaxian- where is...?"

"I killed it." Beelzebub says with a chuckle. "And the others. You're welcome."

"I... I see." Diego says, his adrenaline cooling off. "Well. Thanks a lot, I suppose-"

Diego goes quiet mid-sentence. He pauses and looks away as a voice crackles in the speaker of his T-REX.

"-forcements needed! I repeat, Hope Hiro's children are in danger! Dispatch reinforcements to Adams-014! The Western Front is in danger of collapse!"

"The hell?" Diego mutters. "Beelzebub, can you fly? The western front needs help! Hope Hiro's children are in danger."

Beelzebub quickly nods. "I am fatigued from exerting myself, but I'll recover quickly. Which direction should I go?"

Diego points to the west. "That way! The opposite side of Mount Adams."

"Alright. Will you be okay if I leave?" Beelzebub asks.

Diego hesitates. He glances at the few remaining Kolvaxians that are slowly approaching the front-lines. Even though Beelzebub killed most of them, even a mere handful of them are still a terrifying Threat no human would be capable of killing, barring a few specified Champions.

"...We'll manage." Diego says quietly. "The Wordsmith's children are more important than us, anyway. Just go! If we die here, then you must at least ensure humanity's future Heroes live on!"

"I'll be going, then." Beelzebub says, before jumping into the air and igniting flames beneath his feet. He rockets up into the sky, racing over the top of Mount Adams as he disappears into the distance.

Diego grimaces. "Godspeed."

Part 586: Runes and Dragons

In terms of singular offensive power, humanity's strongest soldier is without a doubt Lord Henry Cliff, leader of Jephthath's Legion. Perhaps Demon Emperor Belial could fight him to a standstill or even overpower him, but neither have tested that possibility yet.

In terms of combat versatility, humanity's two greatest combatants are the Wordsmiths. Jason and Hope Hiro may lack the direct striking power of Henry, but they make up for it with their own carefully honed techniques and preferences for how to wield their magic.

Therefore, despite being extremely powerful himself, Hope Hiro's eldest son, Levi, sometimes finds himself overshadowed by his older peers.

He is strong. His physical prowess isn't quite at Henry Cliff's level, but he is certainly one of the five most imposing warriors on humanity's side.

He is fast, though not a 'speedster' in the classical sense. One of his most useful abilities is his Heroic Sense, something formed over time by his exposure to the Hall of Heroes. By tapping into its subspace dimension with a fragment of his mind, Levi can momentarily increase his thinking speed a hundredfold, as if he had teleported back into the Hall of Heroes!

This enables him to react to new situations as they appear, and to come up with detailed combat strategies on the fly.

But as strong as he is, and as fast as he can think in high stress situations, there is one category Humanity's Dragon dominates in, and that is his body's durability.

Comparable to Bael in his prime, albeit not quite at the level of Wordsmithium, Levi's scales provide him enough defensive strength to serve as a mobile bulwark, tanking attacks that would cripple or kill Henry Cliff if they landed. While Henry certainly has strong bones and tough skin, his defenses are like paper compared to a man enveloped in dragon-scales.

Levi grins as yet another Kolvaxian punches his stomach to try and infect him. The creature's fist *thuds* ineffectively, bending its wrist awkwardly as several small tendons

and bones snap at the moment of impact. Levi retaliates with a dragonscaled fist, pounding the creature's faceless head and sending it flying backward.

The Kolvaxian hurtles into the distance, twisting and spinning as it careens helplessly a hundred feet away. It lands in a heap, then quickly jumps back up, not hurt too badly by the attack.

However, despite lacking the physical striking power necessary to kill these creatures, Levi is far from out of tricks. Behind him, his moderately younger sister, Mandy, levitates ten feet in the air, taking care to avoid touching the ground. Unlike her brother, she is merely a mortal human, lacking in strength and defenses innately. She is a much softer target the Kolvaxians could overpower if they wished.

But the matured woman is a lot like her father, in certain ways.

Mandy is a versatile mage. She has powers beyond comprehension.

She is humanity's sole Runemaster.

The Kolvaxians continually and uselessly target Levi, not because he is a more desirable target than his sister, but because they are incapable of perceiving Mandy's existence. The Runemaster cloaks her body in a shield of Ambient Energy taken from a crack between dimensions, making her odor indistinguishable from background smells, her body invisible to the many forms of known light, and her movements imperceptible to all but the most powerful of Psions.

Invisible, undetectable, Mandy hovers near her brother protectively, using her Runes not only to lash out and strike the Kolvaxians when they're at their weakest, but to bolster her brother's already formidable capabilities through Runic Augments.

The blonde-haired woman reaches into a crack between dimensions. She pulls out a piece of magically enhanced parchment with a glowing rune formed of ten thousand minuscule, mystical lines of intertwined energy. This Rune, something she created years ago, is part of her ever-increasing armory of tools she has developed to enhance her and her brother's combat and support capabilities.

She quickly holds up the Rune and chants in a mystical tone. "Runic Decree, **Immolation Aura!**"

The parchment explodes into dust. A microsecond later, waves of heat erupt from Levi's scales. They radiate outward, lighting the grasslands aflame and causing the skin of

every Kolvaxian within ten meters to catch fire. The creatures step backward, perhaps thinking to pull away, but they don't get a chance to do so. Mandy activates another Runic Decree, one that complements the Immolation Aura's effect.

"Runic Decree, **I Am Your Target!**"

Lines of magical power appear across Levi's body, illuminating in the gaps between his layer of scales. His scales turn black, while the magical runes glow red, making him appear as a shadowy creature wreathed in flame.

The Kolvaxians stop retreating. They charge at him in a frenzy, silently rushing to their doom.

The closer they draw, the greater the heat they experience. Each successive meter results in a rise of one thousand degrees Kelvin, and by the time they draw within the range of Levi's fists, even their durable bodies begin to crack and split apart from the outrageous heat Levi is emanating!

Levi doesn't hesitate. He grabs the back of one Kolvaxian's head, then yanks toward himself, *splating* it against his burning chest. The creature's head explodes into blood and ash, its formidable bones weakened to the point of breakage from the heat.

Levi chuckles as he repeats this action, killing ten of the monsters one after the other! But before he can finish off the other twenty, his flaming aura dies off, as does his aura of aggression.

[Hold them back for a minute.] Mandy orders her brother telepathically. [I've activated ten Higher Runes since the battle began. I'm nearing my limits.]

Levi doesn't complain. Having exterminated so many Kolvaxians in quick succession, he's already surpassed his father and Henry Cliff in killing efficiency, even if he isn't aware of that fact. He hasn't had time to chat with them, so he isn't up to date on their current situations.

[Hurry and regain your stamina.] Levi transmits back to his sister. [Every Kolvaxian we kill slows their progress. We can't let them run away and infect more people!]

Mandy scowls. [I'll return soon.]

Regenerating her mental focus, her mana, and her inner strength is no easy feat. Mandy abruptly disappears, returning to the Hall of Heroes to leave her brother alone on Maiura. She arrives inside a secret chamber covered in hundreds of permanently-active

Runes that glow in a variety of rainbow-like colors. There, she sits inside a pool of glowing condensed mana and meditates, de-stressing while she clears her mind. She purposefully teleports into a private room where even her mother and little brother will not disturb her, a place few even know about due to building it herself.

When she arrives, Mandy carefully absorbs the pool's mana, rejuvenating her soul and allowing her to restore herself to near-peak condition.

One hundred minutes pass in the Hall of Heroes.

One minute in Realspace.

Mandy blinks her eyes. She stands up, steps out of the Mana Pool, then activates a Rune.

"Runic Decree, **Position Swap!**"

She vanishes from her secret enclave and reappears in Realspace, inside her sealed dimension. She frowns when she sees that the thirty Kolvaxians she left with her brother have increased in number, right back to forty! They've already replenished the losses suffered by her Immolation Aura, making her feel as if that spell was a total waste!

[I'm back.] Mandy says, keeping her telepathy short and succinct. [The Kolvaxians are multiplying more quickly than we predicted. The Auras I cast before were inefficient. Let's switch to longer-lasting, localized Runes.]

Levi punches a Kolvaxian in the chest, and it retaliates with a claw-swipe across his face, knocking him into the dirt. Another Kolvaxian bursts out of the ground beneath him to grab at the back of his neck, but Levi senses the sneak attack and rolls to the side, evading it.

[Empower my claws!] Levi orders. [And make sure I'm drawing aggro! A few Kolvaxians have left already. I don't want more joining them!]

Mandy frowns. *There's forty here, yet more have left? The situation is worse than I expected.*

She keeps that thought to herself. [Alright, we'll switch to Plan Heat-Six.]

Mandy pulls a pair of parchments out of thin air. "Runic Enhancement, **Standard Strength Boost!** Runic Enhancement, **Sharpened Talons!** Runic Enhancement, **Flame Claws!**"

Unfortunately, over the years, Mandy has learned that her powers have limitations. Some Runes are extremely strong, but they conflict with other powerful runes, rendering both Runes inoperable and useless. Often, it's better to combine weaker Runes, rather than the most formidable ones which often fail when activated together.

She empowers her brother's arms with longer-lasting Runes, allowing him a lengthier usage time, albeit with a narrower striking capability. Unlike the Immolation Aura, which can turn nearby Kolvaxians into charred bones and ashy meat, the 'Sharp and Scorching Claws' combo is better for drawn-out battles, granting her brother ten minutes of empowerment as opposed to just one. The burden to activate these Runes is also noticeably less, ensuring she won't have to return to the Hall of Heroes as quickly.

Levi continues to fight the Kolvaxians. But now his ordinary claws glow with radiant heat, turning his scales a bright orange. He attacks a nearby Kolvaxian like a feral animal, tackling it to the dirt while he rakes at its race, burning huge chunks of flesh and bone away. He rips and tears, killing it on the spot, but other Kolvaxians continue to attack him from the sides, pounding his scales with their fists and sending painful tremors deep into his internal organs.

The Dragon's Successor grunts. His scales are extremely durable, but his enemies all possess bodies at the Cosmic level! Even simple punches and kicks from them have the power to send the tops of mountains flying! If it weren't for him possessing a sliver of the power of dragons, his heart and lungs would have likely imploded under their barrage of attacks!

"Quit hitting me!" Levi roars, slashing his claws madly at three of the Kolvaxians nearest him. He manages to connect with one of their heads, but the other two duck his slashes and retaliate with punches aimed at his stomach and ribs.

Their attacks fail to connect. Mandy conjures an Elemental Guardian of Wind to assist her brother, and the gaseous creature flits around, using its ethereal body to distract the Kolvaxians while blowing their attacks off-course with bursts of wind. It summons small tornadoes, it cuts at them with focused wind-blades, and it does everything it can within its mana-based 'programming' to keep Levi safe.

Minutes pass.

Levi fights hard. He punches and kicks the Kolvaxians. He rips them apart, becoming more savage and feral as the minutes pass. He focuses on survival and killing efficiency,

while his sister watches and manipulates the battlefield's changing situation from overhead.

Mandy's expression turns uglier and uglier.

Every time Levi manages to kill a Kolvaxian or two, another one shows up. They emerge from the ground, they appear out of thin air... where are all these Kolvaxians coming from? If he slows down for even a few seconds, they regenerate faster than he can kill them! This is insanity!

By this point, she has summoned two Flame Elementals in addition to her Wind Elemental. The monstrous three-meter-tall guardians tower over her brother and the Kolvaxians, burning the Horde and pushing it back as best as they can.

The problem is, when Mandy does another quick headcount, she continues to find that about forty Kolvaxians remain in the area.

We've made no progress! None at all! Mandy exclaims in her head, feeling a sense of existential dread. It's like we're trying to swim upstream, but we remain fixed in the same spot! My brother is going to run out of stamina eventually. When he does, we'll have no choice left but to retreat. Then these Kolvaxians will be free to wreak havoc across- wait, what's that?

The ground underneath Levi's feet rumbles, seemingly caused by a weak earthquake. So busy is Levi fighting that he doesn't even notice the disturbance. He gasps for breath and pants like a dog while jumping as crazily as ever, slaughtering Kolvaxians with a flaming sword his sister conjured for him, weaker than Artoria, but strong enough to kill the Kolvaxians decently fast.

[Levi! Watch out!] Mandy yells. [Something's emerging from below!]

Her Rune-net, buried a few hundred feet underground, abruptly turns off, as if deactivated by a powerful anti-magic field. Mandy's heart chills when she senses a field of energy similar to Gressil's making its way toward the surface.

To his credit, Levi listens to her words. He punts one of the Kolvaxians to the right, checks beneath his feet, then leaps into the air. The Wind Elemental blows him higher, sending him rocketing up several hundred feet before he falls back to the planet below.

The moment he lands on his feet, the ground explodes beneath the Elementals, where Levi had been standing just seconds prior!

A massive glowing-green claw bursts out of the soil and slaps down on the Elementals, crushing them with an anti-magic force field. They explode into motes of light, their artificial souls feeling no pain as their existences implode.

Then, another claw emerges. And another!

A ten-meter-tall monstrosity emerges from underground, its blank face as empty and soulless as any other Kolvaxian. Like some sort of gigantic spider, its eight-legged body emerges and flattens the soil beneath its claws. A bulbous four-sectioned thorax gives its central body the appearance of an ant, but its muscular limbs that end in five-digit claws make it a confusing amalgamation of ant, spider, and monster.

Levi's eyes widen. [What in the goddamn is that?]

[A Kolvaxxed Exobeast.] Mandy says, her tone grim. [I don't recognize the species.]

Already, the ordinary Kolvaxians have started rushing toward Levi's new position. On cue, the Megavaxian, as Mandy has opted to name it, also charges at Levi.

But once it starts to move, its anti-magic field expands outward and sweeps across Mandy's position. With a painful jolt, her stomach roils, and the field of privacy magic enveloping her collapses.

Her position becomes fully exposed to the Swarm!

"Aaah!" Mandy cries out, as her levitation magic also dissipates. She plummets to the soil below, tensing up as she realizes she's about to hit the ground like a bag of rocks.

"Sis!" Levi exclaims. "No!"

He jumps into the air, dropping his flaming sword so as to not accidentally hurt her. The sword dissipates anyway, once the Megavaxian's anti-magic field makes contact with its body. It disappears before hitting the ground, as if falling into an invisible black hole.

Levi grabs his sister's comparatively diminutive form out of midair, jarring her senses and making her wince in pain. The impact hits her hard enough to rattle her skull and make her feel like a wet piece of paper nearly torn to shreds in a storm.

Her brother controls his descent by tensing his legs to act like shock absorbers. He lands on his feet and reduces the landing impact as best as he can, but his sharp arm-scales cut into the underside of his sister's back and legs, carving gashes and bloody marks. As soon as he lands, he spins on his heel and starts running as fast as he can from the horde of Kolvaxians giving chase.

Levi carries his sister like a princess, not even daring to look over his shoulder at the rapidly pursuing enemy forces. Unfortunately, while his reaction times might be exceptional, his actual running speed is not too fast. He might sprint like a superhuman, but the Kolvaxians dive underground and pursue him from behind and below, rapidly gaining on him as if smelling blood in the water.

Shredded and injured, Mandy still has the sense to slap the T-REX activation module on her chest. She envelops her body with nanites, finally granting herself a measure of protection. Levi continues to hold her, but he adjusts his grip to allow the nanites to cover her underside so his scales won't bite directly into her flesh.

"Reserve personnel, this is Mandy Hiro of the Western Division!" Mandy calls out over her T-REX transmitter. "Unknown Kolvaxian monster has just appeared at Adams-011! We need backup immediately! I'm injured, and all magic around the creature is being neutralized! It's wielding Chaos Energy, like Emperor Gressil!"

"Roger that." Comes a reply over the comms. "This is Eagle at Dispatch. I'm diverting Emperor Beelzebub your way and requesting additional backup. I've received word that Emperor Belial is being teleported north of your position. Archangel Squad is waiting for additional details. Please inform me of the nature of the Threat."

Mandy grits her teeth as her jostling body continues to swell and hurt while her brother holds her and runs. She turns her head to look at the pursuing enemies, horrified by the fact that another twenty-plus Kolvaxians have joined the chase.

"Sixty- no, *seventy* Kolvaxians in hot pursuit. Apex Kolvaxian, tentatively code-named *Megavaxian* has appeared. Megavaxian is ten meters tall, with eight limbs..."

She quickly details the monster's physical parameters, and the response from Dispatch takes several seconds to respond.

"Roger that. Archangel Squad is on the way. Standby for imminent arrival of Emperor Belial."

In the distance, just outside the range of the anti-magic field, a figure materializes on the plains. Belial, the Emperor of Passion, quickly looks around herself to assess her surroundings, then she turns to look at the rapidly approaching duo of Levi and Mandy, as well as the small but terrifying number of Kolvaxian elites behind them.

"Spawn of the Devil." Belial gasps. "What in damnation is THAT thing?!"

Belial shakes her head. It doesn't matter what the creature's exact name is, only its capabilities. Clearly, as some sort of mutated exobeast, its threat level is high, possibly much higher than the ordinary Kolvaxians. Its anti-magic aura alone makes it capable of serving as a deterrent to many different members of humanity's military. Fairies wouldn't stand a chance against it!

Inside Belial's head, Fiona speaks. [The anti-magic bubble is almost on you. Here, take this. Jason made it for you a few years ago just for situations like this. Stay safe, Sammy! And thanks for getting me eyes on the enemy asset.]

A tall metal canister materializes next to Samantha, teleported from Chrona right to her position. Samantha presses her palm against an activation symbol on the front, and the whole container unfolds outward, revealing a set of golden Wordsmithium platemail inside, its exterior glittering majestically under Maiura's moonlight.

The Demon Emperor hesitates. [I've never worn armor before. This will limit my mobility.]

[Don't worry, Jason designed it with your abilities in mind.] Fiona explains. [It's not Ordinary Wordsmithium. It's a bit less durable, but in excha-]

Her voice abruptly cuts off, and Samantha senses that the anti-magic bubble has enveloped her position. In less than fifteen seconds, Levi and the pursuing Kolvaxians will be on her like flies on a carcass.

"Screw it. Girls love shiny clothes." Samantha mutters under her breath.

She melts her body, stretching and shrinking to slip into the gaps of the Wordsmithium suit. In just five seconds, she dons the glittering golden armor, adjusting her shape to perfectly fit inside its confines.

Belial steps out of the container, pausing when she notices a sword inside. She recognizes it as looking similar to the one wielded by Henry Cliff, except instead of being a silvery blade, it's been colored black with red accents to better match Belial's style.

On it, a note rests, written in Fiona's style of penmanship.

I asked Jason to make this for you. Love you! Hope you like it, Sammy!~

"Aww, that's so sweet." Belial smiles. She grabs the sword, grunting as she feels its immense weight in her hands.

Having heard tales of Henry's exploits in the Queen Network, she already knows some of the functionality of his most-used weapon. She adjusts its settings, switching it to its heaviest weight as well as its flaming-blade functionality. Then, she turns to face the approaching Kolvaxians.

"Alright. Showtime."

Part 587: Megavaxian

Belial's Wordsmithium armor covers her entire body, leaving only the smallest gaps at her joints. Nanites rush in to fill those gaps anyway, protecting her from any poisons, toxins, or other airborne contagions that might otherwise threaten her. Her armor weighs in at more than 250 kilos, but for a Demon Emperor as strong as the Emperor of Passion, the weight is no different from a suit of cardboard. She barely even feels it.

The succubi's horns stick out through a pair of holes on the sides of the helmet. Her massive shoulder pauldrons give her a fierce and intimidating appearance, while her heavily armored knees, legs, and feet grant her additional options for close combat. If her sword or fists can't deal enough damage, she'll surely be able to use the extra armor on her legs for heavy bludgeoning blows.

Once Belial dons her specialized armor, Fiona's voice transmits into the helmet's earpiece.

"I can't speak to you through magical means. Right now, I'm relaying my words through a specialized transmitter. How's the armor?"

"It's great." Belial says, grimacing as she watches Hope's son rushing toward her, the Megavaxian not far behind. "Talk later."

Belial cries out to increase her adrenaline. She stomps against the soil and leaps into the air, ascending fifty feet in the blink of an eye. The massive faceless monster does not roar at her, but its head inclines upward, clearly detecting the incoming threat.

With a fiery blade aimed at the sky, Belial descends toward the creature, swinging her newly obtained weapon downward with all her strength!

BOOM!

Artoria's altered-copy fails to cut into the hardy Megavaxian's hide, but the nearly unbreakable blade acts as a hammer, its edge pounding the monster into the planet's soil. The Megavaxian's eight legs split apart, and its underbelly slams downward, momentarily halting it in place and allowing Levi to put some distance between himself and the monster behind him. He continues running without stopping, while Mandy cranes her neck around to look back at the aftermath of Belial's attack.

"She barely pierced the skin!" Mandy exclaims. "The Megavaxian is way tougher than ordinary Kolvaxians!"

"Then we'll just have to hit it harder." Levi declares.

Belial's body remains aloft in the air for a second, mainly due to the reverse impact force of her sword's strike. In that single second, she spies the dozens of smaller-but-still-dangerous ordinary Kolvaxians swarming around the Megavaxian.

So many?

Belial falls to the ground and lands in front of the Megavaxian. Her inability to fly leaves her momentarily vulnerable to an attack, but luckily the Megavaxian doesn't lash out to attack her until her feet make landfall.

It rises up, regains its footing, then charges!

The giant spider-like monster accelerates far quicker than its bulk would imply, sending a chill down Belial's spine. She leaps backward to put distance between herself and the approaching mass of Kolvaxians, then she snaps her right leg out, stretching with her rubber-like body to not only send a kick at the monster's "face", but also to push off it and travel away even faster.

Her ploy works. She uses the monster's face as a springboard and accelerates away, using the Megavaxian's forward momentum to accelerate herself even faster. Surprisingly, the Wordsmithium armor deforms and stretches along with her leg, ensuring she doesn't reveal skin or an opening for the monsters to gain an opening. Without this, infecting her on the spot will be a lot harder.

Belial lands near Levi, still fleeing with Mandy. She jogs backward, keeping an eye on the Kolvaxians following them.

"Are you both okay?" Belial asks.

"I'm fine. My sister is a little shaken up." Levi answers. "Stall the Megavaxian. I'm going to drop Mandy outside its anti-magic range, then I'll come back and join you!"

"Got it." Belial answers.

She transmits the full situation to Fiona, who in turn transfers that information to the other forces.

"This armor is really something." Belial adds idly, as she re-enters battle. "How is it so heavy, yet also stretchy?"

"Jason made it specifically for you." Fiona replies over the comms. "It's not as durable as ordinary Wordsmithium, but it's still extremely pierce and cut-resistant. Its blunt impact resistance is decisively lower than ordinary Wordsmithium, but compared to mundane Steel or other common alloys, you're still in better hands. Most importantly, it can stretch and deform in tandem with your body. Test it out so we know what to improve in the future. Also, stay safe! These new Kolvaxians are not a threat you should try to handle alone! Archangel Uriel should be joining you within one minute!"

"Uriel, huh?" Belial grunts. "Great. *Just* who I wanted watching my back."

She doesn't bother complaining too much. Fiona is already aware of how bad the relationship is between Uriel and all the demons. But then again, Belial and Uriel did fight on the same side during Stormbringer. They shouldn't be the worst of enemies at this moment.

Belial re-engages the Megavaxian and the other Kolvaxians, putting all her focus into staying alive while slowing them down. Fiona guides her over comms, and she launches a series of focused strikes at the largest Kolvaxian ever sighted while dancing around and staying nimble, keeping her feet off the ground as much as possible. She doesn't want a sneaky Kolvaxian to pounce out of the dirt and grab her from below, after all.

Her body stretches and deforms, whipping around at increasingly fast speeds as she builds up momentum, her arms snapping forward like rubber bands. Each time she sends her sword or a left hook flying, she stalls the Megavaxian slightly, its Cosmic-level body still unable to fully resist the force of her incredible strength! When her sword and fists land, she uses the impact momentum to increase the strength of her next attack, and soon her speed reaches a dizzying level.

Her new weapon shows off its power, leaving streaks of fire in the air as it snaps out, reverses, then swirls around and fires outward once more. Soon, Belial shifts strategy as the ordinary Kolvaxians pass the Megavaxian and rush at her. She uses her left fist to slow down the Megavaxian while her sword whips around to strike at the smaller ones.

Slash! Thumb! Slash! Thump!

The more Belial builds up her momentum, the more dangerous her sword becomes. If Henry Cliff were to see what she was doing, he'd surely gasp in surprise. Her striking

power far exceeds his, and the increasing momentum becomes deadly when she slashes at the ordinary Kolvaxians for the first time.

She bisects them cleanly, cutting two Kolvaxians in half as her sword sweeps outward, slicing their waists in half and cauterizing the wounds. When the sword pulls back, she pirhouettes like a ballerina, spinning on her toes to increase the next swing's speed further. She cuts down two more Kolvaxians while sending a punch flying at the Megavaxian.

All by herself, Belial stalls the charging enemies, allowing Levi to finally draw out of the Megavaxian's range. He puts his sister down, and she re-activates her Runes, allowing her to heal her injuries and take to the skies once more.

Mandy takes care to map out and assess the Megavaxian's chaotic energy. She sends a pulse of mana toward it, one which expands and dissipates everywhere around the Megavaxian, weakening and fading as it makes contact with the 'bubble' of mana vacuum around the monster.

"Total area of influence is about zero-point-seventy-five kilometers." Mandy says steadily. "At zero-point-five kilometers, all mana is rendered ineffective, but even before that, all magic is noticeably weakened. We'll have to rely on physical attacks and technology to kill this thing."

Her brother runs toward Belial, moving to assist her in battle. At the same time, Mandy looks up into the sky. Her highly attuned senses, bolstered by her magic and enhancements granted by her father's Wordsmithing, allow her to see a figure of light descending from above at extreme speeds.

Uriel, the Archangel of Vengeance, flies toward the Megavaxian like an eagle descending upon a fish in a lake. She holds a spear made of Wordsmithium, one which glows with divine power. She holds it in place, aiming its point ahead of herself as she builds a massive amount of kinetic energy behind her charge.

Right as Levi arrives beside Belial, Uriel's charge reaches its crescendo. She smashes into the Megavaxian from above, plunging her spear into the slightly narrower gap between its head and thorax. The divinely enchanted weapon flies from her grip and pierces all the way through the monster's skin and bone. It continues traveling downward until it exits the creature's lower abdomen and dives underground.

Uriel does not lament the loss of her weapon. Instead, she treats the lost spear as a one-time-use javelin, moving to retrieve a new pair of spears on her back. As she grabs hold of them, the Megavaxian shudders. It halts its movement and falls to the ground, momentarily stopping due to the severed connection between its head and body.

However, this pause does not last long. Uriel slashes at the Megavaxian's skin from above, but this time, she fails to cut deeply into the monster's flesh. Any shallow wounds she inflicts heal up at a frightening speed, outpacing the damage she can deal. Unable to tap into her magic, Uriel cannot imbue her weapons with any elemental effects such as fire or divine energy. Thus, her mundane weapon fails to cause serious damage to the Megavaxian.

Inside the Megavaxian's aura of anti-magic, Uriel also cannot contact her siblings. They become trapped inside her Mind Realm, suppressed and unable to speak. Even so, she has fought countless battles. She does not require Raphael's guidance in matters of combat and war.

Uriel adapts quickly. Several Kolvaxians leap and crawl up the Megavaxian's sides. They charge at her, forcing the Archangel to give up for a while on killing the infected exobeast. She spins her spears and jumps around atop the Megavaxian's back, cutting at the smaller Kolvaxians as they arrive. Her spears behead a few of the Kolvaxians, but often she finds herself unable to land killing blows when her weapons glance off their sturdy bones or the Kolvaxians duck and dodge her attacks, adapting to her combat capabilities in real-time.

Abruptly, one of the Kolvaxians ducks under a spear-sweep, lunges toward her, and punches at Uriel's stomach with all its strength.

"Oof!" Uriel gasps, as the monster's cosmic strength drives the air from her lungs and sends her flying.

She hurtles off the Megavaxian's back and falls to the ground, flapping her wings and stalling mid-air to glide a short distance before impacting the dirt with a heavy *thump*.

Uriel presses the butts of her spears into the ground and climbs back to her feet, coughing a few times as she winces in pain. Each individual Kolvaxian is so strong that if she doesn't take them seriously, she could easily die a dog's death!

More Kolvaxians rush her, and Uriel finally decides to work together with the other two Champions to try and finish these creatures off once and for all. She jumps into the

air and flies over to Levi and Belial's side, where she sees a surprisingly exquisite display of teamwork from the human and demon duo.

Levi acts as a frontline tank. Using his sturdy defenses, he draws the aggression of the Kolvaxians, pulling them away from Belial. His striking power is much weaker than hers, but his defenses are superior. Her new Wordsmithium armor is nowhere near the level of the demihuman's dragon-scales.

Her sword snaps out and slashes, again and again. With Levi drawing the heat away, Belial is able to kill the ordinary Kolvaxians much more easily. She not only cuts one to three of them in half at a time, but she finishes them off afterward before they can regenerate.

"Uriel!" Levi calls out. "Slow the Megavaxian down. Draw its attention. Leave the small fry to us!"

Uriel grunts. Much as she hates to admit it, she won't be able to kill the Megavaxian alone. Wiping out the ordinary Kolvaxians will have to come first.

"I shalt do my best." Uriel says.

And so, over the next five minutes, Uriel does just that. Belial and Levi cut down tens of Kolvaxians, killing them with the greatest efficiency seen on Maiura to date, while Uriel uses her large body and wings to draw the exobeast's attention.

Unable to use spells, Uriel has no choice but to stick close to the Megavaxian. It rears up on its hind legs, exposing its underbelly but allowing it to use its other six limbs and their spindly 'fingers' to attack. The monster attacks Uriel, whipping at her with its claws, trying to swat her out of the air while ordinary Kolvaxians pounce at her from below.

Uriel dodges the creature's attacks, using her wings to nimbly dive and swoop in midair. She tries to cut off the creatures fingers, but they prove to be made more of bone than of skin and muscle. Her attacks glance right off.

"Damn!" Uriel curses. "How art these creatures so hardy?!"

A sense of threat enters Uriel's mind. Reflexively, she looks up into the sky, where she sees a plume of flame rushing toward her position. She identifies the potential threat as Beelzebub, then she frowns.

Beelzebub levitates in the sky, flames covering up his still-nude private bits. Fire shoots from his feet, allowing him to remain aloft, and he begins swirling an inferno in his

palms, spiraling it around faster and faster to increase its heat and impact force. Beelzebub senses the wall of anti-magic surrounding the Megavaxian and wisely decides not to draw any closer.

The orb of fire in Beelzebub's hands condenses smaller and smaller. He continues intensifying its power, sending hotter flames into it while spinning it at the maximum speed he can possibly maintain.

Finally, Beelzebub shouts. "Everyone! GET BACK!"

The Emperor of Inferno holds the spiraling orb in one palm. His body shakes painfully as its screaming heat tears at the space around himself, threatening to condense further into a singularity. Before that can happen, Beelzebub releases a primal, savage roar. He forces a gap in the spiraling power and takes aim at the Megavaxian below.

KSEEEW!

A laser of fire blasts out of the orb, fully concentrated, spiraling to keep its focus tightly contained.

The laser races downward at half the speed of sound, superheating the air around it before smashing into the head of the Megavaxian, tearing through its entire body, and glassing the planet beneath it! The soil instantly turns to magma, heated tens of thousands of degrees in an instant!

Beelzebub roars again, using all of his strength to sweep the laser up, then down.

While the origin of his flames might be magical, once they exit his body's sphere of influence, ordinary physics take over. They penetrate the Megavaxian's shield of anti-magic, then tear through its body with 50,000 degree heat.

Beelzebub bisects the monster in half!

But, worried the monster isn't yet dead, Beelzebub roars one last time, then he flings the remainder of the concentrated orb downward, sending it flying toward the severed and vulnerable interior of the creature's body.

Uriel's heart jolts. She flaps her wings and races away as fast as she can. The infernal orb flies like a sniper bullet, strikes the inside of the Megavaxian's 'stomach', and explodes!

BOOOOM!!

A localized nuclear explosion rips outward, blasting the two halves of the monster's body away, irradiating its corpse, and liquefying its insides! Under such a terrifying heat-blast, not even its bones in the immediate area survive the detonation.

Levi and Belial gasp in horror. They can't possibly move out of the way! The nuclear explosion will surely kill them!

An instant later, Beelzebub fireports in front of them, activates his magic, and holds out both of his palms.

The light of the ignition flashes, blinding him, but he forces the heat to expand around himself and the other two. It bypasses their bodies, sparing their lives, but flash-ignites the land around Beelzebub, Belial, and Levi. A wasteland of hellfire spread outward for a kilometer in every direction before the impact fades away.

The Megavaxian's corpse flops to the left and right, each half scorched beyond recognition. Before long, the two halves turn to dust, falling into a pile of ashes in their own shadows.

As for the other nearby Kolvaxians, those that were in the immediate vicinity of the detonation perished instantly, while others dove underground to flee to unknown destinations.

Levi's chest rises and falls. He breathes heavily, feeling more than a twinge of terror at the devastation the Infernal Emperor just unleashed. If that fireball had struck Levi, even he would have likely died on the spot.

"Beelzebub! That was dangerous! You nearly killed us!" Belial exclaims.

"But I didn't." Beelzebub says, turning to look at her. "If the backlash of my Nuclear Orb had killed you, I'd have died afterward. The Wordsmith's Curse would ensure as much."

He sticks his thumb over his shoulder. "One big bad down. No need to thank me. You guys *sure* seemed to have it under control."

Levi grimaces. Despite Beelzebub's arrogant words, he isn't wrong in his implication. Even Belial would have had great difficulty killing the Megavaxian.

"...Thanks." Levi grunts. "Wait, my sister, is she okay?"

He looks up into the sky and breathes a sigh of relief. Naturally, when Mandy saw what Beelzebub was about to do, she fled a great distance, shielding herself from the

aftermath.

Uriel flies downward. She lands beside the group, directing a hateful glare at Beelzebub.

"Foolish bloodskin! What in damnation was that attack?! Where was thy warning? Verily, I hath nearly perished in the blast!"

"Pft. Calm your tits, Uriel." Beelzebub scoffs. "You already survived one of my nuclear blasts. This one was much smaller and more contained. I decided to experiment with my abilities a little, and everything turned out fine. Now are we done yapping? There's still more Kolvaxians to kill."

Alongside Uriel, Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel materialize. She conjures their Constructs, allowing them to take physical form.

"Thy arrogance is going to lead to the death of someone." Raphael chides. "These Kolvaxians art evolving. Communicate better with thy allies, foolish brat. T'would be an awful matter if the Wordsmith's boy had burned to ash in the wake of thy attack."

"Shut up, Raphael." Beelzebub spits back. "Don't act like you have any authority over me. I'm off to handle some real business now."

Beelzebub doesn't wait for a reply before igniting flames beneath his feet and rocketing up into the sky. He departs quickly, leaving the others behind to deal with their problems.

"Insolent bastard." Michael growls.

"At least Beelzebub's ploy succeeded." Levi says. "I don't know if you people were paying attention, but killing that Megavaxian should have taken us at least another ten minutes, if not more. He saved us a lot of trouble, and we all ended up okay. Let's not look a gift horse in the mouth."

Belial rolls her eyes inside her helmet. "Levi's right. I can't stand his attitude, but Beelzebub brought us results. Let's hurry up and get moving. The Kolvaxians are still multiplying every second we waste."

"Onward we go, then." Raphael says, as he and the other Archangels launch themselves into the skies, taking off to fly elsewhere the need is greatest.

* * *

In the atmosphere above, the High Psions watch the humans with rapt attention.

[The mud dweller's improvement speed is shocking.] Executor Vi says. [I don't think most 7th Level Psions could have killed that 'Megavaxian', yet a mere mortal like Beelzebub succeeded.]

A faint frown flickers across Creator Demila's face, but she quickly conceals it and schools her expression. [Don't be too impressed. Beelzebub's flames are particularly effective against the Kolvaxians. Any Energy Manipulator among our kind should have similar or even greater success if they focus their efforts.]

[Executor Sartran, what do you think?] Vi asks, directing her attention to the most powerful Energy Manipulator in the Volgrim Empire, barring Dosena herself.

Sartran, unlike Beelzebub, tends to focus his efforts on the power of electricity and lightning.

He frowns at Vi's implication. [My attainments in the element of fire are quite paltry. Heat-based energy can come in many forms, but my strengths are best expressed through quick, instantaneous bursts of power. Beelzebub is better at building up power quickly and maintaining it. I cannot replicate his success against a similarly corrupted exobeast.]

Vi frowns. [What about Executor Nufaris?]

[His talents lie in the manipulation of Space and Time.] Sartran replies. [His Energy Manipulation is only so-so.]

Hearing such a frank admission from one of the highest Volgrim in the entire Empire slightly surprises Creator Demila, but it's nothing much to the other Executors. They have always been frank with one another about their strengths and weaknesses. At the highest levels, Executors are not able to find many sparring partners or confidantes, and as such they tend to rely on their peers of equal stature.

[The humans are failing to keep up with the Plague's spread.] Executor Huron says. [They had to direct four of their so-called 'Champions' to defeat that small-scale horde and the Megavaxian. In doing so, they allowed the Northern Front to collapse. Hope Hiro could not cope with so many Plagueborn by himself.]

The Executors all look at one another.

[It's nearly time for us to make our move.] Vi says.

[Let us wait a bit longer.] Sartran argues. [Just a bit longer.]

The Executors all nod.

[We must show these foolish humans the true power of the Volgrim Empire.] Vi says.
[If we save them in their time of greatest need, they will appreciate our efforts all the more.]

[Words of wisdom spoken most truthfully.] Sartran concludes.

Creator Demila's eyes flicker with devious thoughts, yet she remains silent.

She also agrees that the time is not yet right, but her motivations are completely different...

Part 588: Hopeful Struggle

The Northern Battlefield collapses. With only Hope and a platoon of ordinary Legionnaires available to battle the rapidly growing number of Kolvaxians, they simply cannot contain the Plague's spread.

Hope tries. He really does.

But it doesn't matter.

Even though the Second Wordsmith is one of humanity's Champions, he is not a Cosmic. He can battle at the Cosmic level, but only because of Excalibur and a few other key artifacts borrowed from ancient Trueborn Heroes. In terms of actual combat potential, he ultimately comes up short compared to each individual Champion battling the Megavaxian. With their powers combined, Belial, Beelzebub, Levi, Mandy, and the Archangels are all capable of taking on superior threats.

Hope flies into the sky, looking down on the swarm as they fight their way closer and closer to several dozen surrounded Legionnaires. Within seconds, those brave men and women will surely lose their lives.

"Return!" Hope shouts, teleporting them into the safety of Mount Adams' fortified position. He grimaces and spins Excalibur in his hand, firing a full-power blast of divine energy into a mass of a dozen Kolvaxians, but the attack merely pounds one of them into the ground before it jumps back up, unharmed, and resumes its charge toward the base of the mountain.

"Shit. Dammit!" Hope curses. Excalibur's long-range attacks are quite fearsome, but against monsters as powerful as the ordinary Kolvaxians, it lacks a focused striking ability capable of executing clean kills.

"Where are the Warframes, Hans?!" Hope exclaims into his T-REX's mic. "I needed them YESTERDAY!"

"Zey are en-route." Hans says, deliberately adopting a calm tone. "I launched zem from zee base five minutes ago. Zey should be arriving shortly."

"Should be. *Should be*?! We don't have time for guesses!" Hope says, quickly looking up into the skies. He squints as the encroaching night-time darkness makes it nearly

impossible to make out any details in the sky. Maiura's star has already dipped below the horizon, and now only fading rays of its light allow the battlefield to remain somewhat visible. Were it not for humanity's T-REX suits, they'd be at a huge disadvantage in a nighttime battle.

After a few moments, Hope spots his targets. Three dots of light swooping across the upper atmosphere at high speeds, but still minutes away.

"I see them!" Hope says into his microphone. "Cut the thrusters. I'm bringing them here early."

"Very well." Hans replies over comms. "But I warn you. Zey are not yet powerful enough to turn zee tides of battle."

"I just need some backup! I can cut through the Kolvaxians myself as long as they don't surround me." Hope responds.

He pauses for a moment, then utters several Words of Power.

"Momentum. Halt. Teleport! Momentum. Halt. Teleport..."

One by one, back to back, three massive egg-shaped metal capsules slam into the soil, landing thrusters-down as they impact the planet with violent *thuds*. The first capsule bursts open, and five large Warframes leap out in unison, their twenty-foot-tall bodies making them more than three times the height and ten times the overall size of an average human.

These five Warframes feature identically-patterned paint jobs, with black being their primary colors, but each individual having racing stripes drawn across their surfaces in one different color per unit. The lead Warframe is colored red and black, while another is green and black, another is yellow and black, and so on.

These imposing mechs rise to their full heights. The red-colored mech ignites a flaming sword held in the grip of both its arms. The blue-colored mech activates an icy blue sword. The yellow one flares a blade of lightning, and the purple and green mechs respectively reveal plasma and acid blades.

Each of the mechs have heads emblazoned with wings where a human's 'ears' would be. At the same time, glowing white wings expand out of their backs, illuminating the darkness around them and making each one a beacon in the night.

"Cherub Platoon successfully landed." The lead pilot says calmly, his flaming sword raising into an aggressive stance as he stares down the approaching Kolvaxian horde.

The second capsule also explodes open. This time, just two 30-foot-tall Warframes emerge, falling from the platform a few feet and smashing into the dirt. They are unique machines, each one rolling on a gyroscopic orb, radiating gravitic waves around themselves to keep their bodies aloft.

The twin machines, unlike the Valkyries before them, do not have unique paint jobs. They simply have images of purple shields emblazoned on their chests, while the rest of their frames are plain, unadorned metal.

These two newcomers roll around on their spiked balls to fall into line behind the five Valkyries. They level twin Gauss cannons, one attached to each arm, at the incoming Plagueborn.

"Ballbusters One and Two have landed." The lead pilot says into his comm.

For the final pod, when it explodes open, only one machine slowly rolls out. This one dwarfs all the previous ones, rising 50-feet high, rolling on tank treads, with a dual-barrel machine-gun cannon in place of its head. Its left arm glows yellow, radiating a fierce electric power, while the right arm glows red, emitting an equally fierce fiery heat.

This machine's paint job is far more fierce than the ones before it, with blood-red crimson causing every surface to glow ominously in the night, and multiple blue running lights situated around its exterior make it a high-profile target for any enemy to attack. Unfortunately for the Kolvaxians, this is a heavy machine with extremely thick Wordsmithium armor. It will not go down easily.

"Armads online." The pilot says. "No residual damage from the landing detected. All systems nominal."

Hope breathes a sigh of relief. "Alright everyone! Let's beat these alien freaks back and save Maiura!"

"Yes, commander!" All the pilots exclaim in unison.

The battle resumes in earnest! The five Cherub models race out at high speeds, spreading their radiant wings to take to the air. They flicker around, leaving trails of glowing particles behind them as they flit from foe to foe, waving their colorful and deadly swords to and fro.

Behind them, the Armads takes point, immediately pointing its machine-gun head at the thickest mass of Kolvaxians. Its cannons begin firing concussive energy bullets into the crowd, not aiming to kill any Kolvaxians, but to bring their charge to a halt! The projectiles it fires lack the power to bruise the Kolvaxians, let alone kill them, but they're still great for stalling large masses of enemies.

Each bullet explodes on impact, creating shockwaves that rapidly pound the Kolvaxians backward, bringing entire masses to a halt!

At the same time, behind the Armads, on its right and left, the Ballbusters take up positions, aiming their dual-cannons with extreme precision.

BLAT! BLAT! BLAT!

Every 2.5 seconds, they discharge a round from their right or left Gauss Cannons, alternating shots to ensure the guns won't overheat. The operators fully expect a prolonged battle, and as such they don't attempt to stress their machines.

The Gauss Cannons prove highly effective against the ordinary Kolvaxians. Each round fired crashes into the heads of various Kolvaxians positioned here or there, blasting their skull and brains apart and sending them flying backward, where they will crash to the ground and lie unmoving for a while.

Unfortunately, despite the highly energized gauss rounds being capable of dealing high damage to the Kolvaxians, the monsters are still able to regenerate from their wounds. Even with their heads destroyed, most of the Kolvaxians still draw energy from Maiura's soil, regenerating their injuries and returning to active combat within a minute or so.

The Armads, meanwhile, fires even more slowly than both of the Ballbusters. Every ten seconds, its Infernal Cannon or its Thunder Lance shoot a single round that explode with such force that any Kolvaxian directly struck is either blasted apart or scorched to ash, slaughtered on the spot! It's only because of the Armads' slow firing rate that the massive machine is not an optimal choice for killing the monsters.

As the battlefield begins to change, Hope dives down and enters the fray. He activates several Words of Power, accelerating his thoughts and movement speed, allowing him to become a blur as he dances around the fringes of the Kolvaxian forces, cutting them down, one by one, with the power of the almighty Excalibur! Hope's speed, while not the absolute fastest compared to a demon like Ose or even the ancient Titan Zeus, is still at

the high end of the mortal spectrum. Any Kolvaxians that try to attack him end up whiffing their attacks, missing entirely.

His rich combat experience gives him a strong foundation to duel the monsters and cut them down one-by-one.

With one Wordsmith and eight Warframes, the situation changes for the better. The Armads maintains a steady stream of suppressive fire, unloading rapid bolts of explosive energy on the nearest Kolvaxians to slow them down while its twin-cannons steadily kill one Kolvaxian at a time. The Ballbusters roll around, keeping mobile so that any Kolvaxians who might burst out of the ground won't be able to rip them apart before they react. Their cannons, while weaker than the Armads, still provide a strong suppressive effect, giving Hope and the Armads more time to react to incoming threats.

But it turns out the most important Warframe assets are none other than the Cherubs. Using the power of technology, they actually wield more physical strength than Henry Cliff while also being faster and lighter on their feet. Nimble and agile, these machines act as heavy-hitting glass cannons, cutting down Kolvaxians one after the other.

However, the Cherubs have one huge downside, and that is their extremely thin top level of armor. Despite their internals being protected by Wordsmithium, that particular layer is so thin that if a single Kolvaxian were to land a punch on them, their entire Warframe might explode into pieces!

Thus, the five Cherub pilots focus on quick, singular attacks, followed immediately by hasty retreats. Hit and run tactics. Guerrilla warfare!

The Red pilot slashes with his flame sword, cutting through two Kolvaxians at the same time. He bisects both and scorches the wounds to drastically slow their healing, but he fails to kill those two. Unperturbed, he springs into the sky and flaps his wings to avoid any potential follow-up attacks before diving back down elsewhere to repeat his process.

The Blue pilot wields a freezing blade. When she cuts into a Kolvaxian, she chills the monster's blood to an extreme level, flash-freezing it and grinding it to a halt. Her ability to kill the creatures is even lower than the Red Pilot, but in exchange, she immobilizes her enemies for far longer periods.

The Green pilot's acidic blade deals less direct damage, but when he cuts through a Kolvaxian, the acid remains for a long time afterward, continuing to fester and burn with the hopes it will eventually corrode a vital organ and kill the creature. Unfortunately, his

acidic blade does not slow his enemies as much as Blue or stop them dead in their tracks like Red's would.

Yellow's lightning blade is more of an experimental weapon. Its edge is extremely dull, terrible for cutting through soft and hard tissue, but in exchange every swing unleashes a thunder-blast, sending multiple Kolvaxians hurtling away! The Yellow pilot swings multiple times whenever he lands, rapidly knocking away tens of Kolvaxians before taking to the air to recharge his sword back to its maximum potential.

Finally, the Purple pilot wields the fiercest blade of all, a plasma blade mixing the scorching power of fire with the explosive power of lightning. When she slashes at a Kolvaxian, the blade burns its way into the monster's internals, then explodes, sending the monster's body parts hurtling away in all directions! She kills more Kolvaxians than any of the other Cherubs, at least half as many as Hope himself! Unfortunately, because of the light armor on her mech, she has to take great care not to attack more than one or two Kolvaxians at a time before taking to the sky again.

Like this, the five experimental Cherubs, the two Ballbusters, and the Armads provide effective partners for Hope, greatly alleviating the burden of killing and forcing the Kolvaxian swarm to switch between different targets. The Cherubs sting like wasps, occasionally killing Kolvaxians but mostly slowing them down. The Ballbusters knock the Kolvaxians down or pound them into the dirt, only rarely landing killing shots, while the Armads is the best of both worlds, keeping the swarm at bay with its machine-guns and killing the Kolvaxians slowly.

Hope's morale surges! Despite being annoyed with Hans for taking so long to launch the Warframes, Hope understands why he needed time. Hans was caught off-guard, not expecting the Kolvaxians to suddenly strike at Maiura. Even so, he swapped out the armaments on his Warframes to best suit the situation and he dispatched them quickly enough to make a difference.

Now it's up to Hope and these eight pilots to wipe them out and clean up the Northern Front!

Hope and the Cherubs dance around the battlefield's edges while the swarm continues pressing toward the Armads and the Ballbusters. Every single second, hundreds of Kolvaxians are knocked backward or pushed down, slowed to a crawl. Every few seconds, a Kolvaxian dies to Hope or one of the Warframes.

But even so, the swarm continue to progress. The Kolvaxians push closer and closer to the three strongest Warframes, as if dragging themselves along the ground by their bloodied fingernails. With no long-range solutions for attacking, they can only endure the brutal assault of humanity's nine warriors while making small headway toward their ultimate objective.

"Commander!" The Armads pilot exclaims. "They've reached the 100-yard line! We're not able to stop their advancement!"

"How many Kolvaxians are still alive?" Hope asks, transmitting his words via the nanites within his body.

"Six hundred and thirteen." The Armads pilot responds, in between shots.

Hope cuts down another Kolvaxian, but his expression turns to disbelief. "How the hell is that possible? We're killing them faster than ever! You're telling me we only killed forty in the last minute?!"

"No, sir." The Armads pilot says grimly. "We've killed eighty-seven. But their rate of replenishment is increasing over time. If I look closely, I can see more of them appearing in the back-lines every so often."

Hope's expression turns grim.

How are the Kolvaxians arriving on Maiura without infesting the planet's core? This goes against everything we learned about them in the past!

But he doesn't have any answers. Neither do the Warframe pilots.

"Shit! There's a disturbance under the soil." One of the Ballbuster pilots yelps. "Beneath us!"

The ground explodes, and a pair of Kolvaxians leaps at the Ballbuster from below. The pilot agilely rolls to the side, dodging their swipe, but when she tries to swivel her guns to shoot the ambushers, they dive back underground and pop up on her other side, then punch her machine and send her crashing into the Armads.

"Argh! Shit!" The pilot cries, as dozens of warning lights go off. "Activate Gravity Transducers!"

Immediately, a field of powerful suppressive energy radiates around her Warframe, causing anything in the vicinity to become ten times heavier. The Armads trembles as

part of this field grabs the right side of its frame and tugs downward, but its internals are sturdy enough not to collapse from the extra weight.

As for the two Kolvaixans, they shudder and slow to a halt, their feet pressing into the soil as their bodies gain thousands of pounds of mass.

But then they start to move again. Slower than before, but still frighteningly fast in the Ballbuster pilot's eyes. She tries to aim her remaining gun at them, but the weapon malfunctions and an arc of electricity jumps to a different part before completely short-circuiting. The gun flops downward, useless, while the rest of her frame loses its combat strength.

"I can't stop them!" The woman yells. "They're closing in!"

Hope Hiro teleports over, arriving just in the nick of time. His blade slashes twice, and he murders the monsters before they can kill the second Ballbuster pilot. He ignores the suppressive gravity field thanks to Excalibur, its aura shielding him from such a threat with ease. With a single glance, Hope recognizes that her Warframe has lost its operation ability.

"Return." Hope says without a second thought. The pilot and Warframe disappear, teleporting to Hans' secret laboratory elsewhere on the planet, deep inside a Wordsmithium bunker the Plague will not be able to easily break inside.

"We're down one Warframe!" Hope shouts. "But don't be afraid! Reinforcements are on their way. My son and daughter will arrive soon! We just need to hold out!"

The Second Wordsmith tries to boost the morale of his soldiers, but unfortunately, words mean little in the face of such unrelenting pressure. With one Ballbuster down, the swarm's speed surges, and they begin drawing closer and closer to the Armads and remaining Ballbuster, making the pilots of both start to sweat.

"When they get too close, just retreat!" The Armads pilot says to the Ballbuster pilot. "My armor is sturdy. I'll be fine. But you won't! Don't throw your life away for nothing."

"I refuse to give ground." The Ballbuster pilot retorts. "So many have died today. Too many humans! I won't concede ground, and I won't flee! I'll stay here until the bitter end. For humanity!"

"For humanity!" The five Cherubs roar.

The Cherubs all speed up their attacks, striking faster and more often, risking their lives to kill and slow down even more of the Kolvaxian scum. They have to save their two comrades from certain death!

It's at this moment when a figure swoops down from the sky and smashes directly into the center of the Kolvaxian swarm, sending dozens of the monsters flying out in all directions, their bodies spinning through the air uncontrollably. Uriel, the Archangel of Retribution, cloaks herself in a set of Wordsmithium armor not dissimilar to the one Phoebe gave to Belial. Its resplendent golden hue glows in the dark of the night, making her stand out from the mass of Kolvaxians around herself.

She wields two spears, also crafted from Wordsmithium. One red, and one gold. Recreations of her ancient artifacts, the Gae Bolg and Gungnir, granted by her sister Camael. While they are not nearly at the level of those ancient artifacts, they're good enough for her current needs. Jason crafted them with great care.

Like a hurricane, Uriel spins her spears rapidly, battering the Kolvaxians and creating disorder among their ranks. Her brothers all materialize, one after the other, also engaging in battle while trying not to maintain prolonged contact with the creatures embodied by Chaos. Their auras, while much weaker than the Megavaxian, still grant them a certain level of protection and even immunity against sustained magical attacks.

"Hah hah hah!" Uriel laughs uproariously. "None of thee shalt perish so long as I draw breath! I am Uriel, the last living Archangel! Hear my cry!"

She flaps her wings and launches herself like a missile into the back-lines of the Kolvaxian horde, holding her spears horizontally in a V-shape to turn herself into a wedge-like battering ram.

Immediately, she splits the army like Moses split the Red Sea, dividing the Kolvaxians in half and causing them to fly apart.

"Pitiful! Pathetic!" Uriel boasts. "Thy bodies art strong, but thy true power pales in comparison to myself! I shalt treat thee like training dummies, ripe for abuse!"

Uriel rampages unhindered, like a Brute demon tearing through a schoolyard full of children. Each sweep of her spears batters the ordinary Kolvaxians away, preventing any of them from coming close and landing killing blows.

She doesn't manage to kill even a single one, but it doesn't matter. With her arrival, the pressure on the Warframes drops drastically, allowing them to continue slowly but steadily killing the Kolvaxians. Uriel draws their aggression, while Hope and his human allies focus on landing the killing blows.

"So formidable!" The Ballbuster operator exclaims. "So this is the Archangel's true power? I'd only heard rumors, but seeing her in the flesh is even more incredible!"

The longer Uriel sustains her attacks, the more divine energy she is able to output, rapidly rising in power as she builds up her momentum and dashes between her foes, flapping her wings to create shockwaves and jump from one group of Kolvaxians to the next.

Soon, the Kolvaxians drop in number. Because of the sustained efforts of Uriel, Hope, and the Warframe operators, they manage to cut the Kolvaxians down to a local population of 500, and eventually 450!

"Keep it up!" Hope shouts. "We're making progress! Just fifteen- no, ten more minutes!"

Suddenly, Uriel lets out a cry of shock. Something strikes her body so hard that it sends her flying across the battlefield like a cannonball. She pounds through tens of Kolvaxians, skips across the ground like a rock, and smashes into the Armads with enough force to shove it thirty feet backward! Luckily, its Wordsmithium armor saves it from sustaining serious damage, but several warning indicators still pop up.

Uriel coughs. With her momentum shattered, she extricates herself from the small dent made in the Armads' shell and staggers to her feet, still gripping her spears. She looks at the back-lines of the Kolvaxian swarm, where she sees a single figure levitating in the air.

A Kolvaxian converted from a former Psion.

Uriel's eyes narrow. She coughs a few times to clear some blood from her lungs, then she grimaces.

"I wondered when such a creature borne of malfeasance would appear. COME! Thy sneak attacks shalt only succeed once, pitiful snake."

Hope's expression darkens. Despite the fact that the Kolvaxians have surely assimilated tens of thousands, perhaps even millions of Psions over the last 100,000

years, they rarely appear on the battlefields.

That can only mean the invaders are getting serious now.

* * *

In the skies above, the High Psions narrow their eyes. They immediately detect the presence of the newcomer and they grimace in anger.

[It is time.] Executor Riley says.

[No. Wait a little longer.] Executor Vi retorts. [The Archangel can handle one of such a foe. The true menace has yet to show itself. We must be ready to act when it does.]

[Hmph. Then we'll do as you say.] Riley concedes, lowering her battle intent.

All the while, Creator Demila watches, waiting for the right moment to act.

Part 589: Energon

Inside Chrona, Jason Hiro alternates between watching the Maiuran War unfold via the Spynet Sphere, and traveling into his warehouse to take care of several important side projects. Even if the battle on Maiura concludes in just one realspace day, that's still 250 Chrona-days Jason can spend productively working on multiple projects to enhance his strength, as well as the abilities of his fellow humans.

For him, twenty days have already passed since the Kolvaxians first appeared. Jason sometimes thinks about the recent conversation he had with Hope. He scowls every time his subconscious mind brings it up.

"What an idiot. What a colossal moron. When did Hope become so stupid?" Jason wonders out loud, as he manipulates an artifact-knife in his hand, looking at it absentmindedly.

At this moment, Jason stands inside his warehouse. Thanks to the hard work of Rebecca, all his past and present artificing projects have been stored and organized on various shelves and inside mundane and magical containers, their details easily accessible via the central warehouse control system.

This particular dagger represents a random side experiment he decided to embark on just today; a simple design aimed at maximizing one highly specific attribute to the highest extent possible.

A dagger that strikes as many times at once as possible for the sake of stacking up the hits to deal a critical deathblow!

Jason stands before a training dummy, one imbued with exceptionally powerful regeneration magic, and a body made out of the hardest Wordsmithium he's ever produced. Intended to be a testing dummy for battling the Kolvaxians, this puppet is even more durable and regenerative than even the Kolvaxians themselves. Jason takes its design seriously, not skimping on the materials used to make it, as he worries the Kolvaxians may even strengthen over time.

Whenever he designs a new weapon, Jason goes to every possible length to ensure it will be effective against humanity's most frightening foe.

Abruptly, Jason stabs at the dummy's head, and the magic inside the knife activates, causing his arm to phase through time and space.

Stab-stab-stab-stab...

When his knife's stab lands, seven phantom images of his arm also land at the exact moment, causing a huge hole to explode in the dummy's head!

Quickly, Jason retracts his hand, watching as the dummy rapidly regenerates the Wordsmithium used to hold it together.

"Solid piercing capability, but I can't get the duplication threshold above seven. I guess that's the limit. What do you think, Rebecca?"

Jason turns to look at his loyal assistant, the Cybernite who has been crucial in helping him evolve his abilities. Rebecca watches the process silently, nodding her head when she hears Jason's query.

"Seven is fine. What's important is that the strike is highly focused. The armor-penetrative abilities are maximized, while the explosive power is minimized."

"But this knife can only deal with one Kolvaxian at a time." Jason points out. "And it requires 170 Energons to produce."

"170 Energons for an artifact of this quality isn't bad." Rebecca says. "Currently, we're able to capture 1,152 Energons across the Milky Way every Chrona-day. That means we could produce nearly seven knives each cycle."

"Yes, but only if we reduce the Wordsmithium volume to near-zero." Jason objects. "We need all the Wordsmithium we can get."

"The Quantum Knife is itself made of Class V Wordsmithium." Rebecca argues. "Compared to a thousand or so tons of Class I Wordsmithium, we're not making a loss."

Over the last several years, Rebecca and Jason have worked together to formalize a new system of energy mathematics. By harnessing the power of more than a hundred stars in remote locations hidden across the Milky Way, far from the Plague or Volgrim's influence, Jason has been able to secretly siphon the full energy of entire stars and convert it to mana for his own use.

The conversation ratio is truly terrible. 99% of the mundane energy is lost during the conversion, but the resulting mana gained is just as pure as the mana Jason's body innately produces, yet far, far more voluminous.

In fact, the amount of energy vastly exceeds what even Excalibur is capable of outputting! If Hope were to learn this fact, his ears would likely explode from rage...

After so many years, Jason has developed many different 'types' of Wordsmithium, possessing countless unique properties. Compared to the original highly durable but rather 'bland' Class I Wordsmithium he made years ago, the newest evolutions are multiple epochs superior.

One Energon gained from the Milky Way's stars roughly equates to a single ton of Class I Wordsmithium, while Class II requires 2.5 Energons, Class III requires 10 Energons, Class IV requires 50 Energons, and Class V requires 500...

Of course, these numbers are only estimates. Due to mystical reasons Jason and Rebecca have yet to fully unravel, sometimes they are able to produce more or less Wordsmithium than the incoming Energons imply, leaving them to scratch their heads. But by now, they've mostly figured out the averages.

"Seven knives made of Class V Wordsmithium are not that impressive." Jason also retorts. "Forget a single ton of Class V Wordsmithium, those knives don't amount to a fraction of a ton! Most of the mana is spent imbuing them with the Enchantments!"

"Spent, but not wasted." Rebecca says, waving her finger chidingly. "As long as you continue to locate stars in hidden locations, the Energon production will ramp up over time. But actually, I do have a better idea for the knives."

"You do? I'm all ears." Jason says, fiddling with the knife's edge.

"I say we retry the enchanting process. This time, aim for the bottom end of six strikes. As long as the knife can reliably stab six times, that will be more than good enough for our needs, *and* it will lower the Energon cost to manufacture them considerably. Furthermore, we haven't added an elemental enchantment. Since the Kolvaxians are weak to fire, let's try mixing that in. Six strikes that plunge flames, or plasma, or even raw explosive energy into their bodies should allow for potential one-hit kills."

Jason chews his bottom lip. "Wasn't the entire point to get as many stabs in as possible? Doesn't dropping the threshold to six impalements fly in the face of your original design idea?"

Rebecca shrugs. "This is the scientific way, Jason. I extrapolated based on past data and suggested this development trajectory. It hasn't gone according to those projections,

so we'll alter the plan and try again. Remember, the true goal is to develop weapons efficient enough for ordinary soldiers to fight back the Kolvaxian hordes. And if we develop weapons of that quality, they should *also* prove effective against many Cosmic threats."

Jason sobers up, remembering his primary goal. "Right. Good point. Okay, we'll take a break for a few hours then. When I come back, I'll retry with the new design principle. If we're lucky, maybe I can lower the Energon cost below 125... that would be big."

He sets the knife on his machining table beside half a dozen previous prototypes. Then, he stretches and pops his back, but he doesn't leave the warehouse.

"Something else?" Rebecca asks.

"It's Hope." Jason mutters. "I keep thinking about what he said to me. Why is he so insistent on me staying away from Maiura? He's putting lives at risk."

"You don't have to do as he says." Rebecca points out. "So what if he gets mad that you're helping? This is no time for a small-minded man causing thousands or even millions to die."

"That's a *logical* way to put it." Jason says, raising an eyebrow. "But things are never that simple. Hope isn't an idiot. He's actually really smart. Hell, not that many years ago I even felt he was way smarter than me. It's important humanity doesn't become divided during this crisis. If him and I start butting heads, it could lead to a catastrophe."

Rebecca crosses her arms. She looks at Jason meaningfully.

"Is that why you're staying here, working on these projects? You're afraid of pissing Hope off?"

"No, I'm not *afraid* of him." Jason snorts. "But this is about the bigger picture. If I enrage him, or cross some unseen invisible line, I might set him off. What if he lashes out?"

Rebecca falls silent.

Several seconds pass as she looks at Jason, her eyes betraying no emotion.

"If things have degraded that far, Jason, then..."

She pauses.

"...perhaps you should eliminate him."

"What?!" Jason asks. "Are you *actually* saying I should kill Hope?"

Rebecca shrugs. "I have no attachment to him. I don't even necessarily think it's a good idea. But humanity already has a Wordsmith. It would be extremely remiss of me to pretend that allowing a loose cannon Wordsmith to rampage around and threaten the stability of the galaxy is perfectly okay. It is not. If you're this worried about Hope, then maybe you should consider acting in a more *final* capacity."

This time, it's Jason who falls silent. He stares at Rebecca, his mouth slightly agape, incredulous.

"That's- that's such a fucked up thing to say. Even if Hope hates me, he's still fundamentally a good person! He cares about everyone else. He just has a vendetta against me! I don't know *why* he does, but I'm sure if I could figure it out..."

"What?" Rebecca scoffs, shaking her head. "You could convince him to *calm down*? Make peace with him? Jason, based on everything you've said and I've observed, it's obvious why Hope hates you."

Jason blinks. "It is?"

"Yes. He hates you because someone else is bending his ear and whispering hateful words about you. I'll leave it to you to guess who, since you're more familiar with the major players that might be involved."

Stunned, Jason looks away. He glances off to the side and falls into thought for a short while.

"Neil hates me. The two of them talk a lot. But Neil's not a moron. I don't think he'd be so blatant as to tell Hope to hate me constantly. I barely even get in Neil's way anymore."

Jason continues. "So who else? Linda? Amelia? That seems doubtful. Jephthah? We've never even spoken, so I doubt it's him..."

One name pops out in Jason's mind, causing his frown to deepen.

"Seriously? *Solomon*? Could it be him? I mean, he and I left on bad terms. He puppeteered my body without my consent twice, and he even tried to kill Belial and make me the scapegoat. It must be him. But even for Solomon, this is insane. He and Hope are always together inside the Hall of Heroes. Who knows what he's telling Hope when I can't hear."

"Solomon is the most likely culprit." Rebecca admits. "But there is another suspect. Raphael."

"Raphael??" Jason asks, even more bewildered than before. "That's way too out of left field. I mean, Raphael hasn't been entirely honest with me at times, but I doubt there's that much mutual hatred between us. Plus, Hope and Raphael don't seem to spend a lot of time together. No, Solomon seems the most likely suspect, much as I hate to say so."

Jason groans audibly. "What a pain in my ass. It explains why Hope so irrationally hates me. He's always been jealous of the fact that I ended up being the original body, and the fact I was rather heartless to him in the beginning. That was definitely my fault, but... I just didn't realize! If I had known he was literally an exact copy of me, I'd have treated him differently! I wouldn't have let him fall into Neil's clutches and be manipulated, I wouldn't-"

"Stop, Jason." Rebecca says, holding up her palm. "There's no sense in blaming yourself. What happened, happened. The crucial question is, can you unravel Hope's conspiratorial mindset? And if not, then is it really okay to let him keep living as he has until now?"

Jason's expression darkens. He leans back against the machining table and stares at the ground, falling into deep contemplation.

"I don't like killing." Jason eventually says. "Not killing demons, angels, Volgrim, or humans. Not killing anything. But if the need arises, I won't hold back."

"And what, exactly, would you determine to be the moment the 'need arises'?" Rebecca counters. "Hope is pushing harder and harder to sideline you. He's putting people's lives in danger. If not now, then when? Are you going to sit back and let people die?"

Before Jason can answer, she shakes her head.

"Just to be clear, I don't really care what the answer is. Whether a thousand humans live in the Milky Way or a billion, it doesn't matter to me. In my opinion, Cybernites are a superior evolution of the human species. I'd much rather focus on converting more people to my species than saving 'mere mortal' lives. But even with that said, I don't want to see humans die needlessly either. Most importantly, I want *you* to make a decision that won't ruin your mindset and set you on a course for catastrophe."

Jason nods along to her words, but continues to look at the floor. "If I let Hope do as he pleases, that could lead to a catastrophe. If I make up a sloppy reason and kill him, that could equally cause a catastrophe. This is not an easy dilemma to solve. If I could only... fix his outlook on life... it would be so much easier. If I could figure out *why* he hates me so much, maybe I could..."

The Wordsmith strokes his chin. He closes his eyes and sighs.

"I will think about this over the next several days."

"What about the situation on Maiura?" Rebecca asks. "Are you going to remain uninvolved?"

Jason looks at her with a glint in his eye. "I haven't exactly been doing nothing, you know. I've already saved some people. But... I think I'll work a bit harder. There's still room for improvement."

"I agree." Rebecca says, smiling at him.

The two of them stand up straight. They exchange a few more pleasantries, then Jason departs, heading back to the Spynet Sphere. As he walks, he thinks about a great many things, but mostly about how he should deal with Hope.

"Hope. Oh, *Hope*. Honestly... I wish I hadn't made you. I wish I knew back then what I know now. You brought Amelia back. You fought against me every step of the way. But you haven't been all bad, have you?"

Jason chuckles, but his voice lacks any joy.

"There haven't been many good times between you and me. But... I respected you, once. I respected that you made a name for yourself. I knew I screwed up, early on. I regretted the way I treated you. If only you would let me reconcile, couldn't we work past our differences? What do you gain by hating me, other than pain and misery? Isn't there a better way?"

"I don't want to kill him." Jason whispers to himself. "I *don't* want that. And I don't want him to kill me either. What if he lashes out, just to hurt me? What if he attacks Phoebe, or Samantha? Would he? I used to think he wouldn't, but maybe times have changed. He's becoming an unstable variable."

Jason walks up to the Spynet Sphere, and the door on its side slides open. Inside, Fiona stands alone, gazing at the monitors as she keeps her hand on a control panel for

the teleportation matrices. Every once in a while, she teleports someone off-world in secret, making sure not to draw Hope or Neil's gazes.

"Another nineteen hundred and forty." She says as Jason enters. "I've been careful to only rescue isolated individuals or duos."

"Good. That's good." Jason says blandly, not really paying attention. He stands behind Fiona, then reaches over to squeeze her shoulders. "Can we talk? It's about Hope."

Fiona frowns. She turns all the way around to look at Jason.

"What about him?"

Jason's shoulders sag.

"I need your input. I need to come up with a way to handle him."

"Alright." Fiona says. "I'm listening."

"Man, what are we all doing, just standing around with our thumbs up our butts? I'm bored! Let's go already!"

Bael loudly complains, over and over again, to anyone within earshot. Whether they want to listen or not, all of the demons nearby have no choice but to roll their eyes as he whines, bitches, and moans.

Here on the world of Yardris, a massive legion of Demon Emperors, Dukes, and Barons nervously wait for the command to come down through Yardrat to them. The top-level Demon Deities, specifically the Middle Cosmics, hold the true power over demonkind. And recently, a large number of Higher Demons have even chosen to side with Demon Deity Auger, passing their abilities on to him. Thus, he holds more sway over demonkind than any other demon in the ancient past.

"Bael, stop it." Crow says, waving her wing dismissively. "We leave when the higher-ups tell us to leave."

Yardrat paces around, looking a little uncomfortable about the situation, but also plenty happy not to be heading out already.

"Have you forgotten?" Yardrat asks. "The Wordsmiths left you to die on the world of Reaver. They rescued all their fellow humans, but not the demons or Volgrim. Who cares if we don't rush over at the drop of the hat?"

"Yeah! Fuck 'em!" Emperor Fae cackles evilly. "Screw those Wordshits! Always acting high and mighty like they're better than us! I'd love to shove a bomb up their butts, lemme tell you that!"

Emperor Nymph bats her eyes while sitting on a stump she grew just so she could have a seat. "I would rather not go anyway. What good are Emperors against the new Plague? My magic will not be of any use. Even Fae probably won't be able to do more than knock the Plagueborn around a little. The only demons who can offer support to the humans are the Low and Middle Cosmics."

Bael casually picks his nose, flicking the booger on the ground afterward. "I wonder who'd win in a fight. Mephisto, or one of these new green-guys?"

"Doesn't matter." Demon Deity Melody says, her Astral Body floating off to the side. "Mephisto is probably dead. The Volgrim wanted to refine his dragon bones for some awful purpose. It's best not to think about that stuff."

Bael's expression turns glum. He kicks a rock into some nearby grass and sighs. "Man. I miss playin' Sticks and Bones with Mephy-boy. It's a shame he had to go all power-crazy and get his butt whooped. Why couldn't he just stay like he was before?"

"You're one of the only demons who doesn't care about power." Yardrat points out. "Mephisto saw an opportunity and took it. I can't even fault him for it. Shame, though. If he'd just waited, Diablo could have uplifted him a lot more painlessly."

"Yeah. Well. Deeks ain't around no more." Bael grunts.

The demons continue to loiter around, waiting for minutes upon minutes, even a full hour.

Eventually, Melody straightens her posture and assumes a more alert stance. She levitates into the air to hover fifty feet above all the demons, drawing their gazes.

"Alright, everyone. The Deities have communed. We've made our decision. As Nymph pointed out, there's really no point in mere mortal demons showing up to battle the Plague. Instead, the Middle Cosmics will use Yardrat's magic to project their powers onto Maiura."

She continues. "The situation on Maiura took a terrible turn a few minutes ago. It doesn't look like the humans are going to be able to hold on after all, so we have to make a

move now. We might all still feel aggrieved by the way the Wordsmiths left us high and dry on Reaver, but in the end, we need to work together if we're to defeat the Plague."

"Oh." Fae says, blinking twice. "So... does that mean we can go home?"

"Yes." Melody says, rolling her eyes. "You can leave now."

Her Astral Body disappears, turning into cosmic dust and leaving all the Emperors and their subordinates feeling gloomy. As the crowd disperses and most of the demons prepare to travel back to the Labyrinth, one demon complains louder than ever.

"MAN! This stinks! I could've been takin' a nap this whole time! You jerks woke me up for nothing!"

"Shut up, Bael!"

Part 590: Sartran Switchup

Uriel gazes up at the singular levitating Kolvaxian, a foreboding premonition bubbling behind her eyes. As the ordinary Kolvaxians charge at her, she flaps her wings and leaps into the air, soaring well out of their reach.

At the same time, the *Psiovaxian* flies directly at her while summoning an energy field formed from Primal Psionics around itself. The faceless monster emotionlessly plows into the Archangel's body, knocking her away, but not far enough to truly injure her. Uriel easily spins in the air and flaps her wings to halt her momentum, dashing to the side in midair while spinning her twin spears around at increasingly fast speeds!

Bang! Crack!

Her spears smash against the Psiovaxian's barrier, and it retaliates by firing concentrated 'bullets' of psionic power at her, striking Uriel's armor one time after another. Uriel grunts in pain and conjures walls of light to defend herself, but the bullets blast right through, only slowing down a bit and reducing the damage her body takes.

In the skies above, the High Psions watch her battle intently, crossing their arms while they wait for a change that will require their assistance.

[Primal Psionics and a Body Enhancer.] Executor Vi says. [Psionic output appears to be around the 5th Level. It must be a 6th Level Psionic Plaguehost.]

[Roughly equivalent to an average Demon Emperor.] Executor Sartran adds. [Uriel can handle the situation.]

Demila frowns. [It's not accurate to only evaluate this Plaguehost as wielding strength at the 5th Level. It also possesses a Cosmic-grade body. Its Body Enhancements will strengthen equivalently.]

[The battle has barely begun.] Sartran says evenly. [This world has no idea of the pain it is about to suffer. For some reason, the Plague does not tend to send Psions to the frontlines. When it does, it will not stop at merely one or two hosts. It will send a swarm beyond comprehension.]

Demila nods. She has rarely fought on the frontlines against the Plague, and even when she did, that was tens of millennia ago, when the Plague was much weaker. Since its

evolution, she has never personally fought an Enhanced Plaguehost. She does not have a strong idea of just how dangerous they are, aside from what she witnessed on Reaver.

With Uriel no longer able to assist the Warframes and Hope, they once again fall into a bad situation. The Second Wordsmith grimaces as the Kolvaxians begin pushing forward once again, ignoring any losses as they make their way toward the armored mechs and their juicy human pilots.

Thankfully, Uriel pushed the swarm back enough that the Cherubs and Armads were able to mow down a good number of ordinary Kolvaxians. Unfortunately, even more Kolvaxians continued to appear during that period, so their numbers only dwindled by a small amount.

"There's still sixty-three Kolvaxian left!" The Armads pilot calls out, before blasting another one to smithereens. "Sixty-two now!"

A hint of despair rings out in his voice as he witnesses two Kolvaxians teleport onto the rear of the battlefield. Killing one won't matter if two more appear!

Several Kolvaxians dive underground. Hope quickly takes to the air, ready to attack when they pop back up. He hovers near the lone remaining Ballbuster protectively, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Some distance away, a female demon abruptly appears out of thin air. She stumbles slightly, then looks around to evaluate her new position.

"I'm about 500 yards away." She says, speaking into her shining golden armor's comm system. She hefts her flaming sword and turns her attention to the swarm descending upon the Warframes. "Thanks for the assist, Fiona."

"Anytime, Sammy." Fiona says back. "But watch your back. Hope's been acting weird recently."

Fiona pauses.

"Beelzebub isn't coming. He's gone to assist Henry."

"Between me, Uriel, and Hope, we should be able to handle ourselves." Belial says, though her tone betrays a lack of trust. "At least, I think we can."

Belial jumps forward, moving swiftly despite the armor shielding her body. She joins Hope, fighting off the Kolvaxians emerging from underground while Uriel battles the Psion in the sky above.

Over the next ten minutes, a furious melee follows. Hope spots Belial immediately, but he's so preoccupied with protecting the Ballbuster and Armads, while also killing Kolvaxians as quickly as possible, that he doesn't have the attention to spare for Belial's appearance. Even he has to admit she came at a good time.

Uriel's figure leaves white afterimages as she and the Psiovaxian collide in the air. Uriel summons powerful beams and streams of fire, pelting her foe in the same way Beelzebub would, but with less effectiveness. Her flames are simply nowhere near the level of Beelzebub's, lacking the concentration and raw energetic power of his magic.

But, luckily, she doesn't only wield fire magic. She is a master of many elements, including water, ice, flames, wind, earth, light, dark, and even magnetism... though tapping into the power of magnetism continues to give her an ominous foreboding sensation in the back of her mind.

Uriel's twin spears stab at the Psiovaxian. It spins and pirouettes in midair, moving more gracefully and intelligently than the comparatively stupid horde below. While the mundane Kolvaxians slowly begin to dwindle under the combined attacks of Hope, Belial, and the Warframes, Uriel can only do her best to land a killing blow on her foe.

But no matter how hard she tries, she finds she just isn't powerful enough!

Just like with the Megavaxian, Uriel is frustrated by her lack of striking power. Hope wields Excalibur while Belial wields a blade identical in function to Henry's sword, but Uriel's Wordsmithium spears are not at the level of those two artifacts. In terms of durability, they're practically unbreakable, but the spears are not heavy enough to break the bones of the new Kolvaxians, nor are they sharp enough to effortlessly split them like logs.

"Dammit! DAMMIT!" Uriel roars. "Why can't thou simply perish?!"

Out of frustration, Uriel finally reaches the edge of desperation. She looks inside her Mind Realm and grabs at Gabriel's soul.

"Assist me, brother!" Uriel cries.

Boom!

Uriel's eyes glow with ominous light as Gabriel materializes inside of her body, swapping places with his sister's soul. At the same time, Uriel lends her control over the

elements, and she presses her two spears together, causing them to melt together as part of their innate mystical functionality.

Designed by Fiona and crafted via Jason's powers of Wordsmithing, Uriel's replicas of the Gae Bolg and Gungnir are not the transcendent-level artifacts Camael once made, but they are still unique and powerful in their own ways.

They fuse within seconds, transforming into a massive greatsword weighing over ten tons!

Gabriel's eyes pierce the fog of battle. His ancient gaze fixates on the creature before him. The Psiovoxian hesitates as it senses its opponent's aura has drastically changed.

Uriel, the Archangel of Vengeance, has swapped control with Gabriel, the Archangel of Power.

"Come." Gabriel says, his deep voice escaping Uriel's lips like a rumble of distant lightning. "Let me test thy strength, monster born of heresy."

Gabriel moves slowly but with purpose. He flaps his wings and flies at the creature while wielding a comically oversized eight-foot-long greatsword, swinging it down as if it were a hammer.

The Psiovoxian flickers to the side, and Gabriel's swing misses! His sword whiffs the empty air, but a surge of power chops outward, blasting the ground and carving a trench 3 kilometers long, seemingly splitting Maiura's continental plate in two.

"Hmph." Gabriel grunts. "I am out of practice. Serve as my training dummy, wretched filth."

He attacks again, but this time, he adjusts to Uriel's bodily dimensions a bit better. When the Psiovoxian dodges, he attacks again. And again!

Each time, Gabriel builds up momentum and acclimates to the nuances of his sister's borrowed body. He is not used to controlling a body as small and light as hers, nor one lacking in physical strength, but his personal power begins to exert more and more control, changing her muscles to adapt to his sensibilities.

As the seconds pass and turn into minutes, Uriel's body grows stronger and fitter. Her muscles expand in size. Her height increases, taking her from just under six feet tall to over eight feet in height. She begins to resemble an ancient Amazon Warrior, and her body's compatibility with Gabriel's chosen greatsword improves constantly.

BOOM!!

Gabriel finally lands a hit, slashing at the Psiovaxian and hammering it down into the ground. The faceless creature does not let out a scream as it plunges a thousand feet deep into the soil, blasting a massive wave of dirt and rocks outward, startling Hope and the others as they momentarily have to shield themselves from the wall of debris. Hope casts a Word of Power, preventing thousands of tons of dirt and rock from burying himself and the Warframes alive, while also benefiting Belial too.

Unfortunately, the Psiovaxian quickly emerges from the ground seconds later, only slightly injured. Not only is its body durable, but a shield of raw telekinetic energy continues to envelop it, making it even more durable than before.

The Psiovaxian does not charge at Gabriel or attack him again. Instead, it jumps out of the ground and hovers backward, looking warily at Gabriel with its unseen eyes.

"Hmm?"

Gabriel grunts. He has long disabused himself of any notion that this creature is 'stupid'. It clearly seems to have an intelligence of its own, albeit alien, its goals unknown.

"What sort of creature art thou, I wonder?" Gabriel asks calmly. The flames on his greatsword intensify, illuminating his glowing eyes with a crimson color. "Dost thou understandeth my words? Or dost thou intendeth to continue playing a fool?"

The Psiovaxian says nothing. It stares at him for a few moments.

Then, it slightly moves its right hand.

Abruptly, another Psiovaxian appears beside it.

"Hmm?!" Gabriel grunts, frowning deeply.

And then, another!

And another!

Within five seconds, the lone Psiovaxian is joined by four others, all of them looking completely indistinguishable from one another, let alone the ordinary Kolvaxians on the ground.

The five faceless creatures levitate motionlessly before Gabriel for but a single second.

Then, four of them fly away!

East and west, one Kolvaxian goes in each direction, while two rocket southward toward the fortress atop Mount Adams and the battlefield beyond.

[Oh no!] Uriel exclaims. [Brother! Just one of these creatures is too much for thee to handle. Now they art splitting up; thou shalt be unable to give chase!]

Gabriel's heart quickly becomes calm.

"If this world shouldn't fall, then so be it. The opponent before me is the only one I shalt pursue. Humanity has other Champions at its disposal."

Gabriel smiles.

"And not only humanity..."

In the skies above, the Executors immediately notice the change in the situation.

[It is time. Spread out.] Executor Riley says. [Sartran, you go south. Vi, east. Huron, north. I shall protect the western side.]

[And me?] Demila asks.

[You shall stay here with Divinator Fellrun. Protect the central human fortress.] Riley orders. [The humans are incapable of surviving without our assistance.]

[They are only mud-dwellers in the end.] Fellrun adds. [Worry not. I shall aid the humans with all my strength.]

A glint appears in Demila's eyes. [As will I.]

In a single second, the Volgrim's conversation plays out, and four of the five Executors race away, traveling multiple miles in the blink of an eye. Their departing figures leave little more than a flicker of light as they each arrive at their designated rendezvous points.

Therefore, in the few seconds it takes the Psiovaxians to charge toward the other battlefields, the Psion Executors react in that same span of time, jumping in front of their Kolvaxian enemies and startling Gabriel.

Gabriel barely gets an instant to react before Executor Huron seemingly materializes between the Archangel and his Psiovaxian enemy.

"What? You-" Gabriel starts to say.

CRACK!

Huron slams his body into the Psiovaxian, blasting it backward and turning it into a beam of light that immediately ignites explosively as it rips across Maiura's surface. The

friction from the thick lower atmosphere causes it to explode with the same force of a meteor striking the upper atmosphere, and that Psiovaxian smashes into a distant forest less than a second later, blasting apart the trees and turning them to ash.

The Psiovaxian instantly dies, eradicated by Huron's overwhelming power!

As a Low Cosmic possessing a body even the Middle Cosmic Dosena cannot compare with, Huron's physical strength is thousands of times greater than even Gabriel! If he wanted to kill the Archangel, it would take little more than a slap to turn the Archangel of Power into a pile of meat paste.

Gabriel's heart jumps in alarm. Even despite being a relatively calm individual, he is still shocked by the power Huron just displayed.

If this were the Primordial Era, Huron wouldn't be much of a threat. Back then, even the lowest angel was an Apex Cosmic. But that was hundreds of millions, even billions of years in the past.

Nowadays, Huron is one of the most powerful individuals in the entire Milky Way. Compared to the decrepit and weakened Archangels, he is a mountain while they are barely a boulder.

Huron sneers contemptuously at the person he just saved.

[Uriel? Or is it Gabriel, now? Never the matter. I will handle the elite enemies. You can mop up the fodder.]

Another Psiovaxian materializes. Before Gabriel can react, Huron's body blurs, and the monster is blasted apart at the atomic level, its remains launched across the horizon to burn up on impact.

Gabriel's shock turns to a silent despair. Despite his stoic nature, being faced with the truth of his weakness rattles him to his core.

Long ago, he was a powerful Archangel, revered by his peers, able to stand up to any creature on Earth and make them know the terror of his wrath.

Before that, in the ancient times before he lost his memories, he was even mightier, the most powerful of all the Archangels, the one that none could ever defeat.

But now?

He is merely a shell of his former self. An errant soul clinging to the material realm, lacking in strength, a pawn in place of what was once a juggernaut.

Huron's sneer deepens. He cannot help but feel a deep sense of satisfaction when he senses the humiliation of his lesser.

What Archangels? What ancient primordial monsters?

All that remains of their ancient civilization are pitiful insects, not even at the apex of mortal strength.

Of course, if the Archangels were to truly unite their power, Huron's snide attitude would vanish instantly. Even he is not certain of the full depths of the Cherubiim's power.

But, in any case, it doesn't matter. He has confirmed the Cherubiim cannot reappear for a long time. The Archangels used their power once, and will need a long period of time before they can merge once more to unleash its strength. In the meantime, they are but playthings for the Volgrim Empire.

And who knows? Maybe the Cherubiim itself is not as big a threat as they imagined. Perhaps Dosena could handle it on her own, or even one of the Executors.

Hehehe. Wouldn't that be an interesting fight? Huron thinks.

* * *

At the Southern Front.

Henry's sword, Artoria, swings time after time. He kills one Kolvaxian and then another, tirelessly slaughtering them as quickly as possible.

BANG!

A Kolvaxian smashes Henry in the face, sending him flying away. He grinds across the dirt and quickly flips himself back onto his feet, swaying for a moment as he shakes off his disorientation. Blood flows from his nose, and a nasty pair of gashes cut across his cheek, causing even more blood to drip off his jawline.

With two black eyes, multiple sprained bones, and his upper and lower lips both split from powerful Kolvaxian punches, Henry's image cuts a sorry figure. His allies sometimes glance at him and grimace in sympathy.

But Henry ignores the pain. He continues to fight!

At the same time, Ashley picks up his slack, sometimes attacking ferociously, other times holding back. If Henry gets hit, she quickly shields him. If he attacks but fails to kill his foe, she finishes them off.

More than a hundred powerful Legionnaires join Henry. Together, their unified vision and thoughts amplify each other's powers, allowing them to move and react to attacks they shouldn't see coming. The instant a Kolvaxian pounces out of the ground and one Legionnaire sees the attack coming, all of them do. The troopers in that area react instantly, jumping or dodging to the side to evade the attack while their comrades spin around and cut the monster down.

But even so, the Kolvaxians continue to spawn faster and faster. As the first hour of the battle finishes and the second begins, Henry and the other soldiers truly start to feel exhausted. No matter how many Kolvaxians they kill, more just keep coming! And since every Kolvaxian takes all their strength to fully kill, they cannot rest, take it easy, or hold a bit of strength in reserve. Oftentimes, they feel as if they're trying to cut down trees by slapping them until they break!

"Come on!" Henry yells in between gasps of breath. "Do you people wanna live forever? Just keep killing them!"

Across the sky, a naked demon cloaked in fire rockets toward Henry's battalion. Beelzebub looks down at the wall of Kolvaxians, his expression gloomy.

"No matter how many we kill, more keep coming. Shouldn't Maiura evacuate? Just give up. There's no point in wasting any more energy."

But still, he continues flying toward Henry's position. At the same time, Beelzebub summons a pair of tightly condensed fire-orbs, spiraling them as fast as possible to increase their rotational speed and their internal temperature.

He pauses in the air, levitating via flames beneath his feet. He continues to spin up the orbs, making them emit a harsh screeching sound as scorching winds rotate around the Infernal Emperor, cloaking him in a haze of heat.

When Beelzebub feels that the orbs have reached a satisfactory level, he charges downward, slamming into the center of the Kolvaxians and sending a wave of fire outward to blast them apart. Then, he starts swinging his palms around, slapping at the nearest Kolvaxians without letting go of his orbs.

The effect is immediate and drastic!

Beelzebub's Flame Palms tear through the Kolvaxian bodies with relative ease. Each time his palm slaps at a Kolvaxian's head, a heat like that of a star's center shreds them apart, melting their skulls into bonemeal. With his right hand, he destroys their heads, and with his left, he targets their torsos, destroying one after the other to prevent any chances of survival.

Beelzebub's arrival alleviates some of the pressure on Henry. Unlike Neil, Henry doesn't have an extreme level of hatred for the demons. He feels some level of disgust for them purely due to Jephthath's influence, but ultimately his thoughts about Beelzebub are relatively benign. After all, Henry 'betrayed' humanity by accident. If he could be redeemed, then why not Beelzebub?

"Thanks for the assist!" Henry calls out to Beelzebub. "I don't know how much longer we'd have lasted without you! Ugh!"

Henry cuts down another Kolvaxian, while Beelzebub does the same.

"No need for thanks. Just doing my duty." Beelzebub grunts, brushing off the compliment. He also kills a Kolvaxian while speaking, keeping his words short and succinct. "I can't kill a horde alone, but I can help."

Beelzebub fights alongside Henry's platoon for a while, but then his attention shifts as he senses a powerful entity rocketing toward the Southern Front at an alarming speed. Beelzebub quickly notices a faint field of chaos energy around it, marking it as a Kolvaxian like the rest, but its speed is too high to be any ordinary creature.

Before Beelzebub can call out the incoming threat, another even more powerful figure abruptly appears in its path.

A thunderstorm explodes to the north, between the troopers and Mount Adams!

Beelzebub jumps into the air for a few seconds, pausing to stare with wide open eyes as a thousand bolts of lightning suddenly detonate like bombs, blasting the incoming Psiovaxian to smithereens. Seconds later, an 8th Level Psion, Sartran, remains. He levitates aloofly above the ground, appearing quite smug and pleased with himself as he looks at the shattered corpse he successfully intercepted.

[Beelzebub.] Sartran says, projecting his thoughts across the battlefield with ease. [I've been looking forward to meeting you. Mind if I lend you a hand?]

Beelzebub's arms hang limp at his waist, still clutching his spiraling orbs of flame.

"...That would be great." Beelzebub says after a few seconds.

[Wonderful. I won't need long.] Sartran says, his eyes curving up in the Volgrim approximation of a smile.

Part 591: Beelzebub's Imagination

True to his word, Sartran begins attacking the ordinary Kolvaxians with a ferocity unmatched by any of humanity's current champions. His body blurs and flickers as he teleports from spot to spot, flinging ungodly powerful lightning blasts downward, atomizing Kolvaxians one after the other, quickly killing twenty of them in less than a minute.

Beelzebub, meanwhile, struggles to kill one at a time every five to ten seconds. He cannot help but gasp softly as he watches one of the strongest Volgrim in existence obliterating these foes en-masse one after the other.

Henry, likewise, feels a sense of awe and fear. He can kill a Kolvaxian every ten to thirty seconds, depending on how lucky his attacks are when they land. The combination of a flame-imbued Artoria striking multiple vital areas in a single strike ends up divided by his accumulating exhaustion, which in turn slows him down. As the battle has raged for nearly two hours already, Henry has grown to find himself less capable of killing Kolvaxians in a single blow. Often, he needs three to five to finally finish a foe off.

The situation is even worse for his fellow Legionnaires and his girlfriend. Ashley and the Lesser Legionnaires are simply incapable of killing Kolvaxians by themselves. Every dead Kolvaxian comes as a result of their tight teamwork and tens of carefully aimed, full strength blows delivered as quickly as possible. If they attack a Kolvaxian and it manages to dive underground, it will return later, fully healed, wasting all their effort.

The same is true across all of Maiura. While it might seem to the ordinary humans watching from afar that humanity's Champions are capable of 'easily' killing the Enhanced Kolvaxians, the truth is that every one-on-one battle is a matter of life and death.

Every single Kolvaxian has the physical defensiveness of Executor Huron. Their bones are practically as durable as Bael's original body! If they successfully punch or kick a human and send them flying, even one as strong as Henry, they're sure to suffer life-threatening injuries!

The sense of frustration and looming death that was once beginning to take hold of the Southern Defender's minds eases up noticeably. With Sartran showing up to take some of

the heat off humanity's forces, they slow down their attacks, pull back a little, and rest their weary arms and legs. Naturally, they continue to fight, but they do so at a noticeably weaker level, allowing their tired arms to swing with less impact than before.

Naturally, Sartran notices this. He shakes his head while firing another explosive bolt of lightning, blasting a Kolvaxian to kingdom come. But he doesn't dislike the humans for this. After all, he was weak once too. All the Executors were. If he were forced to fight at his maximum power for a prolonged period, he would also grow weary and need to rest. This much is natural.

Only Beelzebub continues to fight as ferociously as before. Despite Sartran's appearance immediately and drastically weakening the Southern horde, Beelzebub still fights at his full strength, his body as full of vigor as ever.

Sartran's gaze flickers. He glances appreciatively toward the Demon Emperor, smiling with his eyes.

[Beelzebub.] Sartran says, communicating privately with only the Emperor of Inferno, not the others. [I have heard a bit about you in recent cycles. You are quite an interesting demon.]

"Hmm?" Beelzebub grunts, only flicking his gaze upward for a split-second before returning his attention to the horde. "Stop distracting me, Volgrim!"

[No need to speak out loud.] Sartran says. [The others won't hear our conversation that way, and that would allow us to communicate more efficiently anyway. According to records our Changelings have written, you've not been a Demon Emperor for long. Isn't that right?]

Beelzebub frowns. He fires a beam of concentrated nuclear energy like a laser directly into a Kolvaxian's chest, blasting it apart and killing two more Kolvaxians directly behind it. This attack fatigues him a little, so he jumps into the air and rockets upward, emitting fire from beneath his feet.

[What's it to you?] Beelzebub asks accusingly, shooting an ugly glance Sartran's way.

[Hoho. You young ones are so hot-blooded.] Sartran says, smiling in amusement with his eyes. [Did you know I spoke to your mentor, Agares, on several occasions? He and I played Sticks and Bones in the past... before the Kolvaxians first appeared. That was during the first ten thousand cycles following the Energy Wars of Earth's lore.]

Sartran chuckles. [I can sense your hostility, Beelzebub. But there's no need for that. I'm not like most other Psions, let alone my fellow Executors. I do not look down on 'mud dwellers'. I think the different species are quite cute.]

[Wow. Thanks for the compliment.] Beelzebub says sarcastically. [Are we done yapping now?]

Beelzebub holds his hand up in a claw pose. Five spiraling orbs of nuclear energy build up, then he snaps his claw forward and sends the orbs hurtling downward at the Kolvaxians.

Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom!

At once, five powerful concentrated explosions detonate, killing two Kolvaxians and sending eight more flying away, badly injured. The injured ones dive underground to heal their wounds by absorbing the planet's energy.

[Dammit!] Beelzebub growls. [I missed my shots! It's all your fault! You distracted me!]

Sartran casually fires out multiple powerful bolts of lightning. He kills three Kolvaxians that have drawn worryingly close to the human's battle-lines.

[Your demonic ability is the manipulation of fire, it seems. But there is also an element of nuclear energy. Fascinating. It seems you are a born Energy Manipulator. I've met a few demons who could qualify as Energy Manipulators, including Emperor Ose, but they always seemed stuck in their ways, only capable of manipulating one element. You're the first I've met that can manipulate a sub-element.]

[You knew Ose?] Beelzebub asks, feeling his stomach tighten.

He wouldn't want to say it out loud... but Beelzebub did care about Ose. She was the first and only woman he ever connected with. Even though he came to find out she was merely using him, he couldn't bring himself to hate her. Her death left a hole in his heart.

Just by mentioning Ose, Sartran manages to catch Beelzebub's interest. Naturally, the Executor picks up on this fact.

[Oh yes. She was a stuck-up female. Arrogant beyond belief. But interesting, too. The only demon I knew who could comprehend the field of technology. I found her to be an engrossing conversation partner. Naturally, as an Electricity and Lightning-focused

Psion, I also know a good deal about technology. We were able to hold many fruitful conversations during my time in Hell.]

He pauses.

[Naturally, because of the mind-wipes, Agares, along with other demons I befriended, forgot my identity. Ose didn't forget, but she still put distance between us. That was a shame. I've always considered myself a friend of demonkind. I place your species on the same level as my own, much to my colleagues' chagrin.]

Beelzebub's glare softens a little. In his mind, this 'Sartran' is quite easy to talk to, lacking the arrogance and condescending nature of the other Volgrim Beelzebub has met, like Demila.

[That's kind of you to say.] Beelzebub says neutrally, while firing another fire-beam at the Kolvaxians below.

[Well, I wanted to speak to you specifically, Beelzebub.] Sartran says, finally getting to his greater point. [As a demon who has unlocked a secondary Element, I wished to ask... what allowed you to comprehend the power of Nuclear Fire?]

[It just came to me one day, when I blew up my body in a fit of rage.] Beelzebub says, recalling the first time he blew himself up to try and kill Hope, Belial, and Archangel Uriel. [Actually, it came when I first ascended to Duke. I found I was able to spontaneously make parts of my body explode whenever I wished. Along with my enhanced regenerative powers and lack of pain, I found that I could rip off my arm and fling it at people to blow them to bits. It amused me greatly.]

[Oh.] Sartran says, a hint of disappointment in his tone. [That's a shame. I hoped it was something more profound.]

[More profound? In what way?] Beelzebub counters.

Instead of directly answering Beelzebub's question, Sartran's aura suddenly changes. Rather than firing bolts of lightning, he summons a sword made out of roaring flames, then materializes amidst the Kolvaxians below, swinging it crazily to cut them down, one after the other.

Slash! Slash! Swish-swish-slash!

His sword dances to and fro, killing them even faster than his lightning did, let alone Henry's sword, Artoria.

Beelzebub's eyes widen to the point of absurdity. Just when he thinks Sartran is going to cut all the Kolvaxians down, the Executor flickers back up into the sky and dematerializes his fire-sword.

[Don't be too impressed.] Sartran says blandly. [Fighting in the middle of a Kolvaxian swarm, especially ones as powerful as these, is a recipe for disaster. Much safer to bombard them from afar.]

[You can control fire too?!] Beelzebub asks, bewildered.

[Haha. A lot more than that.]

Sartran holds out his palm.

Fwip! THOOM!

A flash of light fires from his palm, smashes into one of the Kolvaxians, and pounds it deep into the ground, plunging it more than 500 meters beneath the planet's surface.

Beelzebub's jaw drops.

[Light is also a form of energy. There are many ways to manipulate it.] Sartran explains. [I could focus on heat, or increase the luminosity to blind enemy vision and sensors. I could increase its radiation level to mimic the light of a star, irradiating my foes and rotting their internal organs. I could change the frequency to infrared or ultraviolet to pierce different sorts of defenses. X-rays and gamma rays are also an option. Truthfully though, I'm the High Psion who is most talented in terms of Energy Manipulation, even surpassing Founder Dosena, but my best talent is in electrical energy. It is the one I am most effective at controlling in all situations, so it's the form I use most often.]

He shrugs. [Comparatively, my flame control is quite poor. Even you are better than me at manipulating different types of fire.]

Beelzebub nods dumbly. His mind struggles to wrap around Sartran's explanation.

[You're saying... I don't manipulate fire? I manipulate energy?]

[I have no idea.] Sartran admits. [There are many Energy Manipulating Psions within the Volgrim Empire. I'm not the only one, I'm simply the strongest. I know a few individuals who are superior to me in the field of flame control.]

His look of interest toward Beelzebub deepens.

[But even compared to them... you are something else. Your stamina seems inexhaustible. Your regenerative capabilities are not a trait I've seen crop up among my fellow Energy Manipulators. There's something... *special* about you. Something I can't quite pin down. I am very much looking forward to your future feats.]

Beelzebub falls silent.

He doesn't immediately respond to Sartran, instead frowning as he falls deep into thought.

Sartran continues to wallop the Kolvaxian army, shredding them with ease and quickly culling their numbers down from one hundred and fifty to less than forty. Every Kolvaxian he kills makes their collective threat drop lower than before, making it progressively easier and easier to kill more of them.

Beelzebub, for his part, stops the slaughter. He gazes absentmindedly at the ground below while thinking many different thoughts.

Energy Manipulation. Is that what I do? How do flames relate to nuclear energy? What is nuclear energy itself? Why can my body regenerate from mortal wounds while the High Psions cannot? Is there truly something unique about me compared to them?

After a moment, his eyes flicker.

The Phoenix's Feather. Somehow, I obtained it in my youth, and it empowered me greatly. It must have altered my abilities. Made me more formidable. It granted me my regenerative powers... but what about my connection to fire? Is that also mine, or did that come from the Phoenix?

He recalls a conversation he had with Yama, not that long ago...

* * *

"How did I obtain the Phoenix's Feather?" Beelzebub asked. "I've known I possessed the power of Nirvana for a while now, but I wasn't aware other demons knew. So how did all of you find out?"

"You were only an ordinary imp..." Yama said slowly. "Then one day, a strange entity appeared in the Labyrinth. The First Hell tracked its position as it rushed toward you, then entered your soul. You were too spiritually dull to notice its arrival, but the rest of us were not so foolish."

Beelzebub frowned. "You're saying... the Phoenix Feather chose me at random? But where did it come from?"

"How should we know?" Yama said helplessly. "You lucked out, brat! There's nothing more to it! What, do you think you were chosen because you were special? Like we said, you're not special at all! You're just one fortunate little imp-bastard!"

Beelzebub ignored Yama's goading to focus on the underlying hints behind his words.

"You don't find that even a little odd?" Beelzebub asked. "That I simply obtained the Phoenix Feather at random? Is it not possible... this could be someone's plot? Perhaps they gave it to me for some ulterior motive?"

Yama grimaced. "Still trying to build up a conspiracy? Think what you like. We've told you all we know. We don't give a damn if you believe us or not..."

* * *

Who gave me the feather? Beelzebub thinks. Or perhaps more importantly, was it for a good reason, or a bad one? Can I weaponize it? Are my abilities different from other demons? Do I have more potential I've yet failed to excavate?

He glances at Sartran. The Executor blasts another duo of Kolvaxians to bits, then smiles with his eyes at Beelzebub, easily reading the young demon's mind.

[I don't know what this 'Phoenix' is, but it sounds special.] Sartran says casually. [I wouldn't bother searching for an ulterior motive. Maybe you were chosen. Maybe you lucked into your abilities. But whatever the case may be, I believe you have even greater potential than you think. You just need... a little imagination.]

Beelzebub's eyes flash.

[That's the same thing Saul said. He told me I haven't been exploring my powers enough. I've become stagnant, merely going along with what my instincts say are possible.]

Beelzebub looks at his palms. A sense of shame wells up in his chest. A feeling of waste.

[More. I can do more. I can BE more!]

He raises his eyes to the sky. In that moment, a distant sensation of pride returns to his mind and body.

That pride deepens, becoming something more.

Ambition!

A lack of satisfaction with the status quo!

He is Beelzebub. He is not a follower, nor a leader. He is just himself. He is not content with the way things are.

Like the parting of a veil, he seemingly looks up at the cosmic nature of the universe, realizing that there are new dimensions which previously remained invisible to his eyes.

[Energy. It's all energy! I get it now! I understand!]

Beelzebub's gaze snaps back downward, to the remaining Kolvaxians below.

He lifts up his palm and begins calling upon his magic to summon a revolving fireball within his grasp.

That fireball spins, faster and faster, increasing in speed and temperature. Like before, he wields its power with the intent to create a micro-sized star within the palm of his hand.

[Not enough. It isn't nearly enough!]

Beelzebub's eyes blaze with ambition. He stares at the fire, burning his pupils as the light within becomes more and more blinding. As painful as the death and rebirth of his retinas might be, he continues to stare, sensing not only with his eyes, but his very soul.

Not like this... more like this. No, a little different. The atomic structure is wrong. More energetic. More chaotic. Less orderly. More... EXPLOSIVE!

A vicious sound begins to emanate from the orb. A high-pitched whine screeches outward, sounding like a skillsaw cutting into wood. That screeching changes multiple times, eventually sounding like the distant crackling of lightning!

Crackle! Crackle!!

Sartran's eyes widen. He becomes tongue-tied as he watches Beelzebub achieve in less than a minute the sort of successful experimentation that previously took the Executor hundreds of years.

[Amazing! Impressive! With only his soul's intuition alone? He's a genius! A prodigy!] Sartran praises.

"Hah! Hahahaha! HAHHAHAHAH!"

Beelzebub cackles madly, his grin turning feral as the white star in his palm bursts out with small bolts of nuclear lightning, some of them shooting skyward, others out to the right and left. The faster it revolves, the more crazily the energy within erupts, like a bomb mere milliseconds from going off.

"Let's see what kind of damage this will do!" Beelzebub exclaims, before rearing his arm back and flinging the electrical bomb downward.

It flies into the center of the remaining Kolvaxians and explodes with terrific power, sending hundreds of bolts of lightning in every direction.

BOOOOOM!!!

Every single remaining Kolvaxian, all thirty-five of them, blow up, vaporized by the raw power of Beelzebub's experimental lightning bomb.

Their bodies turn to ash and spray outward, annihilated at the atomic level.

Sartran instantly conjures a shield around the humans, causing the bolts of lightning to be redirected, saving countless lives. Beelzebub quickly realizes that if Sartran hadn't done so, he'd have potentially killed all of the Legionnaires, including Henry and Ashley!

"Damn!" Beelzebub yells. "Apologies! Thank you, Sartran. If you hadn't intervened... I must have lost my mind, taking such a risk! But the power! The explosive power! It was so *intoxicating!*"

Sartran chuckles uneasily. [No worries, my young friend. Many have lost themselves in a moment of euphoric bliss. Transcending one's abilities, especially in such a rapid manner, can be more seductive than the whispers of a lover. You must take care to watch how you evolve your abilities moving forward.]

Beelzebub calms down. He holds up his palm once again, and a faint crackle begins to appear.

He conjures a much smaller, weaker, and more easily controllable bolt of lightning in his palm.

Then he throws it into the distance. It crosses the horizon at the speed of light, igniting a distant forest when it strikes a random tree.

"Lightning. Truly, lightning! I can wield the same sort of ability as Ose! All this time, I had eyes but could not see the distant mountain peaks! I owe this breakthrough to your words."

Sartran shakes his head. [No. You always had this potential hidden within yourself. Truly, I am in awe. You are a genius in every sense of the word. Your natural instincts are beyond mine. When I was a young Psion, my talents paled in comparison to yours. You will achieve great things in the future.]

He pauses before adding, [Continue to experiment. You have only scratched the surface of what 'energy manipulation' can achieve. I hope in the future we will be able to deepen our friendship. Indeed, I would love to teach a prodigy like you more techniques, moving forward. In these uncertain times, the Milky Way always needs more champions.]

Beelzebub sincerely bows at the waist toward Sartran.

[In my eyes, you are half a teacher to me, like Agares was. I will remember your words for the rest of my life.]

Kolvaxians continue to appear, materializing in the distance after Beelzebub eradicated the entirety of the remaining swarm. Sartran sits back, watching happily as his half-disciple continues to try new things with his new mastery of lightning.

Beelzebub releases the flames under his feet. He emits electrical energy in a sphere around his body, levitating by inverting the planet's gravitic energy around himself. In this way, he is seemingly able to fly without appearing nearly as eye-catching as before.

Perhaps in the future, this will turn into a stealthy manner of approaching different types of combats!

[Bravo. Brilliant!] Sartran praises continually. [Your adaptation is unbelievable! I've never seen someone alter the form of their power with such ease. At this rate, you might even-]

[BACKUP! I NEED BACKUP!!]

A psionic voice blasts every human and non-human on Maiura, causing their brains to lock up for a moment. Beelzebub loses control of his powers, causing him to fall from the sky and slam into the dirt below. Henry screams in pain. Ashley falls to her knees, crying out as she also loses control of her five senses for a few seconds.

Archangel Uriel slashes at a Kolvaxian, but the sudden bombardment of a screaming psionic voice jars her brain. She stumbles clumsily toward the Kolvaxian, and it punches her with its full strength, sending her flying!

Belial, Hope, Levi, Mandy, and countless Legionnaires lose their ability to think for a few seconds. So powerful is the voice that they momentarily become braindead, like lobotomy victims.

Executor Sartran snaps his head to the east.

[EXECUTOR VI!]

He ignores Beelzebub's pain, as well as the pain of the sprawled-out humans nearby.

His body flickers, and an instant later, he pounces across the horizon, traveling to the Eastern Front in the blink of an eye.

Beelzebub is the first to recover. He stands up, holding his head as a migraine assaults him.

"...the hell was that?" Beelzebub mumbles, looking around in uncertainty. "What's going on?"

Little do the Maiurans know, but the battle is about to enter a new period of death and destruction.

Part 592: The Weakest Executors

The Executors of the Volgrim Empire are all old monsters. That much could be easily ascertained by how powerful their psionics have grown over the eons, as well as the number of psionic disciplines they have mastered over their lives. Among the Executors, not one is a slouch, and each has their own specialization.

However, while all of the Executors might be powerful enough to sunder worlds and cause mass destruction with ease, that does not mean they are equally competent in different situations.

Executor Riley proves to be a great example of this phenomena in action.

Sent to the Western Front to backup Mandy and Levi, Riley arrives intending to help Hope's children cull the Kolvaxians and reduce their numbers. Unfortunately, while her powers are frightening and impressive given her Low Cosmic power, they are not ideal for combating the Plague's swarm.

Riley flickers into existence a hundred meters in the air above the two humans. It takes them several long seconds to even notice her presence. Riley spends that time quickly assessing the Kolvaxian's forces and composition, then right as she is about to start attacking with her unique methods, Mandy glances upward, sensing her presence.

Unaware of how the situation has just changed, Mandy almost starts to question the Executor's arrival. However, she ultimately doesn't, instead opting to inform her brother that Riley has arrived, though she isn't sure what Psion Riley is, having never met her before.

Riley, likewise, doesn't bother wasting any useless words on the humans. She motions with her hands, causing a ghastly blob of green gaseous material to materialize in front of her chest. It balloons from the size of a grapefruit to the size of a beach ball, and then triples in size one last time, becoming twice as tall as Riley's body, and far bigger in total circumference.

This orb of energy releases streams of gas upward. Those streams turn into ghostly figures resembling small, doll-sized copies of Riley herself.

Then, they begin flying downward at terrifying speeds, splitting up and charging at the Kolvaxian hordes without fear of death.

[Beware, mud-dwellers.] Riley finally says. [My Phantasms will not distinguish between friend or foe. If they draw near, take cover and do not touch them. You will die a terrible death if you fail to heed my warning.]

Like before, Levi has not been able to kill the Kolvaxians effectively. Lacking a weapon as formidable as Artoria or Belial's new blood-colored blade, he has had to resort to his raw draconic strength. This has allowed more than 600 Kolvaxians to swarm together, causing the Western Front's situation to become the most dangerous of them all. With more and more Kolvaxians appearing every minute, it is only Mandy's Runes enhancing her brother's killing potential that allowed both of them to last as long as they have.

Thus, when the strange and unnerving Phantasms race downward, Levi is all too happy to get the hell out of their way and retreat.

He and Mandy watch with wide-opened eyes as the tiny ghosts charge into the bodies of the Kolvaxians, causing them to seize up and shudder, momentarily losing their ability to advance. Any Kolvaxians struck by a Phantasm act in the same way a housecat would if they were sprayed in the face with water, flinching and pulling backward reflexively.

Riley frowns. [Damnation. I knew it wouldn't be so easy.]

She watches with an increasingly uglier expression as parts of the Kolvaxian's bodies begin to rot and melt away, the Phantasms eating them from the inside-out, liquefying their innards in a manner that produces a stench most foul.

Unfortunately, while many of the Kolvaxians end up losing an arm or having crucial internal organs melt into goop from the acrid attacks of Riley's Phantasms, their speed of regeneration allows them to outlast any singular Phantasm that attacks them!

The ghosts that enter a given Kolvaxian use up the energy inside their bodies, cause extreme damage, and then fade away within ten to thirty seconds. But once gone, the Kolvaxians rapidly regenerate from their injuries and return to pristine fighting form!

[I hoped my Phantasms would prove effective, but I knew in my heart they would not.] Riley explains to the bewildered humans below. She converses with them in a fraction of a second, using her enhanced meta-cognition to equally speed up their understanding of her words.

[My Phantasms are able to corrode the physical forms of living creatures, melting them into puddles of blood and bile. Unfortunately, the Kolvaxians have such durable bodies and extreme regeneration that merely one Phantasm at a time will not be sufficient to kill them. I will need the two of you to assist me by striking at their bodies when they are weakest. I can at least soften the enemy's defenses enough for your fists and magic to kill them.]

Mandy frowns. "Can't you hit them with multiple Phantasms at once instead?"

[I could.] Riley acknowledges. [But I cannot materialize too many Phantasms at the same time. Fifty is my upper limit, and they will be less effective if multiple of them battle at the same time. Phantasms are equally prone to killing one another as they are their designated enemies.]

"Then we'll do it your way." Levi says, cracking his neck. "Let's see if my fists will be any more effective with you weakening these bastards!"

He jumps into the battle, sending a punch flying at the chest of one of the Kolvaxians that has seized up, unable to move.

Splat!

Levi's fist strikes the Kolvaxian with the strength of a dragon, blasting it apart and causing its head, arms, and legs to scatter in different directions. Unfortunately, with the creature's head still intact, it is not truly dead, but at least regenerating from such a grievous wound will take tens of minutes.

"Sis! Finish them off!" Levi shouts, lunging at another Kolvaxian.

"Right." Mandy says, summoning a piece of parchment with a glowing golden Rune of an arrow inscribed on its front.

"Runic Decree, **Hermes' Quiver!**"

At once, six arrows formed from golden light materialize above her head, pointing down at her foes. The instant Levi blasts apart a Kolvaxian and its head goes flying, a flash of gold fires at the speed of light, crossing the distance to instantly strike and obliterate the Kolvaxian's skull.

Thanks to Riley's Phantasms, Hope's children gain a much more viable and efficient method of killing the creatures!

Riley's expression remains ugly. Unlike Sartran and Huron, she is incapable of killing the Kolvaxians as quickly or efficiently as them. Having to rely on the contributions of mere mud-dwellers to achieve victory ruffles her feathers in an indescribable manner.

[It's my own fault.] Riley mutters to herself. [I was a Creator before I reached the 8th Level. A single Phantasm was once easily capable of wiping out dozens of these creatures at a time before that idiot Wordsmith fed them the greatest meal of their existence. Now it takes multiple Phantasms just to kill one Kolvaxian. I will need to improve their killing efficiency moving forward or the other Executors will leave me in the dust!]

Naturally, Riley possesses many other methods of slaughtering foes en-masse, but the problem is that she has always acted more as a bully to the weak, focusing her abilities over the years on mass-slaughtering weaklings rather than doing battle against the strongest foes. In the past, if she did have to fight a mighty adversary, she could gang up on them with multiple Phantasms. How could she have predicted that the Kolvaxians would all collectively gain durable bodies on par with Huron?!

If Riley were to fight Huron himself, she would remain confident in standing a good chance of defeating or even killing him. After all, even he would be unable to fight off fifty Phantasms at once.

But if there were hundreds of Huron-clones attacking her from all sides, she would naturally lose. It wouldn't be a fair fight at all!

Thus, she can only grimace with her eyes and fight alongside the pathetic humans, metaphorically swallowing her grievances and using this battle to figure out a good counter for future battles against the enhanced Plague.

As the trio starts whittling the Kolvaxians down, a portal appears in the sky. Demon Deity Kristoff becomes visible, sweeping his gaze around the field as his fellow Deity, Yardrat, allows him to project his power across interstellar distances.

He immediately evaluates the battle situation and exchanges a look with Executor Riley. Her expression turns cold as she realizes the Demon Deity has come to help.

But, unlike with the humans, she doesn't feel too aggrieved. Even with her assistance, the swarm on the Western Front has almost reached a critical mass where the trio's killing speed will require hours of effort to eliminate all the enemies. Kristoff's backup comes at the perfect moment.

Additionally, Kristoff is a Middle Cosmic. His power exceeds Riley's, so she wouldn't feel humiliated if she lost to him in combat.

Such is the mental state of a High Psion.

Kristoff immediately summons powerful spears made of blood. He flings them downward at the speed of sound, causing them to spike through the abdomens and heads of one Kolvaxian after another. Kristoff doesn't merely throw and forget his spears either. Because they are connected to his blood, he is able to control them with a form of hemokinesis, allowing them to spear a Kolvaxian, explode into a bloody mist, and reform into new spears once more!

Like this, Kristoff rapidly and brutally tears through the Kolvaxians, killing them much faster than the combined efforts of Riley and the two humans did before. Even the Executor raises a metaphorical eyebrow at how much Kristoff's killing efficiency has spiked.

[It seems you have been practicing since the battle on Reaver.] Riley says, directing her words to Kristoff in secret. [The difference between your past and present performance is like night and day.]

Kristoff smiles at her.

[I am far from the only Deity who has worked hard to master my new abilities. In light of the threat the Kolvaxians pose us, we have all undertaken extreme pains to pool our collective might. In the future, our feats will frighten you.]

The two of them keep their words secret, not allowing the humans below to converse. For Riley, this is because she doesn't believe mere mud-dwellers deserve to hear from her unless necessary. For Kristoff, it's because there are some things he would prefer his future enemies not know...

Suddenly, from afar, Executor Vi's voice blasts outward, stunning all the allied forces on Maiura with her storm of emotions.

[BACKUP! I NEED BACKUP!!]

Riley's heart jumps in her chest. She immediately diverts her attention from the Western Front to the Eastern Front, on the opposite side of Mount Adams.

Without giving a damn about the humans below, Riley kicks her feet against the empty sky and launches herself like a beam of light, disappearing far faster than any mortal's

eyes could follow. By the time Mandy and Levi recover from Executor Vi's telepathic scream, Riley has already left them alone with Demon Deity Kristoff.

"Don't be alarmed." Kristoff says. "Executor Riley had to leave. The true Threat has emerged. It will require the efforts of all the Executors to stop."

Levi grimaces as half a dozen Kolvaxians attack him from multiple directions.

"Dammit, she really left us in the lurch."

* * *

Some time earlier.

On the Eastern Front, humanity was never able to put any Champions in place. Henry, Belial, Levi, and even Archangel Uriel were all diverted to the other battlefields, causing the buildup of Kolvaxians in the Eastern Front to become utterly overwhelming. Luckily, Hans Wagner foresaw the collapse coming.

At first, only a huge army of Legionnaires and ordinary troopers fought there. In terms of individual combat assets, the Eastern Front surpassed the other Fronts a thousand to one! Henry and Ashley only fought alongside a few dozen Legionnaires, Hope only fought alongside a handful of Warframes and later Belial and Uriel, and Levi and Mandy fought completely alone.

But on the Eastern Front, the vast majority of humanity's 'ordinary' military assets worked together to push back the horde for as long as they possibly could.

Temporal Grenades flew through the air and exploded, trapping five to ten Kolvaxians at a time inside temporary time-prisons, freezing them in place and creating solid barriers that would trap any other Kolvaxians if they stepped inside.

Later, at the moment when around ten Warframes arrived to back up Hope, more than fifty showed up at the Eastern Front, with Hans directing them to the frontlines where the ordinary troopers needed the most help.

Finally, the troopers no longer had to rely on killing the Kolvaxians via thousands of superficial wounds. Once five Armads showed up, they begin to cut down the monsters one after the other, finally carving a path of destruction through them. Combined with an even greater number of Cherubs and several Ballbusters for backup, these three basic but powerful mech types allow humanity to finally gain a foothold and push back the Kolvaxians.

But that was only until the first Psiovaxian appeared. At that point, it began to wreak havoc among the norms, killing tens of men and women in seconds, waving its hands to slaughter them like fish in a bucket.

The moment the Psiovaxians appeared, the Executors took notice. They jumped to the different battlefields to help the humans fortify their positions, and that is how Executor Vi came to arrive at the Eastern Front.

After arriving and killing the Psiovaxian with a bit of effort, Vi pauses to look around. Among the High Psions, she is the least experienced in warfare among all of them. She has not fought on the frontlines much, and the few times she did were emergencies where all Executors were needed on deck. Traditionally, she has always remained stationed on Volgarius where her abilities could be best displayed.

While no Executor is truly weak, and all of them could take out a 7th Level Psion with relative ease, Vi is undoubtedly the weakest one among her fellow high rankers. Her abilities are not specialized for combat. She is the Volgrim Empire's premiere Psyker, a master of mental control, telepathy, and empathic manipulation. She has always focused her efforts on psychological warfare and manipulation of the masses, going to great length to surveil all of Volgarius and keep an eye on any possible dissidents who might arise.

Of course, Vi does possess one extremely formidable combat ability, and that is her mastery of Primal Psionics. For every ten Psions, seven of them will have some level of unique mastery over this flexible style of telekinetic power. Primal Psionics are the purest expression of Psionic power, and as such, no Psion above the 6th Level will forgo its huge benefits.

But among every Psion, there are still variations. Some of them only train their Primal Psionics to a barely passable level, allowing them to create crude barriers of telekinesis, or fly around at passable speeds. Those who are more dedicated will come up with new and unique methods of expressing their Psionics, such as Executor Huron, who trained for tens of millennia to forge his body into an unbreakable war machine, and his Primal Psionics into a material harder than exosteel. In Huron's hands, his raw telekinetic abilities are an expression of his pursuit of physical power to the extreme.

Vi is similar in that her Primal Psionics also reflect her mental focus. As a Psyker who focuses on precise control over others, and delving deep into their minds with her

incredible telepathic ability, her Primal Psionics take the form of 'extreme precision.' She can mold her telekinesis into countless shapes, and can condense it into small and even microscopic 'bullets', firing them with unbelievable accuracy and power.

If Huron is a hammer, Vi is a scalpel. She reduces collateral damage to an absolute minimum, and does so proudly.

From on high above the humans, Vi crosses her arms, looking down at the horde of Plagueborn with a vague expression of disgust.

[No matter how many times I look at them, the Kolvaxians are simply hideous.] She muses to herself. [Once individuals, now nothing more than faceless monsters controlled by a hivemind. Walking tragedies that need to be put out of their misery.]

Without moving her body, Vi instantly condenses a hundred pellets out of raw telekinetic energy. She condenses and hardens them to the extreme, takes aim, and fires them into the horde below, perfectly targeting the hearts, heads, and torsos of multiple monsters in the front.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!!

Her pellets strike the creatures at a fraction of the speed of light, instantly smiting them on the spot and punching their bodies backward, down into the planet's soil.

But Vi frowns.

Of the thirty Kolvaxians she struck, only two perished. The others suffered light to heavy wounds, but quickly regenerated once swallowed by the planet's soil around them.

[Accursed fiends. To think the foolish humans gave such a boon to our enemies! If it weren't for the Wordsmith, the Kolvaxians would have remained easy to slaughter en-masse, but now even I struggle to kill a handful at a time. Their new strength is unbelievable!]

Vi launches another barrage at a different group of Kolvaxians. She kills three of them and badly injures another twenty, but once again the survivors dive underground, regenerate their wounds, and swim back up to the surface.

Vi is, without a doubt, able to kill the Kolvaxians much more easily than the humans below her. But compared to her fellow Executors, and even a few individuals like Henry and Belial, her efficiency isn't impressive at all. Every single one of Huron's punches or

Sartran's lightning attacks causes terrible destruction among the Kolvaxian ranks, but Vi's wide-area slaughtering is several steps below theirs.

Naturally, Vi realizes this fact immediately. If she had a mouth, she'd probably spit angrily to vent her frustration.

Luckily, even without Vi helping them, the human troopers have long grown used to fighting the Kolvaxians. Vi returns to watching impassively, waiting for future Psiovaxians to appear, while scanning the scene below her.

Men and women fight for their lives. The weak mud-dwellers throw a Temporal Grenade at the biggest batches of Kolvaxians once in a while to slow their advance, while the Armads and Ballbusters whittle down their foes one by one. Cherubs dive like birds to execute Kolvaxians with decapitation strikes before flitting back up into the air. The more Kolvaxians these ordinary troopers kill, the more adept they become at taking out the ones afterward.

Vi's expression softens.

[Mud-dwellers are weak, but tenacious. These humans, especially.]

In her heart, she can't help but admire them. While some of the more proficient Legionnaires do possess a bit of metaphysical power, by and by large the majority of human troops are ordinary mortals with only slightly stronger than average bodies. Even a 2nd Level Psion would easily crush them if they were to come to blows.

But the humans' teamwork, their innovative ideas on warfare, and their tenacity allows them to adapt to changing circumstances and find better and more efficient killing methods against their foes.

[If I sent a thousand 5th Level Psions to battle Executor Huron, those disciples would surely perish within the hour. But I wonder if the humans would have a chance of success? Mmm. Probably not. After all, a ruthless and intelligent Psion like Huron is not comparable to these mindless bipedal beasts. The Kolvaxians lack mental acuity and-]

BOOM!!

The ground abruptly blasts open behind the Eastern Kolvaxians, startling Vi out of her thoughts. She instantly snaps her attention to the disturbance, and her heart freezes to ice.

Two Psiovaxians emerge from the soil, racing toward her at a speed no mortal's eyes could hope to follow, and which Vi's enhanced cognition can only give her a bit of time to react.

[The Kolvaxxed Executors!] Vi screams in her mind. [Huron and Sartran! They're here!]

The two ambushers rush at Vi, and she quickly beats a hasty retreat while firing her psionic pellets at them to try and knock them off-course. Unfortunately, Huron's doppelganger tanks the hits without flinching while Sartran conjures a storm of lightning to fire at her fleeing back.

Crackle! CRACK!!

The lightning explodes against Vi's hastily prepared psionic shield, making her scream in pain inside her mind.

The moment she regains her breath, she continues to flee while projecting her voice outward across the entire planet.

[BACKUP! I NEED BACKUP!!]

This raw projection of her telepathic power immediately brainlocks every Sentient below a certain level of power on Maiura. All the humans below her, champions like Henry and Belial, everyone but her fellow Executors and the ordinary Kolvaxians become stunlockd for a few seconds as their brains nearly burst from the power in her voice.

Unfortunately, even as Vi immediately senses the rapid approach of her fellow Executors, she also realizes that her telepathic powers are useless against the enhanced Kolvaxians. The Kolvaxxed Executors don't flinch, informing her that her tools in this next battle will be painfully inadequate.

[Why did they have to choose ME?!] Vi complains in her heart.

The question naturally has an answer. The Kolvaxxed Executors aren't here to play games. They fully intend to add another Executor to their ranks.

And, most frighteningly, the third and final one is still nowhere to be seen.

Executor Nufaris's doppelganger could strike from anywhere at any time, and so it becomes a hidden threat lurking, making Vi more fearful. She might be a lauded High Psion, but even she fears falling into the clutches of the Kolvaxians.

[Hurry! Hurry!] Vi says. [Don't let them devour me!]

Part 593: Divinator Fellrun

At the start of the Maiuran War, the humans felt deep fear. They knew their enemy was terrifying, but at the same time, they believed they had made advances big enough to allow them to accomplish what no Volgrim world had done before.

When the Kolvaxians ripped across Maiura, that fear intensified, but then it eventually settled back down. A hundred thousand civilians and soldiers died, but eventually the rest evacuated, leaving only the bunch remaining inside Fort Adams' confines. With no more weaklings to pick off, humanity's losses steeply fell, and their soldiers started pushing back.

Over the course of the next two hours, the humans began killing the Kolvaxians en-masse.

It was too easy.

Sure, only their Champions could effectively kill the creatures at first, but then the Warframes arrived and began laying down suppressive fire that could match those Champions. And with that, the soldiers' confidence surged!

They could win this war. Even if it took longer than they originally expected, they would kill all the Kolvaxians and take their planet back.

That victorious feeling did not last.

The Kolvaxians had only initiated the war with their weakest, slowest, dumbest soldiers.

The worst had yet to arrive.

* * *

Kolvaxor Sartran and Kolvaxor Huron surround Executor Riley on her right and left. She ducks, dodges, and weaves, trying to attack them with compressed Psionic Bullets, but as expected, her attacks do absolutely nothing to Huron and barely manage to make Sartran flinch.

Her expression chills. [The Kolvaxors are beyond our projections! All Executors, join me!]

Within two seconds, Executors Sartran, Huron, Vi, and Divinator Fellrun all flicker into position, surrounding the Kolvaxors from all four sides, forming a second ring around Riley at the center.

[False 'me', your time to die has arrived!] Huron declares, his eyes flashing with ambition. He pounces at his Kolvax-clone and hurls a punch at it capable of obliterating mountains.

But before his strike can meet its mark, the Kolvaxor instantly spins around and sends a kick flying that bats aside Huron's arm and slams into his shoulder, blasting him into the distance and firing him like a cannonball.

Huron screams in shock as his body careens helplessly, crashing into a distant mountain peak until he embeds half a mile into its core.

That abrupt reversal of his attack sends a pang of fear through the minds of the other Executors.

[Impossible! Huron has always been able to overpower his doppelganger!] Executor Sartran exclaims in shock.

[That was before. This is now!] Riley retorts. [Things are not as they were! The body enhancement given by the human's comrade applied to all the Kolvaxians, including Huron's copy. That means it now occupies a body even more invincible than Huron himself!]

The other Executors feel a surge of fear jolt their minds. How can they not, given this horrifying revelation?

In the past, if they fought a Kolvaxor, they could be assured they were fighting an inferior version of themselves. Sartran's Kolvax-clone would wipe the floor with any 7th-Level Psion, but with his inferior display of Psionics, he would have no chance against the original Sartran.

But now, his doppelganger's body is on par with Huron, and Huron's clone is two times stronger than his original self! That means they aren't fighting inferior clones anymore, but unique monsters with bodies that will not be killable in a short period of time!

Huron himself erupts from the mountain, tearing out of its confines while entirely uninjured. He flickers across the sky and returns to his Kolvax-copy with a fist raised, and

the copy meets his punch with a fist of its own. The two of them erupt into battle, and this time it is Huron who has to proactively dodge and change up his fighting style so that he can outmaneuver his slightly dumber doppelganger.

[Vi, Riley! Help Huron!] Sartran himself says. [Fellrun and I will tackle my copy.]

The two female Executors nod. They jump away, hoping to assist Huron in at least pinning down his insanely powerful copy while only leaving two Executors to handle Sartran's clone.

Strangely, Kolvaxor Sartran appears at ease, watching silently with its arms crossed as the three Executors battle its lone comrade. Sartran himself growls angrily at his clone, narrowing his eyes as he meets its faceless gaze.

[I've killed you a thousand times, fiend.] Sartran hisses. [Even if your body is stronger, your powers are inferior! You're nothing compared to me!]

The Kolvaxor doesn't respond. It radiates a smug sense of superiority, making it seem as though Sartran's words were nothing more than childish taunts.

Abruptly it vanishes and teleports right in front of Divinator Fellrun, conjuring a powerful orb of lightning in its right hand and a hyper-condensed blob of water in its left.

Just as it snaps its hand forward to attack Fellrun, the Divinator dodges nimbly, predicting the Kolvaxor's movement with his precognitive abilities. It uses water to enhance its lightning's conductive effects, but the attack fires off into the distance, sailing into the horizon uselessly.

CRACKLE!

Sartran himself blasts his clone with a much faster bolt of 8th Level lightning, slightly scarring its skin and knocking it away, but otherwise leaving it unharmed.

His expression dims.

Any time the two of them fought in the past, Sartran would have crushed his clone with ease. But now, his clone's 7th Level lightning hurts him about as little as his 8th Level lightning hurts the Kolvaxor. His strengthened abilities are offset by the Kolvaxor's greatly enhanced body, and vice-versa.

The difference is, his clone can afford to fight from afar, or draw in and battle up close. Sartran is not nearly as adept in melee combat, so he absolutely must keep his distance or he'll die before he has a chance to react!

Perhaps sensing this, Kolvaxor Sartran lunges at its Executor-self, summoning a sword made of lightning to slash at him.

But then, Divinator Fellrun appears between the two, a smug look twinkling in his eyes.

[You'll have to get through me first, fiend.]

Fellrun lightly waves his hand. Instantly, a twelve-foot long spear materializes in his grasp, one which radiates an aura of exotic power. This highly durable weapon is crafted from none other than Living Moldanium, the strongest material possessed by the Volgrim Empire!

He spins the spear around his body, instantly making it burst with an oppressive speed and momentum beyond what any mortal could comprehend, and then he snaps the tip of the spear at Kolvaxor Sartran's body.

THUNK!

It impacts the Kolvaxor like a train crashing into a car. The Kolvaxor proves unable to dodge Fellrun's attack and goes flying into the distance, smashing into the planet's surface and skipping across the soil like a rock across a pond's surface.

None of the Executors are truly weak. And among them, Fellrun is considered the third-strongest. His body might not be the most powerful, and his control over Psionics is certainly inferior to the likes of Sartran, Riley, and Nufaris, but he has a merit none of the others do.

Fellrun is a battle maniac!

In 700,000 years, he has never taken a vacation. He has always trained, day in and day out, mastering every weapon he can get his hands on.

He has traveled from world to world, learning from every species in the Milky Way, and even species beyond, all in order to master their fighting forms.

If Buddha is known as the Combat God of Humanity, then Fellrun is the Combat God of the Volgrim. He can use any fighting style, switching between them with fluidic grace. He can wield any weapon, be it mundane or technological.

And that is hardly the full extent of his powers.

Fellrun casually turns his head to the side. His body bends at the exact moment Kolvaxor Sartran reappears and slashes his electric sword at him. Fellrun evades the attack an instant before it actually occurs, weaponizing another one of his formidable and unique talents, an ability that presently makes him the only non-Executor among his fellow 8th Level Psions.

Precognition!

Fellrun does not need to deliberately peer into the future. At all times, he possesses an active sense of future events a few seconds in advance. He can peer into multiple future realities, in a manner not dissimilar to Confessor Vulpanix. Unlike her, he does not use this power to summon copies of himself from multiple possible realities, but instead to divine the potential attack vectors of his enemies.

This multiplies his combat strength!

Kolvaxor Sartran's attack whiffs harmlessly to Fellrun's side. The Divinator revolves his spear around his body and delivers a brutal blow with the heavy butt-end of it to Sartran's head, sending the monster reeling to the side.

Executor Sartran himself ends up watching, metaphorically slack-jawed, as his senior easily bests this repulsive clone single-handedly!

Among the six 8th Level Psions, there is a commonly understood hierarchy of power.

Executor Vi, the weakest, 750,000 years old.

Executor Riley, the second weakest, 645,000 years old.

Executor Sartran, the third weakest, 800,000 years old.

Divinator Fellrun, the third strongest, 1,000,000 years old.

Executor Huron, the second strongest, 750,000 years old.

And finally...

Executor Nufaris, the strongest of them all, just 150,000 years old.

Before the Kolvaxians appeared, before the Energy Wars on Earth, before Nufaris arrived on the scene, these rankings were a little different.

Fellrun was considered the strongest Executor!

Huron was barely considered beneath him.

Naturally, these rankings changed over time. Vi and Riley might be considered the weakest, but they were still planet-crushers in their own right if the need was great enough. Vi could defeat Fellrun in combat under the right circumstances.

But before mass-slaughter and planetary annihilation of weak but infinitely numerous Kolvaxians became the most important metric for strength, solo combat skills were the most important measure for the Executors.

And not one of the 8th Level Psions could hold a candle to Divinator Fellrun.

Even today, that statement still holds true.

Kolvaxor Sartran tries, again and again, to evade Fellrun, to bypass him, to attack from a tricky angle, and to do anything it can to reach the much weaker and easier to kill Executor Sartran hiding behind his superior.

But unfortunately, before the Volgrim's God of Combat, no trick is enough to evade him.

[Weak. Too weak.] Fellrun sneers, ducking to avoid another blast of electricity, then stabbing his spear into the Kolvaxor's belly. He cuts open a shallow wound, but it doesn't go deep enough to cause a grievous injury.

Fellrun seemingly toys with the monster, beating and battering it with the ease of a trained soldier smacking around a child. Each attack jars the Kolvaxor's senses, making its vision tremble when the heavy end of the spear blasts the side of its head and rattles its brain, or when Fellrun shoves the tip into the spot where its eyes should be and splits its skull.

But it just doesn't matter.

Fellrun can't kill the creature!

Ordinary Kolvaxians would end up cut down by the Divinator like wheat by the chaff. But these superior Kolvaxors have greatly enhanced combat capabilities as a result of their 7th Level Psionic abilities. They are much hardier and can deflect or block blows that would kill their weaker siblings.

[Bah!] Fellrun growls. [It's like bashing a hunk of metal from left to right! This creature is so hard to kill, yet utterly non-threatening!]

Suddenly, his eyes flicker. Fellrun dodges to the side, bending his body in an odd manner right as Kolvaxor Huron appears and punches the spot where he levitated only an

instant before. Fellrun smashes his spear into Huron's head, but the Kolvaxor barely even twitches from the impact.

Fellrun senses a grave threat to his life. He activates his psionic power, doubling the flow of time around his body-space, and then immediately flickers away, evading the next attack by Kolvaxor Sartran.

The Divinator is not only a god of combat and a prophet of the immediate future, but also an accomplished Temporal Manipulator!

His ability to alter the flow of time at the highest levels is not something even Founder Dosena can achieve; an accomplishment belonging entirely to himself. He is hundreds of thousands of years older than some of the other Executors, and he has put those millennia to good use by mastering many different branches of Psionics.

[Apologies!] Executor Vi exclaims. [Huron's Kolvax-clone is too hard to pin-down! We can't hurt it at all!]

[At all?] Fellrun asks, troubled. The two Kolvaxors attack him from the left and right, alternating between blasts of lightning and planet-busting punches and kicks while he gracefully dodges and predicts their attacks.

Unfortunately, while Fellrun's agility and combat senses are leagues beyond his opponents, his endurance is not. His body is fairly strong, more so than most of the other Executors, but still far weaker than Huron's. If one of the Kolvaxors lands a decisive blow, Fellrun will suffer a terrible and grievous injury that might even kill him on the spot! Especially Kolvaxor Huron, whose strength is far beyond the original body.

[Not even a little!] Executor Huron roars, feeling aggrieved in his heart. [Those stupid mud-dwellers! I've spent so many cycles pursuing an indestructible body but the fools HANDED it to my Kolvax-clone! This is a grievance I will never forgive!]

Executor Riley summons phantasms to attack Huron's clone. The Kolvaxor completely ignores the fetid phantoms, even when they travel inside the monster's body and wreak havoc. It turns out her abilities can barely even injure the Kolvaxor's internal organs, and they can't do anything to its empowered bones, muscles, and skin!

Vi's compressed Psionic Bullets ricochet harmlessly off Kolvaxor Huron's body. No matter how much she compresses, sharpens, or hardens her bullets before firing, she ends up feeling as if she were flinging plastic pellets at a wall of ten-foot-thick steel.

[What insanity!] Riley cries. [This monster is strong! Way too strong!]

[We can't defeat it, only slow it down or trap it.] Vi analyzes. [Perhaps if Founder Dosea were here, she might...]

[The Second Founder must protect the homeworld.] Sartran counters. [There are five of us and only two Kolvaxors. We can still win!]

Sartran's words fall on deaf minds. By now, even the mighty Huron has begun to believe they cannot defeat the Kolvaxors. Even if they somehow, miraculously, manage to kill the two of them, the Kolvaxors will simply regenerate and reappear in the future!

Without any recourse to take but battling to the death, the five Executors attack the pair of Kolvaxors with a vicious fury.

Ten minutes pass, then a full hour.

In the skies above the human forces, the storm of cosmic-level attacks causes tens of shockwaves to radiate outward, deafening anyone within earshot and often causing internal injuries to the ordinary humans fighting on the Eastern Front. Even their T-REX suits don't shield them from the mere after-effects of the Executor's battle.

Lightning crackles. Fists smash against one another. A spear ignites the air as it heats up due to the friction of whirling around Fellrun's body.

The Executors battle for their lives, sometimes trying to pin Kolvaxor Huron down, other times trying to kill Kolvaxor Sartran.

Eventually, Fellrun takes a big risk. He splits off from the other four and directly battles Kolvaxor Huron while shouting to his comrades, [Kill Kolvaxor Sartran! No matter what! Kill it! I will hold off this one for as long as I can!]

Fellrun doesn't wait for a response. He initiates a brutal series of speedy attacks, spinning his lance around his body with ever increasing speed and ferocity. Every second, he strikes one of Kolvaxor Huron's limbs, his head, his chest, and even his back three to five times. He becomes a living hurricane as he greatly overpowers Huron's brute strength with speed and technique!

At the same time, Executors Vi, Riley, and Huron pin down Kolvaxor Sartran. The Kolvaxian tries repeatedly to break free of the encirclement, but Huron batters him around while Vi pins him in place with her Psionic Bullets, dealing light to moderate damage but mainly focusing on crippling his movements. Riley ends up dealing the most

damage with her phantasms, while Sartran himself stays back and begins to charge up an incredibly powerful orb of psionic lightning.

Several seconds pass, and then a full minute. Perhaps having learned a minor trick from Beelzebub, Sartran condenses the power of his lightning orb as much as possible, continuously pumping his psionic power into the orb while forcing its increasingly explosive energy to remain contained in the smallest space possible.

Kzzaaat! Kzzzzaat!!

High pitched screams erupt continuously from the lightning orb. It increases its revolution speed, becoming hotter and hotter as more furious energies spiral inside its core.

Finally, Sartran lunges at his Kolvax clone. A single command from him causes the other three Executors to lash out and grab the Kolvaxor, holding it down so it can't escape the inevitable.

Right as Sartran starts to press the thermonuclear lightning orb into his doppelganger's chest...

Foop!

It vanishes!

[No!] Sartran screams, his eyes shooting open in horror.

BOOOOOM!!!

The orb explodes with all its expected power, blasting the four Executors away and sending them hurtling in four different directions.

Thousands of bolts of lightning fire in every direction at random. Many of them crash into Mount Adams, striking the Wordsmithium walls and instantly killing the majority of guards stationed along the top of those walls. Plenty of other bolts fire at the ground a mile below, killing hundreds of human troopers, blowing apart Warframes, and sending thunderous explosions outward wherever the rest of the bolts strike.

In an instant, Sartran's attack kills more than thirty thousand humans and monsters, badly cripples tens of thousands more, and leaves just as many reeling on the ground, stunned or unconscious.

Sartran himself coughs as blood flows from burns all over his body. The sheer aftermath of the attack would have been fine if it had detonated inside the body of such a formidable Kolvaxor, but instead, it detonated in the open air, causing him horrific injuries.

[No... how... how could it...?] Sartran wonders, his head reeling.

His blurry vision clear up after a few moments. He spots Executor Huron locked in deadly combat with two foes, and those two enemies send a chill down Sartran's spine.

As before, Divinator Fellrun battles Kolvaxor Huron. But now, Executor Huron battles Kolvaxor Sartran...

...and Kolvaxor Nufaris.

The final of the Kolvaxor trio reveals itself, its faceless head providing no clue as to the emotions it might be feeling, if it indeed experiences any at all.

[Dammit!] Executor Sartran exclaims, glancing around to see that Executors Vi and Riley managed to survive the explosion in better condition than him. [That tricky Nufaris-clone! It teleported my copy away right before I could land my attack! BASTARD!]

As angry and aggrieved as Sartran feels, a deeper sense of fear inevitably swallows his heart.

In the past, these three Kolvaxors could barely amount to two Executors when it came to their combat potential.

But now, each Kolvaxor is worth two Executors on their own. They not only possess a formidable arsenal of Psionic powers, but all of them have bodies on par with or beyond Executor Huron.

The Kolvaxors are not easy to defeat anymore. In fact, they are more difficult than the Executors themselves!

One on one, not a single Executor believes they can reliably defeat or kill their doppelgangers after Artoria's bodily empowerment occurred.

[The five of us are outmatched.] Sartran thinks. [We will need Executor Nufaris's help to level the playing field. Even then, the Plague only needs to take down one of us to win completely. Once they have a fourth Executor's body to play with, we'll never win a battle again!]

Sartran levitates off the ground. He transmits a command to his subordinate.

[Creator Demila. Inform the humans that they MUST evacuate Maiura. This world is lost. We cannot hold back the enemies for long.]

Demila's reply is brief but succinct.

[I contemplate, and I comprehend.]

Demila, still levitating above Mount Adams by herself, smiles with eyes full of malice and ill-intent.

The finale has arrived.

Part 594: The Kolvaxian Conspiracy

Across all of the four battlefields, the humans continue to fight with all their hearts. The Eastern battlefield suffers terrible losses as a result of the Executor's battle in the skies, and the remaining humans rapidly crumble under the pressure of the remnant Cosmic shockwaves slamming into their bodies and psychic attacks that jar their minds. Before long, everyone dies, and the Kolvaxians swarm toward Mount Adams.

[Attention all humans and human allies.] Creator Demila says, her voice cutting through the fog of battle and piercing into the minds of the humans, demons, monsters, and even the few remnant angels. [Maiura is lost. The Executor Plaguehosts are too powerful. You must flee! Begin immediately retreating to safety!]

Inside Fort Adams, behind the increasingly fragile safety of their Wordsmithium walls, only twenty thousand soldiers remain. Among them are humans and monsters, but zero demons. Demila alone levitates above the city, keeping an eye out for any Psiovaxians that might take to the skies and threaten the humans within.

Her eyes hide a deep secret, but her appearance maintains the facade of a Volgrim protector, assigned to assist the humans to the best of her ability.

Not long after her declaration, the ground beneath Fort Adams begins to rumble. Distant *booms* reverberate half a kilometer beneath the feet of the humans, rapidly increasing in frequency as the ordinary Kolvaxians arrive and begin pounding on the Wordsmithium barrier beneath the people's feet. The dirt soil under their feet trembles and cracks from the mere aftershocks of those horrifying impacts, swelling the humans' minds with a sense of dread.

Many of the soldiers start to twitch. Even if they are professional killers, they have watched live feeds from their comrades outside the walls, men and women who are now dead and turned into the very monsters attacking them from the planet's depths. None of them can remain emotionless and stoic in the face of such a terrifying threat.

Neil Adams grimaces. He hesitates for a long minute, listening as the volume of the thrumming within the depths grows louder and louder.

Finally, he taps the side of his T-REX helmet.

"Attention all troopers. Creator Demila is right. We must evacuate. I will have Hope retreat from the Northern Front and begin teleporting people back into the Labyrinth. Everyone else, return through the Warpgate now!"

Quiet sighs of relief go up among the troopers, but many men and women still silently lament the fact they have to give up Maiura.

This was supposed to be their new homeworld!

Maiura was going to become the birthplace of a superior humanity, one unburdened by love of foul demons or other wretched creatures!

But now, it has fallen.

After spending many years quietly building lives on Maiura, the longest-lived residents feel a deep sense of loss. Many of the people who arrived are recent immigrants, only coming here after the Great Debate. But a sizable portion are not, and it is those who had children and started to live fulfilling lives who feel this loss the deepest.

Neil Adams is no different.

For him, Maiura represented his political ambitions. He and Hope will likely be able to build up another world, but at what cost? How long will it last? Will the Plague show up there, too?

Neil's eyes flicker with hatred. He hates the Kolvaxians, but secretly he feels these creatures are not acting naturally. While he lacks evidence for his hypothesis, some aspects of the Plague's attack simply never added up.

Why did it cease all battles on all other worlds in the Milky Way?

Why did it beeline straight to Maiura and attack them?

"Artoria...?" Neil mutters out loud, where no-one can hear him.

The moment the Black Hole Construct was taken by the Plague, that's when everything changed. Could her personality have somehow infected the Plague? Could her memories be special enough to guide the Plague to Maiura?

Neil isn't certain, and he doesn't have time to think about it now.

But once the situation cools off, he secretly vows to himself that he *will* investigate the matter.

* * *

Hope Hiro jumps into the air. He grimaces as a pair of Psiovaxians attack him on the right and left, these powerful creatures each both standing at the 6th Level of the Volgrim, possessing strength on par with 5th Level Psions.

He wields Excalibur in both hands, dashing between them with the swiftness of a fly dodging a flyswatter. The Psiovaxians silently pursue him, with one of them conjuring flame chains to snap at and ensnare him, while the other one fires poisoned needles made out of condensed Psionic power.

Hope dodges the needles whenever they fly at him, shuddering when the needles rip through rock and stone or embed deeply into the armor of the Warframes below him. Just when Hope isn't sure how to handle these two creatures in the fastest way possible, Uriel joins him and begins attacking with a furious salvo. Possessed by the spirit of her brother Gabriel, she wields a greatsword that can hammer and slash effectively enough to pressure one of the Psiovaxians. With her help, Hope cuts one of them down, then he and his makeshift ally kill the other.

Gabriel speaks afterward. "Hope. Neil called for a retreat. Thou must teleport the remaining combatants off Maiura. Verily, I shalt hold back the enemies here. I will draw their focus."

Hope nods. "Alright. It's time we faced reality. Maiura is lost! I can't believe I'm saying it, but this situation isn't salvageable, and it's only getting worse."

After affirming Neil's decision, Hope flies into the sky, leaving the Archangel behind.

Gabriel gives up control of Uriel's mind, allowing the Archangel of Retribution to regain control of her body. At the same time, the other Archangels appear beside their sister with grim expressions of their faces.

Raphael speaks first. "This battle is not what it seems, siblings. There is a greater force at play here."

"The Kolvaxians are not as simple as they appear." Michael affirms. "They act as mindless beasts, but they always hold back until the humans gain an advantage. Then they reveal another card from their sleeves."

"Every time we think we've made a breakthrough, the Kolvaxians reveal another dimension of their abilities." Uriel says coldly. "I believeth even now they hath not shown the full extent of their power."

Uriel splits apart the greatsword Gabriel was using, causing it to revert into her signature twin-spears. Then she alters the appearance of the Gae Bolg, changing it into a single longsword before tossing it to her brother Michael.

Like this, Michael gains a formidable weapon that may help him in combating the Plague.

"Remember, our goal now art not to kill these beasts, but merely distract them." Gabriel says. "Keep thy wits about thee, and take care to draw the fiends' attention!"

After speaking, the Archangels rejoin the battle, the four of them working together to assist Hope as he swiftly starts teleporting soldiers away from the Northern front. Since all of them are only inside the Warframes, it doesn't take him long.

Hope glances at Belial. He hesitates for a moment, then starts to fly toward the Western Front to retrieve his children. Just as Hope is about to leave, Belial suddenly disappears, teleported away.

Hope's expression turns ugly.

Jason! He's still watching, after all.

Secretly, Hope was thinking of leaving Belial here. With the Warframes gone, there would be no chance of her surviving. But since Jason teleported her away, that destroys Hope's plan.

Always ready to protect his vicious demon friends. Hope thinks. *I told you to stay out of Maiura's business! Damn you, Jason!*

Hope departs, leaving Uriel and her brothers behind. Immediately the swarm charges at the angels, threatening to put them down. But luckily, the Archangels simply take to the air, leaving their grounded enemies without a prayer of catching them.

Naturally, with their Cosmic-level bodies, the Kolvaxians are still able to leap into the air hundreds of feet high. But the moment they pounce, the Archangels dash to the sides, flying around with flaps of their wings to nimbly and agilely dodge their comparatively clumsy enemies.

"Come, test me if thou dost dare!" Uriel challenges. "I am not afraid of thee!"

* * *

Hope quickly arrives at his children's side, finding Mandy and Levi fighting with the assistance of Demon Deity Kristoff above. Kristoff's blood spears skewer and slaughter the Kolvaxians like before, but with noticeably higher difficulty than they did before. Without Executor Riley to weaken the Kolvaxians, his spears often end up breaking bones and destroying internal organs, but those injuries regenerate before the Kolvaxians die.

"Alright, kids!" Hope shouts. "We're leaving! **RETURN! RETURN!**"

Mandy and Levi barely get a second to process Hope's words before they abruptly disappear and return to the Hall of Heroes.

Demon Deity Kristoff glances at Hope. He frowns.

"What are you doing? The Kolvaxians will fall upon Mount Adams within a minute."

"A minute is all we need to evacuate." Hope retorts. "Things happen fast when I'm involved."

Hope doesn't stick around to hear Kristoff's retort. Instead, he jumps into the air and races away, this time heading to the Southern Front to rescue the still rather-large army of humans fighting alongside Henry, Ashley, and Beelzebub. Unfortunately, the Eastern Front has entirely collapsed, with no survivors left...

* * *

Boom!

Boom!

The reverberations beneath Fort Adams grow louder and louder. Every second, the intensity ramps up, but still, the Wordsmithium barrier holds without showing the slightest dent. Even with half a kilometer of soil separating the Wordsmithium from the feet of the soldiers, they can still feel the ground vibrating constantly.

Eventually, Kolvaxians begin rapidly scaling the walls of the fortress, incentivising the humans inside to move faster as they race through the Warpgate. Creator Demila summons hundreds of simple orb-shaped psionic constructs to man the walls, blasting the Kolvaxians back down into the valley below before they can make it inside.

"Come on people, pick up the pace! Let's move, move, MOVE!" General Chadwick shouts, spinning his arm in the direction of the Warpgate. "You too, Commander! Let's get the hell out of here!"

"I'll leave once everyone else is gone." Neil retorts. "It won't do for me to be among the first to evacuate."

"With all due respect, sir, that's inadvisable. You're our most important asset aside from Hope himself." Chadwick argues.

"Well, as long as I'm in charge, I will- hmm?"

Neil pauses. He frowns as a 'humming' resonates in the air, causing his bones to subtly vibrate.

"What is that noise?" Neil asks, right before all hell breaks loose.

* * *

"It is time, sister." Michael says. "Let us leave!"

The Archangels continue dodging the Kolvaxians below as they leap into the air, but each time, the Kolvaxians hurtle away wildly, completely missing their agile enemies.

Hardly has a minute passed after the Wordsmith's departure when a strange vibration rumbles the air. Uriel's expression changes as she senses something *shift* on the battlefield.

"What is this feeling? What's happening?" Uriel wonders out loud.

All of a sudden, the Kolvaxians stop frenzying. They cease leaping into the sky, and stop in place, looking up at Uriel with their faceless gazes.

The Archangel of Retribution feels a cold chill go down her spine. Seeing her enemies no longer leaping up at her like rabid dogs, she senses an eerie, alien intelligence hidden within their changed postures.

"What... what is this...?" Uriel whispers.

Michael's expression turns solemn.

"...RUN!"

He grabs his sister, then flies away. Raphael and Gabriel follow behind them, but as they depart, Uriel shoots a glance over her shoulder, looking backward at the silent and unmoving swarm.

All at once, every single Kolvaxian begins to levitate off the ground.

Uriel's skin turns to ice.

"Levit... levitation... they art... PSIONS?!"

An instant later, the swarm of five hundred Kolvaxians takes to the air, no longer moving with the clumsiness of mindless monsters, but with the cold, precise minds of alien hunters.

A swarm of Psiovaxians charges after Uriel and her brothers, making all of them feel terror in their hearts.

"They're Psions!" Gabriel roars. "All of them! We were fooled!"

At the same time, across Maiura's multiple battlefronts, seemingly ordinary Kolvaxians rise up, taking to the skies as they race toward Mount Adams' peak. On the Southern Front, Hope and his allies come under attack by hundreds of Psiovaxians as they also reveal the truth of their nature.

"Help! Help us- AAAHH!!"

A Legionnaire screams pitifully as his body is blasted to pieces by a psionic force exceeding what even a Demon Emperor could output.

Sprinkled among the Psiovaxians are not only 3rd and 4th and 5th Level Psions, but 6th Level Psions and a pair of 7th Level Psions.

Hope and the other humans become panicked as their understanding of the Kolvaxians instantly upends itself. Hope wields Excalibur with every last drop of power he can summon, while Beelzebub flies around, blasting the 6th and 7th Level Psions with the full force of his nuclear hellfire.

Not even caring about fighting alongside a Demon Emperor, Hope and Beelzebub try to protect the humans from the skies while Henry and the Legionnaires battle on the ground. The weaker Psions, still far more powerful than Demon Dukes and Emperors while also possessing Cosmic bodies, beat the hell out of the human soldiers, killing one after another of their weakest members.

"We can't keep this up!" One of the Legionnaires screams. "We need to escape! Commander Hiro, help!!"

Two portals open in the sky. The figures of Demon Deity Kristoff and Melody appear, both of them acting hurriedly to try and reverse the changing situation on Maiura at Demon Deity Auger's command.

This time, instead of summoning spears made of blood, Kristoff reaches through the portal and taps into the power of blood to forcefully empower the bodies of all the humans, as well as Beelzebub. He metaphorically boils their blood, increasing their healing factor and filling them with boundless energy, all while conjuring a Blood Legion of demonic monsters on the outskirts to act as meatshields for the humans.

Kristoff's goal this time is not to kill the Kolvaxians, but to save the humans. As such, he changes up his strategy to try and operate on the defense as much as possible.

At the same time, Demon Deity Melody weaponizes her power over sound to fire concentrated blasts of sound downward, being careful not to unleash wide-area damage, but only to target the strongest Kolvaxians within her line of sight.

Hope conjures a force field around the troopers and himself, using Excalibur as a battery to empower and strengthen the shield, while Beelzebub flickers around outside the shield, going on the offense to unleash hellfire and lightning on his foes.

Beelzebub grits his teeth. "Weak! I'm too weak!"

Even his most powerful and concentrated flames sputter uselessly against the hardened psionic barriers of the 7th Level Psiovaxians. When the two 7th Level Psiovaxians work together to attack and suppress him, Beelzebub becomes crippled, unable to assist the others. Thankfully, Melody's sonic screams impact the Psiovaxian elites with enough force to shatter their shields, freeing Beelzebub from their deadly embrace.

* * *

Five hundred Psiovaxians chase down Archangel Uriel. Among them is a single 7th Level Psiovaxian, a powerhouse with the ability to warp and bend space. This lone creature possesses psionic strength at the Bottom Level of Cosmic Power, allowing it to easily outpace the Archangel, arriving in front of her while blasting her with a beam of necrotic death energy. Uriel screams in pain as that deadly beam rips a hole in her stomach, badly wounding her and crippling her movement.

Still, she perseveres! Uriel's eyes figuratively glow with wrath, and she flaps her wings, turning her body into a battering ram. She summons a wall of holy energy and slams it into the Psiovaxian, sending it careening away.

But, that momentary pause gives the weaker horde of Psiovoxians time to catch up! Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel hurry to shield their sister from behind, using their own bodies as divine walls and their abilities as obfuscation.

Uriel hurriedly tries to fly away, but multiple powerful tendrils of telekinetic energy snap at her, weave between her brothers' fragile barrier, and wrap around her limbs, ensnaring and preventing her from escaping.

With a mighty roar, Uriel's eyes begin to shine with divine power.

"THOU SHALT NOT BIND ME!"

Boom!

She detonates divine energy in her body, blasting apart those otherwise powerful but invisible chains of telekinesis, then she flaps her wings again, rushing toward the mountain top.

From afar, she easily sees the thousands of Kolvaxians swarming every side of Mount Adams. Her heart turns pale as many of the nearest ones turn to look at her, then leap into the air, conjuring psionic power to fly toward her from every conceivable direction.

No! Damnation! Uriel roars in her mind. *I shalt not be bound! I shalt not fall here!*

She moves quickly, dodging and weaving as she picks out a small momentary gap in the incoming encirclement. She starts to race toward it, but at that moment, the 7th Level Psiovoxian flickers into position, its faceless gaze seemingly meeting her eyes.

Shit!! Uriel curses internally, looking around for a different gap in the incoming enemies.

Just as she is about to move toward one last glimmer of freedom...

CRACK!

Something smashes into Uriel's back, sending her careening toward the planet below, and straight into the horde of Kolvaxians.

BOOM!!

Uriel crashes helplessly into the indestructible bodies of her faceless foes. She panics as powerful hands grab at her from all directions. She tries to break free, but she fails to find leverage. The Kolvaxians rip her spear from her hands, then crash into Michael and

Gabriel, swarming them and ripping their construct bodies apart until they return to motes of light.

Her eyes jump into the sky, as if looking for a savior. What she sees instead leaves her momentarily stunned.

There are two 7th Level Kolvaxians, their auras completely identical. One of them struck her, but the other was the one that blocked her passage.

So there were two... Uriel thinks, as countless hands pull at her face and mouth, grabbing her wings and pulling her back, back, down toward the ground.

She tries to fight them off, but it doesn't matter. Her strength is not enough to save her.

Her eyes flicker as her legs are dragged underground.

One of the two 7th Level Psiovaxians vanishes, leaving only the other in place. At that moment, she seems to realize something.

It was... an... illusion?!

The last thing Uriel sees as her torso and arms are pulled underground is her eldest brother, Raphael, staring down at her, his expression dark, but no intent on his face to try and save her.

"Raph-!"

Uriel tries to scream his name, but dirt rushes into her mouth and the ground swallows her whole. The horde drags her into the planet's depths.

Raphael closes his eyes, and then his construct body dissipates into motes of light.

* * *

"Come on, everyone! We don't have much time!" General Chadwick shouts, waving his arms in a spiral motion toward the glowing Warpgate leading to the Labyrinth Core.

Tens of troopers rush past every second while Creator Demila and her Psionic Constructs do battle with the Psiovaxians trying to fly over the walls and attack the humans.

Luckily, Demila is a million-year-old war veteran who has fought tens of thousands of battles against foes both weak and strong. Against the vast majority of other 7th Level

Psions, she will win decisively in battle, with only the most powerful elites posing a real threat. Even when the 7th Level Psiovaxians attack, she is able to hold them back.

With Demila providing an effective shield from the Psiovaxians outside, the humans manage to contain their panic and flee in a relatively orderly, if hurried manner.

The rhythmic booming of Kolvaxians smashing their bodies against the Wordsmithium underneath constantly amps up the adrenaline and fear in the trooper's minds, but they still act like professional soldiers and not unruly civilians.

All of that changes when, out of nowhere, the ground explodes.

Between the Warpgate and the remaining few thousand men and women, a massive hole blasts upward, and Psiovaxians begin pouring out of it, charging toward the juicy humans still inside Fort Adams.

"Oh no! NO!" Chadwick exclaims, his face turning pale.

Neil quickly pulls a gun off his back and fires into the horde, as does his wife. At the same time, the instant the hole erupts, the Warpgate shuts off, its connection severed from the other side. The humans inside the Core wouldn't take a chance of allowing even one of those horrible monsters into Hell, or it could mean the end of all sentient life in the Milky Way!

"Stand and fight!" Neil roars.

The remaining few thousand humans, none of them Legionnaires, all of them ordinary humans and a scattering of monsters, whip out their guns and fire into the horde, their bullets proving nearly useless. Even the heavier cannons only knock one or two Kolvaxians back at a time, and the swarm rapidly descends upon them.

At that moment, five figures materialize inside the Fortress, between the defenseless humans and their monstrous foes. Five figures clad in golden Wordsmithium regalia imbued with massive amounts of magical power.

Jason Hiro's Dronesmiths!

Much stronger than the last time he fought the Kolvaxians impromptu on the world of Reaver, Jason's drones stand valiantly, creating powerful barriers of energy to beat back the horde. At the same time, he materializes multiple portals at the rear of the remaining soldiers, spatial gates leading back to safety.

"Go!!" One of the Dronesmiths shouts. "I'll hold them off!"

Unwilling to stand idly on the sidelines any longer, Jason takes direct action and protects his fellow humans, causing Neil to look at him in a new light. Chadwick, Linda, and the rest all quickly turn tail and run, but Neil pauses for half a second, directing a look of admiration Jason's way.

"...I was wrong about you." Neil mutters. "This is how a true Hero should act."

Jason doesn't hear Neil's words, or perhaps he does but chooses not to acknowledge them. His Dronesmiths blast extremely potent beams of energy at random Psiovoxians, ripping their cellular makeup to shreds and atomizing them into piles of ash and gore.

Neil finally turns and runs. As he follows up behind his men and women, the last dozen of them make it through Jason's portals.

Linda pauses, turning to gesture to her husband.

"Come on, Neil!"

The ground explodes behind Neil. A Psiovoxian pounces at him, but luckily the human Commander has enough of a headstart to escape its attack. With Demila hovering above protectively, just one single Psion won't be able to catch him.

But then, Neil trips.

His feet somehow move incorrectly. He clumsily stumbles over seemingly nothing, losing his balance.

Neil's heart turns cold. He faceplants against the floor, a look of horror in his eyes.

Trip, how could he trip? There's no way he could be so clumsy!

He tries to jump to his feet and keep running, but for some reason, his body seems to become much heavier than before. The subtle interactions of his muscles don't function in the way his brain expects, making him take seconds longer to get up than they usually should.

And then, the Kolvaxian pounces on him.

"NEIL!!" Linda screams, taking aim with her gun to shoot uselessly at the monster wrapping its arms around her husband's chest from behind.

She watches, horrified, as the creature yanks Neil backward, dives into the dirt, and disappears with him, dragging her husband into the depths of Maiura's soil.

Just like that, Neil disappears, with even Jason unable to save him.

Linda's pupils shrink to pinpricks. She stares, dazed, unable to move, seemingly watching and waiting for Neil to return.

But he doesn't.

Neil Adams is gone.

Jason Hiro, watching from Chrona, turns pale with horror. That Psiovaxian in particular exuded a powerful field of Chaos energy that limited his ability to affect the situation. Short of fighting it in melee combat, Jason could not have saved Neil with so little time to react.

"Neil! Neil, no..." Jason whispers.

Chadwick grabs Linda. He pulls her away, and the last of the humans inside Fort Adams beat a hasty retreat. With all of them gone, the Dronesmiths no longer have any reason to stay. And so, they vanish, leaving only Creator Demila behind.

Demila's expression remains inscrutable. She flickers away, leaving the Kolvaxians to crawl around and take over Fort Adams. She teleports into the battle at the Southern Front to assist the last remaining humans there, and eventually, Hope opens a portal, allowing everyone to escape. Jason teleports Beelzebub back to Tarus II, and the last remaining humans disappear from Maiura, condemning it to the Plague for the foreseeable future. With them gone, Demon Deities Kristoff and Melody also fade away, Yardrat sealing off his portals so the Psiovaxians won't be able to travel to their worlds.

Only the Executors remain in the skies above, battling their Kolvaxor foes.

[Everyone! You must retreat!] Creator Demila urges. [The humans have all escaped! Do not stay here and damn yourselves to oblivion!]

[Easier said than done!] Executor Sartran complains. [Dammit! These False Ones are too powerful! We can't extricate ourselves! What are we going to do?!]

As soon as he asks the question, Jason's five Dronesmiths materialize in the air, joining the battle.

"You Executors flee!" Jason declares. "I'll hold them off! You just need to escape so we don't feed another Cosmic body to them!"

And with that, Jason manages to hold off the Kolvaxors long enough for the Executors to break away and flee for their lives. The psionic vibrations of five thousand Psiovaxians

pursuing from behind chills them to their bones, forcing them and Demila to pick up the pace.

The Psions all race into the Void as fast as they can, ditching the planet and leaving with their tails tucked between their legs while Jason's Dronesmiths fight at full power to try and make the Psiovaxians bleed.

Unfortunately, Jason quickly finds that stalling the Kolvaxor hosts is the best outcome he can attain. He fails to land any deadly blows on them, and Kolvaxor Huron ultimately tears through the Dronesmiths like a hot knife through butter, shredding them apart and forcing them to self destruct.

The battle ends on Maiura with a complete victory for the Kolvaxians, and a total loss for humanity.

But it is what comes next that seals humanity's ultimate fate...

Part 595: The Usual Suspects

If humanity's first loss to the Kolvaxians was a wake-up call, their second loss was beyond the realm of a nightmare. 300,000 men, women and children, dead. Humans and their monster allies alike, particularly among the civilian populace.

Families destroyed. Lives ruined. Bonds broken.

Inside the Labyrinth Core, which is no longer a safe space for humanity but a temporary refuge for many of the survivors who weren't sent to Tarus II instead, more than 100,000 military personnel congregate, with scattered civilians among their numbers. Maiura was initially focused on its martial prowess, boasting a far larger contingent of trained service-members than Tarus II, owing to most of the military being loyal to Neil Adams. Now, with their civilian population decimated, out of the million or so humans who lived there, only about 800,000 humans remain.

The Core, jam-packed with humans, monsters, and demons, spills out into the surrounding Labyrinth hallways in huge numbers. For miles in every direction, people who are tired and fearful huddle around, waiting for news of what happened to reach them.

Normally, they might need to wait for military personnel to receive updates through their T-REX communicators, but as it happens, a lot of Legionnaires made it off Maiura, and they maintain a direct mental link with the others among their kind.

"A total collapse of the ranks?"

"My son! Where is he?! He was playing with his friends! Has anyone seen him??"

"You're saying at the end, all of the Kolvaxians were actually Psions? Then why didn't they use their abilities sooner? Were those creatures just toying with us?!"

"Has anyone seen my wife? Her name is Jenna, she has black hair, and I think she was wearing a green dress with..."

"Is Commander Hope okay? Has anyone heard from him?"

* * *

Among these elite humans, scattered reports of the happenings on Maiura spread quickly. Various Legionnaires, connected to their allies inside Fort Adams, as well as

Henry on the Southern Front, are able to reliably update their fellow humans on what's been happening.

Confusion quickly turns to fear. A deep chill goes down the backs of the survivors as they realize they escaped before the situation truly turned dire.

General Magnus Chadwick was one of the last few people to leave Fort Adams before its collapse. He arrives inside the Core amongst a throng of anxious civilians and jumpy troopers, many of them asking him painful questions about what happened.

Instead of answering them, General Chadwick leads several top advisors into a private side room; the very same one Neil used to use when his base of operations was located in the Labyrinth. After closing the door and sitting around a table, Chadwick, Linda Hurent, and a handful of other people sink into their seats, remaining silent for twenty long seconds.

An aura of doom lingers in the air.

"Neil..." Linda finally says, her voice heavy with emotion. She looks blankly at the far wall, clutching her pregnant belly while thinking a great many thoughts she can't begin to elucidate.

"He's gone." Chadwick says gloomily. "He's really gone."

Lieutenant Samuel Baker also joins the discussion. Unfortunately, he was not on Maiura initially, and due to the need to evacuate civilians over bringing combatants to the battlefield, he never made it there to fight. Even so, he's still one of the higher ranking military officers, so he sits in with the rest.

"How did he fall?" Samuel asks.

"A Kolvaxian pounced on him from behind." Chadwick mutters, staring dazedly at the table. "Dragged him into the dirt. We couldn't stick around after that."

Debra, Neil's assistant, also joins the meeting. Despite the death of one of her closest friends, she remains stoic, not showing any emotion on her face.

"What about Archangel Uriel? Did she make it out?"

"I... don't know." Chadwick says. "She was alone, surrounded by Kolvaxians. But she is an Archangel. She and her brothers should be able to handle themselves."

Linda sighs. "What about when the Psiovaxians appeared at the end? Could she have escaped their encirclement?"

"We'll have to ask Commander Hope when he returns." Chadwick says. "Aside from him, Jason, and perhaps the Demon Deities or the Executors, nobody knows what happened on Maiura outside what we saw directly."

"We'll have to check when he returns, then." Debra says. "Right now, we need to understand the greater war situation so we can prepare for what comes next. The Kolvaxian attack caught us completely off-guard. I've already entered talks with the fairies to transfer our people to Pixiv. If Tarus II should come under siege by the Kolvaxians next, their backup will be the world of Sharmur."

"Hmph. With Demon Deity Melody. How... appropriate." Chadwick sneers. "Neil would weep if he were still-"

Right in the middle of Chadwick's sentence, a commotion breaks out just outside the door. Raising an eyebrow, Chadwick walks over, opens it, and checks with the guards outside. Then he closes the door and walks back to sit at his chair.

"It seems the battle is over. Hope, Henry, and the rest made it back. Barely."

* * *

Henry Cliff slowly staggers forward, wrapping an arm around his monsterized girlfriend, Ashley, as she helps him drag his wounded body over to some stairs leading up and out of the Labyrinth Core so he can sit down and take a load off. All around them, the loud noises of people asking questions, rambling words they can't make out from the crowd, and the general hubbub of an extremely packed meeting ground makes their ears buzz.

Hope follows behind them. He appears to be in good condition, mainly thanks to his nanite-enhanced body, but the truth is that the furious battle against the army of Psiovaxians nearly lead to his death multiple times. His bloodshot eyes tell the true story of how narrowly he made it out alive.

"We're glad to see you back, Commander Hope!" One of the many people nearby says.

"You too, Lord Henry! Let's see if we can get you patched up."

"Private Ashley, are you okay? Do you need anything to eat or drink? You look exhausted!"

Henry numbly nods along to the words of those around him, while Ashley directs her angry orc-scowl at the bystanders. "Back off, everyone! Give us some space! Henry almost died, and so did Hope! Give them a rest, for heaven's sake!"

The crowd hurriedly quiets down, but their nervous, bubbly energy continues to radiate outward as people still direct fewer but plenty persistent questions toward the trio.

"Commander Hope, any idea on what happened to Archangel Uriel?" One man finally asks.

"Uriel?" Hope replies. "She didn't make it back?"

"No sir. The higher-ups aren't talking about what happened before they left. All we know is that the Kolvaxians were all Psions, and they launched a sneak attack! It's amazing you made it out alive!"

Hope's heart turns cold. "One moment."

He closes his eyes.

"Locate."

Hope utters a Word of Power, and his surroundings go quiet. The soldiers hold their breath, waiting for the answer they've been dreading.

"...No response." Hope says, his expression turning ugly. "I can locate living creatures no matter where they are, but not if they're inside an anti-magic field, like Gressil's Chaos Energy, or... if they're dead."

Henry slowly raises his bloodied head, his cheeks cut up and mangled from several claws he took to the face.

"I... haven't really had time to listen to the other Legionnaires. You don't think Uriel is...?"

"She might be." Hope says quietly. "Stupid. I shouldn't have left her there, even if she asked. I thought against those mundane Kolvaxians, she'd be able to dodge them and attack from afar. But since they were all Psions, that was a different story."

He pauses, looking at the other men. "I'll find out what happened to Uriel as quickly as I can. Where's Neil and Chadwick? I need to talk to them."

Hardly have the words left Hope's mouth before his surroundings fall silent. The men, women, and monsters surrounding him all recoil slightly, then avert their eyes.

"You... Commander... you don't know? You haven't heard yet?" One man finally asks.

"Haven't heard what?" Hope asks, as a pit forms in his stomach.

He doesn't have to ask.

The reactions of the people around him immediately tells him what must have happened.

"Commander Neil." The trooper says, swallowing heavily. "He... didn't make it. He fell."

He fell.

He fell.

He fell...

Those two words echo inside Hope's mind, causing his knees to become wobbly for a moment. He nearly loses his balance as a flood of emotion washes through his mind, making him feel an indescribable sense of horror and shock.

"No... no, he- he can't be..." Hope says softly. "Fell? What do you mean? How? When?!"

"You should talk to Chadwick." The soldier says, averting his eyes guiltily. "He's in... Neil's old office."

Hope doesn't hesitate. He stumbles forward, his movements frantic, almost drunken. An instant later, he remembers who he is, then speaks a Word of Power to teleport directly into Neil's old work room, the very same place Hope was 'born'.

Hope's sudden appearance makes the military leaders inside jump slightly, but they recognize their guest immediately.

Hope opens his mouth. He starts to say something. To ask what happened, or perhaps to simply say something- anything at all.

But then he sees Linda sitting in Neil's old chair, her eyes downcast, her expression dead.

The reality, the gravity of the situation, truly hits him.

"Linda..." Hope whispers. "Linda... when? How?"

Linda doesn't answer him. It's Chadwick who speaks in her stead, intervening due to her complete lack of ability to speak.

"Hope. It all happened so fast." Chadwick says, keeping his gruff voice as soft as he can manage. "First, the Executors left us..."

Chadwick quickly and succinctly explains to Hope the truth of the matter. Hope's expression falls further and further into despair. He learns of the Executors leaving Demila behind, the attack from the Kolvaxians and Psiovaxians as they scaled the sides of the fortress, Neil's strange demand to stay until the end, and finally, the moment the Kolvaxians exploded through the underground Wordsmithium barrier, charging at the humans until Jason intervened.

Hope slumps to the ground, his back against the wall. His mental numbness becomes so profound that he begins to shake uncontrollably.

Tears well up in his eyes as Chadwick finishes the story, telling him about how Neil was dragged away by the monsters, never to be seen again.

"No... no he can't... we can still... save him? Save... can we... save Neil? Kolvaxian? Is he- my fault, it was all my fault!"

Hope presses his face into his palms, heaving sobs as he truly realizes the man he considered half a father is now dead. Gone forever. Lost to the creatures known for devouring planets whole.

Chadwick and the others fall silent, listening to the Wordsmith's crying and choked sobs with eyes full of their own tears.

In truth, everyone here knows how much Neil meant to Hope. Even when Hope and Neil had their squabbles, or when Hope childishly thought of plotting against him... he never wanted to hurt Neil. He just thought he could do better if he went his own way.

But now... Hope will never know. He'll never be able to rub his superiority in Neil's face, or receive the praise he so desperately craved from his father figure.

Chadwick stands up. He hesitantly walks over to Hope's side, then sits beside him on the floor.

"It's... okay, son. It's okay to cry. Let it all out."

Magnus reaches his hand over to gently squeeze Hope's shoulder, but the moment he makes contact, Hope jerks away, looking at him with tear-stained eyes full of rage.

"Don't touch me! And don't call me SON! Only Neil was allowed to call me that! And he's gone now! He's gone! And it's all MY fault! It's all... my..."

Hope grits his teeth. He looks at the floor as if gazing into the abyss, then, under his breath, he mutters...

"Teleport."

Hope vanishes from the spot, leaving Chadwick startled.

"What? Where did he go?"

Debra shakes her head. "Hope is over a hundred years old. He's an old man now compared to us. But in a lot of ways, he's still a broken youth. Let him cry in solitude. This is almost certainly the worst day of his life."

* * *

Hope reappears in the Labyrinth, tens of miles away. Still seated, he sits in the darkness, crying, not wanting to be around anyone right now. Excalibur faintly illuminates the pitch-black void around him, allowing him to make out the outlines of his body.

His tears come out in sputters, his choked sobs catching in his throat while his chest burns painfully.

Never has he cried like this. Neither has Jason.

The two of them have always been similar in this regard. Bottling up their emotions, smoldering, and bearing the pain silently, unable to let others see their tears.

Even when Jason lost his daughter, he couldn't cry. He wanted to weep over her death, but he couldn't bring himself to let out his full emotions...

But this time, Hope does cry.

In the darkness, with no-one else around, he finally gains some quiet time for himself. He releases all the pent-up pain, weeping like none have ever seen a man cry in their lives.

And then, in the middle of that pain, a voice speaks in the darkness.

"Haha. Shame what happened."

Hope's heart freezes. He shakily jumps to his feet, pulls Excalibur out of its scabbard, and shakily points it toward the direction of that voice, allowing its glow to brighten,

illuminating the surrounding area.

"G-Gressil!" Hope shouts, his voice shaky due to his abruptly halted tears. "You! What do you want? Back off! I'll fucking kill you right now! DON'T YOU TEST ME!"

From the darkness ahead, just outside the range of Excalibur's luminosity, two smoldering red eyes glow.

Gressil gazes at Hope from afar, staying away from him either due to Excalibur's threat, or simply because he feels like it. Even with his enhanced vision, Hope can't make out more than Gressil's eyes. His body remains cloaked by the Labyrinth's shadows.

"Now, now. Is that any way to speak to the person who saved your life?" Gressil asks. "You owe me one, kid. Haha."

He laughs darkly, his tone containing no amusement.

The man and demon fall silent for a moment. Gressil smirks in the darkness when he notices Excalibur's tip trembling in Hope's hand.

"What... what do you want?" Hope asks. "Are you here to poke at my wounds? I'm not in the mood for your bullshit."

"Can't an old friend come and say hello?" Gressil asks. "Also, I wanted to offer my condolences. It's a real shame what happened to Neil. The way he 'accidentally' tripped and fell at the end. Such a clumsy fellow."

"BASTARD!"

Hope's eyes snap open. He lunges into the darkness and stabs Excalibur at Gressil, aiming to impale the prison warden on its tip.

But the moment Excalibur draws too close, Gressil's body melts away, turning into particles of dust as Hope completely misses his lunge.

Immediately, the Wordsmith spins around, looking warily to the left and right for Gressil to be down one of the two directions in the pitch black hallway.

"It was you." Hope growls. "YOU killed Neil. You've been controlling the Plague this whole time! Admit it, Gressil! You MONSTER!"

Gressil doesn't reappear. Instead, his voice speaks from both ends of the hallway, reaching Hope at the same time.

"I would love to take credit, Hope. Truly, I would. Haha. It would be so delightful if I could create something as perfect as the Plague. Sadly, my best efforts merely led to the *Greze*, and they are not a thousandth as ingenious as the Kolvaxians. I am not the one controlling them."

"LIAR!" Hope shouts. "They wield Chaos Energy! I've felt it! Once I tell everyone the truth, they'll hunt you to the ends of Hell! You'll never be able to escape the humans, demons, and the Volgrim all working together!"

Gressil reappears, casually leaning against the wall a few hundred feet behind where Hope started. The Wordsmith cautiously turns to face him while keeping his senses ready in case Gressil attacks from behind him again.

"Well. Believe what you want." Gressil says with a shrug. "Bleh. The Plague isn't my *style*. I'm not trying to assimilate all of creation into one 'mindless' species. I want *Chaos*, boy. I want to enjoy myself, watching all the different Sentients rip each other apart. It's no **fun** if you all join together and become part of some *boring* hivemind. Use your head. You know I'm telling the truth."

Hope's eyes flicker. "If it's not you, then explain the Chaos energy. You can't!"

"Of course I can." Gressil chuckles. "I am the Master of Chaos. I can create it, spread it, and do with it as I please. But I'm not the only one who can wield its power."

Gressil lowers his head, looking at the floor thoughtfully.

"Beelzebub. When he blew himself up on Tarus II, he wielded the power of Chaos, even if only for a moment. So, too, does the Plague. It's really that simple."

Hope frowns. "How does that follow? You're not making any sense."

"Chaos is the embodiment of negative energy." Gressil explains. "Specifically, it is the embodiment of the deepest rage, the darkest hatred, and other such negative emotions. Any transcendent life-form, even you, can harness Chaos's full power if their emotions reach such a level. Beelzebub tapped into that rage when he detonated his body. Thus, the Kolvaxians also harness a deep sense of hatred you cannot fathom."

Gressil's words successfully stupefy the Wordsmith. Hope squints while looking into the darkness, trying to read Gressil's casual body language while keeping Excalibur pointed at the prison warden. He doesn't see any lies in Gressil's posture, though that could be due to his own fluctuating emotions.

"The Kolvaxians are a mindless mass of monstrosities." Hope argues. "They can't possibly be harboring some deep sense of overwhelming hatred. You're grasping at straws."

Gressil sneers. He tilts his head back up to look at Hope.

"*Am I?*"

A moment of silence follows as Hope isn't quite sure how to respond.

"You know so little about the 'Plague.'" Gressil says darkly. "You think it consists of a bunch of brainless instinct-driven creatures, but I'll bet you weren't feeling that way each time it revealed a new facet of its abilities. Even now, the Kolvaxians are hiding their true capabilities. They're *toying* with you for their amusement. I would know. I also like to play with my food. Haha."

"Do you know who, or what, is controlling the Plague?" Hope finally asks.

"Haha." Gressil laughs again. "You're asking the wrong question, kid. Whether I know or not, I won't tell you anyway. It's not *fun* if I do. The better question you should ask is... *who truly killed Neil?*"

Hope's heart skips a beat. He wipes at his eyes with his free hand, drying his tears while controlling the slowly building rage simmering in his stomach.

"Who killed him?" Hope asks. "If you know... say it!"

"I don't need to say anything." Gressil replies. "You already know who, and you know it wasn't me. Neil was a driver of Chaos. Killing him wouldn't benefit me. But it *would* benefit... someone else."

Hope's pupils shrink, ever so slightly. Many thoughts boil to the surface as he remembers what the other human military leaders told him.

"...How did the Kolvaxians break through the Wordsmithium? Even if they possessed high level Psionic power, that Wordsmithium should have held. And then, right after they broke through, *Jason* appeared..."

Hope sucks in a sharp breath. His vision clears up as he realizes the crux of the matter.

"It was him. It was always HIM!"

Gressil smiles. "Seems you've figured something out. Well then. I'll be going now. Do with this revelation whatever you please. Just don't *bore* me. Haha."

Gressil turns and walks away, his body fading into the shadows as seamlessly as Yama's would. After he leaves, Hope stares at the ground, lowering Excalibur until its tip rests against the floor.

"Jason... you did it... you always hated Neil... but this time... YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR."

He gnashes his teeth, grinding them together before uttering a single Word of Power that will change the Karma of the Milky Way Galaxy.

"TELEPORT!"

Part 596: Planetquakes

Jason sat in front of the monitors inside the Spynet Sphere. For several long minutes, he stared at the images of Neil falling to the Plague, replaying them in his head, even as the Plague's latent Chaos Energy distorted the vision of the probing magic he had placed inside Mount Adams.

By the time the Plague overran the fortress, Jason lost all vision of the happenings inside. He tried to watch what Hope was doing, but the sheer number of Psiovoxians in the area made doing so extremely difficult. Every minute in realspace was hours in Chrona-time, so Jason would often leave to deal with other matters for half a day, then return to replay the last few minutes of realspace-happenings when he had more time.

Eventually, after several weeks, the war on Masiura finally drew to a close. Jason watched as Hope and the rest slowly teleported away, one by one, ultimately rescuing the last of the Legionnaires, Henry, and himself.

Jason heaved a faint sigh of relief. It was over.

But the cost paid was... too high.

He sat inside the Spynet Sphere for a full hour afterward, staring blankly at the ground.

Neil Adams had died.

Hope would soon find out.

How could this not change the situation? How could Hope not lash out and blame Jason somehow, some way, like he always did?

And so, Jason deliberately kept an eye on him. Watching as Hope materialized inside the Core, spoke to the others for several long, excruciating realspace-minutes.

Jason kept leaving to work on his important project, returning when his anxiety got the better of him.

He watched as Hope finally had the news broken to him before teleporting away to hide inside the Labyrinth.

Jason's heart constricted with pain. He and Hope didn't get along, that much was true. But in some ways, Jason viewed Hope in the same way he did Daisy.

Jason failed his daughter. She died because of him.

But he also failed Hope. He made a clone, then treated that clone like garbage.

Now his clone hated him. And Jason couldn't blame Hope, even if some of Hope's mental logic was stretched to the extreme.

He failed his daughter. And he failed his clone.

In some ways... Hope was like a son to Jason. That might not be the perfect analogy, but it certainly gave Jason a great many unpleasant feelings when he dreamt up the comparison.

As Hope sat in the darkness, barely illuminated by the light of his sword, Jason watched. A sense of deep shame washed over him, making him feel a pain most indescribable.

And then... Hope abruptly vanished.

"Huh?"

Jason blinked. He quickly uttered a Word of Power to try and find Hope's whereabouts, but...

"Locate! Trace!"

There was nothing.

No response.

Jason's heart turned to ice. How could he lose contact with his clone out of nowhere?

Many realspace minutes and Chrona-hours passed. Jason hurriedly tried all sorts of tricks to locate Hope, but everything he did told him that Hope was enveloped in a field of anti-energy.

And only one creature could create such a field...

"Gressil!"

Jason's face flashed with rage. Was Gressil attacking Hope right at this second? Was he trying to take advantage of Hope's emotional weakness to capture him once again?!

Right as Jason was about to attempt sending in his Dronesmiths, Hope reappeared.

But no longer did he appear broken and despondent.

There, in the pitch-blackness of the Labyrinth, illuminated solely by the glow of his legendary sword, a single expression wormed its way onto Hope's face.

Blinding rage.

Jason's heart stopped. He suddenly realized something that he should have realized long ago.

Gressil wasn't trying to capture Hope again.

He was subverting him.

He was likely the one who had been whispering conspiracies into Hope's ear, just like Neil did.

The two of them must have had a dialogue, a secret discussion Jason couldn't peep in on.

And Jason had no idea what they had spoken about.

Then, Hope slowly spoke a single Word of Power...

"Te...le...po...rt..."

He vanished from the Labyrinth, and Jason lost track of him for several realspace minutes.

"Locate." Jason said many Chrona-hours later, only to blink twice as he spotted Hope levitating in a somewhat strange and unexpected place: The void a thousand miles above Tarus II.

Inside the vacuum of space, Excalibur's energy field enveloped Hope, protecting him from the deadliness of space. He levitated in the air with a malevolent expression on his face.

And then he began to speak...

"Jason Hiro!" Hope shouts, his voice projecting not only out and into the void, but down to the world of Tarus II beneath him. "You murderer! It was you! YOU killed Neil! I was blind to the true monster you are. BUT NO MORE! Get your ass out here, RIGHT NOW! Fight me, you coward! You son of a bitch! You'll PAY for what you've done!"

Hope sneers. "And if you don't come out here, I'll hurt you as badly as you've hurt me AND the rest of humanity! You want to target MY loved ones? I'll target YOURS!!"

On the world of Tarus II, countless people look up into the sky in confusion. They easily make out Hope's voice, and despite its identical timbre and intonation to Jason's, it doesn't take a genius to figure out who's speaking.

"What? Commander Hope said Jason killed Neil? How could he do that?"

"I should have known! Jason and Neil never got along, but to think he'd go this far!"

"Is Hope threatening us? He's forcing Jason to fight him?"

"Of course he isn't threatening 'us', he's probably referring to Phoebe, or maybe Jason's son."

"What the- that's just as fucked up! That's evil!"

"Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth! If Jason didn't want his family targeted, maybe he shouldn't have targeted Hope's!"

"Hope could be making it all up. You know he hates Jason irrationally!"

"Since Jason killed Neil, it's not that irrational of a hatred, now, is it?!"

* * *

Countless voices form a cacophony of formless noise. Many people look up into the skies with fear, anger, and expectant looks on their faces. Many soldiers grind their teeth as they immediately believe Hope's words. Why would he lie?! He must have some indisputable proof Jason killed Neil! And even if he doesn't have proof, the motive is clear enough, as well as the means! Neil was too popular, so Jason murdered him to silence him!

Thanks to the footage captured by a few of the last remaining T-REX's on the scene, many people watched as Neil abruptly tripped over his own feet during his final moments. This footage was even shared by the higher-ups to show people Neil's last moments, and also to ensure no silly rumors of him actually being alive persisted.

Unfortunately for Jason, that footage badly incriminated him. How could a man as well-put-together and valiant as Neil trip so clumsily, even during a life and death moment? Jason did it! He tried to make it look like an accident, but he underestimated the ability of his fellow humans to see through his lies!

Hope's words slowly pour into the realm of Chrona. Jason's expression darkens as he listens, realizing that this situation is rapidly becoming unsalvageable.

"Fiona." Jason says, turning to his former mind-wife.

She purses her lips, looking at him with saddened eyes.

"Yes?"

"I didn't do it." Jason says.

"I know you didn't." Fiona softly replies. "But... I'm afraid the evidence Hope can procure won't make you look good."

"What do you think I should do?" Jason asks.

A long moment of silence follows.

Fiona crosses her arms and closes her eyes.

"Hope was a mistake." Fiona finally says. "And so was I. You made clones thoughtlessly and for selfish reasons. I've... turned out okay. I have made a new purpose for myself. But Hope... he was broken too thoroughly. I don't think you can salvage the situation."

Jason's shoulders sink.

"I... wished you wouldn't say that."

"There's no both-sidesing this story." Fiona replies. "Today, you and Hope have to fight. How it all ends will be your choice. Both of you."

"What if there isn't room in the Milky Way for two Wordsmiths?" Jason asks. "What if he won't listen to reason?"

"Then I guess you're going to have to hurt his wife and children." Fiona says seriously. "But that will be a decision you make. Either way, I don't want to see you die, so... make sure you cross your T's and dot your I's."

"Alright." Jason says. "Just in case, before I do anything else, there's some preparations I need you to make."

Jason and Fiona talk for several minutes longer. He elaborates a plan to her, one that makes Fiona's face scrunch up slightly.

"...Phoebe won't like that."

"I have to keep her safe, and everyone else." Jason says. "I can't risk Hope flying off the handle and hurting her. So it'll be up to you to monitor the situation."

"Then I'll do whatever I can to help." Fiona says, smiling weakly. "Go get 'em, tiger."

* * *

"Come on, Jason!" Hope shouts. "Show yourself! If you don't-"

Hardly have the words left his mouth before a faint displacement of space a short distance away reveals the arrival of the person Hope wants to see the most. Hope's eyes flick to the left as he spots Jason, wearing a white T-shirt and blue jeans, not looking even slightly ready for a fight.

"Hope." Jason says calmly. "I don't want to fight you. And I *didn't* kill Neil. I tried to save him, but I failed."

"Is that so?" Hope asks, curling up his lip in disdain. He rests his left hand on his hip while pointing Excalibur at Jason with his other hand. "If you're so innocent, then why didn't you come here in person? Why have your little Robo-Jason do the talking for you? Guilty conscience, perhaps?"

"I didn't kill Neil." Jason repeats. "Hope, we've had our differences over the years. I've screwed up plenty of times. But I would never kill an innocent person! Certainly not a fellow human."

"You wouldn't?" Hope asks, lilting his voice slightly. "And what about Amelia?"

"She wasn't innocent and you know that!" Jason snaps back. "I loved Amelia! I didn't want to hurt her! But she became a monster! She devoured an entire planet full of people. She and Neil aren't comparable!"

Hope shakes his head. He smirks at the robotic copy of his original self.

"I'm sure that's what you tell yourself. You say you couldn't fix Amelia, but I did. I showed her compassion and brought out her human side. You executed her, and then you executed Neil. Now you're lying to try and deceive the galaxy. But I know about you, Jason. I know all your tricks."

"Gressil's been talking to you." Jason says quietly. "That 'Amelia' you're dating isn't Amelia at all. She's Debra's sister. You brainwashed her into becoming someone else! You changed her memories, her appearance, even her personality. She was a woman named

Annette, until you twisted her into someone else! If she were the real Amelia, you'd never have had a happily ever after!"

"Annette wanted me to change who she was." Hope counters. "She was devoted to me. Debra introduced us, and she offered to become the woman I loved most. It was her decision!"

"Now who's trying to convince themselves of a lie?!" Jason asks. "The truth is, you're here because you're always letting yourself be manipulated. By Neil, Gressil, even by me! And I'm sorry, Hope. I really am. I treated you like trash when I first created you, and you didn't deserve that."

Jason pauses.

"But I *didn't* kill Neil. Think, Hope, think! I'm not the only person who has the desire and the capability to hurt or kill Neil! Gressil does too! That fucker can turn invisible and hide himself from our Wordsmithing! It's obvious he killed Neil and did all this to turn you against me!"

"I thought as much too," Hope retorts. "But after he and I had a little chat, I realized who the real devil was in all of this. Your goal wasn't only to kill Neil. It was to ruin ME as well! And you willingly sacrificed 100,000 people just to do that!"

Jason blinks twice, looking aghast.

"W-what the fuck are you on about now? Are you also blaming me for what happened on Maiura??"

"Of course I am. And I'm not blaming you in some roundabout wishy-washy way either." Hope says, his voice crackling with anger. "You must think I have the memory of a goldfish. You already know how to manipulate the Plague. You called it to the world of Sharmur, and then you called it to Maiura, all so you could swoop in and play the hero!"

"You're nuts. You're actually psychotic." Jason mutters. "I did nothing of the sort! You're swallowing Gressil's lies way too easily, Hope! How can you even BELIEVE the words of a demon who tortured you for days, cut off your fucking limbs, and left you like a pig for the slaughter?? Don't forget it was ME who saved you! My allies, at the least!"

"I hate Gressil, don't get me wrong." Hope says slowly. "And someday, *someday soon*, I'm going to make him pay. I'm going to brutally torture him until he begs for mercy

before killing him. But that doesn't change the fact that you're a murderer and the first one I'm going to take down. Today. Right here and now."

Hope lowers Excalibur. His anger dissipates, leaving him more focused and ready for a fight as he eyes Jason's drone down.

"So you won't listen to reason?" Jason asks. "You refuse to believe my words? I'll say it again, Hope. I didn't kill Neil."

"I used my Wordsmithing already to look up what happened." Hope replies. "I saw him trip and fall unnaturally. I know it was you. No more bullshitting. Let's settle this once and for all."

Excalibur ignites with a bright white light, wrapping its energy around Hope's body and providing him with a transparent set of glowing plated armor. His eyes brighten as well, revealing the hatred smoldering within.

"Fine. I'll fight you." Jason says. "This is the only way we'll be able to finally settle our differences. May the best Wordsmith win."

"Don't worry." Hope concludes. "I will. It's my ONLY desire!"

Then he and Jason lunge at one another.

In the day-lit skies above Tarus II, extremely bright flashes of light begin to erupt, grabbing the attention of many people who happen to look upward. Then, moments later, the planet rumbles, as if an earthquake at 3.0 on the Richter scale were occurring on every continent all at once. Faint rumblings startle the populace, making those who aren't outside wonder what the heck is going on.

Naturally, Hope's words easily reached everyone, and so it doesn't take much for people to figure out what's going on.

"Hope and Jason are fighting in space! What we're feeling are the distant aftershocks of their battle! Just how powerful are they??"

"They must already be at the Cosmic level, like those High Psions. This is crazy! Are they going to kill each other?"

"Commander Hope is too honorable to do something like that. If anything, he'll just beat Jason black and blue, forcing him to apologize."

"Apologize?! You think a few words will make up for Jason murdering Commander Neil? I bet Hope is going for Jason's head."

"Who says Hope will win? Don't you remember when Jason appeared on Yardris? He wiped the floor with those empowered Kolvaxians. I bet Jason will take Hope out easily."

"You wanna bet money on that?"

"Idiots! How can you talk about betting money at a time like this? We need unity and leadership, not for the Wordsmiths to fight each other. What if the Plague shows up here?!"

Once again, countless people argue among each other about just what, precisely, is going to happen.

The minor earthquakes rocking the planet only cause minor instability. A man trying to paint his roof slips and falls due to the vibration, cracking his head and causing others to rush him to the hospital. Emperor Leeroy naturally takes care of his injuries, along with the injuries of other people.

As the battle begins to rage, the earthquakes sometimes ramp up for a moment or two, causing even more vibrations to erupt, making more people lose their footing. People begin to worry, and a few even start to panic.

"Is the planet going to come apart at the seams?"

"Are we in danger? This battle is scary!"

The flashes of light in the sky above intensify, and so too do the earthquakes. Finally, after the first one to reach a 4.0 on the Richter Scale occurs, a planet-wide broadcast plays out via Phoebe Hiro's voice.

"Fellow humans, monsters, and demons. We are going to temporarily relocate to the worlds of Sharmur and Pixiv, under the control of Demon Deity Melody and the Fairy Queens, respectively. I advise that anyone who was living on Maiura go to Pixiv, while anyone who lives on Tarus II should go to Sharmur, but it's entirely up to each of you individually. My husband came to an agreement with Demon Deity Melody that in the event of an emergency, she would protect any humans who settled on Sharmur."

Phoebe continues to speak. "The Warpgate will take you all to the Core, where you will be able to quickly and efficiently transfer to Pixiv or Sharmur. I know this is a scary time, but please proceed in a calm and orderly manner."

Soldiers quickly take control of the situation. They form up lines on the streets, forming calm and orderly processions leading out of the northern, eastern, and southern parts of the main human city to flow toward the Warpgate at the Western Edge.

All the while, flashes of light continue to strike at one another in the sky above.

* * *

Inside Tarus II's central area, the Fortress of Retribution, a pair of angels stand inside their church, their expressions downcast. Dozens of people sit in the pews outside, appearing worried about the earthquakes rumbling beneath the church. As for Cassiel and Soleil, they face one another in a private side-room, away from prying eyes.

"Archangel Uriel... is dead?" Cassiel asks.

"That is what Lady Fiona transmitted to me." Soleil replies. "It seems she and her brothers were swarmed by the Psiovoxians at the end. That means you are the last angel in the Milky Way."

"And you." Cassiel says, touching Soleil's arm lightly.

"I am not truly an angel. I am merely a Black Hole Construct fashioned to be a facsimile of one." Soleil retorts. "Now then. Let us leave this world. I have a bad feeling about the Wordsmith's battle."

"Do you think Hope will win, or Jason?" Cassiel asks.

Soleil shrugs. "I am uncertain. I only feel the battle will not end in a victory benefiting humanity's interests. One way or another, they are going to suffer a terrible loss today."

"I was a human once." Cassiel says. "A long, long time ago. I don't want my fellow humans to suffer."

"Then we must evacuate." Soleil says decisively. "Especially you. I will not risk anything happening to the last angel in the Milky Way, possibly even the universe."

"Thank you, Soleil." Cassiel says, her face flushing with warmth. "For always taking care of me. Even if that's only because it's what Jason told you to do."

Soleil frowns. "I have long grown out of the programming he forced upon me. I am myself. I am an individual. I protect you because I care. If Jason told me to hurt you, I would refuse. He no longer has any sway over my actions."

"I see. Well. Then, in that case, I must thank you again."

Soleil takes Cassiel's hand. She leads her out into the pews, where they both inform Cassiel's followers of the evacuation orders. Then, everyone begins to leave, with the two angels following closely behind.

"Let's grab anyone else we can on the way out." Cassiel suggests.

"No. Your safety comes first." Soleil says.

Cassiel's expression turns gloomy. "I can't leave people to die."

Soleil hesitates. She looks at her friend, and her expression softens.

"Alright. Then we'll make for the Warpgate while serving as a light to illuminate the path. Let's spread hope instead of fear. Order instead of chaos."

Cassiel nods. "Yeah. We'll do that."

The two of them flap their wings and take to the skies, beginning the first step on Cassiel's journey to become humanity's Guiding Star...

Part 597: Tarnished History

Recommended Listening

The two Wordsmiths look at each other for only a single second.

Then Hope attacks.

The Second Wordsmith snaps first, revealing the rage he no longer feels he has to conceal. Instantly, he pounces at Jason, swinging Excalibur with the fury of a hurricane. The blade swishes at Jason's left and right, while the agile Dronesmith dodges with shocking ease.

Wearing no armor at all, this lone Dronesmith slithers and bends its body at unnatural angles, piloted remotely by Jason inside Chrona using a mixture of verbal commands and telepathy. With a 250x time differential as an advantage, Jason has the absolute advantage in reaction speed, allowing him to see Hope's attacks telegraphed, then reacting accordingly.

Hope sweeps the divine blade horizontally, cutting at the drone's torso, The drone bends its body into a U-shape, dodging that attack by the slimmest of margins and wasting Hope's energy.

"Slippery bastard!" Hope snarls. "Is dodging all you know how to do?!"

"No." Jason says through his Dronesmith's mouth. "It's not."

Hope stabs at the Dronesmith's right shoulder. The drone twists its body slightly, easily avoiding the strike. The instant it dodges, it's body blurs and distorts. It jumps at Hope without warning and slams its other shoulder into his chest, sending him flying!

"Ah!"

Hope cries out in surprise. The Dronesmith's attack comes so suddenly that he doesn't even see the attack hit!

Thankfully, the power of Excalibur, as well as his nanite-infused body, protects him from a severe injury. He quickly assumes a defensive stance, keeping his grip firmly on Excalibur so Jason won't be able to snatch it away. He rubs his chest with his free hand.

"Normalize. So you *can* counter!"

"I don't want to fight you." Jason says calmly. "But don't mistake my hesitancy for pacifism. I will fight you if necessary. And you'll lose. You have no idea how much I've trained over the last few centuries, nor how hard."

Hope sneers. "That might be true, but it won't- **ACCELERATE!**"

Suddenly, right in the middle of his sentence, Hope utters a Word of Power, increasing his body's speed. He savagely attacks the Dronesmith, cutting at it with all his fury. But instead of a burst of acceleration to let him cleave the drone in two, his body abruptly decelerates, and his thoughts become groggy.

His attack moves slower than before. He swings Excalibur with a speed that makes him feel as if he's switched to fighting underwater with a sword made of cardboard. The drone doesn't even make an exaggerated motion to dodge, it simply hovers backward, looking at him with the same blank expression as before as his pitiful strike misses by a mile.

What? Hope thinks. *How did my Word of Power fail? It should have worked, unless...*

A moment later, the deceleration wears off as Excalibur and Hope's nanites naturally counter the spell placed upon him. His speed returns to normal, and he looks at the drone with an expression of even hotter rage than before.

"So it's like that. You hide in Chrona, where you have the advantage of time on your side. You heard me start to utter a Word of Power, and you countered me before I could even complete the effect. No matter what I do, you can see through the essence of my attacks instantly!"

The Dronesmith nods. "Yeah. It's a cheap trick. But effective. Does it matter? If you can't even beat my drone, then don't bother with thinking you'll have a chance against me in person. Face it, Hope. I outclass you now. Things aren't the way they were when I first made you."

"You think you're better than me." Hope says, his tone darkening. "But what else is new? You've always thought you were the superior Wordsmith, even when I wiped the floor with you. I know the truth about Chrona. Your dimension has a TDR of 200, which is twice the Hall of Heroes, but that also makes it less stable. You have to stay inside more than I do otherwise you could suffer severe side effects."

"Actually, it's a 250x differential." Jason retorts. "And those 'side effects' aren't as serious as you make them out to be. I solved them years ago. I just choose to fight you with a drone because it's all I need to use to win."

"Liar." Hope snaps back. "It's because you're afraid. If we fought on equal terms, I'd cut off your head before you could react. You're siccing your drone on me so you won't have to risk getting hurt. *Or worse.*"

"I'm multi-tasking." Jason counters. "While I fight you, I'm continuing to improve my Wordsmithing and invent things that will help human society. If I go to you in person, I will only end up focusing on you instead of the bigger picture."

"Bullshit. You're a coward. A complete fucking coward!" Hope roars. "Get your ass out here! **Locate!**"

Hope once again tries to utilize a Word of Power, but the instant it activates, it fails, causing him to fail at sensing his foe. He wastes a minuscule amount of mana, which really amounts to nothing at all with Excalibur serving as his battery.

"Fuck!" Hope snarls. "Coward! COWARD!"

"You can insult me all you want." Jason says. "But it doesn't matter what you say or how many times you say it. I am who I am, and I know I didn't kill Neil. I wish you'd believe me, but outside of tampering with your mind, there doesn't seem to be any way I can convince you. So here I am, at least providing you with an outlet for your aggression."

Hope's eyes narrow.

"Always looking down on me. Since the very beginning. Always treating me like the inferior 'you', or even worse, a bratty child. But I'm not a kid, Jason. I'm the only adult in the room, and I'm not going to let you play games with the lives of your fellow humans!"

Hope slides his thumb down Excalibur's crossguard, tapping into it to communicate with King Arthur through their mental link. Instantly, King Arthur receives his command, then transfers that command back to Solomon inside Chrona.

Multiple pre-planned occurrences rapidly play out, taking less than a second of realspace-time.

Solomon's Crown materializes on top of Hope's head. A series of spells activate, empowered by several Heroes hidden within the Hall of Heroes' confines, two of the key players being Moses and Aaron.

Energy surges into Hope's body. His blue eyes sparkle faintly as his connection to Excalibur deepens. Naturally, Jason immediately notices the prominent golden, gem-encrusted crown that has appeared atop Hope's head.

With Solomon accelerating Hope's thoughts and Excalibur empowering his body, Hope attacks the Dronesmith again. This time, Jason is not able to handily wave his clone off or easily dismiss him.

What follows is a fast and brutal melee.

The Dronesmith summons a silver-colored sword of its own, one that lacks any extravagant visual qualities or flair, but appears to be built solidly with reliable materials. The blade, not a replica of Excalibur, but its own creation entirely, matches Excalibur's durability and cutting power, yet lacks its extraordinary mana-generation qualities.

It makes up for this loss in its more tangible properties, such as its far greater weight of almost ten tons. It strikes with deceptive swiftness, countering Excalibur's mana-infused properties.

Bang! Clang! Clang!

Hope swiftly attacks the drone, and Jason counters by swinging his sword against Hope's. The two of them trade several slashes, with Hope aiming for killing blows with every attack, while Jason responds with perfectly aimed slashes and follow-ups that deflect or bat aside Hope's vicious strikes.

In the span of less than a minute, the two men trade blows several dozen times, with Hope sprouting wings and flying around Jason, circling the drone like a hawk. He repeatedly attacks when he spots a moment of weakness, but Jason always sees the attack coming and deflects it at the last second.

"Hope. I'm trying to give you a chance here." Jason warns. "I've been watching you for years. You've been slowly going mad, acting less and less like yourself. You aren't acting like the man Amelia would want you to be!"

"Don't weaponize my wife, you piece of shit." Hope fires back, summoning power onto Excalibur to try and cut through Jason's sword. He fails, and Jason easily knocks his slash to the side. "One way or another, one of us is not leaving here alive!"

"This all started after Gressil captured you." Jason says, ignoring Hope's words. "After he kidnapped you, tortured you, and left you limbless on that table. I know you blame me

for what happened, but it was clearly him who did that! Don't let Gressil manipulate your thoughts! You're better than this!"

Hope's eye twitches. He feels a pang of agony in his chest at the reminder of that horrifying ordeal. This causes his anger to intensify.

"You DARE mention that?! Fuck you, Jason! FUCK you! How can you speak of something so casually when you know NOTHING about my suffering?! I'm a better Wordsmith than you because my psyche was forged in the fires of pain and agony! You're a soft weakling who fights through proxies!"

A brief silence follows as the two men again trade five attacks, then five more, neither making any headway.

"You speak of 'forging' as if your trauma made you stronger." Jason says emotionlessly. "But what if that's not the truth at all? What if instead it broke you? What if it made you weaker than before? Can you argue otherwise?"

"I don't need to argue with you. You're an insect." Hope sneers. "I'll let my sword do the talking."

Secretly, Hope sends a surge of spiritual energy into a necklace hidden under his clothes. On this necklace, several dozen tiny objects hang, attached by a string empowered via Wordsmithing. Rather than calling it a 'string', it would be more accurate to call it a strand of Wordsmithium fashioned in the design of a string.

And these tiny objects are not pieces of jewelry, but instead, shrunk Heroic Artifacts!

Hope's trickle of mana taps into one of those artifacts, a tiny walking staff that once belonged to the Mountain Hermit, Jeremiah. A second later, Hope's eyes faintly change. He gains the ability to seemingly peer through all of creation, allowing him to see lines drawn in the air, lines which trail and predict the movement of the Dronesmith.

As if peering into the Matrix, Hope's eyes dart from side to side, looking through the fabric of reality, even peering into the true mechanical construction of his foe. It takes no effort on his part to spot the deficiencies of this mechanical wonder, and for him to identify minor but crucial flaws he can exploit!

Hope snaps again! He charges at Jason, swinging his sword in the same wild style as he has several times before. Jason's drone quickly counters, blocking the attack as Hope

swipes at his left side, but then Hope changes his attack at the last second, turning the sword from a wild slash into a carefully aimed stab!

The drone tries to deflect his attack, but due to an awkward combination of mitigating factors, its arm joints fail to rotate at the exact degree needed to fully deflect the blow.

Excalibur slides past Jason's sword and narrowly stabs into the drone's waist, then slashes outward, ripping a hole in its skin right above where a human's thigh would be.

Naturally, the drone feels no pain, but it still flickers backward as Jason takes a few minutes inside Chrona to evaluate the damage.

"Hahaha. First blood goes to me." Hope says, grinning evilly. "And soon, second blood, third blood, all the way to the final attack."

"Nice feint. You actually deceived me." Jason replies.

As he speaks, the hole ripped in the drone's thigh instantly repairs itself, undoing the damage Excalibur caused. But Hope doesn't bother worrying about it. Even if he shatters the drone's body, this battle is little more than a warm-up exercise. Jason can always send more drones. Killing the First Wordsmith is the only way for Hope to truly win.

"Things aren't going to go the way they did before." Hope says confidently. "You can't stall me forever, asshole. I'll find your weaknesses. I'll exploit them. I'll rip apart your little toys, and then I'll rip apart *you*."

Inside Chrona, Jason's expression dims slightly.

The expression doesn't reach the face of his drone. It remains just as stoic as ever.

"I just don't understand." Jason says slowly. "We're not enemies, Hope. You don't have to be so stubborn. If you just listened to reason, you'd know I didn't kill Neil. I'm not deliberately sabotaging you. And for god's sake, I *obviously* don't control the Plague. You've been fed a stream of lies, and now you're going to execute me for them?"

"We're way beyond 'reason' and measured words." Hope says, chuckling under his breath. "Your feeble attempts to cloud my mind are pathetic. My ancestors smile on me. They support me in my battle. Can you say the same?"

"I don't have the Hero comrades you do." Jason answers. "But that doesn't mean *no* Heroes support me. And even if they didn't, it wouldn't matter. I've seen enough here to know the truth about you."

Hope's smile twists slightly. He frowns at Jason.

"And that truth is?"

"You've been slacking." Jason immediately answers. "Your Wordsmithing is sloppy. Crude. You're relying on the other Heroes to empower yourself. I'll admit, it's something I used to do, and probably still would be doing if Solomon hadn't jumped ship to you. But in truth, it's been a blessing not having my hand held by ancient fossils. I constantly use my Wordsmithing. I hone it, train it, and master it to the fullest extent that I possibly can."

Jason lightly points his sword at Hope.

"That's the difference between you and me. I failed before, but I won't fail again. I learned from my mistakes. I mastered my powers. I have become a fully self-actualized Hero on par with my predecessors. I can stand on my own two feet with pride. But you? You've hobbled yourself by relying on the abilities of others. You have no clue just how incredible Wordsmithing truly is. How can you defeat me when you can't even control your own ego?"

Hope's eye twitches. A dark cloud washes over his face as his emotions rapidly begin to boil. He ignores Solomon yelling at him inside his mind, warning him not to lose control and fall victim to Jason's goading.

"That smugness. Oh, how I *hate* it. If I can't beat you today, I'll kill myself tomorrow. That's how dead-set I am on killing you, Jason. I'll pay you back for every humiliation you've dealt me. And I'll start by breaking your drone's body so your soul can learn humility!"

Hope attacks once more. This time, despite his anger, he focuses all his thoughts on the battle, using Jeremiah's ability to peer through the essence of warfare.

When the Dronesmith attacks, he evades by the slimmest of margins, counters, and swipes Excalibur across its chest.

When he attacks first, he feints, ducks, and even dodges the drone's counter-attack, toying with it and easily outmaneuvering its increasingly clumsy movements.

Before, the drone seemed slick and untouchable. But now, Hope sees that it is in fact quite a limited mechanical construct. It is little more than a vessel Jason can use to

unleash his Wordsmithing remotely. In truth, Jason's fine control of the Dronesmith is atrocious and incapable of threatening a sufficiently prepared enemy.

The Kolvaxians lost because of Jason's Wordsmithing. Their limited intellect prevented them from countering his drone.

But Hope is not a mindless Plagueborn. He is a Wordsmith who understands Jason's abilities, so he is able to counter his opponent's methods.

* * *

Minutes pass. Half an hour later, Hope grins as he continues to brutally attack the weakened drone. By now, hundreds of small cuts line the drone's body, with Jason no longer able to rapidly repair its injuries due to how frequently Hope lands shallow and serious hits. And with Hope not letting up even a little bit, he's frequently able to make major gains, learning how the drone fights and adapting to its combat style.

One big gain Hope makes during this period is when he notices an odd pattern in the Drone's movements. Every five or so minutes, the drone's combat capabilities take a massive nose-dive. It doesn't fight as well as before, and its combat style even switches up to be distinctly different. Often, it will switch to focusing on defense, usually with middling results.

During these periods, the drone almost entirely stops talking to Hope. If it does speak, it doesn't say anything of substance, and merely gives curt 'yes' or 'no' replies.

Naturally, with Solomon's assistance, Hope manages to figure out the truth of the matter.

[Five minutes in realspace is 1,250 minutes in Chrona.] Solomon explains to Hope through his Mind Realm link. [That's twenty hours. Jason is probably staying awake while you fight him, and using his spare attention to control the drone. But when he finally needs sleep, he puts someone else in control of it. Possibly Fiona, or someone else within Chrona. That's why it stops responding. They don't want to give away that Jason isn't the one controlling it.]

Hope's eyes flash. [Jason must be pushing himself to sleep for only 4-6 hours at a time. That means, every five minutes, I have only a minute of time to use my Wordsmithing while Jason can't retaliate! But if I do that and he wakes up, he'll likely realize I've figured out his dilation dilemma!]

Solomon nods grimly. [Then we'll have to strike hard and fast the next time he goes to sleep. I estimate another four minutes and fifteen seconds before that happens, based on the previous cycles.]

Hope narrows his eyes. [Tell me when that moment arrives. I'll take care of the rest!]

* * *

Inside Hope's Mind Realm, many different Heroes sit around in chairs and recliners, having built up Hope's Mind Realm to be a comfortable environment, yet also one that provides stimulation via ancient electronic video games, or simulations for them to battle one another and pass the time.

One Hero sits off by himself in a garden not dissimilar to the one in the Hall of Heroes. Jeremiah, the Mountain Hermit, sips some coffee from a fancy cup while looking off into the distance, not paying much attention to anything in particular.

Solomon approaches him, then takes a seat in a nearby chair.

"Ah, Jeremiah. So, what do you think of the battle so far?"

Jeremiah doesn't answer at first. He continues to drink his coffee for a few moments, then slowly blinks his eyes and looks at Solomon, appearing confused.

"Hmm?"

"The battle outside. Hope versus Jason." Solomon repeats. "Your power is helping the boy fight much harder than before! I'll bet that makes you proud."

Jeremiah, once again, slowly blinks his eyes, uncomprehending.

"My... power. My gift?"

"Yes." Solomon says, this time becoming the confused one. "He's using your eyes to fight Jason."

"Ah." Jeremiah says, looking away.

After several long seconds, and another sip of coffee, Jeremiah looks at Solomon, meeting his expectant gaze.

"Who is... Jason?"

"Y-you don't know??" Solomon asks, bewildered. Unfortunately, despite more than a century passing since his awakening inside the Hall of Heroes, Jeremiah hasn't spoken to

hardly anyone, including the Knowledge-Seeker. Solomon simply doesn't know much about him.

"No." Jeremiah answers. "I do not."

"Well, I have a few minutes to spare." Solomon mutters. "It's like this. Hope is the Second Wordsmith, and Jason..."

Over the next three or so minutes, Solomon explains the basic histories of the two Wordsmiths to Jeremiah, who in turn remains silent, staring off into the distance while he sips his coffee.

"...and that's how we get to today, where the two of them are fighting." Solomon concludes. "Have you not been watching realspace through Hope's eyes?"

Jeremiah closes his eyes for a moment. Then, he opens them, turning to look at Solomon once more.

"Sorry... your name... who are you?"

"S...Solomon..." Solomon says, feeling the energy deflate from his body. "The Knowledge-Seeker."

"Oh. So it's like that." Jeremiah says slowly, looking away once more. "Are we done talking?"

"I..."

Solomon starts to mutter something, but the complete lack of interest from his fellow Hero makes him feel as if he's pouring the waters of his mental energy into a bucket filled with holes. It's all ultimately seeping out and going to waste.

"I'll just... take my leave. Pleasure chatting with you, Jeremiah."

"Right. Same." Jeremiah mutters perfunctorily, as Solomon trudges away.

Many minutes later, Jeremiah slowly blinks his eyes.

"What a strange fellow. Never stops talking..."

Part 598: The Demon Inside

Recommended Listening

Hope continues attacking Jason, wearing down the Dronesmith more and more every minute. Eventually, as the fourth minute arrives, the Drone's movements change. It starts fighting more defensively, using its sword to block attacks instead of slashing and stabbing at Hope's openings. It stops speaking, and Hope's eyes flare with excitement.

The time is now!

Without hesitation, Hope, who had seemingly stopped bothering with Wordsmithing up to that point, suddenly begins calling out Words of Power rapid-fire.

"Detect! Locate! Uncover! Examine! Dissipate! Normalize! TELEPORT!"

In the span of just a few seconds, Hope abruptly locks onto Jason's location somewhere in the general vicinity of Tarus II, uncovers his hidden soul signature, and removes all of Jason's protective wards.

Then, he teleports his other-self out of Chrona, making Jason's sleeping figure materialize right in front of him! Wearing a simple black long-sleeved shirt and some black jeans, Jason appears just as ordinary as ever, lacking any armor to protect his fragile human body.

Got you, you son of a bitch!

Hope's eyes snap open, and a feral grin appears on his face.

"DIE!!"

He pounces at Jason and slashes his sword down, but right before the sword can connect, Jason's eyes open. He shimmers to the side, and Excalibur misses him by a metaphorical mile!

"Nice reaction time!" Hope sneers. "I knew it was too easy! **ACCELERATE!**"

His body's speed increases, and he intensifies his assault, speaking additional Words of Power while Jason smoothly dodges his attacks, the margin of dodging decreasing with each sweep of Excalibur's blade.

"Die! Die! DIE!!"

Hope becomes furious. His quick execution failed, yet somehow, Jason woke up and easily dodged the attack that should have beheaded him.

Even worse, Jason doesn't say a word, merely looking at his clone with eyes full of mockery.

Less than a minute later, after dodging one of Excalibur's slashes by the narrowest of margins, Jason abruptly teleports 500 feet away, crosses his arms, and smirks at Hope.

"You fell for it."

"What?" Hope asks, frowning at the same time as his sneer slips. "What are you talking about! All you know how to do is dodge!"

"I'm not Jason." Jason says, his words confusing Hope even more. "You allowed your hatred to blind you. I honestly didn't think this trick would work, but it did."

Bewildered, Hope pauses his assault. He and Solomon quickly communicate, causing his expression to darken.

"No... it can't be. You're... another Dronesmith?! But that's impossible! I locked onto your soul signature!"

'Jason' rolls his eyes. "Is that so? Wow. My true, genuine soul signature. Guess I must really be Jason then. Go ahead, cut me in half... if you even possess the ability. Find out just how silly you look right now."

Inside Hope's Mind Realm, Solomon's expression visibly dims.

"...He's not screwing with you, lad. That truly isn't Jason. He must have faked his soul signature, knowing you'd try and lock onto him when he went to sleep. He knew needing to sleep was a huge weakness, so he compensated for it. Brilliantly, I might add."

Those last few words reveal a hint of genuine admiration Solomon still feels for his first Wordsmith pupil. Though the two of them left on bad terms, Solomon can't help but feel a bit nostalgic when he remembers the first time Jason stood up to him and walked his own way, refusing to see things the way Solomon wanted him to.

After showing Jason the entirety of the Ancient Era, Solomon thought Jason would finally understand his perspective, and in truth, Jason did. But he also possessed his own unique point of view, and thus ended up not going along with Solomon's grand plans.

In the end, Solomon sent himself to Hope, finding a more pliable subject, yet also one who somewhat... lacked his own backbone.

Unlike Jason, Hope had already grown accustomed to doing what another person said, that person being Neil Adams. Listening to Solomon's advice came more easily for him than it did for Jason, who had become more independent over time.

When Solomon sees his former pupil outwitting his current one, he can't help but feel a bit of pride. Jason has learned to anticipate his enemies, not merely react to them when it's already too late.

Even so, Solomon pushes that feeling of pride down.

Hope is his student now, and the key to realizing his ambitions for someday slaughtering all the demons. Until Jason is slain, he will always be a thorn in the Knowledge-Seeker's side.

"A fake?" Hope growls. "I dispelled all the enchantments! I even normalized your metaphysical state! How can you possibly be a Dronesmith?! **Examine!**"

Hope's heart sinks. His Word of Power doesn't fail, and ultimately gives him the information he didn't want to hear.

The Jason before him is a Dronesmith, same as the one he's been fighting until now.

"To think Wordsmithing could be used in such a slimy, deceptive way." Hope says, practically spitting the words at Jason.

"The word you're looking for is 'intelligent'." Jason fires back. "A word that has failed to describe you in recent years. You're falling apart, Hope. Your mental acuity is degrading, as if you've been struck by Alzheimers. What happened to turn you into such a deranged conspiracy theorist? Don't you want to improve yourself, save humanity, and make the galaxy a better place for all? We both come from the same source! I don't understand how we've diverged so far!"

"All I desire is to punish you for killing Neil." Hope replies. "For now, that's it. That's my goal. Once I kill you, I can take everything back that belongs to me. All the things you've stolen from me..."

"Does that include Phoebe?" Jason asks. "Is she... 'yours'?"

"She was." Hope says slowly. "Maybe she should still be. Great kings have often had multiple wives. Solomon, for instance. If I'm going to become a legendary figure... I'd only

be following the precedent they set."

Finally, Jason's stoic expression cracks, ever so slightly.

"You really are gone, Hope. There's nothing left of me in there. You're a hollow man. A shell of what you should be. Pathetic. I've no more sympathy for you."

Abruptly, four additional Jasons materialize around Hope. In unison, all of them summon magically enhanced golden Wordsmithium armor, becoming identical no matter how Hope looks at them. Even the damaged Dronesmith disappears and reappears, repaired back to full integrity, or perhaps swapped out for a fresh one sporting Wordsmithium armor.

"I'm done going easy on you." Jason finally says, the last Dronesmith conjuring armor onto itself. "You were right. Today, one of us isn't going to walk away from here alive. I only regret that I'll be hurting Amelia again."

Hope smirks. "If I win, I'll take Phoebe back. If you win, you'll get Amelia. How's that sound? Nice and fair, 'big brother'?"

"Like I said, you're too far gone." Jason repeats. "Even if she were the true Amelia, and not a shoddy facsimile conjured from your tormented nightmares, I wouldn't toy with a woman's heart like that. The fact you *would*? Well. That has some disturbing implications. It makes me wonder how much of *you* I have in *me*."

Jason's Dronesmith lifts its helmeted chin, ever so slightly.

"After I kill you, I'll release Amelia from whatever spell you've put her under. Maybe Gressil really did ruin your mind. You've even starting to think like that demented rapist."

"FUCK YOU!"

Hope doesn't fire back a witty retort. He attacks!

Despite being surrounded by six Dronesmiths, Hope engages in battle with all of them, bravely or perhaps stupidly doing battle despite being outnumbered and surrounded in every direction.

This fight will determine which Wordsmith will rule the galaxy!

Inside Chrona, Jason sits inside the Spynet Sphere, his attention on many different things at once. Six tiny spheres of energy levitate around his head, connected by thin

threads of magical energy visible to the naked eye. These strings of mana fade into Jason's skull, allowing him to monitor each of the Dronesmiths in unison while not needing to keep too much of his focus on them.

He holds a sword in his hand, pausing every twenty to thirty seconds to communicate with his drones and issue them orders, controlling their bodies with pointed directions, then returning his focus in short bursts to the sword once more.

"Examine. Damn. It's still not quite... **Eru.** No, that isn't it either..."

He pauses, looks up at the Spynet screens, then switches his attention to the drones, then once again back to the sword.

"Multiply. Examine. Maybe that's the problem. Four is the limit. If I go for five, the enchantment destabilizes... **Undo.**"

Behind him, Fiona and Rebecca sit at a pair of computer terminals and deliver intel about the current situation to Phoebe and a select few others on Tarus II. They also work to begin evacuation procedures, since they aren't certain of how dangerous Hope's future actions are going to be. He might lash out and attack the civilians if things don't go his way, so both women work to move people off-world in preparation for that possibility.

Once more, he rotates through his tasks, while Rebecca and Fiona periodically glance at him occasionally.

"How are you holding up? Need me to tag in?" Fiona asks.

"No. I can handle Hope." Jason says bluntly, not bothering with too many words. He can't spare the mental capacity.

Fiona frowns, looking at Jason's back from afar. To her, he seems tired, even more than the last few days.

Indeed, as Solomon guessed, Jason has needed to sleep deeply following these long sessions of twenty-hour battles. Unlike Hope, who has battled his alternate self for less than an hour, Jason has already fought without stopping for several days, soon to close in on a week.

If he were only piloting one Dronesmith, he wouldn't be terribly fatigued. But he has been doing far more than just this.

Controlling a drone, keeping an eye on the galactic situation via the Spynet Sphere, talking to Hope while waiting tens of minutes for the time-delay to allow him to finish

speaking, and testing his powers all at the same time... Jason has kept extremely busy.

Now that Jason needs to manipulate six drones at once, even the lauded First Wordsmith is beginning to find that his mental abilities aren't able to keep up.

Jason blinks his eyes more often than usual. Every time he taps into the six Dronesmiths to control their movements, his forehead creases deeply, showing the strain his brain is enduring. He slows the pace of his Wordsmithing tests to put more attention on the battle, and eventually he sets the sword on the ground, giving up on his experiments entirely.

Several minutes of silence follow.

As Fiona and Rebecca steal glances at him, Jason finally decides to speak.

"This is impossible. It's like I'm trying to perfectly execute six Tool Assisted Speedruns at the same time."

Fiona blinks twice. "What?"

"The time differential," Jason randomly explains. "It's just like one of those TAS's. Wait, you don't know what that means..."

He pauses for a moment, transmitting more commands to the drones before continuing. Then he turns in his chair to look at his spiritual wife-clone.

"You've never played any of those video games I set up in the recreation center, have you?"

Fiona shakes her head. "I haven't. Sorry, Jason. They're just not something I understand the appeal of."

"Well, when I was a kid, seemingly living an ordinary life, they were a form of escapism for me." Jason continues to explain. "At some point, people started doing this thing called 'speedrunning' where they would try to play and beat video games in the fastest possible time."

He pauses every so often to communicate with his drones, but always returns to the topic at hand afterward.

"Naturally, at some point, records started hitting the limits of what humans could physically achieve. If a game could be beaten in a minute and thirty-four seconds, it might not be possible to optimize even a single extra second out of the speedrun. That's when

TAS's began to surge in popularity. People would slow the game down to a fraction of the normal speed and play it by pressing buttons at extremely specific moments to perfectly control the characters beyond a superhuman level."

"But," Jason continues, "that doesn't mean games became easier to beat. On the contrary. Playing games at 1% their normal speed means needing to adapt to an entire new paradigm of controls and thinking about how button presses work. It became more about predicting movements and reactions to input rather than moving purely on instinct. If a speedrunner presses the 'jump' button, it could be tens of real-world seconds before the character onscreen actually jumps, meaning there would be a huge delay in their actions."

Jason gestures behind himself, at the Spynet's screens, several of which show multiple angles of Hope and the Dronesmiths, seemingly frozen in time, but actually moving at almost imperceptibly slow speeds.

"It may seem like I have a huge advantage over Hope, but in fact, I have to look through the eyes of six drones, control their movements perfectly, and strike at Hope whenever his guard lowers. I'm lucky that my body isn't threatened by him, so even if he does land a vicious attack, it'll just be on a robot I can recreate and send back out there. I technically have the advantage in endurance."

Once again, he pauses to send more mental commands to his drones.

"Except that isn't *actually* the case. Hope is fighting at high speeds. For him, it's been thirty minutes of high-intensity nonstop combat. For me, it's been days and days of the slowest, most grueling, most boring wait-a-thon ever put to the screen. I have to patiently wait to see if the slash he's sending at Drone Three is a simple downward slash across the chest, and then react accordingly, or guess whether or not he plans to change the angle at the last instant, throwing my prediction off. If I don't pay perfect attention to his every move, I risk a drone falling to his schemes, which sets me back and emboldens him."

Rebecca nods. "I understand the problem. Humans are not usually capable of looking at things moving in extremely slow-motion and staying focused on those things for long periods of time. It is as if you are watching six different movies of grass growing and trying to predict the direction each individual shoot of grass will curve toward as it grows."

"Exactly!" Jason exclaims. "And even worse, my Wordsmithing is extremely weak due to the distance between me and Hope. I can't cast Words of Power on him directly, at least not very often, because I'd be going into conflict with Excalibur's massive pool of energy, and thus would expend too much of my own. The best I can do is counter Hope's Words of Power. Except if I slack off and don't pay attention to the words he speaks, he might slip a Word of Power in and I'll miss it due to the time differential. It's like I'm trying to Skype someone with a thirty minute delay on their responses. It's painful!"

Fiona blinks again, uncomprehending. "Skype...?"

"Old Earth thing. Never mind that." Jason says, waving his hand.

Another several minutes of silence follows. Jason's concentration slips up as his mind wanders. Suddenly, he slams his fist on his chair's arm.

"Son of a BITCH! He got one!"

Fiona glances at the video feed, where she sees Hope unleashing an empowered sword strike from Excalibur, slicing through one of the Dronesmiths and blasting its internal parts to bits. The clean strike essentially decapitates that drone's combat capabilities, taking it out of contention.

"It's okay, Jason. You can summon another one." Fiona says.

"Yeah. Yeah, I know." Jason growls. **"Teleport. Teleport."**

The destroyed Dronesmith vanishes, replaced instantly with a fresh new one. In realspace, a look of anger freezes on Hope's face, showing his dissatisfaction at the instant swapping of his defeated foe.

"C...O...W...A...R...D..."

Jason's anger bubbles up, unbidden.

"What a god damned selfish lunatic! He knows I didn't kill Neil! He's just doing all this to sate his ego and right the so-called wrongs I've committed against him! And even worse..."

Jason pauses. He glances at Fiona, then looks away.

"...Did you hear what Hope said earlier?" Jason asks. "About Phoebe and Amelia."

"I haven't been paying attention to your talks." Fiona says, shaking her head. "Why?"

Jason hesitates.

"He... Hope said something that struck me as... a little... *rapey*. It really didn't feel like something he would ever say, not in a million years, but he did. It disturbed me."

Fiona's frown deepens as Jason plays back a short clip of their discussion for her and Rebecca to hear.

"Disturbing is an understatement." Fiona mumbles. "Why would he say that? Why would he even *think* that? And what would his plan be to make it... work? Would he pretend to be you and deceive her? Would he expect her to jump into his arms? Or would he use Wordsmithing to control her mind?"

"All three possibilities are discomforting." Rebecca says. "The last one, especially so. As far as I'm aware, neither Wordsmith has ever gone so far as to manipulate the free will of other Sentients. Doing so crosses an ethical line, one I'm not certain they could come back from."

Jason's anger shifts. It turns to a hint of dismay, and then guilt.

"No. You're wrong, Rebecca. I did do it in the past. To Amelia."

He pauses, then continues.

"When Bahamut initially captured her, Kar, and me, Amelia started freaking out. I used my magic to control her emotions and dial them down. I did it for, at the time, what I *thought* was a good reason. But it created a terrible rift between us. It's partly why she left me and went on to become the Black Queen."

Jason hangs his head. His expression becomes solemn.

"What bothers me the most isn't even Hope's words, or his threats toward Phoebe. It's the implication that, despite how far we've diverged, we're not that different. What if I had swapped places with Hope? Would I be doing the same things as him? Pursuing only my own selfish thoughts and desires? Not caring how they affected other people? Becoming an obsessive, intent on subsuming power from those who I perceived as having wronged me? Believing in conspiracy theories so long as they validated my worldview?"

"Jason..." Fiona says softly. "You can't think like that."

"On the contrary. I can and I should." Jason retorts. "The way Hope is acting now is merely an extreme extension of past actions I once took. This seems to imply that if I'm not careful, I could become like him. I don't ever want that to happen."

Jason concludes his self-examination with a warning to himself, solidifying his determination never to fall into the same pits of selfishness and despair Hope has.

In the First Wordsmith's eyes, his other half has become a blight on the Milky Way's future. A harbinger of potential evil that could become an even greater threat than the Plague someday.

"I have to kill him." Jason says softly. "There's no longer any other way this can end between us. It's him or me."

Jason clenches both of his fists, resting his arms on the side of his chair. He closes his eyes and focuses intently on the battle between his drones and his clone.

The battle continues to rage, ever so slowly. Even with his newfound determination, Jason's attention span wavers. Every torturous minute that passes melts into the other. Those minutes become an hour, and then two hours.

Jason flinches. "Motherfucker. He got another one. Tricky bastard."

"Teleport. Teleport."

Jason yanks the destroyed Dronesmith out of Realspace, then he sends another one to replace it. His weary eyes reveal the depths of exhaustion he's beginning to feel at this slow-motion game of cat and mouse.

"This is getting ridiculous." Jason mutters. "How long is it going to take before I-"

Mid-sentence, Jason disappears.

Fiona, busily focused on her tasks, takes two seconds to register the sudden cutting-off of his voice. When she turns around, she stares in confusion at his empty chair.

"Huh? What the- where did Jason go?"

Rebecca's eyebrows tighten.

"It's Hope! He somehow uncovered Jason's true location. He pulled Jason into Realspace!"

She quickly points at one of the monitors displaying the battle, where a baffled Jason stares, frozen in disbelief, at his clone.

The true battle has just begun.

Part 599: Hope's Deception

Six Dronesmiths surrounded Hope. At first, the Second Wordsmith began to feel a sense of foreboding mixed with extreme alarm. He knew Jason was able to control multiple Dronesmiths, but it was only after facing one of them in combat that he realized just how formidable these machines truly were.

But then the actual battle began, and Hope immediately became confused.

The machines fought with extreme precision. They targeted him whenever he was at his weakest, surrounding him from all directions and slashing, stabbing, or chopping at him with their individualized swords. Each one of the blades shone in a different color, though the performance appeared to be completely identical. Hope took to calling them by the colors of their swords.

Blue Drone seemed to be the one Hope fought earlier. It had accumulated significant damage over the course of their fight, but all of that damage disappeared after Jason swapped it for a fresh machine when Hope looked away for a second.

Red Drone was the first to strike, and always the most aggressive. Whenever Hope turned to face another drone, it was always Red who attacked the fastest, seemingly disregarding its own bodily integrity.

Yellow Drone moved the fastest, backing up Red to combo with any of its offensive movements. If Hope clashed with Red, Yellow would follow next.

Green, Black, and White all had their own purposes. They focused on interfering with Hope's movements, harrying him when his back was turned, and otherwise exuding a threat that forced him to keep them in mind. Even when they didn't attack, Hope couldn't ignore them, for fear of a sneak attack from behind.

Damn... Hope thought, after the fighting intensified for a few minutes. Jason really is going all-out! He's aiming for my head! He wants to kill me!

But that only furthered Hope's determination.

What else is new?! He's ALWAYS wanted me gone. Jason can't stand the fact that I'm better than him. I'm the superior Wordsmith! That's why he always undermines and tries to make me look bad!

With Solomon's help, Hope began to laser-focus on dealing with Jason's drones. Solomon monitored them in real-time, while Hope fought with his mental speed increased to the limit of what the Crown could manage.

In this way, Hope made his first major realization.

* * *

[Jason's robots aren't as dangerous as I first thought!] Hope mentally exclaims, deflecting one of Red's slashes and hovering to the side to evade a followup by Yellow. [The six of them combined are only a little deadlier than Blue was all by itself earlier.]

[These drones are acting partially autonomously.] Solomon replies. [I've noticed some of their movements repeating. My guess is that Jason is giving them specific directions from Chrona some of the time, but allowing them to fight autonomously during other times. In Autonomous Mode, they're not much of a threat at all. Their artificial intelligence is atrocious.]

[Jason probably hooked Centurion up to their internal cores,] Hope thinks. [But I have Centurion inside me, too!]

Hope taps into the nanites swimming within his body.

[Centurion, analyze the movements of these six Dronesmiths. Detect any regular patterns. When my body is under an anticipated threat, make me react to it automatically.]

[COMMAND CONFIRMED, PILOT HOPE HIRO.] Centurion booms. [SEMI-AUTOPILOT ACTIVATED. NOW ANTICIPATING INCOMING THREATS.]

Hope continues to fight. The more Jason's drones attack him, the more he becomes adept at quickly dodging their movements and anticipating their attacks in real-time.

During one maneuver, Hope slips up and accidentally dodges an attack from behind too slowly. A sword slashes across his back, drawing a long but shallow wound and making him wince in pain. Luckily, his nanites deflect the majority of the damage and quickly heal his injuries.

Hope spins in midair, somersaulting as if he were fighting underwater. In the 360-degree field of motion of fighting in space, Hope has absolute freedom to move as he needs, but also has to anticipate threats from every direction.

The longer he fights, the better Centurion's prediction algorithm becomes. Soon, Hope is able to match the drone's combat operations blow for blow, and then he quickly starts exceeding them thanks to Solomon's Crown tapping directly into Centurion's nanites. Hope bends flexibly, his bones and flesh-body acting more flexibly than the Dronesmiths' Wordsmithium-alloy internals.

Slash!

Excalibur rakes across the Green Drone, cutting a huge gash across its skin and severing multiple metallic ligaments. The drone quickly backs off, and two others zip in to fill the gap.

Foop!

The Green drone disappears, then reappears a second later, fully repaired.

[Damn! He's such a cheater!] Hope growls. But despite his complaining, his eyes shine as he realizes there might be a way to use Jason's 'cheating' against him.

Minutes pass. Soon, the battle has reached the half-hour mark. Barely even winded, Hope continues to fight just as aggressively as before, slashing Excalibur with a relentless fury. He begins to notice cracks in the Dronesmith's operating parameters. Sometimes, they dodge just a bit too slowly, or react sluggishly to his unexpected moves. He starts mixing in feints, twisting his sword at weird angles, moving toward a pair of Dronesmiths and attacking one but switching to the other at the last second.

Each time Hope does this, he finds that Jason fails to react in time.

Hope uncovers the truth of the matter.

[I'm fighting in real-time, but Jason must be reacting in 250x slowed-down time. That means he's having to deal with boredom and mental fatigue, while my adrenaline is still running high! He's been fighting me for two or three weeks at this point. There's no way he can easily hold his attention span in between sleeping sessions at such a high level! He's starting to slip up more and more!]

Solomon nods. [That seems to be the case. We should be able to use this to our advantage.]

[I already have an idea.] Hope thinks, a vicious smirk spreading across his face.

He continues battling. When he detects a lull in the drone's combat capabilities, the telltale sign that Jason has gone to sleep, Hope quickly whispers two Words of Power

under his breath.

"Trace. Link."

Then, he charges at the Red Drone, meeting its aggression with an even greater viciousness of his own!

Slash, slash, slash!

Hope rakes his sword from left to right, severing the drone in half. He quickly launches himself toward the Yellow Drone as if to kill it, but secretly he keeps his attention on the Red one.

When it disappears and a new one reappears, Hope's smirk doubles in intensity.

Gotcha, motherfucker.

He lets out a wild roar, as if angered by his loss, then slams his sword against Yellow's sword.

The moment the blades clang together, Hope quickly whispers another Word of Power.

"Locate."

This time, he doesn't lock on to a position inside the Chrona system, but a hidden dimension located somewhere halfway across the Milky Way.

[I found him!] Hope exclaims. [That sneaky bastard, he didn't hide Chrona inside Tarus II's voidspace. I don't know where it is exactly, but it's about 12,000 lightyears from here.]

Solomon smiles. [And what are you going to do with this information?]

Hope doesn't even bother responding inside his mind.

"Recall."

The moment Hope speaks the Word of Power, his eyes snap open as Jason materializes a few feet away, clearly in the middle of a sentence about to say something.

Hope doesn't hesitate. Before Jason can get his bearings, Hope lunges at him and swings the sword downward at Jason's neck, intending to diagonally cut him in half from the shoulder to the hip.

Unfortunately, even a mere second in Realspace is 250 inside Chrona...

Jason's body instantly flickers backward 100 meters. Hope's slash completely misses, making him cut at nothing. He stumbles in midair, his body spinning from the accumulated momentum that failed to disperse on impact.

"Damn you!" Hope exclaims. "I was so close!!"

He quickly reorients himself and faces his other half, firing off a Word of Power to ascertain Jason's identity. This time, his magic fails to penetrate a barrier of magical power surrounding Jason.

But even the lack of an answer is an answer itself. The Dronesmiths clearly relayed to Hope what their internal mechanical parts looked like. Only Jason himself would have a body shielded from the effects of Hope's Wordsmithing.

"You finally got me." Jason says, his tone surprisingly calm. His voice beams across the vacuum of space, entering Hope's ears through some mystical method the Second Wordsmith can't quite ascertain. Jason certainly doesn't seem to be wearing any impressive artifacts or other magical devices. He wears nothing more than a plain white T-shirt and blue jeans.

[And yet you somehow predicted my movements.] Hope replies telepathically, his tone sullen.

"It wasn't difficult. I operated under the assumption that you, or more likely Solomon, would eventually sniff out my true location. I prepared contingencies, just in case."

Hope's eye twitches. "You had no time to react! How did you even speak a Word of Power?!"

Jason sighs. He shakes his head at his foolish clone.

"I already told you, Hope. You and I are no longer as we were. Your predecessors are coddling you. You rely on them and their abilities too much. I, on the other hand, am a fully realized Wordsmith. I've figured out a lot of amazing things our power can do. A fact you're apparently oblivious about."

Jason holds up his hand. Suddenly, three mysterious glowing marbles spring into existence above his upraised palm.

"Here's your first lesson. Wordsmithing is magic that works primarily based on your thoughts. The 'word' you speak is only one component. Figuring out this Truth may sound simple, but it unlocked the first step on an entire staircase of my understanding."

Hope raises Excalibur, putting a small but powerful barrier between himself and his original self.

For some reason, Jason's unerringly confident tone starts to make Hope feel a *little* bit nervous.

What gives Jason his confidence? Hope isn't sure. But it must be something significant; perhaps a secret about Wordsmithing that might overturn Hope's entire understanding of the system?

"You're saying that you're better than me because you've learned a few tricks?" Hope asks.

"If it were only a 'few tricks', you wouldn't be in much danger." Jason retorts. "In actuality, it's a complete deconstruction of how Wordsmithing itself works. I haven't spent the last hundred years dicking around. I spent it preparing for an intergalactic war that could break out at any time."

Jason shrugs. "Ah, but it's a shame I have to use my knowledge to kill you first."

"You can try, Jason." Hope says, as Excalibur's mana surges into his body, causing his eyes to glow. "You can try."

The three magical marbles of light vanish from Jason's palm. One second later, golden Wordsmithium armor appears on his body, followed immediately by a sword that perfectly replicates Excalibur's appearance jumping into his grasp. Finally, hundreds of glowing red lines etch themselves onto Jason's armor, giving it a bloody and intimidating air...

Two seconds later, both Wordsmiths leap forward in unison, ready to finally duel each other to the death.

Inside the Hall of Heroes.

Amelia and her three children stand next to a scrying orb controlled by Solomon. This orb projects a scene of the battle in Realspace, slowed down a hundred times, allowing them to follow what's happening as the battle between the Wordsmiths begins.

"Mom. Is dad going to win?" Blake, her youngest, asks.

He pauses waiting for an answer. When one doesn't come, he turns to look at her, only to see a distant look on her face.

"...Mom? Mom? Are you okay?"

Amelia blinks her eyes. A profound look of sadness washes over her face. She quickly hides her expression with the palm of her hand.

"It's... it's nothing. I- I just... I don't like the way this battle has played out. Hope isn't himself. He's gone crazy over killing Jason. His hatred.. it's too much."

Across the table, Levi and Mandy also watch the holographic projection of the battle. Unlike Jason, Hope does not have a Spynet of his own, but the mystical Scrying Station is able to project anything Solomon sees, as well as the vision of Jephthah's Legionnaires.

"Mother... are you thinking about what father said earlier?" Levi asks.

"I am. I can't stop." Amelia mutters, lowering her hand. She stares at the floor, appearing defeated. "Jason... called me a false image of Amelia. He's right. I'm not really her. I don't know who I am. And your father... what he said about me, and Phoebe... is that all we are to him? Merely objects for him to possess?"

Mandy appears discomforted by her mother's words. She massages her arm absentmindedly.

"Dad... didn't mean it, mom. He didn't. He was just saying those things to get under Uncle Jason's skin. They aren't really going to kill each other. Once dad lets out his aggression and finally answers who is the strongest Wordsmith, this will all be over."

A moment of silence follows.

"Is that true?" Blake asks. "Will dad stop before it's too late?"

"I... don't think so." Amelia says softly. "Your father... isn't bluffing. He really wants Jason dead. And what he said about Phoebe... I don't think Jason's going to let him off, either."

She sighs.

"I didn't want it to be like this. Constantly fighting among ourselves. Humans killing humans. We need to unite, especially after the attack on Maiura. How can Hope be so stubborn? It clearly wasn't Jason who killed Neil."

"I disagree." Levi says, injecting his own opinion into the discussion. "Jason had the means and the motive. Is Neil a clumsy person? No. Him tripping over his own feet was too out of place. Someone had to have made him do it. A single Word of Power would do the trick, and we'd have no way to detect it. I think Jason is doing all of this deliberately. He wants to eliminate our father and clean things up so there's only one Wordsmith left."

"No way!" Blake exclaims. "Uncle Jason wouldn't do that! He's not a mean guy! He's really nice!"

"He's been inside Chrona for two hundred years." Mandy says softly. "Even I'm nowhere near that old. I'm only fifty, and I already feel very different to how I was when I was twenty. We've barely interacted with Jason over all the years of his life. Who knows how much he's changed? Maybe he started to see dad as a threat."

"Exactly." Levi says with a nod of his head. "Mom, whatever feelings you might have about Jason, Hope is our dad and your husband. We have to root for him."

Amelia falls silent. She stares at the slow motion image of Hope and Jason clanging their swords together.

With a shake of her head, she turns and walks away. "I can't watch."

Her children stare at her as she walks out and leaves, a myriad of emotions playing upon their faces. She doesn't even look at them, instead making her way back to her bedroom.

Once inside, Amelia locks the door behind herself. She walks over to the corner of the room and sits on the floor in the corner, her back against the wall. She pulls up her legs and rests her forehead on her knees.

"I don't want Hope to die." Amelia says to nobody in particular. "I don't want Jason to die either. I'm so... so tired of being weak. Always too weak to change anything. I have to face the truth. I'm not the Black Queen. I never was. Jason's right. I'm nothing. A shell of a person Hope loved. I wanted to please him. I told him to make me into his dream woman. But in the end, he doesn't even really care about me. He wants Phoebe. He wants the *real* Amelia."

Amelia's eyes darken.

"I don't even know what I want anymore. I don't know what I desire. I want to be happy with Hope. But I'm not good enough for him. I'm just an accessory. A mother for

his children. What if he doesn't love me at all? What if he never did?"

Amelia glances at a mirror on the wall, a mirror which reflects a strangely twisted version of herself. A mirror image that doesn't appear to her as it does to other people.

"...What do you think? What should I do? How can I become a person he loves? Is that even what I actually want?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Stop asking me. I don't know what I want. I don't even know who I am."

Tears well up in Amelia's eyes. Her lips quiver as she stifles a sob.

"Ugh... huu... I don't... I don't want him to die. But I can't change his fate! I'm not strong enough. I'm a pedestrian, observing from afar. The universe does what it wants, and I'm helpless. I'm completely helpless!"

Tears stream down her face. She wipes at her eyes, grits her teeth, and slams her fists against the carpet. The impact lets out a soft *thud*.

"I can't be a damsel in distress! Even if I'm not really Amelia, I still feel like I'm her! I have her memories! I must have a part of her IN me! Even if it's just a tiny sliver of her soul!"

Amelia's eyes redden. A sense of agitation builds inside her heart.

"That's... that's it! That's what I want! I want Hope to love me! I want to be someone he can love! I want to BECOME Amelia! But how can I do it? HOW??"

Her agitation grows stronger. She clenches her fists and presses them against the side of her head, rocking her body from side to side as she talks.

"I can feel it. Something! It's close. So close! There's a piece of Amelia still there! Something about her that I can tap into! It's not my imagination! It's really there! A second voice! It must be her!"

Amelia's expression becomes a little giddy. She wipes the last of her tears away, concentrating even harder on the strange sensation she's feeling.

"So... close... almost there-"

Foop!

Abruptly, Amelia disappears from the corner of the room, seemingly teleporting two feet forward.

As her surroundings abruptly change, even if only by a small amount, Amelia gasps.

"What?! I did something! How did I do that? What's going-"

Foop!

She teleports again. This time, she appears atop the middle of her bed, making her feel even more disoriented.

"What? What's going on? No... this isn't right. This isn't Amelia's power. It's something else. It's almost like I'm-"

Foop!

Amelia vanishes again.

But this time, she doesn't reappear.

The room falls silent.

Several hours pass before Amelia's children come to check on her.

All of them end up leaving while scratching their heads, looking as confused as anyone would be in such a situation.

Where did their mother go?

Part 600: Shocking Testimony

[Recommended Listening](#)

Unarin stands inside his Sanctum, alongside Dosena. The glint of many ancient pieces of art on the walls do not draw Unarin's attention as they usually would. Instead, his thoughts dwell on the rather sudden and unexpected battle between the two Wordsmiths, a battle he did not see coming but which also isn't *entirely* out of his expectations. Naturally, he noticed some tensions building between them in the past, but he could never fully account for the thoughts they were secretly holding within their time-accelerated domains.

The two highest Founders wait for a while until the individuals they've been expecting finally arrive.

The doors to Unarin's Sanctum slowly open, and two Psions enter. Executor Riley, and Executor Sartran.

They did not teleport inside, because that would be extremely disrespectful to the First Founder's authority. In the Volgrim Empire, none may enter his Sanctum without permission. Not even the highest of High Psions. Only three individuals have obtained such a special privilege, those being Founder Dosena, Muuxunuu, and Unarin's brother, Randis.

Not even the other three Founders possess the right to desecrate Unarin's Sanctum without permission. This therefore stands as a testament to the rest of the Empire on just how intimate Unarin's relation is to the other three. He even considers Dosena to be as close to him as his own family.

The Executors enter, agitation visible on their faces. Clearly, after the battle on Maiura, they did not anticipate that the two Wordsmiths would suddenly pounce at each other's throats.

Unarin faintly frowns. "Where is Creator Demila?"

Sartran bows his head. [Apologies, First Founder. After the battle, I dispatched her to check the situation on Tarus II. She will return shortly. Her infiltration skills are excellent.]

"I see." Unarin says, his tone plain. "I am interested in her perspective. She has been watching the humans for longer than the rest of you combined. She may be able to shed light on this new development."

[Are we going to intervene?] Riley asks.

Unarin remains silent for a time. He stares at her, his face giving away no clues as to his inner thoughts.

"...That will depend on any useful details you can give me, as well as Demila. Start by recounting the events on Maiura. Leave out nothing."

Sartran lifts his head. [With permission, I will transmit a psio-burst.]

Unarin nods. "To Dosenia. Both of you."

The High Psions nod. They open up their minds and instantly transmit every single piece of information they collected during the battle on Maiura. Using her super-accelerated mind, Dosenia finds it utterly trivial to sort through a mere few hours worth of memories, collecting and assessing each point one-by-one.

After checking to ensure none of the information is compromised, and also that none of the High Psions have been compromised, Dosenia transmits a nearly identical data-burst to Unarin. It would not be acceptable for anyone but her to do this, for Unarin does not trust any other Psion with slipping information directly into his mind.

Not that they could, even if they wanted to. As a practitioner of the Mind of Void, Unarin's ability to resist Psionic mental links is powerful to the extreme. Over the eons, only Dosenia has mentally communicated with him enough to bypass some of his filters.

A minute later, after Unarin silently receives Dosenia's transmission, he finishes digesting all of the new information. His expression becomes inscrutable.

"As I suspected. There does indeed seem to be a sinister intelligence lurking within the heart of the swarm. It is not as mindless as it purports to be."

Unarin falls silent again for a few moments.

"The matter of Kolvaxians hiding their Psionic abilities is alarming. We must now assume that they are capable of deep planning and plotting. It is very likely the Executor Plaguehosts are feigning weakness. They are capable of fighting at the 8th Level of Psionics. They merely choose not to do so in order to make us complacent. From now on, we must assume that they will reveal this capability in a future battle."

[I have my own thoughts on the matter.] Dosena interjects, her voice plain. [I believe it is possible, perhaps even likely, that the Plague can replicate the same host over multiple instances. The swarm has never shown this to be possible, but if we assume it is, then we could see ten copies of Executor Huron appear within Milky Way space all at once. Perhaps even a hundred copies, a thousand, or millions.]

"That is a terrifying thought." Unarin mutters. "If true, then this war is already lost. The Plague will be unstoppable. There is no point in entertaining such thoughts. We already know that killing a unique Plaguehost, such as Sartran's doppelganger, will cause it to regenerate elsewhere. I prefer we assume that only one of these individuals may appear at any given time. Anything else is a gross violation of the laws of Cosmic Conservation. I refuse to believe Akasha would allow any Ruler to create such an unstoppable army."

Dosena doesn't retort. Even she believes this to be a step too far, and would simply mean that the war is lost. The Second Founder might be powerful, but not even she could defeat a thousand of Huron's clones attacking her all at once. Her best option at that point would be to flee for her life.

At that point, why even bother fighting anymore? The Volgrim might as well start hiding in pocket dimensions or fleeing into the Unknown.

Unarin begins pacing back and forth, allowing his thoughts to wander.

"The matter with Neil Adams is... troublesome. I spoke to him on this very day, and was even beginning to make plans to deepen our collaboration. He was wiser than I expected, though burdened by his hatred of demons. I still believed we could work together to achieve greater things."

"For him to abruptly stumble and fall over his feet like a clown... it seems there was some external intervention involved. Creator Demila was the closest during that event. Let us wait to hear her testimony before I make any final decisions."

Unarin's eyes betray no emotion, but internally, he already has a suspect in mind.

It was Demila, not Jason, who caused Neil's death. Hope Hiro jumped to a different conclusion because of his hatred of Jason, but the matter is all too clear to me, as it must be to Jason. But why would Demila kill Neil Adams? Especially without my permission? I shall give her a chance to explain herself before I render judgment.

A flicker of killing intent flashes through Unarin's heart. This unruly subordinate failed to capture Gressil and has reported only the most useless information until now. She caused a major diplomatic incident, and it could cause a huge rift between humanity and the Volgrim.

To do all of that without Unarin's permission, she had better have a good reason!

The First Founder does *not* tolerate insubordination.

Unarin and the Psions engage in further small talk, dissecting the events of that day, as well as discussing several key losses. The deaths of the Archangels genuinely surprise Unarin the most. How could Raphael allow his foolish sister to blunder into the Kolvaxian's claws? Unarin begins to wonder what sorts of powers the swarm will obtain once it digests Archangel Uriel completely.

Twenty minutes later, Creator Demila arrives back on Volgarius, traveling to it via a Warpgate. She hurries to the Founder's Thumb as quickly as possible, causing Dosena to frown as she senses the rapid approach of her junior.

[Something isn't right.] Dosena remarks privately to Unarin. [Her emotions are unstable. She is uncharacteristically anxious.]

Unarin narrows his eyes.

"Is that so..."

Not even a minute later, Creator Demila teleports just outside the Sanctum. She waits, her body trembling, until Unarin motions with his hand. Then, she power-walks inside.

After entering, and before Unarin can say anything else, Creator Demila quickly drops to one knee and bows her head deeply while slapping a hand over her heart.

[Founders, forgive me! I acted without permission!]

Unarin blinks. This wasn't what he expected.

"Elaborate." Unarin says, drawing the word out.

Creator Demila keeps her head lowered, unwilling, or perhaps afraid to look into Unarin's eyes.

[It was I who caused Neil Adams' death to the Plague.] Demila freely admits. [I did this without permission and caused an unavoidable incident to occur. However! I had a good reason for doing what I did.]

"I should certainly hope you did." Unarin says, his heart flickering once more with killing intent.

This imbecile!

Perhaps Demila might be unaware, but Unarin is quite certain Jason had already established surveillance inside the Founder's Thumb. For her to blunder inside and admit to killing Neil Adams, this will surely escalate the conflict. Even Unarin himself only spoke of the matter in vague and cryptic hints, so as to not give the Wordsmith an angle upon which he could attack them after the battle.

Demila hurriedly explains. [First Founder. I have been keeping a close eye on the populations of Tarus II and Maiura for several cycles. I was investigating many cryptic happenings among the human populace, but it was the battle on Maiura against the Plague that caused me great alarm. I knew I had to act quickly, or else the entire Volgrim Empire would suffer a horrible tragedy!]

Unarin blinks. Once again, she surprises him with her words. What could she be angling for?

"A tragedy?" Unarin repeats. "Speak quickly. My patience wanes."

Demila raises her head, looking earnestly at Unarin.

[The humans have deceived us. They are not as weak and pitiful as they seem. They are developing an army capable of crushing the Plague and the Volgrim alike!]

This time, it's Dosena who answers. [What? Outrageous. We would know if such a matter were true.]

[With all due respect, Second Founder, I am not deceiving you.] Demila says. [I recently noticed that some of the humans were displaying extraordinary metaphysical powers. I initially attributed these powers to the effects of the 'Power Gloves' made by Jason Hiro. But I did not fully realize the scale at which they were operating. Humans have begun wielding powers en-masse. Their deaths at Maiura were a feint!]

"A feint?" Unarin repeats again, reeling slightly from disbelief. "Do you mean to tell me that Jason Hiro willingly allowed thousands of humans to die in order to deceive me? He is not the sort of person to do such a thing."

[Perhaps he was not such a person before,] Demila counters, [but he is *now*. He has spent hundreds of years inside a time-accelerated dimension known as 'Chrona'. The

Jason you met in the past was far younger and more naive than the one battling Hope Hiro today. The Jason that has secretly aged inside Chrona has been making plans to destroy the Volgrim Empire. He has mastered his Wordsmithing and uncovered horrifying uses that will cause our complete and total extermination!]

"Creator Demila." Unarin says, his tone filled with warning. "The humans are our allies. I would advise you to pick and choose your words carefully. If you do not have evidence to back up your claims, I will have the Executors exterminate you on the spot. Admitting to killing Neil Adams is heinous enough, but if you cannot satisfy my demands, there will be no saving you."

Demila hurriedly lowers her head. [Of course, First Founder. I would not dare utter such accusations without the proper evidence.]

Demila lifts up her palm, revealing a data shard held within her grasp. She allows it to levitate for a moment before teleporting it to Founder Doseña.

This shard happens to be a highly encrypted data shard often used by the Changelings. Normally, Psions would not be able to readily access it, but Doseña is different. She casually hacks its security parameters within seconds, then taps inside to look at the data and images within.

Her expression gradually darkens.

Inside the shard, videos and Changeling testimonies of humans possessing incredible metaphysical powers en-masse are revealed one by one, each item showing detailed reports on how the humans are rapidly learning to master their powers.

But Doseña is not immediately impressed.

[These abilities are slightly worrying, but not one human is shown wielding powers at the Cosmic level. They are no threat to us. The abilities afforded by these 'Power Gloves' are not even a threat to our 5th Level Psions, let alone the High Psions.]

[As I said, I only recently uncovered all the evidence.] Demila explains. [There is more. I believe... the humans have fixed their 'Flaw'.]

"What?!" Unarin asks, this time visibly shocked. "You're certain? The Flaw that prevents them from freely harnessing the power of Magic?"

[That very one.] Demila says, her tone grim. [I have also collected evidence that Jason Hiro has constructed a massive cube-like artifact with temporal enchantments placed on

it. He is using this artifact to train human troops. I don't have conclusive proof, but it's likely he has raised at least one Bottom Cosmic human inside the Cube's confines.]

Demila continues speaking, turning the Truths of the matter into 10% lies, exaggerating tiny details and magnifying possible negative outcomes. As Unarin listens, his heart begins to sink.

"You... state that Jason drew the Plague to Maiura to eliminate Neil's threat, and to give himself a justification to battle Hope Hiro. You believe he is planning to kill Hope as well. These are nothing more than points of baseless conjecture. We don't know his thoughts."

[We have to strike.] Demila pleads. [Once Jason kills his clone, he will have obtained solid control of humanity's forces. He is already building a coalition with the demons and monsters. Even if you don't think Jason or the humans pose us a threat, what of the Middle Cosmic Demon Deities? If they unite behind the Wordsmith, they will be able to overwhelm us!]

[More assumptions.] Dosea retorts. [You have not demonstrated that Jason is able to truly threaten the Plague. It does not matter how much of a threat the humans pose to the Volgrim. We are all going to die to these newly empowered Plagueborn. Lest you've forgotten, they are now capable of crushing our Executors. It won't be long before the Plague can even threaten *me*.]

Demila falls silent for a moment. Her expression turns as dark as the night.

[With all due respect, Second Founder. I believe you've forgotten something important.]

Dosea blinks. She glances at Unarin, who also appears slightly confused.

What 'important' thing could they be forgetting?

Demila lowers her eyes and shakes her head.

[Jason Hiro already controls the Plague.] Demila quietly declares.

[What?!] Executor Sartran exclaims. [Impossible! There's no way you believe such a thing!]

[A laughable claim.] Executor Riley mutters, rolling her eyes derisively. [Even for you, this is pure delusion.]

[I am not deluded.] Demila replies calmly. [Jason Hiro seized control of the Plague during the battle on Reaver. It was a masterful stroke. He deceived us all. Do you really think the Plague's actions following that battle made sense, given what we knew of them? Do you truly believe the Plague has been hiding its intellect from us all this time?]

Unarin remains silent. He listens carefully, taking great care to separate his increasing alarm from his rational mind. If Demila is telling the truth, it would mean the Volgrim Empire is about to lose the war.

If she is telling the truth, then there is no longer any hope of defeating the Plague. The humans have already seized victory.

[Jason Hiro 'fed' his so-called 'Black Hole Construct' to the swarm.] Demila explains. [He empowered the swarm, but also subverted it to follow his will. That is why the swarm's behavior has changed so drastically. When I realized this, I had to take immediate action to kill Neil Adams. Jason planned to take out Neil later; to slowly amass power in secret while making us fear the New Plague. But the truth is that the Plague is already under his control. Now he has to hurriedly battle his clone, throwing his long-term plans into momentary disarray.]

Demila lifts her hand and balls it into a fist.

[Founder Unarin! We must strike! Quickly, while we still can! Jason and Hope are battling now, in Realspace. They are together, in the same place! If we hurry, we can eliminate their Threat! I do not know what will become of the Plague, but anything is better than having an intelligent mind controlling it to wipe us out!]

* * *

A minute passes.

Unarin remains totally silent. He stares at the floor, thinking countless thoughts. Sometimes, he touches his nose, other times, he scratches his thigh. These minor movements draw no attention from the Psion observers, but Dosena's psionic senses take notice.

"This... accusation." Unarin says, sighing heavily. "The whole time, it has been... pure conjecture. I follow the lines of reasoning, Creator Demila. I do. But it can just as easily be attributed to accidents and unintentional mistakes. If Jason is really as frighteningly intelligent as you claimed, I would have divined so by now."

Demila's heart sinks.

"I'm afraid that, despite your warnings, I cannot act on mere words alone." Unarin finally says, straightening his posture. He folds his hands behind his back and assumes his typical domineering stance. "Regarding the matter of human empowerment, this is certainly minor cause for alarm, but the rest is baseless and would put our relations with the humans in danger. In this time of uncertainty, I welcome a human army powerful enough to assist us in our battle against the Plague."

[Wh-what?] Demila asks, bewildered. [Founder Unarin! I must protest! I know the evidence is not perfectly solid, but surely you can see reason! Jason Hiro has seized control of the Plague, and he-]

"Not another word." Unarin says, his tone turning cold. "I told you before. If you failed to meet the level of evidence I require, I would punish you severely. You have caused a rift between myself and the Wordsmiths. If Hope Hiro wins the battle, it is likely he will find out about your actions and launch an attack on us for killing his mentor and closest friend. If Jason Hiro wins, he might be grateful, but he also might be angered by our interference in his plans, as well as your attempts to slander his good name."

Like a disappointed father, Unarin closes his eyes and shakes his head.

"I cannot in good conscience allow you to go unpunished. After the battle between Wordsmiths has concluded, I will take diplomatic action to investigate the matter of humanity's Flaw being fixed, and I will sincerely apologize to the victor for your vile acts."

[Founder Unarin!] Demila exclaims, her voice panicked.

"Dosena. Take her and the Executors away." Unarin says, waving his hand in a slightly odd manner. "I will begin thinking about how to sincerely apologize to the Wordsmiths for our violation of their trust."

Dosena nods. [As you command, First Founder.]

Demila tries to protest, but Dosena's powerful psionics grab onto her and yank her into a hidden pocket dimension. The other two Executors fall silent, allowing themselves to be taken as well.

After they have all departed, Unarin heaves a huge sigh.

"...To think it came to this."

Part 601: Duel of Fates

Recommended Listening

Jason and Hope don't hesitate. The moment Jason summons his imposing golden Wordsmithium armor, he lunges at Hope, his supposed 'replica' of Excalibur slashing at Hope's neck.

Hope lifts Excalibur and parries Jason's attack. But when their blades collide, the metaphorical weight of a mountain crashes into Hope and sends him flying away.

Jason gives chase, rushing to land the final blow!

[Shit! He hits hard!] Hope thinks to himself and the Heroes presently residing within his Mind Realm.

With his mind accelerated by Solomon's Crown, Hope's reaction speed proves far superior to Jason. The First Wordsmith's movements seem outright sluggish by comparison, especially now that he has lost the boost given to him by Chrona's time dilation.

It doesn't even take a split second for Hope to recover from being sent flying. He quickly shouts, "**Reorient**," and his body stops careening through the Void. When Jason rushes him, Hope thinks of another Word of Power to follow up from the previous one.

"Heavy!"

His body triples in mass. When Jason's sword slams into his once again, the impact still jars his senses, baffling him with how much power the First Wordsmith is able to project. Each slash from this 'False Excalibur' might as well be a point-blank shot from a tank shell!

But thankfully for Hope, he resists!

The second hit almost makes him lose his grip on Excalibur, but he uses his intimate attachment to the divine blade to telekinetically yank it back into his grasp.

"You're such an amateur." Jason says, his expression hidden behind his helmet.

Jason slashes his replica blade once more, but just as Hope is preparing for another heavy-as-a-mountain strike, Jason's movements drastically speed up!

Jason's body blurs to the right. He flickers to Hope's right side and slashes at the Second Wordsmith, causing Hope's heart to leap in fright.

"Deflect!" Hope hurriedly shouts right before the sword hits him.

Jason's attack bounces off an invisible barrier that hastily projects around Hope's arm, but before Hope can breath a sigh of relief, a strange mirage-like after-image replays, and Jason's sword slashes downward once, twice, three more times!

RIIIIIP!

Jason slices Hope's right arm into thirds, severing it from his body, and causing agony to tear through Hope's mind.

In that single instant, Hope realizes he's been had! Jason's sword isn't what it seems to be on the surface!

"Teleport!" Hope shouts, disappearing and reappearing several miles into the distance. The moment he materializes, the pain of losing his arm surges into his brain, making him scream in pain. "Aaaargh!"

Jason teleports a short distance away, but he doesn't close the gap. He simply looks at Hope, his unseen face inscrutable to the Second Wordsmith.

"You're a disgrace." Jason says, his tone cold. "A hundred years inside your 'Hall of Heroes' and you're still a Wordsmith stuck in the First Level of Wordsmithing. I can see through your shallow repertoire of abilities with a single glance. Pathetic."

Every word Jason speaks infuriates Hope to his core! Hope quickly regrows his arm, and Jason watches without taking action, as if laughing at the thought Hope might have a chance.

"Eat my ass!" Hope growls. **"Regenerate! Strengthen! Empower!"** The hell makes you so confident in your 'superior' Wordsmithing, anyway?! You're doing the same shit as me!"

Jason chuckles softly under his breath.

"Haha. *Am I?*"

Jason lunges toward Hope again, having waited for his Clone to regenerate his left arm. Hope quickly summons a barrier of mana around himself, intending to prevent

Jason from sneak-attacking him again. Jason won't be able to break through Excalibur's barrier that easily!

Hardly has the thought entered Hope's mind when his pupils shrink to pinpricks. Jason dumbly charges directly at the barrier like an idiot, raises his sword, and cuts down...

His sword passes right through the hardened magical barrier as if it doesn't exist at all! Jason cuts through it like a practiced sushi chef slicing sashimi!

Hope quickly strikes at Jason's sword, and he even manages to deflect the blade, but he quickly realizes the attack just now wasn't a genuine threat to him.

Jason is toying with him.

"Wow, nice barrier." Jason says, his cold tone now carrying a sardonic edge. "Never seen that one before. Definitely wouldn't have made a note to prepare for it in case we ever came to blows. Come on, Hope! Got any tricks I *haven't* seen?"

From the very beginning of their duel, Jason has surprised and startled Hope time and time again.

The Second Wordsmith quickly realizes that Jason isn't playing around. He's been preparing for their battle for years.

There's only one thing that irks Hope...

"I thought you wanted me dead." Hope says. "Why let me regenerate my arm? I was defenseless."

"Were you?" Jason asks. "Maybe. But then again, maybe not. You do have that old bastard Solomon rattling around in your head. I might seem arrogant to you, but actually, I'm just being careful. I always assume you're capable of killing me at a moment's notice so that I can fight you as seriously as possible."

"Bullshit!" Hope exclaims. "You're treating this whole battle like it's a game."

Jason doesn't respond for several seconds.

When he does respond, his voice raises an octave, as if slightly excited.

"Hope, Hope, Hope. Don't you know? Every second here is 250 seconds inside Chrona..."

As Jason speaks, his Dronesmiths materialize around Hope, all six of them! While wearing the same armor as Jason, no longer do they wield differently colored swords.

Every single one is an exact replication of Jason's current appearance, making them effectively a six-times force multiplier!

"Last chance, Hope." Jason says. "No more fucking around. I'm going to kill you in the next thirty seconds if you don't start fighting like your life depends on it."

Hope's right eye twitches. He glances uneasily at the six Dronesmiths that have appeared, then his posture slightly relaxes.

"You know what? Fine. Your Wordsmithing is a little better than mine. But I'm still the one chosen by our predecessors. I'll claim victory today and take back everything I desire."

Hope's eyes shimmer with light. They start to glow a brilliant blue and white as he channels the power of the Heroes he's come to know within the Hall of Heroes.

At once, a series of phantasmal arms grow out of Hope's back. Each of these arms grips onto an ancient artifact, mainly consisting of martial weapons such as swords, spears, and axes, but one of them even turns out to be a bow, and another makes Jason's heart turn cold.

"What the- you THIEF! How DARE you! There's no chance Sir Lorent would go along willingly with your plan to fight me!"

In one of Hope's phantasmal arms, a large crimson halberd rests, its blade glowing with ominous bloody energy as Hope channels its true power.

"Well, on that, you're right." Hope says, shrugging. "But me and Solomon didn't give him much of a choice. It's fine. If you think about it, I can still technically be considered his aunt's husband. He's fighting for a good cause."

"The FUCK he is!" Jason roars.

No longer does he sound as calm and in control as before. The abuse of Sir Lorent, Phoebe's last 'living' relative, her precious nephew, touches on a reverse scale of offensiveness that drives Jason to the brink of rage!

All six Dronesmiths charge at Hope, and so does Jason. Under their encirclement, a furious melee breaks out!

The vacuum of the void prevents any noise from propagating. Without air to allow soundwaves to spread, only the dull impact of magical shockwaves rattle the brains and teeth of the combatants.

Over the next few minutes, Hope and Jason furiously battle! They charge at one another, retreating, flanking, faking each other out while growing used to each other's tricks and throwing new ones into the mix.

Solomon does a lot of heavy lifting for Hope. He analyzes the battle using the mental acceleration of his Crown and comes to an important realization.

[Jason's sword is similar to the one he granted to Corporal Henry!] Solomon hurriedly explains. [It can change 'forms' and wield unique abilities. But he has to change the settings using his thumb, or perhaps his mind. He can't use all of them at once, and the total number of abilities the sword can unleash are limited to a handful or less!]

Hope nods. He doesn't have time to chat with Solomon, not while manipulating his small army of phantom arms like some sort of eldritch horror monster.

Already, Hope has noted down three core abilities of Jason's sword, ones he's simply labeled [Mountain Smash], [Multistrike], and [Magic Nullification]. These abilities allow Jason to take on different threats, but they also might not be the only abilities his sword possesses.

After all, Henry's sword has five different 'colors', and those powers can be mixed and matched. For all Hope knows, Jason's sword is far better than Henry's.

In fact, it's extremely likely this is the case! Jason has had plenty of time to refine and execute on the concepts that made 'Artoria' so powerful. If he didn't have a far stronger version of that sword, then what the hell was he doing all that time inside Chrona?

Powerful strikes impact one another, sending out magical pulses that reach the nearby moon of Kelkin, as well as the slightly more distant world of Tarus II. These spatial quakes cause terrible restlessness and instability among the terrain, forcing the remaining leaders to call for an evacuation. The Wordsmiths battle, unaware of the devastation their powerful blows are unleashing.

Indeed, by this point, the two of them have touched upon the realm of Cosmic power. While neither Wordsmith is truly a Cosmic entity, the attacks they unleash, and the

defensive prowess of their armor and bodies allow them to match at least Bottom Level Cosmics in destructive capability.

Unfortunately for Jason, Hope discovers a minor but important weakness of his as they battle.

Jason always weakens his attacks when Sir Lorent's halberd comes within striking range!

As the duel continues, Hope begins deliberating using the threat of damaging Sir Lorent's halberd to force Jason to back off potentially dangerous attacks. When Jason gets too close to his body, Hope shamelessly moves the halberd in front of himself, grinning as Jason is forced to divert his attack to a more favorable vector for Hope.

"You piece of shit!" Jason shouts. "Lorent is a good man! He just wants to paint and make art! How can you treat him in this way?! If he dies, it'll be your fault!"

"But he won't die." Hope counters. "Because you're being *very* careful not to damage his artifact. Right, Jason? And really, if you *did* break it and he died, how would it be my fault? You'd be the one who landed the killing blow."

With Jason constantly forced to pull back, Hope smells an opportunity. He goes on the attack, charging at Jason and pressing his advantage.

Time after time, Hope draws closer and closer to Jason, cutting with Excalibur and using Solomon to predict which of the three forms Jason's sword will take. At the same time, he uses Sir Lorent's halberd as his defensive bulwark, always ensuring Jason can't close the gap.

With so many phantasmal arms sticking out of Hope's back and fighting semi-autonomously on their own, the only way to kill him is through a frontal attack. His back is theoretically safer than his stomach!

Suddenly, Hope lunges forward. He slashes Excalibur horizontally, and manages to land a terrible blow, slicing through Jason's Wordsmithium armor with chilling ease. He cuts across Jason's ribcage, biting deep into the First Wordsmith's flesh!

...But unfortunately for Hope, Jason switches positions stealthily with one of his Dronesmiths. Hope only half-bisects one of them, and it immediately teleports back to Chrona for repairs.

"Nice swap." Hope remarks blandly, before firing off a Word of Power to search for the 'real' Wordsmith. Unfortunately, all the remaining six Wordsmithium-clad 'drones' have the same aura. Hope finds that the trick which helped him uncover Jason's location earlier no longer works. Jason has learned from his previous mistake, and now all six of the remaining enemies possess the same aura.

"A cheap trick." Every single remaining 'drone' says at the same time, speaking in unison as they pause their assault. "But Hope, aren't you getting bored of this Basic Wordsmithing battle? Why don't I up the ante and reveal the power of Level Two Wordsmithing?"

"Level Two Wordsmithing?" Hope repeats, bewildered. "What does that even mean? How many 'levels' are there?"

"As of now, I'd say there's five." Jason says, speaking through all of the drones at once. "Level One is pretty simple. You speak a Word of Power, and a magical effect happens. It's basic stuff. It's also the best you can do, what with your clumsy and unskilled usage of your power."

"Fuck off!" Hope snarls, charging back at the Drones once more.

"Seems you don't believe me." Jason retorts. "That's fine. I'll just show you what Level Two Wordsmithing means, and we'll see if you can wrap your head around it without me explaining."

Jason then sighs dramatically. "Oh, who am I kidding? You've got Solomon there. I'm sure he'll figure it out for you."

"God, I'm so SICK of listening to you BLABBER!" Hope screams, as he and the Dronesmiths once again engage in battle.

On the world of Tarus II, the planet-quakes steadily grow more violent, causing some of the buildings with weaker foundations to suffer partial collapses. People and monsters end up trapped under the debris, forcing emergency crews to divert attention to rescue them. Unfortunately, some people end up dying, which results in their souls entering the Lazarus Tower.

But with the battle between Wordsmiths building in power, some begin to worry that the Lazarus Tower isn't safe. What if it collapses? Will people no longer be able to revive?

Unfortunately, this is the case. The Lazarus Tower uses the remnant artifact known as Valac's Lantern to capture the souls of the dead after they first die. It cannot save lives a second time, but the ability to give unlucky people a second chance at life, let alone resurrecting them in the powerful bodies of the Respected, makes it Tarus II's most valuable building.

However, the tower is deeply connected to the planet's core. It cannot be moved except by Jason or Hope using their Wordsmithing, so the human leaders are powerless to uproot it. They have no choice but to pray it won't crumble and kill all the souls trapped inside who have yet to revive.

It's during this time of crisis that an unlikely hero emerges to help people. Beelzebub reappears on Tarus II following the Maiuran War. He hurries around, flying at supersonic speeds to race from one crisis zone to another. Using carefully targeted beams of fire, he cuts through the debris of crumbled buildings and uses his superior Demon Emperor physique to pull trapped men, women, and children from the rubble.

Even so, Beelzebub quickly becomes flustered by just how many people need saving. He starts setting small fires around the city in order to Fireport between them, increasing the speed of jumping back and forth, but even so, he can only help so many people so fast.

"What the devil are those Wordsmith idiots doing up there?!" Beelzebub grumbles to himself as he lifts multiple tons of rubble off a trapped Felaris girl. With both her ankles broken, Beelzebub has to fly her over to the medical corps before he can move on to the next trapped victims.

Beelzebub directs a withering glare toward the Void above. Thanks to his keen demonic vision, he can just barely make out the faintest flashes of distant light, the tangible after-effects of Hope and Jason's battle. But it's the explosions of Bottom Cosmic power that light up the sky, giving him and the other demons the heebie-jeebies.

The amount of power Jason and Hope are outputting is truly terrifying!

"If only I could fly up there and slap some sense into them." Beelzebub mutters.

Unfortunately, his flames will not function properly in space due to the lack of oxygen, so he'd need to rely on solar heat to fly. And as a mortal, even if standing at the apex of said mortality, he is not immune to the void's vacuum. Flying into outer space would suffocate him and cause him to fall into a coma. His regenerative abilities would prevent him from dying, but it would surely be an agonizing experience.

Beelzebub arrives near the eastern side of the plateau. He finds Kiari already helping rescue some people with her oversized bugs.

"Beelzebub!" Kiari exclaims. "You're here! Great! I need you to handle the exobeast uprisings!"

"The what, now?" Beelzebub asks.

"Because of the Wordsmith's battle, exobeasts all over Tarus II have gone into a frenzy! They usually stay in their forests and leave us alone, but now they're going berserk! They've started charging toward the city, and barely anyone is strong enough to stop them!"

Beelzebub hesitates for a moment, torn between rescuing more people trapped in the rubble versus fighting battles against the exobeasts. He ultimately decides to do as Kiari says, and takes off, launching into the sky while a stream of fire follows in his wake.

Kiari has enough bugs to help excavate the injured. Only Beelzebub and precious few other champions can handle such massive exobeasts!

Indeed, it doesn't take longer than a minute for Beelzebub to spot a strange living tree in the distance, one with thousands of vines sprouting from its body. The monstrous and overgrown creature silently whips its vines around, each one striking the ground with enough force to shatter concrete. Humans and monsters flee for their lives, with none of them able to threaten the exobeast in the slightest.

Beelzebub sneers. "A wood-type creature. You shouldn't have threatened my pet humans, you rotten stump!"

The Emperor of Inferno furiously attacks the tree, spraying it with highly focused 3000-degree jets of flame that glow white-hot in the midday sunlight. The tree immediately ceases its attack on the tiny bipeds and turns to face its new threat.

Silent, never making a sound, the exobeast whips at Beelzebub multiple times, sometimes inflicting painful blows as one or two of its vines manage to connect, but typically suffering disastrous losses. Its deadly vines perish by the tens, causing its body to shudder and shake as pain transmits from its scorched limbs to its central core, or whatever vital organ it possesses with some relation to a brain.

Beelzebub shows no mercy. The sight of several dead humans nearby enrages him, and he charges directly at the tree, detonating an explosion of flame energy outward from the

center of his chest!

BOOM!!

Thousands of degrees of infernal hellfire scorch the tree to death, burning it to ashes as it collapses into its footprint. The humans who were fleeing pause to look at Beelzebub in amazement, shocked that humanity's former greatest enemy has become one of its most powerful champions!

But none of them have time to cheer. They continue running toward the Warpgate, hundreds of thousands of them, all moving to try and save themselves.

At the same time, flickers of light sometimes envelop families of humans and monsters, pulling them away. Those humans end up being taken to various inner dimensions of Camael's Cube, though surprisingly Fiona also opts to start teleporting carefully selected humans into Chrona as well.

During these uncertain times, she can no longer afford to be as cautious as before. Humanity's existence is at stake! It's more important that the humans are able to survive than that Chrona's secrecy continue being maintained.

Beelzebub turns away from the tree-like exobeast's corpse. He flies into the air and discovers a distant rock-like exobeast attacking other humans.

Beelzebub grimaces.

"Damn. That one's going to be a little harder."

With a sigh of resignation, he charges in, ready to resume his quest of saving lives.

All the while, he silently begins to forge a legend that will completely reshape the way humanity thinks of him...

Part 602: Devourer

Recommended Listening

Since the beginning of their battle, Jason has established a decisive power advantage over his clone. Time and time again, he reveals tricks and powers Hope never thought possible, showing the truth of his mastery over Wordsmithing.

But that pales in comparison to the true power he hasn't shown.

Jason is the True Wordsmith. Over the last 200 years inside Chrona, he has spent that time mastering his powers to a degree Hope cannot fathom. Even Solomon repeatedly expresses quiet surprise at how far his former pupil has evolved.

Jason and the five remaining Dronesmiths hover a short distance away from Hope, helmets obscuring their faces. Even so, Hope senses an aura of disdain from his other self. Jason is clearly unimpressed by Hope's clumsy use of Wordsmithing, and he makes no attempt to hide his thoughts on the matter.

Hope charges at one of Jason's drones, expecting their battle to go like before. Instead, the drone backs away, going on the defensive. When Hope slashes Excalibur, the drone simply flies backward even faster, evading the attack without trying to deflect it or strike back. All of the other drones pull away as well, making Hope frown.

"What's the matter? Scared, Jason?" Hope sneers furiously attacking the clone even faster. "Don't be a pussy! Fight me like a man!"

"Careful." All six 'Jasons' say in unison. "Your 'Neil' is showing."

At once, a change occurs. One of the drones swaps out its sword, exchanging it with a two-handed magical-looking staff with purple gems inset at the top of its frame. With intricate runic patterns etched onto its shaft, as well as golden drawings of creatures Hope can't quite make out, the staff appears no less formidable than the Dominion Rod itself.

The purple rod spooks Hope, making him pause his attack. He expected Jason to reveal a new facet of his Excalibur-clone, but instead, he summoned an entirely different weapon type; something Hope has never seen before.

What the hell is Jason cooking? Hope wonders.

"Truth be told," Jason himself says, now standing apart from his drones, "I'm actually not much of a swordsman. Phoebe and Fiona both still kick my ass any day of the week. I've been fighting you with a handicap all this time. My true calling is actually this bad boy. It will help show off the Wordsmithing you've become blind to, Hope."

Hope quickly examines the newly revealed 'Jason', but he isn't entirely certain if this is another of Jason's tricks, or it's the real Jason himself.

"Inspect!"

Hope's Word of Power gives him no clues. For all he knows, the staff-wielding Jason is one of his drones, or it might not be. Hope simply can't tell!

But at this point, Hope is beyond caring. Whether or not it's really Jason, Hope needs to destroy that one speaking, as well as the rest of the drones. The only way to truly eliminate Jason is by destroying all of his backups!

"Whatever!" Hope declares. "Do your worst!"

The moment the words leave Hope's mouth, Magus Jason acts. He starts waving his staff in a series of patterns while calling out the same Word of Power over and over again.

"Activate. Activate. Activate."

Swords materialize around Jason. Like a swarm of bees, their numbers increase from one all the way to twenty. Each sword acts on its own, like a living artifact. They buzz with energy, revolving around Jason like planets caught in his orbit.

Then, Jason charges at Hope, and all of the swords attack.

A hurricane of steel falls upon Hope. Previously, the Dronesmiths made him feel a little oppressed, but that pales in comparison to the feeling generated by these sentient swords.

One after another, relentlessly, a maelstrom of blades cuts, slashes, and stabs at Hope. His multi-armed form retaliates with a great fury, trying desperately to deflect and swat away the sometimes-annoying, sometimes-terrifying storm of swords.

"Deflect! Block! Barrier!" Hope shouts.

"Activate. Activate. Activate." Jason retorts.

Jason continues repeating the same Word of Power. This time, instead of summoning even more swords, they begin wielding new forms of magical power.

Some of them slash at Hope with thousand-degree flames.

Some strike at him with lightning blasts.

Others bite at his flanks with an icy chill.

Along with the summoned swords, Jason's five remaining drones join the action. They attack Hope from all the different angles, forcing him to dance to Jason's rhythm. Within just a minute of furious combat, Hope already starts to feel deeply oppressed.

Jason's method of fighting is unfair. Truly unfair!

Unlike Hope, who likes to fight his enemies head-on, Jason hangs back, directing the battle from a distance. He speaks the same Word of Power over and over again, causing new and unexpected effects to play out as his weapons change their forms and attack patterns constantly.

Sometimes, the swords become lances. Other times, they change into hammers, both small and large.

[This is insanity!] Hope exclaims, while desperately beating back the hurricane of weapons and drones attacking him from all sides. [I'm.... I'm going to have to take a risk!]

Solomon's tone remains grim. [Jason has you outmatched. Do whatever it takes to win!]

Hope hesitates for a short while. He tries to see if he can adapt to Jason's style of combat, but he just doesn't have the ability to split his attention in so many different directions, not even with the assistance of Solomon's Crown.

Even so, he does finally make a small gain.

[Jason's acting all goddamned coy about his 'superior' Wordsmithing, but I already know what this is!] Hope exclaims. [He cast Words of Power on objects, then 'activates' their effects! THAT'S his so-called super secret Wordsmithing bullshit?! I can do that too!!]

Naturally, even though Hope recognizes what Jason's so-called 'Second Level' is, he doesn't have time to sit down in the middle of their battle and make his own extra-special artifacts filled with latent magic effects.

But what really pisses Hope off is the sheer number of effects Jason continues to activate!

"Activate. Activate. Activate." Jason repeats, time after time.

Soon, beams of piercing energy start firing out of the swords. They bombard Hope from all directions, striking him and wounding him badly with lasers made of necrotic energy that burn his internal organs and make him howl in pain.

Tiny orbs of explosive power burst out of Jason's armor and fly at Hope faster than his mouth can react, exploding next to him and rocking his senses as they detonate with the force of grenades.

Just one of these explosions would blast an ordinary human into meat chunks. If it weren't for his nanite-infused body and Excalibur's aura protecting him, Hope would have died a thousand times over!

Finally, Hope's eyes flare with insight.

[It's time to get serious! Hammurabi, I'm counting on you!]

Hammurabi's voice booms in Hope's mind. [I shall do what I can.]

Hammurabi's artifact secretly activates at the exact same time as three of Jason's drones lunge at Hope, aiming to land killing blows.

The instant their swords are about to strike Hope, he lowers his defenses!

Jason's heart skips a beat. This unexpected move is too bizarre! He doesn't have a chance to stop his drones, and is left helpless as their swords impale Hope's heart, stomach, and cut at his neck to decapitate him.

Shik-shik-slash!

Hope remains motionless. The blades impale and cut him while beams of necrotic energy fly into his body unimpeded and Jason's artifact blades cut at all his exposed flanks.

An instant later, all hell breaks loose.

The drone that 'decapited' Hope instead finds its own head parted from its shoulders.

The drone aiming to stab Hope in the heart abruptly shudders as a powerful attack stabs into its chest, destroying several core parts of its chassis.

The drone that stabbed his stomach suffers an equally devastating setback.

As for Jason himself, hundreds of wounds suddenly erupt on his body, causing blinding pain to assault him from all directions. Tears, rips, cuts, and stabs slash at his

skin and muscles, biting into more than a dozen of his internal organs. The pain is so swift and immediate that he doesn't even have a chance to scream.

The wind is driven from Jason's body, causing him to soundlessly gasp, then cough up blood!

"Kuhuk!"

Jason shudders. His mind goes blank as the pain of a hundred deep and shallow cuts and stabs impale him. He nearly dies on the spot!

Luckily, a pre-determined magical effect inside his armor activates, momentarily empowering his internal organs. A wave of healing energy on par with Belial's strongest healing magic washes over him, rapidly sealing up his injuries and cleansing the necrosis that was about to erase his existence.

But all these effects still take time. Time that Hope immediately seeks to exploit.

A hungry look flashes inside Hope's eyes. Without hesitation, he ignores all the Dronesmiths around himself, and pounces at Jason!

"TELEPORT!"

Hope instantly flashes over to Jason's stunned, wounded, regenerating body. He slashes Excalibur at Jason's neck, grinning evilly as victory is finally within his grasp!

Then Jason shimmers away.

Hope's slash goes wide, cutting across the spot where Jason hovered only an instant earlier. His pupils shrink to pinpricks.

He's been had!

Jason reappears a second later, his body fully healed, but his helmet hiding a deep wariness within his gaze.

"You almost got me." Jason says solemnly. "I knew you had to have another trick up your sleeve. Whatever that was, it truly surprised me."

Hope sneers. "An eye for an eye, Jason. You barely escaped death just now. Your pitiful 'Level Two Wordsmithing' is nothing at all. If you think I only have one trick left, you're sorely mistaken. One more slip-up, and not even fifty levels of Wordsmithing will save you."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Jason says, his tone even. "But I did cheat a little. You forced me to use Level Three Wordsmithing without telling you. Magical effects that activate based upon pre-determined conditions are among my newest inventions. It saved my ass just now, and I have plenty more where that came from."

Hope glowers at his other self. [I didn't know Wordsmithing could be used like that. Doesn't this mean he can make his own artifacts?]

Solomon nods. [That's exactly what it means. It's what he's been doing the whole time. That staff he's holding is an artifact similar to the ones made by Camael. His armor is an artifact too, or perhaps several different artifacts. He doesn't need my artifact or any other predecessors', because he can make his own. Which also implies *you* could have been doing that all this time, too.]

Solomon's spoken words hide his true feelings beneath a subtle layer of subterfuge, one Hope might ordinarily pick up on if he weren't letting his emotions get the better of him.

But sadly, Hope is too hellbent on killing Jason to note Solomon's deeper meaning.

During this battle, the Knowledge-Seeker has grown to resent his pupil.

Compared to Jason's splendor, Hope's capabilities are far inferior. His mastery of Wordsmithing is sub-par. His emotions lead him by the nose, causing him to act far too thoughtlessly and constantly fall into Jason's traps. If it weren't for Excalibur's protection and the Crown accelerating his reaction speed, Hope would have died a hundred times by now.

Inside Hope's Mind Realm, Solomon glances at Hammurabi, seated a short distance away.

The two ancient kings exchange a glance. Unnoticed by Hope, both of them subtly shake their heads.

They've already determined that Hope is the weaker of the Wordsmiths. Even if Hope wins by wielding their powers, it will be a net loss for humanity. Solomon would rather Jason continue leading, using his newfound prowess and cunning to guide humanity toward a better future.

Sadly, Solomon also realizes this won't give him what he truly wants, which is the extinction of all demons. Jason is not keen on slaughtering their species, and so he would

not go along with Solomon's wishes.

Decisions, decisions...

Solomon sighs softly. In his heart, he knows Hope is the better choice for leading humanity if the sole goal is to wipe out the demons, but losing such a splendid Hero as Jason would be a terrible tragedy.

The best choice now would be to leave both of them alive and continue building up Hope so that he can someday achieve Solomon's primary objective. Once all the demons are dead, Hope's use will come to an end, and Solomon won't care what happens to him then.

[Hope.] Solomon says, his tone soft. [You've lost. It's over. Hammurabi's power didn't let you land the killing blow. Jason won't fall for it a second time. We need to retreat to fight another day.]

Hope's head flinches as if Solomon had shot him in the face. [What?!]

[It's the truth.] Solomon replies, their conversation happening at the speed of accelerated thought. Comparatively, Jason's body seems to move in slow motion. [I no longer believe we can win. Jason instantly recovered from a wound that should have killed him. If he can do that, then he won't die to any of the other tricks we've planned.]

A look of disbelief momentarily passes over Hope's face. [You're betraying me? Right now, when we're this close?! I nearly killed Jason a moment ago! I have him right where I want him!]

[I'm not betraying you!] Solomon protests. [It's just... there's no longer any point in fighting. Be realistic! You can't beat Jason! He prepared for this fight better than we did. I'm loathe to say it, but Jason put his two hundred years of prep time to better use than we did, and now he's reaping the rewards. If we continue fighting, we're sure to lose. You'll die!]

For a while, a time that feels like minutes, but in actuality isn't even a single second, Hope's mind races. He reels in shock from Solomon's words, unable to believe what the old man has dared to say.

That shock quickly passes.

Rage replaces it.

[NO. We're NOT giving up! Just because you've lost your nerve doesn't mean I have too!] Hope mentally roars. [I can kill him! I'm better than him! I have the power of the predecessors on my side! Don't you dare give up on me now!]

Solomon's eye twitches. A cold glint flickers in his iris.

[Fine. I guess I have to say it, then.]

Hope frowns, sensing that Solomon is no longer willing to hold back.

[The truth is,] Solomon says, [we've lost faith in you. Jason has completely overtaken you in combat and leadership capabilities. Jason has mastered his power, while you've floundered. I know it's hard to hear, my boy, but I blame myself. Jason was right. I've coddled you, and inadvertently slowed your own heroic progression. If it weren't for me, perhaps you could have beaten Jason to uncovering these 'levels of Wordsmithing'. If this battle continues, you won't have our full support, and you'll die. It's as simple as that.]

[So. You *are* betraying me.] Hope answers, his tone ice-cold.

[It's not a betrayal!] Solomon exclaims. [God dammit, Hope! Be realistic, boy! You can't win! You've lost! Your obsession with one-upping Jason has been getting out of hand over the years, and you've said some truly disturbing things during this battle. We all believe you need to take time to find yourself, think about what sort of a man you're becoming!]

Hope's expression becomes ice cold. Solomon's words no longer move his heart.

[You are one to talk, *Solomon*.] Hope thinks, as his hands faintly tremble with accumulating rage. [You think I don't know what you really want? You don't care about me. You never have. You think of me as a tool you can use for your revenge. All you care about is eliminating the demons. I played along because I thought your abilities would help me achieve my goals... but like Jason, it seems I've finally realized the poisoned dagger you represent, keeping you by my side.]

Solomon's expression turns to stone. [You're speaking in absolutes. I'm not your enemy, Hope. We both have our own goals, but all I've ever wanted was to help you become the best Wordsmith ever! If we leave here, you can regroup and train harder to-]

[No more words from you, *old man*.] Hope interrupts. [I've listened to your lectures for a hundred years. I've long grown tired of them. Always so preachy. Always acting

infallible, as if your shit didn't stink. And now you have the *balls* to admit you led me astray, yet think I should continue to value your counsel?]

Hope internally sneers.

[I only ever valued the power of your artifact. As for you yourself, you no longer have any real value to me.]

Jason watches from the side. For him, less than two seconds pass in realspace time.

"...Magical effects that activate based upon pre-determined conditions are among my newest inventions. It saved my ass just now, and I have plenty more when that came from." Jason says out loud.

Two seconds later, Hope's eyes abruptly and bizarrely snap open. A look of feral rage washes across his face, making Jason raise his guard.

Then, Hope shouts a Word of Power that leaves Jason confused. It is not the reaction he expected to his previous statement.

"DEVOUR!"

Jason blinks. *Devour? What is he up to now?*

Inside Hope's Mind Realm, Solomon's eyes shrink to pinpricks. [Hope! NO! NO!!]

His soul shakes and trembles. Unimaginable pain and agony rapidly begins eating at Solomon, ripping chunks of his ethereal body away and melting it into Hope's soul instead.

[Aaah! AAAAARRGH!]

Solomon shrieks in agony. His mind rapidly loses coherency, and the other Heroes inside Hope's Mind Realm jump backward, alarm palpable on their faces as they realize what Hope has just done.

[YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN IN THE WAY OF MY DESIRE, OLD MAN.] Hope roars in his head, his expression turning slightly demonic. [ALL THAT MATTERS IS KILLING JASON. YOU'RE NOT MY FRIEND. YOU'RE MY ENEMY. ALL MY ENEMIES MUST **DIE.**]

Solomon tries to speak, to beg for his life, but no words come out. More and more chunks rip out of his soul, and eventually, his consciousness fades to black.

Once he loses the ability to resist, the rest of his soul explodes into spiritual dust. Hope's soul foundation erupts with power.

In an instant, Hope gains all of Solomon's heroic abilities!

"UUUAAAH!!!"

Hope lifts his head and roars to the heavens. His eyes glow with hatred, rage, and satisfaction.

All at once, he fully taps into the power of Solomon's Crown. No longer does he need to use Solomon as a mediator between himself and the Crown's latent strengths, allowing his mind to accelerate its perception to a level he could never have previously fathomed.

Jason, watching from the side, feels his heart sink. All he sees is Hope shout a Word of Power, then roar like some sort of eldritch monster.

In Jason's heart, he senses something major has changed. Something vile and drastic, something that his clone should never have done.

"Always running his mouth!" Hope yells, before breaking out into a fit of demented laughter. "Hahahaha! Always mocking me, calling me 'boy', treating me like his puppet! But now who's LAUGHING, Solomon?! Me! ME! Hahaha! HAAHAHAHA!"

Jason's heart sinks into his stomach. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what Hope just did.

"No! Hope, you- you DIDN'T!"

"Oh, yes I DID!" Hope sneers, looking at Jason with an expression of naked malice. "Solomon is gone! His powers are mine! I should have done this a long time ago! Oh, it feels so GOOD! *So delicious!* Eating his soul has instantly made me more powerful than I ever could have dreamed!"

Hope's tongue snakes out of his mouth. He licks his lips while looking at Jason like a piece of juicy steak.

"Haha... I wonder what would happen if I ate your soul too, eh, Jason? You think I'd gain all those juicy new Wordsmithing abilities you've been working on? Oh, what a delicious twist that would be!"

"You murdering motherfucker!" Jason shouts back. "Solomon didn't deserve such a fate! How could you even do such a thing? Are you even still human?!"

"Human?" Hope repeats.

He pauses to think for a moment.

"Maybe I'm not human." Hope finally answers. "I'm better than a mere 'human'. I'm a HERO! A superior existence! The more souls I eat, the more powerful I'll become! All these stupid rules, all these limitations holding me back! So pointless! I should let myself be who I've always wanted to be!"

Jason's lip trembles. He looks at Hope like a monster, a true monster that has slithered out of the void.

"For Solomon's sake." Jason says slowly. "And for the sake of humanity, I cannot let you continue to live. I'm sorry, Hope. I wish it didn't have to be this way."

Hope laughs. "Haha. Just come at me, Jason. *If you dare.*"

Jason's clone no longer has a shred of sanity left.

He's become a skinwalker, a feral beast following its selfish desires without a hint of empathy.

He is a human no more.

Part 603: HUMAN NO MORE

Recommended Listening

Hope Hiro, the Second Wordsmith, and one of only two living Heroes walking the mortal plane... brutally murders his mentor and supposed friend, King Solomon.

The reaction from the other Heroic Souls inside his Mind Realm is swift and immediate.

[You monster!] Hammurabi cries. [How could you?! My pupil! SOLOMON!!]

[Evil child.] Arthur adds, his tone ice-cold. [We were wrong to support you.]

Jepthath is the one who reacts the most violently. [Vicious little BASTARD! How dare you?! What level of depravity have you fallen into?!]

Elizabeth Kindelmann, Jeremiah the Hermit, Moses and Aaron; all these heroes quickly hear and spread the news of Hope's atrocity. They react with shock and horror, swiftly condemning his heinous actions!

But at the same time, a disturbing smile snakes onto Hope's face as countless words of criticism come his way.

[*Quiet.*]

Hope speaks in a tone so sinister it chills all of them to their cores.

[I should have done this a long time ago.] Hope says, transmitting his words at the speed of thought. Solomon's Crown bolsters his mental speed to a level far faster than Jason's. [If any of you want to waste further words, I'll devour you next. I am this generation's Hero. You will do as I say... *or else.*]

Inside the Hall of Heroes, Hope's children obtain news of what has happened through their sole remaining link to the outside universe; Jepthath. They sit inside the Central Gardens, dazed expressions playing upon their faces.

"It can't be..." Blake says, his eyes losing focus. "Dad wouldn't- he couldn't..."

"Dad's always been a little weird when it came to Uncle Jason." Mandy replies. "But this... this... even Solomon? How could he..."

"Our father isn't a murderer!" Levi shouts, slamming his fist on a nearby boulder. His draconian strength causes him to shatter the rock into fragments, crushing them into powder. "Solomon must have... must have tried to trick him!"

Hammurabi's spirit, simultaneously inside the Hall of Heroes and Hope's Mind Realm, shakes his head. He lowers his eyes, disbelief in his heart.

"No. Solomon was as honest as ever. That lad was... I wish... I should have told him how much I cared. I let my pride get the better of me. Now I'll... never see Solomon again... that poor boy..."

A single second passes in realspace time. Jason watches Hope, his stomach sinking as he realizes the depths of his clone's depravity.

Suddenly, Jason's three remaining Dronesmiths attack. They lunge at Hope and swing their swords with reckless abandon.

In Hope's eyes, their movements are as sluggish as if they were mucking their way around in quicksand.

With mere twitches and careful adjustments to his body's positioning, Hope deftly dodges and deflects their attacks. He slithers like a cobra, then wields Excalibur with a precision far beyond what he previously displayed.

Jason sends his enchanted blades to attack, but they don't even have time to draw close before Hope utters his first Word of Power since devouring Solomon.

"Inferno!"

Excalibur ignites with a thousand-degree flame. Hope suddenly pirouettes in midair, spinning with the grace of a ballerina as he allows one of Jason's clones to swing a sword underneath his rising leg.

Then, Hope swings Excalibur at the drone's neck.

He beheads it!

Hope takes out yet another of the drones, leaving only two more, as well as Jason's small army of enchanted daggers.

Electrical bursts ring out. Plumes of fire engulf the area. Bursts of ice explode, sending shrapnel flying.

Jason furiously tries to pin Hope down, but his clone's movements are too precise and calculated. He easily battles the remaining drones and Jason's daggers without breaking a sweat.

"Hahahaha! Pathetic!" Hope laughs. "It feels good, Jason! Solomon was really holding back on me! Now I can see the world as he did! Your movements are as sluggish as your thoughts are transparent!"

Jason's heart pounds with rising fervor.

He tried to kill Hope. He came so close, but Hope's sudden reversal of fates ended up taking out two of Jason's drones, and nearly killed Jason from the backlash.

A bead of sweat drips down Jason's forehead. The trick Hope used earlier with Hammurabi was not something Jason expected, so he had no way to counter it. Now, even as he desperately tries to kill Hope, he also finds himself holding back. He doesn't understand the mechanism used to reverse his attacks, and charging in blindly could cause him to nearly die again!

If it wasn't for Fiona teleporting me into Chrona for a second, Hope would have beheaded me on the spot. Jason thinks. I need to find out what his reversal ability is. Is it one of the Heroes? Can it be used multiple times in a row? Does it have a cooldown period? Is it always active?

Minute begin to tick by. Jason works with Fiona to disentangle his two remaining drones while also furiously launching an assault on Hope from afar. Anytime Hope starts to move toward Jason, the First Wordsmith quickly puts distance between them.

That reversal ability can't be active all the time. Jason thinks, his mind racing as he starts to put the pieces together. Hope isn't charging at me recklessly. If he were truly capable of turning any attack his opponent launched back on them, then he'd just rush at me without fear for his life. That means there's a weakness I can exploit!

A year ago in realspace time, Jason began using a very basic ability to 'predict' things that could happen in the future using simple and complex deductive reasoning.

Thanks to the power of Wordsmithing, Jason's so-called demonic alter-ego *Smithy* becomes unusually valuable in this fight against his clone!

Jason's brain metaphorically revolves like a typhoon. Thoughts collide together, creating sparks inside his Mind Realm as his mental engines work together to examines

facts and clues, drawing links between established pieces of information.

I don't know what Heroes Hope has working under him. Jason thinks, as he dodges a beam of holy energy fired from Excalibur. But that reversal ability must belong to one of them.

The fight continues to rage. Jason swaps out his staff for the sword from earlier when Hope draws closer. A second later, the two of them start furiously attacking, with Hope using his accelerated perception to outplay Jason's swordsmanship over and over.

Sensing his imminent death, Jason scowls. Hope's ability to react in real-time has grown explosively.

Jason only has one way to retort.

"Activate!" Jason shouts.

An instant later, Jason's own perception of time speeds up. His eyes snap to the left and the right. Using his power of prediction, he starts estimating multiple different trajectories Excalibur is likely to travel, then he dodges several of them while swinging his own sword into the path of the rest.

CLANG CLANG CLANG!

A storm of collisions rings out in the vacuum, with both Wordsmiths slamming their blades together like a meat grinder.

Hope tries to kill Jason.

Jason tries to kill Hope.

But with Hope having devoured Solomon, his ability to combat the First Wordsmith rises to a level where they become almost exactly equal in combat strength.

Each time their blades impact one another, massive explosions of spiritual energy explode outward, firing toward Tarus II and intensifying the planetquakes ravaging Jason's homeworld.

The humans and monsters continue moving toward the Warpgate, but due to the battle between Wordsmiths, huge valleys and trenches rip open at various locations, creating 10-to-100 foot impassible gaps. Demons and monsters with flying abilities are easily able to bypass these canyons, but the relatively ordinary mundane humans have to take long detours to get around them.

Some people even fall inside, causing them severe injuries or even killing them!

This forces demons like Kiari and monsters like Yamir to divert some of their attention away from the rampaging exobeasts to saving the humans who have fallen tens of feet into the rips in the planet's surface.

But neither Jason nor Hope have any time to think about these things. They instead place every bit of their focus on killing one another, each one praying they'll be able to finish the other off and claim victory.

For the sake of themselves.

For the sake of humanity!

In Jason's eyes, Hope's blade moves ten different directions first, then it moves just once afterward as his predictive powers disentangle the possibilities of multiple future realities into a cohesive narrative. The longer he observes Hope's movements, the better his predictions become, allowing him to react faster and faster every minute!

Likewise, the more Hope notices Jason adapting to his movements, the more he struggles to change up his battle-style, shifting their dynamic once in a while to try and keep his other half on his toes.

"Deflect! Shift! Reorient! Sharpen! Explode!"

"Activate. Activate. Activate. Activate."

Hope constantly uses different Words of Power, but Jason never stops using the exact same one. Since the start of their battle, Jason has almost entirely only activated effects contained within his weapon or armor, frustrating Hope with just how many powers and latent abilities Jason seems to have stored within.

How many goddamned spells and enchantments has he put inside that single set of Wordsmithium armor?! Hope mentally cries out in frustration. This is fucking ridiculous! He keeps revealing new ones, too! All the time! There HAS to be a limit!

Jason's remaining drones hassle Hope from the sides. His enchanted blades doggedly pursue Hope, while Hope's multi-armed form battles all of them in unison.

But at the same time, Jason notices something important.

The other arms are not actually being controlled by Hope. They are manifested and controlled by the Heroes inside Hope's Mind Realm.

And those Heroes have become a lot less fervent in their support for Hope ever since he murdered Solomon.

Jason's prediction abilities continue to focus directly on the battle with Hope, but every so often, he spares a few thoughts for the meta-conditions of their battle, the behind-the-scenes circumstances that could make a crucial difference as the hours drag on.

The other Heroes may have supported Hope before, but I refuse to believe they would continue doing so after what he did to Solomon. Jason thinks. It's more likely they are only fighting now out of fear! They don't want to support Hope, but they don't want him to devour their souls next, either! They're not putting their all into the fight. If this keeps up, I might be able to spot an opening and go for the kill!

Jason isn't the only person who notices the weakening of Hope's combat abilities.

Hope does as well.

[Don't you bastards try to backstab me!] Hope exclaims. [Keep fighting! We're getting closer to killing Jason! I can sense it!]

Elizabeth Kindelmann grits her teeth. She fights a little harder, but in her heart, she feels deeply unnerved by the viciousness Hope has put on display. He is not acting like the same person she interacted with for the last hundred years, but she dares not speak up, lest he direct his wrath at her.

One of the Heroes, however, is not content with remaining silent.

Hammurabi glares with deep, unconcealed hatred out of Hope's eyes, making sure Hope can easily pick out his disgust from the forced blankness on the faces of the other Heroes.

[You worthless little devil.] Hammurabi spits, drool congealing at the edges of his teeth. [Solomon was my most precious pupil. You had NO right to murder him! I've decided I won't be helping you any more. If Jason comes close, my power will not shield you. Let him behead you and take revenge for Solomon's death! I will not remain quiet while you commit atrocities! My era has already come and gone! I won't cling to life just so a tyrant can wield my power like a bludgeon!]

Hope's expression turns nasty. [You *dare* talk back to me, old man?]

[Do your worst, demon!] Hammurabi roars. [Fellow Heroes! Stop assisting this fiend! We are not his pawns! Each of us is a proud legend of our own eras! We cannot cower to the whims of a narcissistic little murdering bastard just because we're afraid of death! We have already died once. What is another death at this point?! Give Jason a victory! If Hope wants to devour our souls, then let him! Show the universe that we Heroes are not the pitiful little lambs Hope wants us to be!]

Hope's heart palpitates with rage.

On the one hand, he'd love to kill Hammurabi. If this continues, Hammurabi's words will cause the other Heroes to grow a backbone. Should they all stop fighting at once, then Hope will lose to Jason without a doubt. He needs their help to stay in the battle!

But on the other hand, Hope has a minor problem getting in the way.

He can't find a lull in combat to kill Hammurabi!

With Jason no longer holding back, Hope just doesn't have a spare second to devour Hammurabi. And even if he did, he'd be vulnerable for a few seconds after assimilating Hammurabi's soul.

Jason might behead Hope before he could fully defeat Hammurabi in a soul battle.

This would obviously result in a complete loss for the Second Wordsmith.

Hope's eyes secretly flash. He uses Solomon's wisdom to quickly think of a hundred possibilities mid-battle, brainstorming a way he can cow and frighten the other Heroes, or otherwise control and force them to work for him.

Hammurabi's soul is as powerful as Solomon's was. Hope thinks. He and Arthur are going to be the hardest to subdue. Arthur has already started resisting me, but I've wielded Excalibur long enough to take over a portion of its control rights. The sword no longer has the power to easily reject me anymore. But the same isn't true of Hammurabi. If he fails to retaliate against one of Jason's crucial attacks, I'll die!

A vicious thought spreads inside Hope's mind. A way he can salvage the situation.

Fear is my greatest weapon. I can't hold back!

Without warning, Hope suddenly charges at Jason in a seemingly suicidal rush. Jason, about to stab Hope in the heart, reflexively pulls back, which actually surprises Hope.

Hope instantly understands his slight miscalculation. He expected Jason to attack, but Jason was still wary of Hammurabi's power. The First Wordsmith wouldn't want to take a risk and instantly lose the battle.

But that works just fine for Hope. As he charges at Jason, he suddenly shouts a Word of Power.

"Teleport!"

Hope vanishes, causing Jason to quickly look around, spreading out his senses. Expecting Hope to suddenly appear behind him or strike from a tricky angle, Jason is surprised when that doesn't happen.

"Locate." Jason says, turning his attention toward a certain direction in the pitch-black void.

He uncovers Hope's new location, more than a hundred miles in the distance, invisible against the backdrop of the cosmos.

As for Hope, having granted himself a few seconds of reprieve, he shouts another Word of Power.

"Devour!"

Hammurabi scowls. He grits his teeth, waiting for the magic that took Solomon's life to grab hold of his soul now and eradicate him from existence.

Instead, Elizabeth Kindelmann screams in horror. [Ahh! No, no!]

Hammurabi turns to look at her. But he doesn't see her body beginning to dissipate into particles of soul energy.

Instead, it's Jeremiah, the Mountain Hermit, who begins to fade.

The old man who kept to himself, who never hurt a soul, clutches his chest as he doubles over in pain. Jeremiah silently suffers as parts of his soul rapidly tear away, turning him into a paper doll riddled with holes.

[Hope, NO!] Hammurabi exclaims. [Not him! Not the Hermit! You FIEND!]

But his words fall upon deaf ears. A moment later, Jeremiah explodes into motes of light. Hope's eyes glow with insight as he gains control of all Jeremiah's powers, primarily his godlike vision. Combined with Solomon's mind, Hope becomes capable of perceiving things at a higher qualitative level than ever before!

[You SEE?!] Hope roars with a mixture of satisfaction and rage. [THAT'S what happens when you defy me! You want to keep running your mouth, Hammurabi?! Maybe you'll be next! Or maybe it will be someone else! You'd better do your job, or I'll make every last one of you suffer!]

Hammurabi's heart runs cold.

He was willing to sacrifice himself to make a point. He was willing to die if it meant defying the words of a tyrant.

But never did he imagine Hope would be so cold, so heartless as to murder *Jeremiah* of all people.

The kindly old Mountain Hermit. A man who enjoyed the solace of nature, who kept to his quiet forest and didn't bother anyone else.

How could it be him? How could Hope do such a thing?

[You... you are... a demon...] Hammurabi says slowly, feeling the blood drain from his face.

[*What was that?*] Hope hisses. [Care to repeat it? Want me to target someone else, Hammurabi?!]

[I... no... I didn't mean...]

[You'd better do as you're told.] Hope retorts, directing his metaphorical gaze at each of the Heroes inside his Mind Realm in turn. [You'd ALL better do as you're told. There's no more compromising here. There's no questioning my orders. I am this generation's HERO and that means you have to do as I say! If you don't, I'll just eat every last one of you!]

Hammurabi shudders. He and the other Heroes no longer feel as defiant as before. In fact, compared to Satan the Devil, Hope now seems far more vicious and beastlike than that ancient schemer ever did.

At least Satan had a 'code' he followed. Rules he lived by.

Hope seems to have lost all morality.

He's become a demon among demons. An archfiend even the ancient devils would tread lightly around.

Jason teleports a short distance away. He immediately senses that Hope's aura has changed again, making him seem noticeably more powerful.

"What did you do?" Jason asks. "What did you do, Hope?!"

"Why do people ask questions when they already know the answers?" Hope sneers. "I enjoyed the taste of a little *snack*. Now my powers are stronger than ever. You no longer have a prayer of winning this battle, Jason."

"They're not *your* powers." Jason snaps back, his heart darkening. "You're a thief. A liar. A demon wearing human skin. I don't know what changed you, but there's no saving the Hope I knew anymore."

"I've always been this way." Hope retorts. "I just... *held back*. I had a little too much 'you' in me. I wasn't willing to do whatever it took to achieve my desires. Now I am. I'm going to become the most powerful Hero who ever lived. Then I'll take over the Milky Way and make sure none will dare to defy me."

Excalibur glows brighter than before. Hope's eyes peer inside Jason's Wordsmithium, for the first time allowing him to look directly at his other half. No longer can Jason's armor conceal his face from his clone.

The two men look each other in the eyes. Hope's irises seem to glow a mixture of blue, red, and green, representing the taint and demonic inclinations that have infested his soul, while Jason's appear as bright and pure blue as ever.

"You're never going to win." Jason declares. "No matter how many souls you eat. No matter how many powers you steal. Because you're a directionless monster, lashing out with selfish greed. Humanity will never bend to a tyrant. They might fear you in the short term, but they will always resist you, even if only in their hearts. You'll have to sleep with one eye open, knowing someday someone would betray you. Maybe even your own wife and kids."

"Just wonderful, more platitudes and soft words." Hope sneers derisively. "Stuff the rest of what you're going to say right up your ass. I don't want to hear any of it."

"Oh, Hope." Jason says with a soft smile. "I know you don't."

Those words weren't meant for you. Jason thinks.

The remaining Heroes inside Hope's mind look at Jason silently. They still struggle with what they should do. Even Hammurabi looks less spirited than before.

But nevertheless, Jason's words strike a chord within their hearts.

Being devoured by Hope is a horrifying thought. Becoming the eternal soul-slaves to a madman is not something any of these ancient Heroes wishes to endure.

But compared with giving up their dignity, their will to live, and their Heroic virtues...

Faint sparks of light emerge within their souls.

Perhaps they may yet have a way to resist.

Hammurabi lowers his eyes.

To think Solomon abandoned this lad. My pupil had eyes but he could not see the true Hero before him all along.

"Enough yapping!" Hope roars. "This is it, Jason! This is the day you die!"

Hope shifts his gaze, aiming it at Excalibur.

"Focus! Empower! Siphon!"

Excalibur abruptly shines with a radiant light, then it dims as that light sucks into Hope's body.

His muscles grow, ever so slightly. Energy surges through his veins. His bones harden, and his tendons tighten as pure mana races into his very Existence.

"Oraaaa!!" Hope roars, lunging at Jason.

The final battle between man and beast reaches its decisive tipping point.

Part 604: Demonization

Fiona watches the battle play out in realspace. Her eyes flick from left to right as Blinker and Rebecca control the final remaining two Dronesmiths. Periodically, Fiona will take over Blinker's duties when the Fairy Queen tires out and needs to sleep, but usually Blinker remains the one controlling the drone.

Earlier, when there were more drones, some of the Psions helped out. Even Kar did, treating it like a game of life and death, though his heart clearly wasn't in the game when it came to potentially killing Hope. Even Hope's recent vile actions only served to ruin Kar's mood and make him retreat into himself, wandering over to the local Chrona lake to sit on the edge of the shoreline and ponder life's vicissitudes.

"The battle is really ramping up." Blinker says, keeping a steady eye on the painfully slow actions of the drones as they play out in realspace. "I still don't know how Jason managed to control ten of these things at once! Controlling a single one is already SO mentally taxing."

"Hope has sped up his movements and reaction speeds. The drones are not able to adequately keep up. We can only strike when his attention wavers to pull some pressure off Jason." Rebecca says, her tone giving no hints as to her thoughts on the situation. "Ultimately, this battle is Jason's to win or lose."

"Just keep doing what you need to do." Fiona replies. "The planetquakes are getting worse. I have to stay in contact with the remaining troops on Tarus II. It seems Jephthath's Legion have sprung into action more fervently. They're really helping speed things along. Hope doesn't know, but he's already completely lost Jephthath and Henry's allegiance. They're working together in secret to protect the people threatened by Hope's vicious attacks. Excalibur's power output is way too dangerous! If this battle goes on for another few hours, Tarus II is likely to suffer a partial environmental collapse. Perhaps even worse!"

"Both Wordsmiths are fighting at the levels of Bottom Cosmics." Rebecca points out. "At this level, the damage they can unleash is terrifying. Since they're not true Cosmics, they also aren't going to suffer any Akashic Backlashes due to the incidental damage caused by their battle. Neither of them has yet to properly Ascend."

Fiona blinks. "You know a surprising amount of information regarding that stuff."

"Not much more than you." Rebecca replies. "Miss Becker never spoke to me on this subject, and I imagine she knows much more than I do."

"Perhaps we'll have to talk to her after this." Fiona concludes.

* * *

On the surface of Tarus II, a few hundred feet from the Western Warpgate.

"Thanks for the assist!" Kiari exclaims, looking at the Legionnaire beside her with a sweet smile. "I didn't know you guys and gals were so strong! Even my bugs couldn't pull all that debris away so quickly!"

Lieutenant Lauren Mallard, one of the higher ranking Legionnaires, nods at Kiari brusquely. She projects a holographic map of the local area from a borrowed T-REX's wrist transmitter. "Let's not waste any words. Buildings keep collapsing, and lives are still in danger. I need you to send a swarm to this position here, and two clicks east on the other side of the city. One of those oversized spiders would help a lot, since we can put their webbing to good use pulling people out of a canyon."

"Sure. Anything else?" Kiari asks.

"The battle in orbit is only intensifying more and more. Lord Henry has decreed that we must all work together to assist the First Wordsmith. We're bringing more Legionnaires here to help- hm?"

Lauren glances at the Warpgate a short distance to the west. She frowns.

"Something wrong?" Kiari asks, following her gaze.

"It's... nothing." Lauren says hesitantly. "I thought I sensed something, but it was just the wind. Anyway, after you deal with those two situations, I need you to join Beelzebub to the north. There's another powerful exobeast rampaging, but it's a fire-type and his flames aren't having much effect."

"My bugs aren't very good against flames..." Kiari says hesitantly. "They'll get roasted."

"Anything helps. Lives are in danger." Lauren answers gruffly, in her usual military manner. "I need to go. We'll keep in touch."

"Okay! See you next time." Kiari chirps.

Recommended Listening

"You're gonna die Jason! You're gonna DIE!!"

Hope's attacks come at Jason like a hurricane. With the energy of Excalibur empowering him, Hope's nanite-infused body operates at a level of peak human physical fighting power it never has before. He greedily drinks in the power of the legendary blade's mana, elevating his skin, muscles, and bones to the highest level they will ever achieve.

His eyes snap to the left and right, up and down. His pupils seemingly leave blurs of movement as he tracks everything in his field of view. Even more frighteningly, his body is finally able to keep up with his heightened perception speed, and his sword-strikes rattle Jason's entire body when their weapons collide.

Jason's enchanted daggers strike at Hope, but Hope starts tanking some of them with his physical body. The magical blades glance right off his skin, due to the enhanced nanites buffed by Excalibur's mana. Forced to go on the defensive, Jason swaps out his sword for a new weapon he hasn't used yet.

Hope watches as, within a fraction of a second, Jason exchanges his sword for, of all things, a *bo staff*.

"Activate. Activate. Activate." Jason keeps saying, his own speed and power rising in an attempt to match Hope's.

Unfortunately, the First Wordsmith ends up fighting slightly on his back foot. Hope's power and natural perception speed are far above him. Only by relying on temporary boosts of mental speed enhancement can Jason keep up with his clone, while Hope never needs to worry about reactivating his now-natural abilities.

Even so, Jason's switch to a bo staff is not for nothing. He summons the staff and instantly begins spinning it around his body, revolving and whirling it at speeds far faster than any ordinary human could think of following with their eyes. Naturally, this does not apply to Hope, at least not immediately.

But soon, even Hope becomes astounded. The bo staff starts spinning with such deftness and dexterity that Hope loses sight of it every so often, failing to perceive where it will move and strike next.

The two men engage in a brutal close-quarters battle. Hope attacks Jason ferociously, but each time he strikes at Jason, multiple times per second, Jason deflects Excalibur with his enhanced bo staff. The First Wordsmith spins his body, seemingly dancing in the Void as he ducks and dodges Hope's attacks, sometimes jumping forward to smash his staff against Hope's face and body. But Hope also manages to deflect these attacks, resulting in a momentary stalemate.

"Impossible!" Hope shouts. "Swords, staves, magic, how are you practiced in so many areas?!"

Jason doesn't answer. He merely sneers beneath his helmet, an expression Hope perceives thanks to Jeremiah's newly acquired eyes.

In truth, Hope easily uncovers the truth of the matter. In the ancient world, human fighters could achieve mastery of a weapon if they wholeheartedly trained with it for five or so years, even dating back further than the ancient Roman Empire. Since Jason has had over two hundred years to train, he likely picked up several weapon masteries in his free time. He certainly won't match up to an ancient monster like one of the melee-focused Psions in terms of weapon proficiency, but compared to a fellow human like Hope, he's miles and miles ahead of them.

As the battle rages, Jason patiently observes Hope's demeanor. He realizes that Hope is not relying on the 'damage reversal' ability to protect himself, but instead his own hardened defenses.

Perhaps that power does belong to one of Hope's Heroes. Jason thinks. In which case, they must be resisting offering their powers to Hope. That means he's vulnerable!

Suddenly, in the middle of their furious melee, Jason spots a momentary opening. It appears for such a brief window that he almost misses it, but he still grabs his one chance to end the battle.

He swaps out his bo staff without hesitation, bringing back the sword and catching Hope off-guard.

Then Jason lunges at Hope, stabbing the sword right at Hope's heart!

SHIK!

Jason pierces Hope's heart, but he miscalculates!

Hammurabi activates his ability, Eye For an Eye, at just the right time!

"Cough!"

Jason's entire body seizes up. His own heart practically explodes, as if he had stupidly stabbed himself. His eyes blank out, and his emergency measures activate, working quickly to heal the damage.

But not quickly enough. Hope pounces on this opening, grinning wickedly as he swings his sword toward Jason's temporarily immobilized body.

Riiiiip!

Hope cuts through something, but it isn't Jason. One of Jason's two remaining Dronesmiths jumps into Excalibur's path, taking the hit for Jason. Hope roars with anger, shoves the drone away, and attacks again, only for the final remaining Drone to jump into his path, interrupting his certain victory before he can succeed.

"YOU!!" Hope roars.

Hope tries to kill this final Dronesmith like he did the previous one, but to his surprise, it puts up a lot more of a fight.

Piloted by Rebecca, a half-machine half-human hybrid with processing power on par with Solomon's Crown, the final Dronesmith is much faster and more capable of battling the Wordsmith, especially thanks to the time dilation slowing things down to a more manageable speed.

Rebecca pilots the last Dronesmith deftly, taking full manual control of its body as if she were there on the battlefield in person. Unlike Blinker and the other pilots, who issued commands remotely, Rebecca doesn't hesitate to sync up her digitized brain to the drone, essentially projecting her own will onto the battlefield in person.

Hope's multi-armed body fights hard, but the arms controlled by the Heroes inside Hope don't move as swiftly as they did before, allowing Rebecca a little more breathing room...

She fights for ten long seconds, buying Jason enough time to fully regenerate from his wounds and snap back to reality.

Unfortunately, just as Jason awakens, Hope finally breaks through Rebecca's impeccable defense, bisects her Dronesmith, and pushes through to lunge at Jason once more.

"No more robot slaves to protect you!" Hope laughs uproariously. "No more lucky saves! I've killed you twice, Jason! It's only gonna take one more time, and I'll be the ultimate winner of our battle!"

Jason grimaces. He switches back to the bo staff, returning to his impeccable defensive posture. Despite Hope's bold and boisterous words, the truth is his combat form is much worse than Jason's. The First Wordsmith has spent two hundred years inventing new technology, spiritually mastering his Wordsmithing, and practicing the art of battle and war. He has learned what he is capable of and mastered his body's limits.

Compared to Hope, who deftly wields Excalibur but has a far more limited viewpoint on the world, Jason is much more well-rounded. Even being weaker than his Clone's physical strength, he is still able to keep up with Hope all the same.

"You're so pathetic, Hope." Jason retorts. "You haven't landed any good hits this whole battle. You keep relying on someone else's power to make me strike myself. So which Hero is it? Whose ability are you stealing?"

Hope's eyes ignite with metaphorical fire. "Think I'll give you a hint so you can turn the tables? Fuck off! Stop prying for answers! You'll never get any!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Jason answers calmly.

Jason's mind revolves quickly. He assesses the battle with the help of processors built inside his Mind Realm, processors which enable his extremely practical 'prediction ability', enabling him to latch onto previous patterns and predict possible future events.

Hope glanced away for 0.73 seconds before replying. Possible tell for a lie: 14%.

Hope did not deny my claim about there being a Hero responsible for his 'reflection' ability. Likelihood my prediction is correct: 79%.

Hope's ability may have a cooldown. He relies on tanking physical damage directly, but reflects excessive damage using this external Hero's ability. Likelihood of statement being correct: 84%.

Unfortunately, Jason doesn't know about Hammurabi, nor does he know about any of the ancient Hero's abilities. Still, he is able to draw closer and closer to the truth every time Hope activates Hammurabi's power, allowing Jason to tighten a metaphorical noose around Hope's neck. If Hope were to understand how perceptive Jason has become, he might even be a little frightened.

Hope is, in many ways, no longer human. He has become a demon hellbent on devouring souls to empower himself.

But in some ways, Jason isn't entirely human himself, either. Taking lessons from Rebecca, he has semi-digitized parts of his brain, or more specifically his Mind Realm, building spiritual processors to handle vast quantities of real-time data. This has allowed him to accelerate his learning potential over time, master new weapons, new forms of combat, and other amazing feats Hope could never have dreamed of.

Unlike Hope, who has relied too much on the powers of other Heroes, Jason has leveraged his own Wordsmithing more and more, even growing to disdain the idea of using other people's powers.

Sure, Hammurabi might be a convenient way to reflect damage, but if Jason were to make his own damage reflection ability, it would be entirely under his own control. No doubt, after this battle concludes, and should he be the victor, he will go on to try and copy some of Hope's more inspired powers.

Eyes that can pierce through any barrier would certainly come in handy once in a while. Jason idly thinks.

While Jason reflects on the battle and other random things, Hope continues to grow more and more enraged.

No matter what tricks he pulls, he just can't kill Jason!

He tries. He really does.

He parries, stabs, slashes, teleports, flickers, pirouettes, and does all sorts of other fancy moves.

But each time, he fails to get past Jason's insane defensive techniques. The First Wordsmith's mastery of the bo staff borders on ridiculous! He spins it around his body so fast that Hope doesn't dare to get in close, lest he come under a hail of bone-shattering strikes that not even his enhanced nanites will protect him from.

[I can't break through. He's too strong!] Hope thinks. [Come on, you useless ancestors! What should I do? How can I beat him?]

But to Hope's chagrin, none of the other Heroes answer him. They all look away, averting their eyes as they continue to harden their hearts. No longer do they wish to serve him, but to see him fall.

This enrages Hope, but he doesn't have the time to devour anyone else, not with Jason remaining alert to the possibility of him doing so.

Hope's multi-armed body presents less and less of a threat the longer the battle drags on. With the Heroes inside his Mind Realm growing progressively less interested in fighting for his 'cause', their arms present almost no danger to Jason at all. Only Hope himself, wielding Excalibur, manages to pressure Jason.

[Useless! USELESS! All of you! Spineless fucking cowards!] Hope roars, even as nobody including Hammurabi deign to reply. [Do you want to die? DO YOU?!]

Elizabeth Kindelmann's eyes twitch. She directs a withering glare toward Hope, then resolutely abandons full control of the phantasmal arm she was manipulating.

[Do your worst.] Elizabeth says, closing her eyes as she waits for her inevitable death.

One by one, the other Heroes start to drop off, allowing their artifacts to go still. Jason instantly notices the rapid decline in movement behind Hope's body. His eyes shine with insight.

Hope is finally losing his grip on the other Heroes! They aren't willing to fight his dirty battles anymore. This also means his back is exposed! If I can just find a way past that horrid reflection ability, I can kill him!

Hope's situation slowly begins to unravel. The longer he fights Jason, the less of an advantage he holds. Jason dissects Hope's fighting style and begins to actively press his advantage, pushing hard to try and create an opening for himself to land the killing blow.

With his back metaphorically against a wall, Hope starts to feel desperate.

I can't kill him! I can't! This is ridiculous! I need information! I need to become better than him, and fast! But how? Should I devour another Hero?

Hope gnashes his teeth. *It's all because of his Wordsmithing! Jason has those 'levels' he's been playing coy about, but if I had all his Wordsmithing knowledge, I could easily destroy him! It would be trivial!*

Ah, that's right! I have Solomon's powers! If I just touch Jason, I can steal all the knowledge in his mind. I'll learn all his tricks and gain a decisive advantage!

With a newfound goal in mind, Hope suddenly fights more aggressively. Jason becomes slightly confused as Hope starts taking bigger risks, braving the storm of revolving bo staff blows to try and get closer to him.

Decisively, Jason pulls backward, frustrating Hope.

Shit! I can't get closer! That goddamned staff hits like a firetruck! He struck my chest and it felt like an anvil crushed my collarbone!

"Heal!" Hope shouts, patching up his injuries.

Jason smirks. "Ohhh, I see what's going on. You want to try and get close to me, touch me, and steal my memories. Hope, you're an *actual* fucking idiot. I'm wearing armor. Solomon's power only works on skin to skin contact! But I'll bet you didn't even know that, did you? Sorry to crush your dreams. Say, why don't you try using your Wordsmithing to take away my armor and weapon? Or have you also realized that won't work?"

Jason's taunts drill into Hope's ears painfully, enraging and frustrating him in equal measure. Hope's heart palpitates after realizing he's been seen through.

But even so, he needs a breakthrough! He needs to master Wordsmithing quickly! If he can just steal the knowledge of a superior Wordsmith, then he'll equalize the playing field. Combined with his two new Heroic abilities, he'll have an advantage Jason won't have a chance of breaking past!

But how? HOW?! Hope thinks.

"Disassemble! Disappear!" Hope shouts, trying to remove Jason's armor. To neither Wordsmith's surprise, Hope's Words of Power do absolutely nothing.

"Hahahaha!!" Jason laughs. "You actually did it! Oh my god, you're such an imbecile! Such a halfwit! Is that all you've got, Hope? I can see the end coming for you, little monster! Once I finish dissecting every part of your fighting style, I'll break your bones into powder! You won't have a chance in hell!"

"Shut the FUCK up!" Hope shouts, his words only sounding pathetic compared to Jason's taunts. "You haven't won, Jason!"

"Nope, not yet!" Jason says, as his smile disappears. "But soon. Soon I will. And then I'll finally be able to make up for the mistake of creating *you*."

Finally, Hope's rage cools. He continues striking at Jason and batting aside any dangerous bo staff hits, but his mind turns deathly calm.

Jason's right. He's going to win if this keeps up. And then he'll kill me. I won't be able to hide in the Hall of Heroes, not for long anyway. If I can uncover Chrona's hiding

location, he can uncover mine. That means I have to win. There's no going back now.

A full minute passes. The two men continue fighting furiously as Hope thinks a little, then a lot.

Suddenly, a spark lights up in his eyes.

That's it. That's it! Solomon's power... he had a limitation I don't. If I combine it with...

Hope abruptly taps into Jeremiah's ability. He peers through Jason's armor, past his face, and into the very core of his brain.

An instant later, lines of magic materialize inside Hope's eyes.

Solomon's power successfully activates!

"URGGHH!" Jason cries out, as a painful lance of magic pierces into his brain.

"Aaaaah!" Hope also cries out, as two hundred years of memories fly out of Jason's brain, cross the Void, and travel into Hope's Mind Realm.

In an instant, both men shudder and fall still. Jason's spinning bo staff careens away as he loses his grip on it, but so too does Excalibur fly out of Hope's grip.

Both men float in the depths of space for three long, painful seconds.

Then, they wake up.

Hope's eyes snap open. He coughs, feeling momentarily delirious as countless memories from Jason's life replay in his Mind's Eye. He stumbles slightly, then clumsily calls out a Word of Power.

"Return!"

Excalibur reappears in his grasp, but Hope's grip becomes somewhat shaky. He rapidly tries to digest Jason's memories, but there are so many that he can't quite do it all at once. He has to pierce through the noise to find the most pertinent information.

Jason, likewise, recalls his bo staff. Pain surges through his brain, making him wince and frown as he struggles to heal the damage. His armor's innate ability quickly succeeds, restoring him to his peak condition.

The two Wordsmiths fall silent. Jason instantly understands what Hope has done, and his expression falls. No longer does he smile.

"Hope. You..."

Hope's head spins from vertigo. He looks at Jason, comprehending more and more of Jason's last two hundred years as each second passes.

"What the *fuck*? Jason, you- holy *shit*. That's what you've been doing? All this time?"

Jason's heart turns cold.

"So you succeeded." Jason mutters. "You somehow activated Solomon's power. I should have seen it coming. It's my fault. I got complacent."

"Never mind all that." Hope says, looking at Jason with an increasingly complicated expression. "You've been busy. Very busy. Busier than me, and not by a little either."

"I have to prepare for every possible eventuality." Jason says coldly. "You weren't supposed to know about them. *No-one was*."

Despite his anger and hatred of Jason, for at least a moment, Hope can't help but look at Jason with a hint of respect.

"...I'll admit it, Jason. You are the better Wordsmith. *Were*, I suppose. That's over now. I know all your secrets. But don't worry. After I kill you, I'll take over and carry on your work. You have my solemn promise."

Jason straightens his posture. He slowly starts twirling his bo staff once again, but this time, a cruel hatred flickers in his eyes.

"I never really thought about it before, but now I see why Solomon was so hated." Jason remarks. "Those memories were personal to me. Emotional. You don't deserve to look at them."

"I understand now why Daisy meant so much to you." Hope says softly. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry for the hateful things I've said. Losing your daughter... I shouldn't have talked about her in that way."

"You've gone way too far to even bother with these shitty, feeble apologies." Jason replies. "Shove any further words right up your ass."

Hope nods.

He lifts Excalibur more decisively than before. Jason's memories continue to play out in Hope's mind as he uses Solomon's powers in conjunction with the Crown to rapidly peer beyond the veil, understanding how Jason thinks, plans, and fights.

"Fair enough, Jason. But it's fine if you give up now. I've already won."

Jason snarls.

"You haven't won *shit*."

Part 605: The Final Wordsmith

For the first time since the battle has begun, a serious lull occurs as Jason and Hope wisely take a short break to size each other up.

Jason, unsure how many secrets Hope is going to figure out in the next few minutes, but having already started making preparations in case Hope broke through his mental barrier, starts thinking up brand-new counter-measures. Hope might have his memories, and he may have started to close the information gap, but Jason's clone still needs time to swallow all that new information and adapt it to himself.

Hope, as Jason predicts, is wary about immediately attacking. Even with Solomon's power and the Crown's mental acceleration, he isn't able to comb through two hundred years of memories in only a minute or two. Indeed, to fully digest his gains, he might need several months or even years.

Solomon spent centuries honing his powers. He learned how to rapidly filter through mountains and galaxies worth of information, drilling down to key information his opponents possessed. Hope has barely had any time at all to learn how to use Solomon's powers, and as a result he isn't even one percent as efficient in sorting through all that information.

Even so, Solomon often swallowed the thoughts and memories of ancient monsters like the Archangels and Psions, entities who lived for millions, tens of millions, or even billions of years. Hope only needs to sort through a mere two hundred, so his burden is infinitely lighter than what Solomon had to bear when he accessed the memories of the Volgrim's Celestial Designer, Psymin Miralax.

"Interesting." Hope says, breaching the momentary silence. "So it's like that. Two hundred years of preparation time. Even Batman would look at you in awe."

"You have my memories now." Jason says, narrowing his eyes. "So, at the very least, you can see the truth about Neil. You know goddamn well I didn't kill him."

Hope's eye twitches. He flickers through some of Jason's most recent memories.

Then he frowns.

It's as Jason said. He *didn't* kill Neil.

Hope hesitates. He lightly bites his lower lip.

Then a look of savage anger flickers over his face.

"No. You didn't. But you wanted to. I can see that much. You had several plans for how you wanted to eliminate him. You and Fiona even workshopped a few strategies!"

"I never acted on them!" Jason protests. "It wasn't me who killed Neil. Are you going to judge me for a thought-crime?"

"Heh heh heh..." Hope gurgles in his throat. "You may not have killed Neil, but you *would have* eventually. So what if you weren't his ultimate killer?! You were waiting for a chance to strike! You still deserve to die! And after I'm done with you, I'll hunt down his real killer and slaughter them too!"

"You've crossed too many lines today, Hope." Jason says. "Even if I wanted to forgive you, I couldn't. You've lost all sense of humanity. You've given in to your sick, deluded conspiracy theories. You blame everyone else, even when the truth is right in front of you. Not even looking at my most precious memories can deter you."

"And you once again talk in that preachy, moral high ground way you always do." Hope retorts. "What are you gonna do, Jason? I know all your tricks now! Once I master all your Wordsmithing powers and combine them with my newly acquired abilities, I'll become unstoppable! What can a simple Wordsmith do against an Empowered Wordsmith?! I can think faster than you, strategize faster, and I'll know what you're planning before the thought even enters your mind!"

Jason straightens his posture. He lowers his bo staff at an angle, pointing its top end at the ground.

"So you know everything now? You have all my memories. You're 'unstoppable'. And you think that means I can't win?"

Hope frowns. He continues to rapidly flick through Jason's memories, to find out what he was planning for this battle, but he quickly becomes frustrated by a simple chaotic factor he never predicted.

Jason made FAR too many plans for the future!

Not only for this battle against Hope, but also for battles against other future threats.

Jason has spent two hundred years preparing contingency plans for the Demon Emperors, the Demon Deities, the High Psions, Founder Dosena herself, and even

enemies from beyond the depths of the Unknown.

Using his powers, Jason spent a surprising amount of time trying to investigate the situation inside other galaxies, such as Andromeda, the Cat's Eye, Messier, and other such places. His investigative magic often ended up firing at empty patches of the sky, but in a few cases he did manage to glean important pieces of information regarding his future threats.

All these actions accelerated following his travels with Calanthra, the Fairy Queen who took him through Yredelemnul's Eye into Ripspace. Jason learned a tiny hint about the Truths of the universe, causing him to divert some attention toward predicting future Threats.

But none of that matters to Hope right now. He instead focuses on trying to dig up as much of Jason's findings as he can so he can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat!

Instead, what Hope finds is disappointingly useless to him in the short term.

He uncovers memories of Jason training his swordsmanship, his mastery of the bo staff, daggers, and other such weapons. But these memories mean nothing to Hope, since thoughts cannot convey the full understanding of a training regimen, nor the instinctual movements provided by such training.

Watching a master train with the sword is practically useless compared to learning the sword in one's own way.

At the same time, Hope uncovers the truth about many of Jason's Wordsmithing tricks, but it turns out a huge number of them are heavily reliant on pre-made effects and other outcomes Hope doesn't have any time to replicate! What use is learning how to forge his own artifacts if he doesn't have the time to make one right now, in the middle of this crucial battle?!

But just as Hope has that thought, he finally discovers something useful amidst Jason's memories.

And that something also turns out to be immensely frustrating.

"Jason, you lying piece of shit!" Hope screams. "You fucker! You absolute fucker! All this time, I thought you were 'activating' effects hidden within your artifacts! But you weren't!! You were deceiving me the whole time!"

Jason's eyes glimmer. He realizes Hope is rapidly drilling down to the most dangerous Truths, the ones that will soon start giving him a decisive advantage in their final battle.

"That's right." Jason concedes. "I did deceive you. My Wordsmithium armor only has two effects, which you've no-doubt uncovered by now. On top of providing me incredible defense, it also provides an extreme burst of regeneration should I suffer a debilitating injury. And that's it. That's all there ever was."

Hope's heart sinks. He finally discovers the Five Levels of Wordsmithing, right as Jason reveals a core Truth he kept secret until this very moment.

The First Level: One may vocalize a Word of Power to create magic.

The Second Level: One may cast Words of Power onto oneself, others, or objects to temporarily or permanently enchant them, with different costs and gains.

The Third Level: One may multi-entangle multiple Words of Power at once, enhancing their effects, albeit with greater and greater chances of the combined effect fizzling out or becoming neutralized and worthless.

The Fourth Level: Words of Power are more dependent on Imagination than on anything else...

Hope's heart turns cold. It's only now that he realizes the truth behind Jason's so-called '**Activate**' Word of Power.

Jason was never *activating* effects inside his armor. Each time he spoke, he conjured a brand new magical ability.

An ability that should have been determined by the form of the word, yet never actually was.

"**Activate!**" Hope suddenly shouts, pointing his palm at Jason.

But when Hope tries it, nothing happens.

"**Activate! Activate!!!**"

Hope tries to summon a fireball, or cause an explosion, yet each time he tries, he miserably fails. His mana drops by the slightest margin, yet no magical effects actually play out.

"Ha... haha... hahaha..." Jason slowly laughs, an evil smile playing on his face. "You really are a *fucking imbecile*, Hope. Did you think it would be that easy? Steal my

knowledge, steal all my gains? It took me more than *fifty years* to comprehend the true profundities of Wordsmithing. Even if I taught you directly, it would still take at least ten."

Jason lifts up his chin and sneers at his dumbfounded clone.

"To vocalize a word, which holds an inherent meaning, while thinking of a different meaning entirely. This is no less than thinking two opposing thoughts at the same time. Solomon's powers might make it easier on you, but you still need training to do so. *And I'm not going to give you the time you need to learn.*"

Suddenly, Jason launches at Hope, accelerating from a dead stop to a full-bore bull rush as his bo staff swaps out for a massive golden spear.

"Explode!" Jason shouts.

Hope jumps in alarm. He quickly raises his defense, waiting for an explosion, but instead, his body abruptly jerks and spins to the side, exposing his flank.

What?! Shit! It wasn't an explosion at all! He tricked me! Hope thinks.

Jason slams his spear into Hope's mana barrier formed by Excalibur.

Clang!

The impact sends Hope flying! Jason doesn't use his magic-cutting blade, but instead the raw ramming power of his weapon to inflict serious damage on Excalibur's barrier integrity.

Not wanting to be caught off-guard again, Hope tries to do the same trick as Jason.

"Teleport!"

In his head, Hope tries to imagine sending a bullet flying at Jason at the speed of light while deceiving him with a fake Word of Power. Instead, the spell fizzles, causing nothing to happen.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit!" Hope curses.

"Come on, Hope! You have all my abilities! Use them against me!" Jason jeers, before stopping to face his clone once again.

"Elephant! Snake!"

Jason shouts out two bizarre Words of Power, and his body vanishes, turning invisible. Hope momentarily feels a Threat approaching, and raises his barrier to try and protect

himself once more.

"**Block!**" Hope shouts, no longer trying to bother with this nonsense fake-Wordsmithing. Since he can't replicate what Jason is doing, he might as well just use good-old honest Wordsmithing to protect himself.

He succeeds. Jason clashes against the barrier summoned by Hope, causing his invisible form to momentarily flicker and reveal itself. He vanishes again, but not before Hope shouts another Word of Power.

"**Reveal!**"

Nothing happens. Jason remains invisible.

"**Explode!**" Jason shouts, but Hope doesn't fall for the same trick twice. He readies himself for Jason to teleport into his blind spot, or for his body to get forcibly spun around...

But then something ridiculous happens.

A massive explosion detonates right in front of Hope, flash-banging him with a light as bright as a star and making him reel backward and shriek in pain. "Aaaaargh!"

"You are *such* a gullible goober!" Jason taunts again, his voice coming from multiple directions. "Who said I only LIE when using Words of Power, Hope?! Honest Words of Power hit harder! You should know that if you have my memories! Now you have to be on guard for lies and the truth in equal measure!"

Hope's mind reels. "**Heal!**" He shouts, repairing his damaged eyes and vision while also trying to remain on guard from Jason's rapidly more distorted words, coming from all different angles.

"If you could do this from the beginning, then why didn't you?!" Hope shouts angrily. "Were you only toying with me??"

"These powers were never meant for the likes of you." Jason replies. "But you forced my hand, Hope! You crossed a line you never should have! Now I'm going to bring down an anvil on top of your head!"

Before Hope can ask what the hell Jason means, his original self starts shouting bizarre single-syllable words he's never heard before.

"**Do! Rah! So! Mee! Lah! Hem! Shah!**"

At that moment, another crucial thought plays in Hope's head.

The Fifth Level: Wordsmithing may require Words of Power, but the Words themselves are merely vocalizations. The most important components of a Wordsmith's magic occur inside their Imagination.

It's only now that Hope realizes just how many secrets Jason was holding in reserve.

The First Wordsmith flickers back into existence, then he disappears again. He starts teleporting around, seemingly at random, with Hope catching only split-second glimpses of his after-images as Jason circles Hope like a group of sharks, each momentary reveal causing a flash of terror to jolt Hope's heart.

"Ahhhh!" Hope roars, tapping into Excalibur's magic. "I won't die here! I won't!"

He rushes at the most recent of Jason's after-images, but a powerful impact slams into Excalibur's barrier from behind, throwing him off-course. Then another impacts his right side, and another slams into his left.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Like a battleship being shelled from all sides, each impact transmits through Excalibur's barrier into the sword, then through Hope's hands into his body. His internal organs suffer painful blows, and Excalibur's seemingly 'infinite' energy starts to feel less and less infinite every second.

"Locate! Detect!" Hope shouts, but he fails to uncover Jason's hiding place.

"Mo! Rah! So! Lah!" Jason shouts, each new Word of Power coming from another direction.

Bullets blast Hope from all directions, slamming into his barrier at the speed of light. Thunderous spear strikes explode against the barrier, weakening them further.

"JASON!!" Hope roars. "You're forcing my hand! You son of a bitch!!"

Suddenly, Hope speaks another Word of Power.

"Extract!"

He summons a Heroic Artifact into his left hand, a massive blood-red spear that Jason will surely recognize instantly.

"One more move and he dies!" Hope screams. "Do you want Sir Lorent to die?! You'd better stop now, you bastard!"

Inside the flickering after-images, Jason glances at Hope.

He sees the fate of Sir Lorent being put into question.

It only takes him a split-second to make his decision.

[Fiona. Activate the Star-Net.]

Hope holds Lorent's spear protectively, not daring to actually kill him lest he lose his only prayer of surviving, but not wanting his threat to appear weak and feeble either. At this point, even if Hope were to devour all the other Heroes, he secretly worries he still won't be able to oppose Jason's rampant and overpowering usage of Wordsmithing.

Suddenly, a flicker of immense power transmits out of an unknown location. Hope's eyes snap onto this energy beam. He looks to the left in surprise as Jason's invisible form abruptly reveals itself when the light strikes him.

Golden energy harmlessly impacts Jason's Wordsmithium armor. The starlight super-enchants the platemail, empowering it far beyond its previous limits, even drilling into Jason's core body and pouring into several previously-placed, carefully calculated mana beads made to integrate with Jason's skeleton and internal organs.

For a brief second, Jason and Hope's eyes meet.

Then, Jason moves.

"...Huh?"

Hope mutters a single word, a badly phrased question, as something tears through his barrier and strikes his body.

He stares ahead distantly, uncomprehending.

...Huh?

He tries to speak, but fails. His mouth attempts to open but it remains unmoved.

Then his arms detach from his body.

He stares dumbly at this sight, his vision rapidly beginning to dim as he tries to understand what just happened.

Jason levitates behind Hope, his spear drawn. An instant later, he spins around, swaps out the spear for a sword, and begins quickly cutting, slicing, and hacking at his opponent's defeated form.

Slash slash slash!!

Jason cuts across Hope's neck. He severs his abdomen in half. He eviscerates both of Hope's arms, then his legs.

Jason's body moves like lightning. He carves across Hope like a meat grinder, dicing his clone into tens, hundreds, and then thousands of bits.

In an instant, the battle concludes.

Jason's empowered glowing golden body dims in luminosity.

He levitates in space, watching as a sickly mass of diced flesh spreads throughout the void, the last remnants of his clone's body.

Hope, the Second Wordsmith, is dead.

Despite the deceptively simple final win, Jason's heart palpitates with pain. The rush of empowering his body with the full power of the Star-Net was excruciating, like having his body thrown into a massive pot of water and boiled from head to toe. He shudders and shivers, feeling weaker than he's felt in a long time.

He looks at Hope's body, and he looks at the dozens of artifacts floating in the void that he took care not to damage.

Excalibur, in its full sized form, along with Sir Lorent's spear.

Solomon's Crown, carefully separated from the top of Hope's head by a razor-thin scalping swipe.

Hammurabi's miniature obelisk.

Many other tiny and shrunken Heroic artifacts Hope wore on a necklace...

Jason observes all of these. He reaches toward Excalibur, but an instant later, it vanishes.

Foop!

Then the other artifacts also vanish, one by one, in unison.

Foop, foop, foop!

Even in death, Hope was not totally useless. He planned a way for the artifacts to return to the Hall of Heroes, should his enemies attempt to steal them for themselves.

Only Lorent's Spear remains behind. Jason takes hold of it, sighing heavily as the Star-Net's after-effects start to hit him harder and harder by the second.

"Lorent. Are you alright?" Jason asks.

Inside the spear, Lorent's soul appears catatonic. He lays on the ground, motionless, badly injured by whatever means Hope used to control him.

"Don't worry." Jason mutters. "You're safe now. I'll fix you up. **Return.**"

Jason sends Lorent's artifact to Chrona.

Then, he sighs. His shoulders sag, and his exhaustion deepens further.

[I've sent Lorent to you.] Jason transmits. [Tell me about the galactic situation.]

Even though he's tired beyond belief, Jason still has to think of the bigger picture. He listens intently as Fiona tells him what's been happening during his battle.

[The aftershocks from your battle devastated Tarus II.] Fiona explains. [We've lost at least 6,000 people to the planet-quakes, and only managed to evacuate a quarter of the population.]

Jason nods. [Now that the battle is over, those quakes should be stopping soon. I'll go down there and see what I can fix.]

Jason coughs. "**Return.**"

He utters a Word of Power, causing his Wordsmithium armor to disappear and return to its holding place inside Chrona, where it can regenerate the damage it sustained from the Star-Net empowerment. With it gone, he breathes a little easier, no longer feeling suffocated by its weight.

[Hope isn't dead yet.] Jason says. [His soul will have become entangled inside the Lazarus Tower. I need to go there and take care of his... remnants.]

[What about losing the artifacts?] Fiona asks.

[They've gone to Hope's 'Hall of Heroes'.] Jason replies. [I can recover them later. With Hope gone, I can search out his hiding place. I'm not looking forward to talking to Amelia or their kids though.]

Fiona's reply takes a moment to arrive.

[...Do you feel guilty?]

[About killing Hope? Of course I do.] Jason answers, lowering his eyes. He stares at the mincemeat remains of his clone's corpse, feeling a little sick to his stomach. [I feel

like... like I just aborted a child. I was a terrible father. I didn't raise him with love. I let him live his own life, and in the end, he- what the hell?!

Jason's heart jumps.

In the midst of Hope's floating corpse, a strange, shadowy specter, barely visibly to the naked eye, but especially perceivable to Jason's spiritual senses, reveals itself.

[What... what the fuck is that?!] Jason asks, going on the alert. [Do you see that? There's a weird... goopy creature! It's right where Hope's brain used to be!]

Jason slowly raises his sword. He watches the strange creature with great trepidation. As he does, a single word transmits from its barely tangible form, past his defenses, into his mind.

[DE...SI...RE...]

[DE...SI...RE...]

[DE...SI...RE...]

Jason shivers. The creature's tone is both malevolent and seductive, like an ex-lover who only wishes for good things to happen to you, but for all the wrong reasons.

The more he looks at the creature, the more frightened he becomes.

[That thing... was it *inside* Hope? How did it survive my final attack?!]

Jason ponders carefully for a moment.

He thinks about a lot of things, like Hope's nonsensical motivations, his deep seated hatred, and how no amount of evidence would ever convince him to see Jason in a good light.

When Jason recalls all these incongruent facts, his predictive abilities activate, allowing him to put pieces together he was previously missing.

Is that why Hope acted the way he did? Was he being controlled by somebody, or something? Perhaps a demon? Perhaps even...

Suddenly, Fiona speaks in Jason's Mind Realm.

[JASON!! LOOK OUT! BEHIND-]

Jason's heart turns cold. The panic in her voice, before he even registered what she was saying, made him realize a life and death threat was upon him.

But before he could react...

BOOOOOM!!!

A massive blast of cosmic power smashes into Jason from behind. His vision turns white, and his body instantly evaporates.

Hope's body disappears, along with the sentient parasite.

Everything in the vicinity explodes with the power of a star initiating a supernova.

In a single instant, Jason, the First Wordsmith, dies.

The smoke clears. The light dissipates.

Two figures materialize.

Founder Dosena and Creator Demila.

[Just in time.] Creator Demila says, breathing a sigh of relief. [We're fortunate the Wordsmith was distracted.]

[Was that truly him?] Dosena asks, her expression muted. [It seems both Wordsmiths are accounted for. But do we know if they have any additional clones?]

[I assure you. There are only the two.] Demila says smoothly. [My investigation has revealed that the Wordsmiths are only able to make perfect clones by combining their powers with Solomon's Crown. Neither Wordsmith wanted any further competition between the two of them, so they refused to make additional copies of themselves.]

Dosena glances around. She examines the fractured remains of the Dronesmiths before nodding succinctly.

[Then it is done. Both Wordsmiths are dead. We must destroy the Lazarus Tower so they cannot revive. Only then will the Human Threat finally be rendered inert.]

She glances at Demila.

[You have finally provided a valuable service to the Volgrim Empire. Your warning came at a timely moment. Had you waited any longer, we might have missed our chance to exterminate these humans before they grew too powerful.]

Demila quickly bows her head. [I merely aim to serve the great Founders. It was your prescient decision-making that brought about this fortuitous outcome.]

Dosena resists the urge to roll all of her eyes. [The Executors will join us shortly. Come. Let us clean up the remnants of their sorry species.]

Fiona watches, her body frozen in shock, as the two High Psions casually reveal themselves, then start flying toward the helpless world of Tarus II.

"Jason..."

"Jason..."

"JASON!! NOOOO!!"

Part 606: Our Darkest Day

Inside the Labyrinth Core, anxiety etches itself onto the faces of every human present. The Demon Deities control the Labyrinth now, and their pressure is much higher than before thanks to Diablo's empowerment. Demons considered 'impure' become much weaker when inside the Labyrinth, while demons considered loyal to their species receive a substantial boost. Ordinary Emperors are now so strong that they are barely a half-step away from being considered Deities, while the Emperors aligned with humanity become as weak as Demon Dukes.

The humans and their allies tentatively flee into the Labyrinth, but their presence is tolerated, not preferred. Two of the remaining Demon Emperors, Fae and Crow, stand at the edges of the Core, watching as more and more humans stream inside. At the same time, phantasmal projections of Demon Deities levitate in the air at the top of the Core, standing on the ceiling while looking down on the humans below with disapproving eyes.

They don't make any moves to push the humans out. After all, the First Wordsmith's power has recently grown, revealing he has several cards hidden, and no Demon Emperor or Deity wants to get on his bad side. The Middle Cosmic demons might be able to shut him down or kill him if given the chance, but because of Diablo, they have all become attached to their homeworlds, unable to project power efficiently across intergalactic distances, except through their weakened Astral Avatars or portalling methods belonging to demons like Yardrat.

Demon Deity Auger looks at Demon Deity Melody, who stands with her arms crossed, glancing between the other Astral Deities present inside the Core. He frowns at her slightly, but says nothing.

During this time of turbulent turmoil, where humanity's two Wordsmiths are currently battling one another, the demon leaders have been forced to show restraint. Melody offers her tacit protection of the humans, not wanting to see tensions escalate, but she is heavily outnumbered by the other Deities. It is only because of the Wordsmiths and their future threat that she manages to hold fast against the other demons' pressure, but even she is beginning to feel a little out of her league in these dark times.

"Some of the humans have decided to relocate to Sharmur." Melody says, glancing at the other Demon Deities. "Nobody here has a problem with that. *Right?*"

"Of course not." Auger says, still eyeing her with disapproval. "Sharmur is your world. You may run it as you... see fit."

"I don't care how the humans decide to migrate, so long as it's not to my world." Yardrat adds. "You may mingle with these lesser beings as you please."

"Mmm." Melody grunts, nodding her head brusquely.

* * *

In the Core below, a small group of soldiers stands together, forming a light protective barrier around a woman seated in their center. Located off at the edge of the Core, in Neil's old room, Linda Hurent sits at his old desk, resting her elbows heavily while looking at a man across from her.

Lieutenant Diego Rivers, one of the higher ranking Legionnaires, stands on the other side of her desk, his arms crossed. Every so often, he relays new information regarding the battle between Wordsmiths. At the same time, due to wearing a top of the line T-REX, he also receives transmissions from other soldiers, as well as transmissions from Chrona. He serves as a unifying voice of three separate forces, giving Linda a clear overview on the battlefield's shifting positions.

Despite losing her husband only an hour prior, there is no sadness or anguish in Linda's eyes. Only a cold, hard ruthlessness.

Linda receives many different updates over the course of Jason and Hope's battle.

She and Chadwick, as well as other leaders, deliberate on what to do following Jason and Hope's battle. Ultimately, the winner will decide their course of action, with some people favoring re-unification of humanity's armies, and others desiring to maintain the current paradigm of 'Two Humanities'. Naturally, if Hope ends up the winner, he'll likely prefer forced reintegration, along with ostracizing traitors and demons, while Jason would likely prefer to keep the two separate.

Linda listens intently to Diego's updates. Thanks to his connection to Jephthah, he maintains a direct feed to the battle between Wordsmiths. He is also able to offer Linda an immediate update on one piece of crucial information.

"What did you say?" Linda asks, her gaze turning sharp. "Jason *didn't* kill Neil? You're certain?"

"Hope confirmed it." Diego nods. "He won't relent, though. Even after obtaining Jason's memories, he refuses to forgive the First Wordsmith. Jephthah is advising him to concede, but there's no room for reconciliation at this point."

"Of course there isn't. That stupid, brainless little..." Linda mutters, growling under her breath.

Some of the soldiers and commanders glance at one another out of the corners of their eyes. Hearing Linda curse Hope like this is surprising, since Neil would never do such a thing. But over the last hour, Linda's 'appreciation' for Hope has dwindled rapidly. Hearing about his brutal murder of two fellow Heroes has done him no favors in improving his image, and now that his entire reason for combating Jason has come into question, the absurdity of the situation slaps Linda across the face like a wet fish.

With Neil Adams gone, a surprising number of people look to Linda for support, as well as Chadwick. Despite Linda not formally being listed as commander of humanity's forces, she was close to Neil, and some people secretly pray she might make a decent substitute, while others privately think that just because she bears Neil's child, that doesn't make her qualified for such a high position. The latter group would prefer Magnus Chadwick take over instead.

As for Magnus himself, the portly Norwegian man does not seem particularly averse to either option. He was fine serving under Neil, and he would be fine with taking over in his stead too. But he holds a surprising amount of faith in Linda, and as such, he waits to see what she will do.

"We can't make any decisions yet." Linda says. "We have to wait until we see which Wordsmith will win. Only then-"

"Ah!" Diego suddenly exclaims, interrupting Linda. "Sorry, commander! It's just... Jason Hiro... defeated Hope! He killed him in a single strike!"

"What?" Linda asks, blinking twice. She sits up in her chair. "What do you mean?"

"I've lost visual on the battlefield." Diego explains. "Jephthah's artifact has already been recovered by the Hall of Heroes. But before Hope's death, I saw Jason unleash some sort of frightening cosmic power! He completely obliterated Hope in less than a second!"

Lord Jephthath says it was one of the most incredible feats a Hero has ever pulled off, even rivaling King Arthur!"

Magnus and Linda exchange glances. They look around at the various other leaders, slightly in disbelief.

"...If Hope is dead, Jason will be sure to eliminate his remnants inside the Lazarus Tower. Their battle is over, and we must follow the new leader. We will make no attempt to save Hope's soul."

She gestures to Chadwick.

"With their battle concluded, the evacuation is no longer necessary. Continue the rescue operations, but plan for a swift return to order within the next few hours. I want repair crews on site, ready to rebuild and reinforce wherever necessary. By the time-"

"Ah!" Diego exclaims again, once more interrupting Linda. She pauses mid-sentence and looks at him, knowing he probably wouldn't interrupt without a good reason.

The look of shock frozen on Diego's face instantly turns her heart cold.

"Jason... Jason Hiro... he's been killed!" Diego says, his face aghast. "This is straight from Chrona! Oh my god! It- it was... it was the Volgrim! The Psions ambushed Jason right after his battle! They're on their way to Tarus II as we speak!"

"WHAT?!" Chadwick shouts, standing up from his chair. "A betrayal?! We have to act quickly!"

"This is the worst case scenario!" Linda adds, also standing up. "Inform the Cubers! We need them to start teleporting high value assets off-planet at once. Increase the evacuation speed! Let's start funneling people to Sharmur and Pixiv right away!"

Just then, Diego's face scrunches up as he reveals even more bad news.

"The Psions- they've attacked the Tarus II warpgate! They're raining damnation upon Tarus II! We've lost our physical link to the planet!"

"Shit." Linda curses. "Then we can't hold back. Contact Chrona and the Hall of Heroes. Tell them to join in. Start teleporting people off-world immediately! We need to save as many lives as possible!"

On Tarus II, powerful beams of psionic energy lance down from the skies above. Each beam travels just below the speed of light, smashing into the planet's surface with thunderous fury.

The very first target struck is the Lazarus Tower. It crumbles into dust as the Psions obliterate its existence. Never again will the souls contained within walk the cosmos.

The next is the Warpgate leading to the Labyrinth Core. It isn't destroyed, but a powerful attack strikes it with enough force to throw off all its calibrations, destabilizing it and forcing a shutdown.

All across Tarus II, people begin to panic.

Screams and cries of fear go up all around the Fortress of Solitude. Not that long ago, Jason built a massive 'glass' barrier around the Upper Plateau city and reinforced it, but he later removed that barrier due to coming to a 'peace' agreement with the demons.

Now, its conspicuous absence ensures there isn't even the slightest protection for any human caught in the barrage of psionic missiles plunging from the skies above.

Emperor Kiari tries to help people. She rushes to and fro, but eventually, she disappears, teleported off-world by one of the Cube's internal matrices.

So too are Doctor Fathy and Grima taken away, along with many other semi-important individuals. Once they vanish, the teleportation links start targeting humans at random, pulling them away as quickly as possible.

* * *

Five thousand miles above the upper atmosphere, far from the planet, Founder Dosena glares at her compatriot, Creator Demila. The 7th-Level Psion breathes heavily as she summons another orb of psionic power, punches it, and causes hundreds of missiles to fall toward the planet below. Each one strikes with precision, blasting apart one or more humans at a time, but Demila's attacks gradually slow down and weaken. Her shoulders heave as pain wracks her body.

[F-Founder Dosena...] Demila says, turning to look at her superior. [The... The Akashic Backlash... it's too much... I can't keep going like this.]

[Stop your whining!] Dosena shouts. [Pathetic excuse for a Psion! Why do you think I brought you along and not one of the Executors? You're merely a Bottom Cosmic. The Akashic Backlash will be far milder compared to what they or I endure! Hurry up! More

and more humans are escaping every second. Founder Unarin made it clear we need to hunt down and kill *every* single human.]

Demila nods weakly. She hesitates, slowly charges up another barrage, then sends a few dozen beams of cosmic energy slamming into the surface below.

Dosena's eyes narrow. She grows incensed when she realizes that Demila's accuracy has declined even further.

[Stop putting on an act! You are a High Psion! Act your rank!]

Demila turns to look at her superior, weakness in her eyes. [Second Founder, I am trying, but the backlash... it is... truly too much. We should have brought weaker Psions...]

[Obviously.] Dosena growls. [Since at least THEY wouldn't have been as useless as you! Always the most pathetic excuse for a Psion. A million cycles old, yet you've failed to become Executor. You failed to hunt down a Demon Emperor, and now you're failing at this basic task! Gah! What a waste of space you've proven yourself to be!]

Dosena levitates forward, then shoves Demila aside.

[Just get out of my way! If you can't do it, then I will!]

[What? No, Second Founder, you can't!] Demila protests. [Your life will be in peril if you attack these mere mortals. Just wait until the Executors arrive with the reinforcements. They should be here soon.]

[We've already shut down the Warpgate. They will have to travel via a longer route.] Dosena counters. [I don't want to waste even a single time-unit. If you can't perform, then I will!]

Demila listens to Dosena's words. She offers a few feeble protests, but secretly her eyes glint with satisfaction.

Everything is going according to 'her' plan.

Even with Executor Nufaris traveling to a nearby star system via its Warpgate and then transferring to the Tarus sector through his superior spatial psionics, it'll still be at least five to ten minutes before he arrives.

That's more than enough time to spring the trap, Demila thinks.

With the Lazarus Tower obliterated on arrival, the Wordsmiths no longer have a chance of reviving. Their bodies have been scattered to ash, and their souls obliterated.

Now, all that remains is for Demila to eliminate her opposition and she can *rightfully* take her place at the top of Volgrim society...

Unaware of her junior's thoughts, Dosena levitates forward and rapidly begins charging up her power. After a few seconds, she fires more than a hundred beams of light that sweep across Tarus II's surface, crack the continental plates, and blast apart anything in their path. No matter how reinforced the building might be, simply getting grazed by her attack for a split second will cause any structure to dissipate into particles of light, along with the souls hiding inside.

Even so, despite her incredible power, Dosena does not attack wantonly and without restraint. Her powerful senses pick out all the humans, monsters, demons, and even the insects and other life forms. She deliberately targets only the humans, smashing their bodies and souls to pieces, killing them rapidly and without hesitation.

Demila's secret smug happiness deflates slightly when she realizes that despite her pretense of being severely injured by harming the mortals, Dosena actually appears to be entirely uninjured herself.

But how could that be possible? Surely, as a Middle Cosmic, she should be wracked with pain right now.

Dosena notices the confusion on her foolish junior's face.

[We Cosmics have a variety of ways to deal with the Akashic Backlash.] Dosena says, her words carrying a taunting edge. [I will pay dearly for this genocide, but only later. I developed a technique long ago to delay the effects of the Akashic Backlash for as long as possible.]

[So it's like that.] Demila says, bowing her head subserviently. [This foolish subordinate is ever impressed by your myriad methods, Second Founder.]

[Bah! Stop being 'impressed' and help me kill these insects!] Dosena counters.

Demila nods. She summons even weaker psionic attacks and sends them plunging toward the planet below.

When her attacks hit, she kills perhaps thirty ordinary humans, missing more than half her attacks. She sweats harder, acting as if the pain of the Akashic Backlash is truly too much for her to bear.

Dosena, meanwhile, begins to grow suspicious.

She is no fool. She has lived through many different ages and eras. Demila's pathetic nature has always been evident, but even for a stupid grunt like her, this act is simply too much.

Luckily, the Executors will arrive soon. At that point, Dosenia will have some choice questions for her lesser associate.

Dosenia continues raining fire and brimstone upon the world below. Humans perish every second, dying by the thousands, and even the tens of thousands.

[Half the humans are dead.] Demila says.

[A large number have escaped into the Labyrinth, and still others are being teleported off-world, likely to that 'cube'.] Dosenia counters. [After we finish here, I'll need to uncover its location, and annihilate any humans hiding within.]

Dosenia's attention wavers. As she speaks, one of her beams strafes across the center of the Fortress of Retribution. It smashes against the soil, pounding deep underground until it reaches a certain location with ten humans tied up together, all surrounding a certain metal box. The humans whimper and shiver, terrified out of their wits as the planet rumbles around them.

Dosenia, too busy trying to detect human life forms holistically, fails to notice that this clump of humans is extremely suspicious. Thoughtlessly, she sweeps an attack right over top of them...

An instant later, a light as bright as Tarus's star ignites.

Tarus II rumbles.

Then, it explodes.

Instantly, Dosenia snaps her eyes toward the sudden burst of super-ignited energy particles. She hastily taps into her powers, flickers a light-second away, then violently shudders as the full power of an Akashic Backlash tears through her body and veins.

Tarus II super-ignites, its core instantly detonating as if it were a miniature supernova.

Every single life-form still on the planet evaporates, turning to space dust. The light blinds Demila, and she too teleports away, closing her eyes and reaching out with her senses to try and detect Founder Dosenia.

When she does, hunger emerges in her eyes. Demila detects Dosena's lifeless body floating in the Void, utterly incapacitated as all the power in her soul becomes locked away by a power Beyond Cosmic.

There she is! Demila thinks.

She ignores the planet exploding behind her and rushes toward the Second Founder.

[Second Founder! Are you alright?] Demila asks, concern thick in her voice.

But just before she can arrive, another Psion emerges from the Void, appearing between her and Dosena.

Demila abruptly jerks to a halt, looking at the newcomer with surprise.

[Executor Nufaris!] Demila exclaims, quickly making sure to put some pleasure in her tone. [You came just in time! Something happened! Tarus II-]

[I am aware of all that has transpired.] Executor Nufaris says, his pitch-black skin making him seemingly blend in with the Void. He looks down on Demila with eyes full of cunning, seemingly peering right through her very soul. [It seems there was a super-ignition of Trifrancium on the planet's surface. I have witnessed similar detonations before.]

The exploding form of Tarus II provides ample luminosity, mere tens of thousands of miles from the planet's former spatial position. Demila feels a chill as she sees Nufaris's piercing gaze looking deep within her bones.

[Yes! That is... what I was going to say.] Demila says, lowering her gaze. [Your wisdom is truly infinite.]

[Mmm.] Nufaris replies, still looking at Demila coldly.

Without another word, he flickers over to Dosena's position, then gently wraps his psionic power around her. At that moment, two more Executors emerge, protectively hovering around the Second Founder. Executors Riley and Sartran both appear, looking at Demila with suspicion-filled eyes.

[Executors?] Demila asks, suddenly feeling that things are taking a terrible turn. [Is... something wrong?]

[There have been a few questions regarding your recent reports.] Nufaris says, his tone dry. [Of course, we would never want to accuse a junior of any indiscretion without cause,

but we intend to return with you to the homeworld for questioning. Creator Demila, do you willingly submit yourself for this investigation?]

Demila tries to keep her tone even. She glances at the Second Founder, her helpless form just barely out of reach, and then back at Nufaris.

[Of... of course. I am always ready to lay bare my Truths for the Highest Executor.]

[Your 'Truths', yes. I am certain those are still a valuable commodity in this day and age.] Nufaris says, a faint sneer appearing on his face.

By now, Demila cannot deny the facts any longer.

The other Executors have suspected her involvement with Gressil for a while. Perhaps they've been waiting for her to slip up.

And now, once she returns with them to Volgarius, she'll be on the chopping block for sure.

[But... what about the humans?] Demila asks, gesturing back toward the expanding bubble of heat and plasma that was once Tarus II.

[Executor Riley will handle the humans.] Nufaris says. [I am here to retrieve and heal Founder Dosena's injured body. As for Sartran... he will 'escort' you back to Volgarius.]

Executor Riley crosses her arms, assuming a lofty posture.

[Not many humans remain now. Eliminating them will be my pleasure.]

Sartran, meanwhile appears conflicted. [Are we continuing with the human's genocide? The entire premise was based on Demila's testimony, and she is no longer reliable.]

[The Wordsmiths are dead.] Riley says. [They were the cornerstone of our cooperation with their species. Even if Demila may have lied about a few things, the fact is that the humans did fix their Flaw, so more Heroes will arise. We cannot allow them to continue propagating.]

Demila shudders.

The Executors know. They know everything!

Well, perhaps not 'everything', but they have clearly not taken her at her word for some time. She was foolish to think they would!

[Hm?] Nufaris grunts, glancing toward Tarus II's exploding remnants. [What is that?]

His words cause the other Psions to look backward. Even Demila follows their gaze, confused.

Inside the center of the exploding planetary mass, a noticeable blip of metaphysical energy appears, causing the Psions to flinch.

[A Cosmic signature?] Sartran asks. [It's rapidly spiking in power.]

[What entity could possibly survive inside the remnants of a Trifrancium detonation?] Riley asks.

Seconds later, something unbelievable happens.

The heat mass erupting outward abruptly freezes, then it begins to reverse course, sucking back toward an unknown position somewhere in the center of the detonation.

[What in the Founders' names?!] Demila gasps. [It's a Bottom Cosmic! No, it's growing stronger every second!]

[Bottom Cosmic... Low Cosmic... by the ancients, it's... it's approaching the realm of Middle Cosmic!] Nufaris exclaims, showing emotions for the first time since his arrival.

From deep within the collapsing sphere of Trifrancic heat, a shriek of primal rage erupts.

"AAAAAAHH!!"

The rage contained within this screams visibly frightens all the Psions. Even Demila experiences a wave of horror at the pure, unadulterated fury contained within that scream.

[No! I can't believe it!] Sartran shouts. [That voice! I recognize it! It's... it's...]

"VOL!"

"GRIM!"

"BAS!"

"TARDS!!"

Each syllable punches through the Void, impacting the Psions' psyches as if they were enduring psychic attacks. They flinch and hurriedly shield their bodies, looking toward the voice's source with growing horror.

[By the unholy wrath of the Sentinels!] Sartran shrieks. [It's Beelzebub! How did he survive such an explosion?! He must be absorbing the heat! He's- he's a Middle Cosmic now!!]

The last remnants of Tarus II's heated remains finally absorb into the figure at its center. Beelzebub, no longer a mere Emperor, explodes with a blinding light, becoming even brighter than Tarus II at the moment of its explosion. The Psions hurriedly look away, not daring to gaze directly into the full fury of his rage.

"YOU PSIONS WILL PAY!!" Beelzebub roars. "MY HUMANS! YOU KILLED MY HUMANS! MY FRIENDS! I'LL BURN YOUR EMPIRE TO ASH!!"

Nufaris doesn't hesitate.

[RUN!]

He grabs the Second Founder and flees right before Beelzebub shoots flames behind himself, turning into a fiery comet rocketing through the Void, hot on the tail of humanity's murderers.

The Cosmic Flame Deity is thus born...

Part 607: Our Brightest Night

Beelzebub awoke inside a blinding white void of light. He found himself laying on his back, and when he sat up, he had no idea where he even was.

A massive mountain loomed to the east, while fields of flaming trees burned all around him. Curious, Beelzebub stood up and walked over to the trees, but he couldn't make heads or tails of how their perpetually flaming branches worked.

"Wait, what am I doing here?" Beelzebub wondered. "Ah, the humans! Tarus II! Wasn't the planet under attack? Then... where is this place?"

"Hey, kid." A voice said from behind Beelzebub. "You're finally awake."

The young Demon Emperor turned around. He raised an eyebrow when he saw a strange, ghost-like, faceless and featureless 'person' standing behind him.

"Who are you?" Beelzebub asked. "No, *what* are you?"

"I'm the Creator." The person said, spreading his arms. "And this is the Cosmic Realm. I've been expecting your arrival for a long time."

"The Creator?" Beelzebub asked. "Wait, so you're that *prick* who kept fucking with me whenever I blew myself up? Does that mean I'm... dead?!"

"Not dead." The Creator answered. "You are a Candidate. A potential future Ruler of the Milky Way. And now, you've finally crossed the extraordinary threshold, becoming a Cosmic."

He gestured around himself grandly.

"These are Akasha's Plains. And that over there is the Staircase of Ascension. By climbing it, you can begin your journey to achieving ultimate power."

"I don't have time to climb some staircase!" Beelzebub shouted. "Tarus II is under attack. I have to revive, regenerate, and help push back whoever is responsible!"

"Ah. So you don't know." The Creator said, his tone mysterious.

"Don't know... what?" Beelzebub asked.

A moment of silence followed.

"Tarus II is gone. It was attacked by the Psions. They killed Jason Hiro, and they came to destroy the planet afterward. Now that it's gone, you have begun absorbing its essence into your body to empower yourself. This allowed you to push past the barrier of Demon Overlord into the realm of Demon Deity. And from there, your soul has entered the Cosmic Realm, where you can uplift yourself to a higher level."

Beelzebub blinked several times.

"What- hold on, you just hit me with a LOT there, old man! So it was the Psions who attacked Tarus II? The Psions?! But they were supposed to be our allies! And what's all this about a 'Demon Overlord'? I'm an Emperor, you numbskull."

The Creator's faceless expression didn't change, but Beelzebub somehow felt as if he could perceive a faint smile emanating from the Creator's visage.

"Oh, how little you know. The truth is, Beelzebub, your species came to power via soul manipulation. All along, you were stuck at the fifth level of Mortal Power, calling yourselves Emperors and wondering when you could become deities while entirely neglecting the final step to achieving that power."

The Creator calmly continued to speak, stunning Beelzebub with this new information. "Imps, Grunts, Lords, Barons, Dukes, and Emperors. The next rank after Emperor is Overlord, not Deity, but because of your soul manipulation, your species never managed to uncover this Truth."

Beelzebub's skin color lightened slightly as the blood rushed to his head. "So... that's why we always had such trouble trying to become Deities. We were effectively trying to skip past an entire rank we didn't know existed!"

"Indeed. But you, kid, lucked into a new path of progression. Because of your detonation during Stormbringer, you eradicated every last soul within yourself, returning to the level of a lowly mortal. The seed of the Phoenix called upon you, and when the Phoenix's Remnant found you, it flew into your body, directly empowering you to the rank of Overlord."

The Creator paused for a moment, allowing Beelzebub to digest his words.

"You are a True Demon. A *Daemon*, if you will. Almost a separate species, or rather, the species your people could have become if the allure and taint of soul manipulation had not swallowed them from the beginning. And who knows? Perhaps Archangel

Raphael secretly pushed your people into that direction to subtly weaken your future potential. By making soul manipulation seem like a terrible and easy path to power, he may have influenced Satan to deliberately push the demons into this path of depravity."

Beelzebub lowered his eyes.

"A Demon Overlord. The first one ever..."

"No." The Creator replied. "Satan the Devil was the first Overlord. His wife, Belial, was empowered by the ancient dragon Leviathan, and nearly attained that rank herself. As someone who never practiced the art of soul manipulation, she could have reached the final level of mortal power had she known it existed. But she grew complacent, or perhaps she never cared for obtaining such power in the first place. Either way, as of now, you are the *second* Demon Overlord to have ever walked the cosmos."

"But I'm beyond that now, aren't I?" Beelzebub asks. "And this place... this Cosmic Realm. It's where I can ascend to the rank of Demon Deity."

The Creator gestured behind himself to the Staircase of Ascension.

"The sooner you begin, the sooner you can return to Realspace and exact your revenge. The Psions attacked Tarus II. They blew it up for their own selfish goals, and they even killed the First Wordsmith. As such, it is your chance to shine. You must use that hatred you feel to uplift your flames to the next level!"

Beelzebub's eyes narrow. "Those bastard Psions. You're right! I have to make them pay. I have to!"

The Creator lead Beelzebub to the Staircase of Ascension. After explaining the rules, he levitated to the side of the staircase, watching as the Overlord of Fission begin to sprint up the staircase, grimacing whenever divine bolts of lightning impacted his body, but still pushing as hard as possible to climb the staircase with all his strength.

"Good. Good!" The Creator exclaimed. "Keep climbing! Ten steps! Twenty!"

In the midst of Beelzebub's climb, a second Ruler approached to watch the Creator's newest asset making his way toward the pinnacle of ascension.

"Heh heh. What's this? Another little Candidate?" The Dark One asked, his winged bipedal body flying close to the Creator. "Ready to embarrass yourself again, Creator? After that pitiful- what was its designation? *Melfitop*?"

"Mephisto." The Creator replied, not deigning to give any credence to the Dark One's words.

"Haha, yes. Mephisto. That was its name! That sad excuse for a Cosmic hasn't left you too embarrassed to watch? Oh, your skin is thicker than I expected, you half dead ghost. It won't be long now before your Individuality crumbles. Then your galaxy will be ripe for the taking!"

The Creator ignored the Dark One, simply watching as Beelzebub pounced upon the 30th step, then continued to jump to the next one.

"Underestimate Beelzebub at your own peril." The Creator said. "I believe he will someday stomp your best Cosmics into the dirt."

"Hahahaha!!" The Dark One cackled. "Oh, I would love to see him try! Hmm?"

Finally turning his attention to Beelzebub's climb, the Dark One frowned. He crossed his huge, muscular arms and watched as Beelzebub reached the 40th step.

"...Well. His climbing speed isn't bad. I'll give you that."

But Beelzebub didn't stop there. He continued to climb.

The fiftieth step.

The sixtieth step.

The seventieth!

Soon, multiple other Rulers began to approach, each one assuming the simplistic body of an orb of light. Their celestial gazes fell upon the newest Cosmic to challenge Akasha's staircase.

"This entity is only climbing for the first time." Inquisitor, the Ruler of Messier said. "Its ascension speed is abnormal."

"I have detected an extreme level of bodily regeneration within its physical frame." The Absolute, Ruler of Triangulum, said. "This is aiding it in resisting and absorbing the Divine Lightning."

The Creator frowned. He did not enjoy the presence of these other Rulers, but neither could he force them to leave.

Instead, he floated downward, a little closer to Beelzebub.

"Keep climbing, boy! If you can reach the 100th step, you'll receive a special boon!"

Beelzebub gritted his teeth. He jumped to the 72nd step, grimacing in pain as a bolt of lightning struck his body, refined his inner energy, and changed him into a slightly more formidable being.

"What... what... boon?" Beelzebub finally asked.

"At the 100th step, you can ask a Divine Favor of Akasha! He can make countless miracles come true! He also grants a boon at the 250th, 1000th, and 10,000th steps, along with others far beyond those. But for you, all you need to do is reach the 100th step! If you can do that, you won't regret it!"

Beelzebub nodded. His eyes watered as the pain continued to increase.

He made his way to the 75th step. Then the 80th... then the 85th.

But by the time he reached the 90th, his body was beginning to give out. Countless beams of lightning struck him every time he climbed a step. His newly obtained affinity to lightning did nothing to shield him from Akasha's Wrath. Even his regeneration meant little in the face of such impossible odds.

Finally, Beelzebub collapsed on the 93rd step. He tried to move, but his muscles gave out, and his body lost all sensation.

"Ah. Too bad, kid." The Creator mumbled. "But even so! You have tempered yourself to heights I have not seen in the Milky Way's Cosmics for tens of Ages! Now, when you return to the physical realm, remember your anger! Remember your rage! Unleash your true power and show everyone why I designated you one of my Candidates!"

Beelzebub simply fluttered his eyelids in response. Then, exhaustion took him, and his soul was flung from the Cosmic Realm back to Realspace...

Not long after.

A molten fury hotter than anything seen in the Milky Way since its galactic center first formed gives chase after the High Psions.

Beelzebub, the Cosmic Flame Deity, rockets forward at superliminal speeds, rapidly closing the relatively short distance to his hated enemies. Fire streams out of his eyes, leaving tears of flame trailing in his wake. His entire body glows white-hot, raising the temperature around himself to well over 100,000 degrees.

Executor Nufaris is the first to flee. His duty, guarding Founder Dosena, takes precedence over all others. He uses his mastery of spatial translocation to traverse the Void faster than his comrades.

[Split up!] Executor Riley shouts, deliberately aiming her voice at the other Psions while excluding Beelzebub. [Try to draw him away from the Second Founder!]

Demila doesn't hesitate. A cunning light fills her eyes as she rapidly flickers away, choosing not to go along with the other Executors.

With Riley and Nufaris traveling 'north' and 'east' in galactic directional terms, Demila travels 'south,' seemingly fleeing for her life, but secretly expanding on her plots and machinations as a final chance for success falls into her lap.

But one Executor doesn't flee.

Executor Sartran holds up his palms and faces Beelzebub.

[Wait! Beelzebub, it's me! Sartran! Your mentor! Please, this is a misunderstanding! We did not intend to blow up the planet! It was an accident!]

"I DON'T BELIEVE YOU!" Beelzebub roars, deliberately aiming his charge at the target in front of him. He beelines for Sartran, his eyes filled with scorching hatred.

[An accident!] Sartran pleads. [Calm down! We can talk this out!]

Sartran's words fall on deaf ears. Seeing that Beelzebub has no intention to stop, Sartran roars with psionic fury. He summons barriers of electrically enchanted flames in front of himself, hoping that in spite of his Low Cosmic ranking, he might be able to beat back Beelzebub, or at the very least, slow him down for a time.

Beelzebub's nuclear-ignited body slams into the barriers and tears right through them. He grabs at Sartran's throat, but the Executor flickers to the side, barely dodging in time.

"HAH! YOU CALL YOURSELF MY MENTOR?! YOU LYING SACK OF SHIT! I ALREADY HAD A MENTOR, AND HIS NAME WAS AGARES! I KILLED HIM, AND I'LL KILL YOU TOO!!"

[Please! Calm down!] Sartran exclaims.

His words don't slow Beelzebub down even a little bit.

For a few short seconds, the two Cosmics tussle in the vacuum of space. Beelzebub fires unthinkable powerful beams of concentrated nuclear hellfire, and Sartran uses his

superior control of energy to redirect and deflect some of them, but eventually, he falls into a trap when Beelzebub fireports behind him, aims his palm at Sartran, and screams a word in rage.

"SOULFIRE!!"

A blast of rainbow-colored flames smashes into Sartran's back, incinerating his body and swallowing his soul. Sartran's eyes pop open in one final moment of agony before his soul is ripped away from its holding facility on the secret Psion world Jason once called 'Mudball'. Unable to defend himself, Sartran falls into a slumber as Beelzebub swallows his soul, forcibly containing it within his Mind Realm.

But, having learned some important Truths from the Creator, Beelzebub does not devour Sartran's soul to empower his physical body. He merely contains it so that he might extract intelligence from his captive later.

Without hesitation, Beelzebub snaps his eyes toward the three retreating forms.

One of them is Demila. Beelzebub ignores her. A weak little 7th-Level Psion is of no consequence, and there are tens of thousands more like her across the Volgrim Empire.

That leaves only Executors Riley and Nufaris.

Since Nufaris took the Second Founder's body, he is the best target to pursue!

In the blink of an eye, Beelzebub blasts nuclear hellfire behind himself, rocketing after Nufaris at superliminal speeds far outpacing the speed of light.

"THE SECOND FOUNDER KILLED MY HUMANS!" Beelzebub screams into the Void. **"I WON'T LET YOU RESCUE HER, FILTHY PSION!"**

Executor Nufaris, the most powerful of all Executors, is still only a Low Cosmic compared to Beelzebub's Middle Cosmic status. His eyes darken as he senses Beelzebub's aura locking onto him.

Unlike Sartran, Nufaris doesn't bother speaking to his pursuer. Instead, he rapidly taps into his abilities, thinking of ways he might throw Beelzebub off his trail.

Unfortunately, the Void is both vast and empty. Nufaris realizes immediately that even if he enters a gas nebula or an exotic region, Beelzebub's Cosmic senses will not lose their lock on him. He will eventually catch up.

I will require a minimum of five rotational cycles to return to Volgarius. Nufaris thinks. But if I do, I'll be leading this Devil right to the empire's doorstep. It would be faster for me to reach a Warpgate, but the time required to calculate Volgarius's travel vectors will leave me vulnerable.

Nufaris looks at Dosena's unconscious body in his arms. Never has he seen his lauded Second Founder in as weak and pitiful a state as she is now.

Even worse, because she is unconscious, she has zero psionic defenses protecting her body. Ordinarily, Dosena could tank one of Beelzebub's attacks without flinching, but right now even a stray heat ray could burn her body to ash.

And that isn't even the worst part.

Founder Dosena's True Body contains her soul. If she dies to Beelzebub, we won't be able to revive her. This will result in a crippling loss for our Empire.

Suddenly, Nufaris senses Beelzebub's rapid approach from behind. His psionic senses lock onto Beelzebub, whose speed has drastically increased.

Nufaris's expression turns grim.

I can't escape him by moving in a straight line. I will have to bet everything on this!

Beelzebub chases Nufaris. His speed increases faster and faster every second, rapidly reaching twenty thousand times the speed of light!

"PSION SCUUUUM!!"

Beelzebub stretches out his hand, like a claw belonging to a fiery god of death. He grabs at the rapidly approaching body of Nufaris, grinning evilly as he senses victory within his grasp.

Then...

Foop!

Nufaris abruptly flickers an entire light-hour to the side. He halts his movement in an instant, and Beelzebub blasts right through the spot where he was flying only a moment earlier.

It takes Beelzebub a second or two to register what just happened. By the time he does, Nufaris has already begun flying in a new direction, putting huge distance between himself and Beelzebub.

Beelzebub realizes he's been had.

"Shit!"

A lot of the rage diffuses from Beelzebub's voice, replaced instead with confusion. He spins himself around and releases heat from his feet to stop his forward momentum, but it takes nearly thirty seconds, even with his boundless Cosmic power, to reverse direction and give chase after Nufaris yet again.

When Beelzebub chases him again, he once again whiffs the impact as Nufaris flickers away, using his vastly superior control over Spatial Psionics to instantly change the direction of his flight.

Beelzebub goes hurtling past Nufaris once more, screeching in rage about that damned, no good, dirty rotten cheater of a Psion.

This process repeats two more times.

Beelzebub gets closer and closer each time, trying to anticipate Nufaris's teleportation direction, but it simply doesn't matter. After they travel 500 Lightyears away from the Tarus system, Beelzebub's inferior control of his abilities reveals a devastating weakness Nufaris is able to grasp hold of time and time again.

On the fifth time, when Beelzebub is about to grab Nufaris, the Executor disappears once more.

Beelzebub halts his momentum faster than the previous times, but to his dismay, he doesn't detect Nufaris's new position at all. Instead, Nufaris's aura becomes extremely muted, as if he were suddenly hiding behind a thick barrier that reflected sonar.

"Hm? Where did he go?!" Beelzebub snarls.

Ten seconds pass.

Twenty.

Thirty.

Nufaris reappears, but Beelzebub's jaw drops when he realizes Nufaris has somehow made it more than thirty lightyears 'east' of Beelzebub's galactic position.

How did he travel so swiftly and stealthily?

That question causes Beelzebub's mind to burn with anger, but at the same time, he starts to notice a sensation of energy leaving his body.

"What the...? Why am I weakening, all of a sudden? Or has this been happening the whole time?"

Beelzebub looks around. He frowns as he realizes that his Cosmic Power is slowly starting to depart his body, but he isn't entirely sure why.

Frustrated, he gives chase after Nufaris again, but his energy starts draining even faster, until he eventually ceases his pursuit.

Finally, Beelzebub reaches out with his senses. He detects a 'thin' line of Cosmic Energy trailing back the direction he originally came from.

The direction of the Tarus system.

"Hmm..."

Beelzebub falls into contemplation for a moment. He eventually opts to fly back the direction he came, traveling after the line of cosmic energy. As he does, the sensation of his energy draining begins to lighten up. Once he draws within 100 lightyears of the system, it trickles down to a barely noticeable drain, and by the time he arrives back inside the system, it stops completely.

Beelzebub sweeps his gaze around. He senses the remainder of Tarus II's moon, Kelkin, which luckily was not engulfed by Tarus II's detonation, but which has lost its anchor to its celestial body.

Then, Beelzebub follows the line until he senses the emergence of a massive golden cube hidden within a pocket dimension.

"So... that thing is what's giving me my power?" Beelzebub mutters out loud, to nobody in particular.

* * *

Nufaris succeeds in evading his pursuer. He joins back up with Executor Riley, and the two of them frown as they realize they've lost Demila's signal.

[Executor Sartran is dead.] Riley tells her superior. [Beelzebub devoured his soul. It seems distance is no barrier to the new Demon Deity's signature ability, 'Soulfire.']

[How frightening.] Nufaris grunts. [That means if he had caught me, he might have devoured my soul and the Second Founder's as well.]

[What are we going to do?] Riley asks. [Founder Dosena is in terrible condition. It could take countless orbital cycles before she is capable of fighting again.]

[Our Empire is at its weakest.] Nufaris states. [We must meet with the First Founder and seek his counsel. But... I no longer have any doubts. Demila betrayed us. She tricked the Second Founder and caused her to suffer an extreme Akashic Backlash. We must send out an order across the Empire to capture and execute her on-sight.]

Riley looks away. Anger clouds her vision.

[To think that wretched old hag would betray her people. Death is too kind a mercy for her.]

She pauses, then looks at Nufaris.

[Beelzebub is no longer pursuing us, but he will likely come sooner or later. What do we do if he does?]

[That is up to the First Founder to decide.] Nufaris replies. [Come. Let us make haste back to Volgarius. We have too much to report.]

* * *

Founder Dosena, unconscious, remains unaware of the world around her. Unable to move her body, she is pitifully helpless, having to rely on her subordinates to save her life.

Even so, her formidable mind does not fall dormant, and she continues to 'dream' about a great many things.

She thinks back to that fateful moment when Demila came to her, barely an hour earlier.

Demila told Dosena and Unarin about the humans' secret and nefarious plans. Naturally, the two Founders noticed a few holes in her arguments, but the chance to rid themselves of the Wordsmiths was too good an opportunity and they had to take it.

Publicly, Unarin waved off Demila's concerns.

But in secret, he used subtle hand signals and body language to convey his true intentions to Dosena.

"The Wordsmith was our best shot. But he wasn't the only one."

"Kill them all."

Dosena seemed to acknowledge his decree to leave the Wordsmiths alone, but in truth, she took Demila, transmitted secret instructions to the Executors, and raced through the Warpgates to arrive at Tarus II before it was too late.

All these facts now make Dosena feel a bit sad and helpless.

We... were tricked. She thinks, her mind drifting on a sea of emptiness.

Should have... never... killed... the Wordsmith...

Part 608: Friends of Phoenix

Frustrated by his inability to catch the elusive Executor Nufaris, Beelzebub returns to the Tarus system. He stares despondently at the location where Tarus II once existed, now nothing more than tens of trillions of fragments of rock spewing out in all directions, likely to someday crash into the other planets across the system, as well as obliterate the moon of Kelkin on impact.

But with all the humans on Kelkin saved, what few there were, the survival of a sparse moonbase means nothing to Beelzebub. Instead, he feels a small hole in his heart.

"I failed them." Beelzebub says, lowering his head. "I promised these humans I would be better, become strong enough to protect them... but I couldn't protect anything. Now they're gone. All that remains are those who escaped to the Labyrinth."

With nothing better to do, Beelzebub follows the link of Cosmic energy chaining him to a secret hidden dimensional space. With surprising ease, he levitates forward and appears in this space, causing all the stars of the Milky Way to vanish, plunging him into deep darkness.

Up ahead, he spots a seemingly tiny golden cube, one that radiates lingering cosmic power, yet is clearly not as powerful as it should be.

Beelzebub flies forward, easily traveling tens of thousands of kilometers every second. At his casual sub-light pace, he draws closer and closer to the cube, which he quickly discovers is not small at all. In fact, it is quite massive, much bigger than the red giant star located within Tarus's system. At this scale, ten thousand Tarus II's could fit inside.

The closer he draws, the more awed Beelzebub becomes. He's never heard of this artifact before. Its very existence blindsides him, making him wonder what this object is and why, exactly, he's become attached to it.

Just as Beelzebub slows to a stop a thousand kilometers away, a figure instantly appears before him and starts speaking loudly, giving him a jumpscare.

[HI BEST FRIEND! I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU!]

"Ahh!" Beelzebub exclaims, nearly jumping out of his skin. He reflexively punches a fireball at the 'attacker' but the attack instead disappears inside the tiny little flaming

bird's body, making her do a loop-the-loop in excitement.

[Wow! Thank you for the fire! That's really nice of you!]

Beelzebub pauses for a few seconds, taking stock of this strange, tiny little bird.

"...Phoenix? Are you the Phoenix?"

[Well yeah, Best Friend! Who else could I be?] The Phoenix asks in her cute little girl voice. [You ask funny questions! You're funny!]

Beelzebub remains quiet for a moment. He recalls the time when a strange bird flew out of Jason and empowered his body. This led to his ascension to Demon Emperor, or rather, to Demon Overlord. It cleansed away his impurities and removed the taint of soul manipulation from him, allowing him to not only regain his former power but ascend far beyond it.

"What... is this giant cube?" Beelzebub asks. "And how are you related to it?"

[Oh, that's easy. My Bestest Best Friend made it for me!] The Phoenix chirps. [My Creator! She was a really nice person. I think. I don't actually remember her... or much of anything. Ohh!! Do you wanna come inside? I have lots of Small Friends in here!]

"Small Friends?" Beelzebub asks, befuddled.

He thinks for a moment, ultimately deciding that this Phoenix wouldn't harm him, given their apparent close relationship.

"Alright. Show me around. I could use something to distract myself."

[Okay! Great! Just follow me to the big stinky doorway.] The Phoenix says.

Beelzebub levitates after the Phoenix. He raises an eyebrow at her words.

How is a doorway 'stinky'? This Phoenix seems rather unreliable.

Before long, they arrive at a massive circular entrance leading inside the Cube. Big enough to fit ten Tarus II's, if it weren't for Beelzebub's cosmic senses, he might have trouble following its perimeter with his vision.

Once inside, Beelzebub and the Phoenix fly forward, and Beelzebub unsurprisingly finds that there isn't the faintest whiff of a 'stinky' odor in the air.

Then he gets the shock of his life.

All throughout the Cube, hundreds of autonomous machines buzz around, each one ranging in size from a moon to a planet. These machines do not function on technological

principles, but magical ones. Energy churns around inside them as they perform various duties, mostly amounting to maintaining life support all throughout the Cube's interior.

To Beelzebub's surprise, outside of the Cube there is a vacuum like space, but after passing through the entrance, he arrives in a colossal interior space filled with oxygen and other life-uplifting gasses, all perfectly suited to Sentient needs.

And the longer Beelzebub looks, the more astonished he becomes. All throughout the Cube, there are 'bubbles' resembling small planets turned inside-out. Within these bubbles, Beelzebub senses the aura of humans and monsters living good lives, all within slightly time accelerated domains ranging from two to ten times Realspace speed.

"This Cube... is amazing." Beelzebub whispers. "Phoenix! How many humans are in here?"

The Phoenix pauses her flying. She spins around a few times, looking a little befuddled.

[Oh... I don't know... maybe a hundred?]

"That few?" Beelzebub asks. "Impossible. I sense at least a thousand in that little watery-bubble right over there!"

He points to one of the nearest planet-bubbles, and the Phoenix nods.

[That's what I said, Best Friend. There's a hundred Small Friends. A hundred thousand!]

"Oh! A hundred thousand? That's a good number, then." Beelzebub mutters.

The Phoenix continues flying deeper into the Cube, and Beelzebub follows her, his attention mostly focused on the humans all around him.

I don't know how many humans made it into the Labyrinth, but with the Wordsmiths dead, they're in grave danger! The humans here are a lot safer, especially now that they're under my protection, and their population will rapidly increase with time acceleration boosting their reproduction. But I can't ignore all the humans in Realspace.

"Phoenix," Beelzebub says, "There are other humans out in Realspace. Can you help me rescue them? I don't know how to get to the Labyrinth from here."

The Phoenix turns her head back to look at him.

[Realspace? Labyrinth? What are those?]

"You... don't know?" Beelzebub asks. "Then where did all these humans come from?"

[Big Ugly Rock.] The Phoenix says, seemingly losing interest. [I tried to save all the Small Friends like Good Friend told me, but then Big Ugly Rock disappeared. Rest of Small Friends disappeared with it.]

"Oh." Beelzebub says, his expression falling.

The Phoenix has a strange way of referring to people. Beelzebub contemplates. Big Ugly Rock must have been Tarus II. And her thinking is rather childish. I wonder if she even understands that all those people died.

Beelzebub doesn't press the issue. The Phoenix's immature way of speaking doesn't change the fact that it was her power which Uplifted him. He would never mock her, especially after she boosted him enough to take partial revenge on the Volgrim.

Beelzebub's gaze flicks inward. He scowls at Sartran's soul, thinking of all the ways he'll soon torture his so-called 'mentor' for information.

But now isn't the time.

"So, Phoenix, where are we going?" Beelzebub asks. "Where are you taking me?"

The Phoenix's expression lights up. Her bird-beak seems to curve up into a cute smile as she pauses her forward flight to buzz around Beelzebub excitedly.

[Great question, Best Friend! Good Friend went to sleep recently, but he won't wake up. I need your help to wake him up! You can do it, right? Right?]

Beelzebub raises an eyebrow. "You need my help to wake someone up? I mean, *I* guess. What's his name?"

The Phoenix pauses to give Beelzebub a strange look.

[I just told you, silly. He's Good Friend! Not as good of friend as Best Friend, but still Good Friend! Good Friend woke Phoenix up and made the Container stop being mean to Phoenix. Phoenix likes Good Friend! Good Friend gave Phoenix lots of Small Friends to play with too! Now Phoenix isn't bored all the time!]

Just as Beelzebub is about to say something, a mild sense of danger suddenly rushes toward him from behind. He quickly turns around to see a titanic floating twenty-sided star racing forward before abruptly coming to a stop half a kilometer away. Its presence dwarfs him in size like a skyscraper compared to an ant.

[HMM BRRM BRRM.]

The mechanical 'star' buzzes something incomprehensible at Beelzebub, but for some reason, he intuitively understands its speech.

[STATE YOUR DESIGNATION.]

Beelzebub frowns. "What are you?"

His refusal to answer the question angers the star. Its central core starts to glow red as it charges up an attack.

[INTRUDER DETECTED. ELIMINATE.]

"Who are you calling an intruder? The Phoenix invited me here, you lump of scrap metal!" Beelzebub snaps back. "You want to fight me?! Come on, give it your best shot!"

[Hey!] The Phoenix says, jumping between Beelzebub and the star. She snarls nastily at it. [Stupid Annoying Dummy! Go away! You're upsetting my Best Friend! You Big Jerk!]

The star pauses charging its attack.

[INTRUDER DESIGNATION?]

[He's Best Friend! Do you hear me, Big Jerk?? HE'S! BEST! FRIEND! Now go away!]

The star lowers its attacking intent.

[NOT INTRUDER?]

[No! He's a guest! You have to be nice to my guests!]

Just like that, the star deactivates its attack programming. It powers down, turns around, and flies away, accelerating from a dead stop to a breathtaking speed in an instant. It becomes a speck in the distance within seconds.

"...The hell was that?" Beelzebub asks, after it has left.

[One of the Ten Annoying Dummies.] The Phoenix replies, seemingly pouting. [Used to hurt me a lot until Good Friend made them a little nicer. But they're still mean! Stupid Big Jerks.]

Beelzebub scratches his head.

This place is weird.

It doesn't take much longer before they arrive at what Beelzebub estimates to be the central nexus of the entire Cube. There, a large stone platform levitates, nearly invisible strings of energy spreading out in all directions to control the climate of all the micro-worlds inside, as well as to empower the Cube's sentries and maintenance drones.

But that isn't what draws Beelzebub's attention.

Instead, he is shocked to feel a familiar soul resting atop the platform, enveloped in a flaming, divine barrier of energy to prevent the soul from escaping to the Great Beyond.

"That's... Jason Hiro's soul?!" Beelzebub exclaims, shocked beyond belief. "I thought- I thought he would have been trapped inside the Lazarus Tower when it was obliterated! To think he was here! Does that mean we can revive him??"

The Phoenix flies around Jason's soul playfully.

[Of course, silly! You always ask the funniest questions. Good Friend lost his body and he's sleeping now. But you can wake him up!]

Beelzebub's surprise turns to elation and excitement, but then his expression deflates.

"I can? But how? I don't know how to revive other people. Phoenix, are you sure I can do it?"

The Phoenix bobs up and down, almost as if nodding with her whole body.

[Yuppers! You can! But, err, well...]

She loses some of her enthusiasm, then she flies over and lands on Beelzebub's shoulder.

[Best Friend is really strong. Stronger than me. But Best Friend has to become weak to save Good Friend. Phoenix doesn't want to hurt Best Friend, but Phoenix also doesn't want Good Friend to sleep forever.]

Beelzebub remains quiet for a moment.

He thinks about the implications behind her words.

"I'm a Middle Cosmic now, and you're clearly much weaker than me. Are you saying that in order to revive Jason Hiro, I need to give up my power?"

The Phoenix nods her little head, ever so slightly. Her expression turns downcast.

[Phoenix is sorry. This is the only way. Phoenix doesn't want Best Friend to be weak, especially when Best Friend was so happy about becoming stronger before. Phoenix also

sensed that Bad People hurt Good Friend. If Best Friend becomes weaker, Bad People might return and hurt Best Friend and Small Friends. Phoenix doesn't want her friends to suffer.]

Beelzebub remains quiet for a moment.

"This... 'weakening'. Is it permanent?"

[Yeah.] The Phoenix mutters softly. [Best Friend will have to get stronger again in some other way. You won't regain your strength over time.]

"I see." Beelzebub says.

Beelzebub becomes very still for a time.

He thinks carefully on the long term ramifications of this choice.

Right now, the Volgrim have lost the Threat of their Middle Cosmic, but they still have many powerful 8th and 7th Level Psions in their army. If just a handful of them attack, and Beelzebub isn't a Middle Cosmic anymore, the Cube will be in grave danger.

But at the same time, Jason's revival will mean a much brighter future for humanity. The Wordsmith can surely continue to innovate powerful new spells and abilities over time, uplifting humanity as a whole.

Furthermore, Beelzebub thinks to himself that he *personally* owes Jason a great debt. If it weren't for Jason inadvertently bestowing the Phoenix upon him, Beelzebub would have remained a mortal for the rest of his short, miserable life.

Even if giving up his power would result in him becoming a mortal again... it would still be worth it for repaying the debt he owes.

Beelzebub stays silent for only a few minutes. He thinks about many things. He contemplates the consequences of this choice.

And he ultimately makes his decision.

"Don't worry about it, Phoenix. I rose to a Middle Cosmic once already. So what if I have to do it again?"

Beelzebub sneers. His ego rapidly begins to inflate as a haughty expression imprints upon his face. He crosses his arms and assumes a domineering stance.

"Hah! The Great Beelzebub, backing down from a challenge? Unlikely! As if I'd fear having to work my way up to a Cosmic again. You know what? It was too easy the first

time around! The second time, I ought to put a little effort into my Uplifting. It's no fun having someone else boost me by accident. Much better to work and improve my power the old fashioned way!"

[Wowowow!] The Phoenix chirps happily. [Best Friend is so cool! Best friend isn't scared of anything! Okay, so you want to help Phoenix wake up Good Friend now?]

"Yeah. Do what you have to." Beelzebub says, lowering his crossed arms to stare at Jason's soul seriously. "What do you need from me?"

The Phoenix flies over to the Wordsmith's soul. She lands atop it like a bird taking a perch. Then she looks at Beelzebub.

[Give Phoenix your power. Phoenix will do the rest.]

Beelzebub nods. In spite of his bravado, he still hesitates for a moment, but pushes through his wariness without hesitation.

I owe him this much!

Beelzebub summons his Cosmic energy. He begins carefully beaming it to the Phoenix through their invisible link, but the Phoenix swallows it so greedily and so easily that Beelzebub starts to turn up the pressure, sending more and more of his Cosmic power every second.

All the while, Beelzebub's Middle Cosmic energy rapidly deflates. He begins to feel somewhat sickly, and then, it happens.

He drops to the level of a Low Cosmic.

Slightly saddened by the reality of this loss, Beelzebub continues to press onward. He roars with fury and sends an even more powerful flood of energy the Phoenix's way, and she absorbs that too!

Before long, his Low Cosmic status also disappears. Beelzebub drops to the level of a Bottom Cosmic, the same as Mephisto.

Several minutes later, his energy finally plunges below the Cosmic level.

He returns to the realm of mortals, assuming the rank of Demon Overlord.

[That's... enough...] The Phoenix says, her expression pained.

Beelzebub stops transferring his energy. He blinks in surprise, having expected needing to give the Phoenix all of his energy and returning to the level of an ordinary

mortal. Remaining at a Demon Overlord power is an extremely good outcome, especially compared to his fears.

But Beelzebub stops paying attention to any of that. His eyes widen as the Phoenix's tiny body rapidly assimilates his Cosmic power. It releases Jason's soul and takes to the air, crying out in pain and ecstasy as its miniature form inflates in size, quickly surpassing Beelzebub's height, then growing bigger, bigger, bigger...

Beelzebub's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets. The Phoenix grows until it reaches the level of the Sentry Stars, completely dwarfing Beelzebub with its immensity. It cries out again, screeching to the void and causing his brain to buzz with pain.

[I remember now.] The Phoenix says, no longer sounding childish and innocent. Its voice booms with the divine grace and gravitas of an ancient, wizened woman far beyond her years. Her eyes sparkle with insight as she regains countless ancient memories previously locked away within her psyche.

[My creator: Camael. My purpose: To contain the Dark Dragon. My battle: Neverending. My suffering: Immeasurable. The weakening of my soul over the eons. The Dark Dragon's struggle to the bitter end. Its sudden and violent... *escape*.]

The Phoenix's eyes burn with peerless radiance. It sweeps its gaze across the Milky Way, frowning as it fails to detect the aura of its tormentor.

[Dead? Impossible. There are no Apex Cosmics alive now. How could that ancient fiend have perished? It must still be out there, somewhere, hiding.]

Then, the Phoenix turns its frightening gaze upon Beelzebub.

[Small one. Best Friend. You have revived a portion of my power. I offer my deepest gratitude. I am no longer strong enough to contend with that abomination from the Primordial Era, but now that I need not suppress it, I can seek out ways to increase my Cosmic Energy once more. I have already paid The Creator a visit. He has explained to me the current state of the galaxy. This is no longer a flourishing era, but a dead one, ripe for exploitation by the Milky Way's many enemies.]

Beelzebub feels a sense of primal awe from deep within his soul. The sheer majesty on display by the formerly silly bird goes way beyond anything he expected.

He only intended to revive Jason Hiro. He had no idea he would accidentally awaken this powerhouse.

"Phoenix? You're so... big! I didn't expect- I mean, did you *intend* for this to happen?"

The Phoenix looks at him blankly.

[My naive, weakened form knew very little of the galactic situation, or of mortal happenings. Guided purely by instincts, she only sought to revive the entity known as the Wordsmith, Jason Hiro. It is our good fortune that my embarrassing, weak little self managed to bring forth her former glory, even if purely by accident. I am ashamed you had to see me in such a pitiful state, my Best Friend.]

Beelzebub blushes slightly. Being called a 'Best Friend' by such an overwhelmingly powerful entity just doesn't feel as cute and endearing as before.

But, he wagers secretly that he'll get used to it in time.

"Can you bring back Jason Hiro now?" Beelzebub asks.

The Phoenix sweeps her mighty gaze over his soul.

[Indeed, I can. Though not a trivial feat to perform, it is well within my power. Due to the manner of his body's destruction, his soul has suffered some damage. Nothing I cannot repair. Because of his wise decision to tie his existence to mine, I possess many Cosmic inroads to the pathways of his soul. Reviving him is little more than a matter of a short time.]

Beelzebub bows his head. "Great Phoenix, I beseech you to revive the Wordsmith. The galaxy's fate relies on him."

The Phoenix remains quiet for a short time.

She recalls a certain divine vision her creator once spoke to her about in great secrecy, a prophecy of universal importance.

[More than you know. Less than you think. And *certainly* not in the way that you expect, my Best Friend.]

Magical energy swells within the Phoenix's chest. She taps into the full power of her newly revived Cosmic might and chuckles.

[Tis' a shame that I am only a Middle Cosmic. If I were an Apex Cosmic like in the past, bringing Jason Hiro back would take less than a second. Ah, the vicissitudes of time...]

She sends a beam of heavenly energy directly into Jason's soul, causing his psyche to scream in pain.

Some time afterward, The Wordsmith is reborn...

Part 609: Wordsmith's Woe (END OF BOOK 5)

Jason Hiro awakens slowly.

Very slowly.

His eyes open, but he fails to make out anything in front of him using his sight. In his field of view, the entire world is little more than a hazy, blurry mess of disorienting colors and confusion.

Sounds rumble into his ears. He fails to make them out.

Who is he? Where is he? What is he doing? What was he doing?

Like a child confused by the chaos of the universe, Jason fumbles his hands around, grabbing at his chest. He starts to shiver, slightly frightened by the sights and sounds barraging his senses.

Slowly, his mental acuity claws its way back to life. A hand lifts him up by the back of his head, pulling him into a sitting position, nearly making him vomit from dizziness.

"-awake? Can you hear me? Jason? Jason?"

A male voice speaks. Jason blinks his eyes, befuddled. He recognizes the words. He faintly recognizes the voice. But he also fails to remember how to work his own mouth and vocal cords.

Some unintelligible sputters escape his mouth. A female voice, much more powerful and grandiose than the male voice, replies inside his mind.

[His soul has suffered catastrophic damage. Give him a while. Rebuilding his brain was a simple task for me, but it will still require time for his soul to re-acclimate to his new body.]

Minutes pass. Jason's delirium lessens, bit by bit. He looks around, dazed and confused, eventually meeting the eyes of a strange, red-skinned man with pointy ears.

"Jason. It's me. Beelzebub. Can you understand me? Are you lucid?"

Jason slowly blinks.

"Beel...be..bub...?"

"Close. You've almost got it." Beelzebub says, slightly frowning. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Jason head lolls forward. The urge to sleep nearly seizes hold of him, but Beelzebub lightly shakes him back awake.

"Focus, Jason. No sleep now. Sleep later, okay? How many fingers?"

Jason smiles, his expression slightly stupid. "Three."

"No there's- actually, you're right. It is three. I expected you to get it wrong. My bad." Beelzebub says, chuckling to himself. He looks behind Jason, at the massive form of the Phoenix. "How long will it take him to get back to his usual self?"

[Not long.] The Phoenix replies. [I'll have you know my ability to regrow bodies is beyond any mortal science or magic you could ever envision. It is my greatest purpose, and my highest accomplishment. Soon, Jason will remember who he is, and what he fights for. Just keep talking to him. And don't let him fall asleep. If he sleeps, it will cause the acclimation process to revert, and he might lose his soul again. This time, permanently.]

Beelzebub nods. Despite having already heard this, the reminder doesn't hurt. It would be a terrible tragedy if they brought Jason back to life, only for the Wordsmith to die a few minutes later because his soul was too sleepy.

Several more minutes pass. Eventually, some clarity returns to Jason's eyes. His breathing normalizes, and his expression becomes more placid. He stops wearing a stupid smile, and eventually he manages to sit up on his own.

"Beel...zebub..." Jason grunts, resting his face in his hands. "What are you... doing here? Where am I? What's going on?"

"You're inside the Cube." Beelzebub explains. "Camael's Cube. The Phoenix has just revived you."

Jason remains quiet for a few moments. He almost asks Beelzebub what the Cube is, who Camael is, and who the Phoenix is, but after a few seconds, the answers slowly bubble up in his mind, so he thinks better of it.

"Camael... Cube... Phoenix... I, uh, I see. Cube. Cube. Why am I in the Cube? I think... I was doing something... important..."

Beelzebub's frown deepens. He glances at the Phoenix, remembering the instructions she gave him. Even so, he didn't expect the temporary amnesia to be this severe.

Hopefully, Jason will return to his former intellect. It'd be a tragedy if he stayed an idiot forever. Beelzebub thinks.

But luckily, as more minutes pass, Jason remembers more and more of what happened.

"That's right. I was... fighting... someone."

"Hope." Beelzebub replies. "You were fighting Hope."

Jason scrunches up his face. "How could I fight 'hope'? That's just a concept. You can't fight an idea."

"No, I'm talking about Hope Hiro, your clone. Remember?" Beelzebub prompts.

"Ohhh... yeah... Hope Hiro." Jason mutters. "My clone. We were fighting... I don't remember- I said something, then he said... something... and then... what happened next?"

Beelzebub and the Phoenix exchange a glance. They both metaphorically shrug.

"We're not sure." Beelzebub says. "I didn't get to observe your battle. I don't know how it ended, other than that I think you killed Hope."

"I did?" Jason asks, turning slightly pale. "Why would I kill my clone? That doesn't seem like a very nice thing to do."

He pauses, thinks for a moment, then his expression becomes crestfallen.

"Not nice at all. But I remember now. He said some... nasty things... about my wife. He was a real jerk."

Jason nods slowly.

"...A real jerk."

Beelzebub resists the urge to raise his eyebrow until it smashes through the Cube's roof. Jason's weird sayings are actually starting to aggravate him a little, but at the same time, he can't really blame a guy who just went through a traumatic resurrection.

"Do you remember killing him?" Beelzebub asks.

Jason purses his lips. He remains silent for ten, perhaps twenty seconds.

"Yeah. I do. My Wordsmithing was superior. I managed to save the other Heroes, too. Including Lorent."

Beelzebub nods. He creases his brow and looks away.

"That should be about the time when the Volgrim attacked. They killed you, striking from behind. That's what the Phoenix said, anyway."

The Phoenix nods. [My weaker self received a transmission from Chrona informing me to begin immediate and nonstop evacuations. I followed the guidelines and did as I was told.]

Jason remains quiet for a moment. Then his head suddenly jerks in alarm.

"Wait- the Volgrim attacked? They killed me?! And then you revived me- that's why I'm here?!"

Beelzebub nods. "Jason, it's been over three hours since you died. After they killed you, the Psions attacked Tarus II. They... destroyed it. They killed every human who wasn't able to be teleported off-world in time."

"WHAT?!"

Jason nearly has a heart attack and dies a second time!

He jumps to his feet, then staggers and falls to his knees, coughing hysterically as his heart-rate spikes from adrenaline.

"NO! No!! It can't- they wouldn't! COUGH COUGH! How dare they?! The people! My *COUGH*, friends, my family! Where is everyone?! What happened to them?!"

Jason clutches his chest, sputtering painfully as the sudden and unexpected pain of loss and grief contrasts with his confusion from being reborn. He looks at Beelzebub, desperate for answers.

"I don't know how many are still alive, and I don't know how many died." Beelzebub says. "I checked, though. Your wife isn't here. She might be inside the Labyrinth-"

"The Labyrinth! That's it! I have to look for her!" Jason shouts. He pauses for half a second, his mind racing. **"Heal! Normalize! Energy! Return!"**

He rejuvenates his body, and before Beelzebub can warn him about his complete lack of clothing, the Wordsmith disappears.

"That... played out differently in my head." Beelzebub mutters to nobody in particular.

* * *

Demon Deity Yardrat's astral body levitates beside Demon Deities Kristoff, Auger, and Melody. Their four astral bodies 'stand' on the ceiling of the Labyrinth Core, unburdened by the limitations of gravity.

"With Beelzebub's sudden ascension, the humans are not as defenseless as they seemed a few hours ago." Auger points out. Naturally, he and the other Deities have sensed Beelzebub's Cosmic Aura from across the galaxy. "The Second Founder is in shambles, possibly even dead. That means the Volgrim are now the only major player in the Milky Way without a Middle Cosmic to protect them. That bodes well for us."

Yardrat smiles at Melody. "Of course, the humans depend on the kindness of two Demon Deities to protect them. That means, in essence, their fates are not theirs to control. I wonder what you think about this?"

Melody scowls. "I think rather than scheming against the humans, you should ask the bigger question here. How did Beelzebub uplift himself? And to such a level, I might add. He chased Executor Nufaris across several star systems. He is clearly not limited in the same way as the rest of us. Without Diablo, it should not have been possible to Ascend..."

The other three Demon Deities scowl back at Melody, then look at one another, not certain of what to say.

The humans gaining a second protector is truly shocking. If it were only Melody, that would be one thing. But for Beelzebub to become a Middle Cosmic too, and one who is not shackled to a single star system, that means his allegiance will be of the utmost importance moving forward.

"The future is not set in stone." Auger says, schooling his expression. "Melody, your love for the humans is... noble... but it is also fraught with peril. Those same humans could someday rise up and grow to resent you. Do you truly wish to work with Beelzebub and protect them? They are a danger to our species."

"They're only mortals. Leave them alone." Melody fires back. "Haven't they suffered enough? Now they've lost both of their homeworlds and have to start all over again."

"We demons have lost worlds too." Yardrat protests. "Hell Harbor was reduced to rubble. Sharmur, it will take you decades, perhaps even centuries to rebuild. And if the Plague returns, surely it will ease your mind to have allies like us at your disposal."

"With *allies like you...*" Melody repeats, crossing her muscled arms, "...who needs enemies?"

"Now now, there's no need to be so quick to anger." Auger says in a soothing tone. "After all, there are many concessions your fellow Deities would be willing to- huh?"

At once, all four Deities flick their eyes toward an outcropping inside the Core, slightly above the mass of humans and monsters who managed to evacuate and are now waiting in lines to travel to Sharmur and Pixiv.

There, atop that outcropping, an unbelievable sight grabs their attention, as well as the attention of everyone else in the vicinity.

A flash of light erupts outward, and a completely naked man materializes atop the platform.

Someone in the crowd screams in shock.

"What the f- isn't that... JASON? He's alive?!"

"The Wordsmith! How in the- I thought Chrona said he died?!"

Within just a few seconds, every pair of eyes in the vicinity turns to look at Jason, only to then immediately glance downward at his... manly bits.

Why the hell is the Wordsmith naked?

Jason doesn't answer that question. Too frantic with shock, he completely ignores the people's strange gazes and swivels his eyes from side to side.

"Phoebe! Where is Phoebe? Where is my wife? Has anyone seen her??"

His words cause the crowd to gasp. It really is him. As for why he's naked, that matters a lot less than answering his question. He must have been knocked unconscious and just woken up or something.

"We haven't seen her, Jason!" One trooper calls out, amplifying his voice with his T-REX. "You can ask High Command. General Chadwick and Linda Hurent are in Neil's old office!"

Jason nods. Without hesitation, he barks a Word of Power. "**Teleport!**"

He vanishes from the spot, making the three 'enemy' Demon Deities scowl even harder.

"It really is him!" Kristoff exclaims. "He used his Word Magic! How did he survive? I thought Dosena blasted him with her full Cosmic power?!"

Demon Deity Melody grins, her mood instantly rising. She smiles cheekily at her fellow Deity.

"I guess you can't help but keep underestimating the humans' mightiest Hero, huh?"

* * *

Jason flickers into Linda's office. She and Chadwick jump in shock, not even having had time to hear news of his return, so little time has it been since his arrival.

"Hope?! No- Jason?" Linda screams. "You're alive? You're... you're really alive?!"

"And why in gods' name are you buck naked?!" Chadwick asks, finally causing Jason to look downward.

"Ah- shit, sorry." Jason says, finally noticing his nudity. "**Clothes.** There, now forget about that. Where is Phoebe? Have you seen her? Is she safe?"

A moment of silence follows. Linda and Chadwick, still reeling from the revelation that Jason is alive, need a few seconds to grapple with this new fact, and then to think about his question.

"Phoebe isn't here." Linda finally answers. "I believe she was taken either by the Hall of Heroes, Chrona, or the Cube. I don't know which one. She was obviously designated a high priority asset, so she would have been the first person saved."

Jason blinks.

He thinks for a moment, then finally recalls an important fact.

He told Fiona before battling Hope that if anything should go wrong, no matter what, Fiona needed to prioritize saving Phoebe and Timothy above all else.

"Fuck! I'm so stupid!" Jason exclaims, clawing at his face. "If my memory wasn't so- never mind. You're right. Fiona has her! I should have realized."

Jason closes his eyes. He looks inside his Mind Realm to tap into the central control system for his Mental Supercomputer.

Over the last 200+ years, he has slowly built up an immense spiritual computer capable of accelerating his thoughts in short bursts, strategically analyzing enemy attack patterns, and predicting future events based on known and quantifiable data.

This supercomputer also has the useful function of allowing him to communicate with Chrona, even when his body is in Realspace, at hyper-accelerated speeds.

But when Jason looks inside his Mind Realm, he finds... nothing.

Nothing!

The entirety of his Mental Supercomputer is gone!

His expression turns cold. He opens his eyes and stares ahead vacantly, causing Linda and Chadwick to look at him in confusion.

He sure is acting weird, they think.

After a few moments, Jason puzzles out the truth of the matter.

Once he died, the Phoenix remade his body. And when she did, she likely reconstituted it from scratch. Naturally, his Mind Realm was made anew. It wouldn't have included his Mental Supercomputer.

That explains why Fiona didn't immediately contact me. Jason thinks. She couldn't. But it's no matter. I'll just speak to her now.

He nods at Linda and Chadwick. "I'll be back later. For now, start tallying the losses. I want a full report when I return."

Linda nods. "Consider it done."

Chadwick smiles. "It's good to have you back. It wasn't until you were gone that humanity realized how badly it needed you."

Jason doesn't bother replying. His anxiety is already making him dizzy with worry.

Since his brain no longer has its innate protections against the effects of Extreme Time Dilation, Jason makes sure to take half a minute Wordsmithing various protective effects before teleporting back to Chrona.

"Hyper. Accelerate. Contain. Protection. Defense. Accelerate. Condition. Reprieve. Expand. Defense..."

Finally, he speaks the last word needed to complete the ritual.

"Return."

Jason vanishes, leaving the others behind.

He appears inside the Spynet Sphere, where he finds Fiona standing there, her expression... inscrutable.

"Finally." Fiona says, sighing softly. "I really thought you were dead, Jason. I saw everything that happened. Everything before and after the Psions killed you."

Jason nods hurriedly. "That's good. You can tell me all about it later. But for now, I just need to know, where are Phoebe and Timothy? Are they safe? Did you bring them here like I told you?"

Fiona tucks her lower lip inward. She bows her head.

"It's been over a month, you know. A month since you died. And nearly a full week since the Phoenix revived you."

Jason blinks several times. He looks at Fiona with a bizarre expression.

"I get that this has been hard for you, Fiona. I do. I just- look, can we put that off? This talk? Just for a minute or two? Where's Phoebe? Is she okay?"

"A month is a long time, Jason." Fiona says, raising her eyes to meet his. "I lost my faith after the first two weeks. Once the Lazarus Tower was destroyed... I felt my heart break."

"Fiona... what... what is this?" Jason mumbles, feeling slightly dizzy. "What do you- why are you talking like this? Where's Phoebe?"

"I did what you told me to do." Fiona mutters, looking away. She touches her arm. "I just... I'm sorry, Jason. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry about what?" Jason asks. "**Locate.**"

He pings his wife's location.

But the result comes back negative.

And in that moment, Jason's heart turns cold.

"What... what did you- where is she? What happened? Why can't I detect her?"

Fiona closes her eyes. She doesn't say anything, but merely gestures for Jason to follow.

His legs seemingly full of lead, Jason staggers along behind Fiona, feeling his stomach slowly plunge into the soles of his shoes.

They don't walk far.

Directly across from the Spynet Sphere, inside Jason's house, they pass through the front doors, and there, Jason sees a sight that nearly steals the life from his body on the spot.

"No... no... it can't be..." Jason whispers, stumbling forward as he places his hand on the cryogenic pod. Through its frosted glass, his wife's face peeks out, her eyes closed, in the silence of eternal sleep.

"She didn't make it." Fiona whispers. "I'm sorry, Jason. She... she was alive. I... I activated the teleportation array. She came here. So did Timothy. He made it, but... she... she died on the spot. I couldn't... I couldn't resuscitate her. I even tried bringing Samantha and Leeroy here, but they couldn't bring her back."

Several long seconds of silence follow.

Jason loses the strength in his legs. He slumps to his knees, his hands dragging against the ice-cold glasses as his forehead presses lifelessly against the cryopod.

"I'm sorry, Jason. I'm sorry." Fiona whispers, as tears well up in her eyes. "All I could do... was... preserve her. That's it. I can't- there's nothing left. No soul. And if there was, the- the Lazarus Tower... it's gone... so..."

Jason remains silent. He stares blankly into the cryopod, unable to speak. His eyes lose focus. His arms drop to his sides.

"Dead." Jason mutters. "Dead. Truly dead."

A faint flicker of light sparks in his soul. Abruptly, he looks up at Phoebe's face.

"Resurrect. Revive! Heal! Regenerate! Restore! Resurrect! Revive! Return!!"

Jason speaks one Word of Power after another.

He rapid-fires them out, repeating some, praying, hoping for a miracle.

But his prayers go unanswered.

Like Hope before him, who failed to truly revive Amelia, Jason also fails to bring his wife back.

His previous hollowness becomes even more empty and full of despair. He sags sideways, turns around, and lays back against the pod, looking up at the ceiling in a daze.

"I can't... fix her... I can't... bring her back... there's no point anymore... there's nothing..."

Fiona grits her teeth. "Jason. Jason! Look at me! You have Timothy. Your son! You still have Timothy! I'll get him for you! Think about what Phoebe would want. Don't let your son down!"

But her words fall on deaf ears.

"Oh. My son." Jason mumbles. "Yeah. Him. Good idea. Let me kill him too. Just like Daisy. Just like Phoebe. Kill him too. Kill them all. Everyone on Maiura. Everyone on Tarus. Kill all the humans. Kill all my friends. Kill my family. Just kill them all."

Jason stares at nothing. He looks into the abyss, feeling a new, horrible sensation swallow him whole.

A feeling of grief too black and frightening to put into words.

A loss so deep, so heart-wrenching that none who hadn't experienced something similar could comprehend the depths of such despair.

"Kill Phoebe. Kill Daisy. Kill Timothy. Kill Fiona. Kar. Blinker. Kill everyone. Hope was right. I'm useless. I'm nothing. I only bring death."

"No. Jason, that's not true." Fiona says. She bites her lip, then walks a little closer. "You can't- you can't blame yourself. This was... this was my fault. If I had just... calibrated the teleporter better... if I had... had..."

"Don't do that." Jason mumbles. "Don't try to make me feel better. It was my fault. It always was. It always is."

Slowly, as if his joints were moving with the same robotic motions as his Dronesmiths, Jason stands up. He smiles emptily at Fiona.

"Just go, Fiona. Just go. I want to be alone right now. With Phoebe. With my wife."

Fiona stares at Jason. She looks past him, at the cryopod with Phoebe's frozen body.

Unwilling to leave, she remains in place, hindered by indecision.

"Fiona. You can go." Jason says. "Looking at you right now... hurts. You're not Phoebe. But looking at you... makes the pain worse. Please go."

Fiona lowers her head. She ultimately relents. She slowly turns around and takes a step toward the door, pausing when she hears Jason say one last thing.

"I love you, Fiona." Jason says. "Just like... I loved Phoebe. I love you."

Tears well up in Fiona's eyes.

"I love you too, Jason."

Unable to look back, she exits the building, and the door closes behind her.

After her departure, Jason turns to Phoebe's pod. Silently, he presses some of the buttons on it, activating its wake-up procedure. Jason pulls his wife out of Cryostasis, then lifts her into his arms to carry her like a princess.

He stands there for a minute, in the silence of the room, before looking off into the distance.

"I... don't want... to be here... right now." Jason says to nobody in particular.

He remains quiet.

Then, he utters a Word of Power.

"Teleport."

Instantly, Jason departs Chrona's temporal space. He re-emerges into Realspace, arriving inside a pitch-black hallway.

An unknown, empty hallway somewhere in the Labyrinth.

Jason continues to stare forward for a full minute. Lost in thought, he reminisces about his past.

He remembers the first time he met Phoebe, shortly after Bahamut's death.

He remembers when Amelia cut his throat and left him to die.

It was Phoebe who nursed him back to health.

She treated him better than he deserved. When other people mocked him for being a cripple, no longer a mighty Wordsmith, she was there for him.

When she was injured during the battles against Satan and the Archdemon, Jason felt scared for her life, but she ultimately pulled through.

When they lost their daughter, Jason blamed himself, and he felt even worse for his wife.

And now, after all these years...

"I regret." Jason says under his breath, as he looks into the blackness enveloping his wife's face. Even with nothing to latch his eyes onto, he feels as if he can still see Phoebe looking at him, sadness in her eyes.

And why wouldn't she be sad?

He failed her.

He failed humanity.

He failed everyone.

Jason slumps down. He rests on the ground, his back against the wall, his wife in his arms.

"You know what?" Jason says, as if Phoebe will reply. "I don't care anymore. About anything. Any of this. I realize now. Ever since I met you, you were the one thing that always kept me going. The one thing I always cared about. Even when Daisy died, I was able to persevere because of you."

"But there's nothing left now."

"There's nothing for me to care about."

He momentarily thinks of his son, but even that thought barely lasts a minute.

"It's better if I don't stick around. I'll just kill him too." Jason mutters. "Fiona can raise him."

Jason gently runs his fingers through his wife's hair.

"Let's just stay like this. Okay? Til' death do us part. We'll stay like this... until I die. Then everything will be okay again."

Jason smiles.

"It'll all be fine."

He closes his eyes.

Time passes...

A minute...

An hour...

Perhaps a day.

Jason stops caring. His heart becomes stone.

All thoughts turn to Void...

Until...

A voice speaks in the darkness.

"Haha. Well. Isn't this sad?"

Jason opens his eyes. He gazes ahead at the wall he can't see. He sighs.

"Oh. It's you. Of *course* it's you."

"Come now. That's no way to talk to an old friend."

"Go away." Jason murmurs. "Or... you know what? Just kill me. That's fine. I don't care anymore."

"Yes. I can see that. Seems the wifey died. Shame. I thought you two were such a cute couple."

A momentary flicker of anger passes across Jason's vision. He looks to his left, where he sees a pair of blood-red eyes looking at him from the darkness, perhaps fifty feet away.

"Was it *you*? Did you kill her?"

"No, no. Don't be ridiculous, Jason." The demon says, chuckling sinisterly. "That wouldn't be any *fun*. Tormenting you is one thing, but all those people who died... they died because of you. Because of your incompetence. As for the wifey, welp, chalk it up to some bad luck. Sometimes... shit happens. Haha."

Jason's anger fades, replaced once more with the indifference of death. He looks at the wall ahead and sighs softly.

"I don't want to talk to anyone. If you're not here to kill me, then just leave. I want to be alone."

The demon falls silent for a few seconds.

"...How boring. You're no fun when you're like this, Jason. Don't you even know who I am? I'm your best friend. I'm your closest ally."

Jason snorts, painfully unamused. "The hell you are, *Gressil*. God. Your mind-games are so tiring. I don't have the interest in playing them anymore."

Gressil plods over and flops down beside Jason, then lightly squeezes his shoulder.

"Oh come on, kid. This isn't a game. It's reality. Haven't you realized the Truth yet?"

Jason doesn't answer. He simply closes his eyes and ignores Hell's prison warden.

Gressil smirks. "Jason. Do you remember when we first met?"

When Jason doesn't answer, Gressil continues. "No, I don't mean our first fun little game of cat and mouse. I mean *before that*. When I played 'gargoyle' and you stumbled upon my 'statue' shortly after exiting your cryopod. Didn't you ever think back on that little interaction and find it suspicious? Why was I there, right outside your cryopod's room?"

Jason still remains silent, so Gressil continues to speak.

He leans in a little closer, practically hissing in Jason's ear.

"It's because *I let you out*, Jason. I released you from that cryopod. I stole you away from Marie's laboratory with my little bag of tricks. Actually, I stole a few *other* pods first. I wasn't sure which one that *Cat Mask* put you in, but I knew I'd find it eventually."

Jason sighs.

"Alright. I'll bite. Why let me out, then?"

"Haha. Isn't it obvious?" Gressil asks, smiling even wider than before, with his hideous, long-beaked face. "*It's because I was bored*. Playing with these uninteresting three-dimensional opponents is no fun. But ever since you revived, there has been an endless cycle of Chaos. Countless wars, no more stalemates. No more Volgrim throwing bodies at the Plague for them to slowly, efficiently, *mindlessly* devour."

"Great. Good job." Jason mutters. "Are you done?"

Gressil squeezes Jason's shoulder again. "Come on, chum. Don't be boring! Be more vibrant! You're a Wordsmith! Why are you acting like a three-dimensional enemy when you should be thinking in four?"

"Gressil." Jason says, his tone as bland as ever. "I just don't care anymore. Okay? You know why. Stop wasting both of our time. If you're going to kill me, just kill me."

"Right. Because the wifey died." Gressil replies, sneakily jabbing another verbal knife into Jason's heart. "As I said before, it's such a shame she's gone. If only she were still around, you'd be fun to play with again."

"I already tried reviving her." Jason says. "It didn't work. Nothing works. My powers are useless. Just like me."

Gressil pushes himself off the ground and rises into a standing position. He cracks his back nonchalantly, looking off into the distance.

"Ahh, so true. So true. Wordsmithing can't bring people back from the dead. There's no take-backsies. No do-overs. Oh, if *only* you could fix all your past screw-ups. If only you could do it all over again, with the knowledge you have now. *Surely* you wouldn't make the same mistakes. But alas! There's no way that's possible!"

Gressil shakes his head, bemoaning Jason's lack of ability. He beats his chest in grief.

"If only life granted us second chances, perhaps I wouldn't be stuck, fused together with this rotten lump of flesh that once called itself my mother. Ah, but there are no do-overs. Isn't that right, Wordsmith? Isn't... that... right...? We just can't do things all over again..."

Jason unwillingly listens to Gressil. Slowly, his mind spins up a little, seemingly whirring back into action like a broken timepiece restored with a slight jolt of energy.

"Do things... all over... again?"

Jason blinks a few times. He looks into the darkness, at the place where he would normally see his wife's face.

Do it all over again.

Go back and fix the past.

Change things. Don't make the same mistakes.

Jason's heart thumps in his chest, as if turning from rock to flesh. A quiet gasp of air sucks into his lungs.

Go back.

Do it again.

TRY AGAIN.

ONE MORE TRY.

WON'T BE LIKE BEFORE.

Jason's body starts to tremble.

Fear, anticipation, excitement.

All these emotions blend together into an emotion Jason previously couldn't bring himself to feel.

Hope.

This emotion becomes so overpowering, so intoxicating, that Jason fails to resist its pull.

Like a magnet drawn to its opposite, Jason shakily rises, still holding his wife in his arms.

"To... go back... it can't be possible..."

Gressil sneers. He turns to look at Jason, his eyes narrowing in the darkness.

"*Can't it?* You're a Wordsmith. You can make the impossible... possible."

Jason's mind spins with excitement. The loss of yesterday suddenly becomes a possible redemption for tomorrow. He looks at the body held in his arms, and at once, he comes to a decision.

"I... have to try... even if not for me... for her! For them! For everyone!"

That idea coalesces into a concrete concept, and that concept finds its way onto Jason's tongue.

A Word of Power!

"REWIND!"

Jason utters a fateful word that will forever break the fabric of reality itself.

Power swells inside his body. An illumination as bright as a star ignites within his chest for a fraction of a second, lighting up all of his surroundings!

And then...

It vanishes.

An instant later, Jason's eyes lose their light.

The Wordsmith collapses, bringing his wife with him.

Both of their bodies ragdoll to the floor.

Dead.

Gressil stares at the two of them. An eerie glow illuminates within his soul.

His smile turns maniacal.

"Did it... I finally... DID IT..."

"HAH... HAHA... HAHAAHAHAHA!!!"

Gressil rears his head back. He laughs uproariously, cackling to the heavens as countless potential futures branch out in his mind.

"SHATTERED! IT'S ALL BROKEN! CHAOS FOREVER! THE GREAT SHATTERING IS HERE! HAHAAHAHAHA!!!"

"JASON HIRO, YOU REALLY DID IT! YOU DIDN'T FAIL ME AFTER ALL!"

"HAAHAHAHAHA!!!"

Gressil's greatest plan ultimately succeeds.

Everything will be different now.